

STOLEN GOLD

FREDERICK FAUST

(AS GEORGE OWEN BAXTER)

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STOLEN GOLD

George Owen Baxter
(Frederick Schiller Faust)

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Stolen Gold

A Reata Story

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: Frederick Faust's original title for this story was "Stolen Gold." *Western Story Magazine* when it was first published in December 3, 1933, under the byline George Owen Baxter, changed the title to "Reata's Danger Trail." This was the fourth short novel featuring Reata, one of Faust's most popular characters. There would be seven short novels in all about Reata: the first being "Reata"; followed by "The Whisperer," and then "The King of the Rats." This fourth story in the saga has Reata trying to set up household only to have Pop Dickerman return and require Reata to perform one more service.

“THE HOLD-UP”

Dave Bates had the outside job. Next to Gene Salvio, he was the best shot of the three, but they had matched for the choice position, and the turn of the coin insisted that Harry Quinn should go inside with Salvio.

The outside job was the easiest, because, if the two inside men were both shot up without being able to complete the robbery of the bank, Bates could slide away undetected. But if the two came out with the stuff, he had his share of the trouble. Also, he had to watch the main door and see that, if a disturbance started inside the place, no sudden rescuers poured in from the street, no men with guns in their hands.

The day was still and very hot. It was ten in the morning, when there is just enough slant to the sun to give it a fuller whack at the body. There was not a horse, not a wagon, not a man, not a dog, or even a chicken in the crooked little main street of Jumping Creek. The sun was making itself felt, and the wooden and canvas awnings bravely stretched out their arms and threw a gentle shadow down to the ground. The heat of the day was enough to make one, at a stroke, understand the whole nature of the people who live south of the Rio Grande. It made one want to sit still and trust time.

But Dave Bates could not trust time. He had to trust, instead, to his two partners inside the bank, to the two revolvers under his coat, and to the rifles that lay aslant in the saddle holsters under the right stirrup leathers of three of the saddles.

The other two horses would not be backed by men. They were on hand to carry a heavy load, and the load would be gold, if all went well. A powerful canvas saddlebag hung on each side of both saddles.

When Dave Bates thought of the ponderous, unwieldy nature of such a metal as gold, he cursed the stuff and wondered why a bank had to be loaded down with that stuff, instead of light, crisp, new, delightful banknotes? And his lean face, that looked as though it had been compressed in a mold to half of the proper width, twisted crookedly to the side. Then he glanced up toward the mountains that, in the distance, flowed away into the pallor of the skies. Of course, that was the answer, and out of the rocky sides of those mountains the gold was worked and the ore ground and washed, and so, in driblets, the precious stuff was brought down to Jumping Creek.

Well, as soon as the work had been finished, Dave Bates hoped that they would get out among those mountains. And he reached a hand under his coat and touched

the handle of one of his Colts, already well warmed by his body. Then he drew himself up to the full of his five feet and five inches, and expanded his scrawny chest. The two guns were what made a man of him. People could laugh down a little fellow like Dave Bates, but they could not laugh down his guns.

What he prayed was that Gene Salvio would not be too hasty with his weapons. Guns are all very well, but they ought to be used with discretion. Otherwise a fellow had blood on his trail. Invisible blood, perhaps, but nevertheless damning. In a wide and careless country like the West, many crimes are forgotten. They wash away. But murder sticks worse than soot. Dave Bates knew all about it, and now he remembered the savage eyes of Gene Salvio and wished that he, not Harry Quinn, had walked into the bank with Salvio. He might be a stronger influence to keep Gene in check, if a pinch should happen to come. In the meantime, the seconds went by, with gigantic strides, measured by the pounding of the heart of Bates.

And then it came, like the crash of two mighty hammers brought together, face to face, or like the sudden first stroke of a booming bell—a gunshot in the bank. And then a voice screaming out. It might be a woman; it might be a man. Pain unsexed the sound. No, it was the scream of a man. No woman would cry so loudly.

Words came babbling through the screeching. That was the voice of Gene Salvio, snarling, raging, threatening, and then came three more revolver shots in rapid succession—just the way Salvio knew how to fan them out of his gun.

The street had been empty a moment before. Suddenly there was life in the shadows, here and there. Then someone shouted: “The bank! They’re after it!” Men came on the run. They came from up the street and down the street. They came with naked guns, glittering in their hands.

Dave Bates thought what an easy life robbers have in other parts of the world. But who would choose a life of crime in the West, where men go armed and know how to use their weapons almost as well as though they had to live by powder and lead?

Like two counter waves the men of Jumping Creek rushed toward him. His heart shrank in his body. He wanted to run. His queer half face grew longer and smaller and twisted more to one side.

Instead of running, he remembered that code which he had learned long years before. A bad code to live by, but a good code to die by. Stand by your fellows in crime, and never let them down. That code had brought him through many a dark moment and stained him black enough. Now it made him step suddenly back from the horses with a gun in each hand.

Inside the bank, the screaming had died away to a deep, pulsating groan.

Footfalls were scuffling in there.

Bates shouted: "Get back on your heels, all of you! Drop them guns and hold back. Watch lively now!" And he fired a bullet just over the head of a chunky man with gray hair and a black mustache.

The two advancing waves of armed humanity wavered, halted, and then swayed back and forth for a moment, uncertainly. If a single leader had sprung out now, to give the men new impetus, they would have closed over Dave Bates with a single rush, and he knew it. He even saw one about to act—a slender, tall youth with a ridiculously bright Mexican outfit on him. This fellow wavered less than the others. He began to crouch a little, with a wild look in his eyes.

Dave Bates drove a bullet into the ground at his feet and knocked dust over his boots as high as his knees.

"I'm watching you *hombres*. Back up!" he shouted. "I'm goin' to let a streak of light through some of you."

Suddenly the tall young man stood up straight and pressed back. He had had enough. He wanted to be a hero. He wanted desperately to be a hero. He wanted desperately to be brave, but his courage had not quite hardened in his breast. He was just a year or so too old or too young. Who could say?

The whole crowd gave back on either hand, and then Salvio and Harry Quinn came out, staggering with the weights they carried.

Gold—they were staggering under weights of gold!

Harry Quinn was a strong man, but he grunted as he heaved up a chamois sack and dumped it onto one of the empty saddlebags.

Someone in the crowd—well back toward the rear—yelled out: "Are we goin' to be bluffed out by three thugs? Come on, boys! All together. One rush and we got 'em! They're cleanin' us out of all our cash!"

The crowd was stirred by that appeal, but it was not stirred enough. The sight of Dave Bates, as he kept his body swinging a little from side to side, was too disheartening—the sight of him, and his lean hands that held the guns with such familiar ease, just a little above the height of the hip, his thumbs resting on the hammers. He could turn loose a torrent of lead from those weapons, and each man, as the little figure swayed, felt the dark muzzles of the guns draw across him like knives. The vast emptiness of death yawned at them from the little round barrels of the Colts.

So they hung there, in suspense, willing to be brave, but held back by the lack of a dashing leader. One man able to take one step forward would have loosed a double avalanche capable of smashing the life out of that band of three, but no man

dared take the single step.

The two extra horses were loaded—well loaded. And more of those small chamois bags were dropped into the saddlebags on the horses that would have to carry riders, also.

“Ready!” snapped the voice of Gene Salvio.

“Ready!” said Harry Quinn.

Gene Salvio leaped into the saddle on his black horse. How beautiful all those horses were, well chosen for strength and for speed. But far better-looking was Gene Salvio, as he sat in the saddle with laughter on his lips and the devil in his eyes. Men shrank away from him. They looked down. They did not want those eyes to single them out, because they saw that this man was ready and willing and eager to kill. They could see that gold was only an excuse. It was blood that the fellow really wanted.

Dave Bates and Quinn mounted in turn. Salvio was unencumbered on the black. Both Harry Quinn and Bates led one of the extra horses. They moved forward.

Gene Salvio said: “You fellows get on ahead. Go slow and steady. And keep looking into their eyes. Mind the windows and the doors, too, but mostly mind the windows. Go on ahead. I’ll take care of these gents behind us.”

Admiration warmed the heart of Dave Bates. To be sure, Salvio might have been a little too ready with his guns, back there in the bank, but he was also the fellow to push them safely through the crisis that he had helped to bring on by his rash bloodthirstiness. Watching the windows—that was a good idea. Of course, there might be men at any of these windows, and the doors, too, were open mouths out of which the dragon danger might rush at them.

He heard Salvio shouting: “Stand back there! You in the black hat . . . don’t move your hand like that ag’in! Give us room through here, or we’re going to take room, and the room we’re going to take is going to be vacant for a hell of a while after we’re gone!”

It was well expressed, thought Dave Bates. There was really a brain in the head of that fellow Gene Salvio.

The crowd, in fact, was bearing back. As the robbers went through the street, there was silence around them, but there was a shrill murmur ahead of them and a growling murmur behind them. Men in that crowd began to shift their eyes from one face to another, trying to find that most needed thing—a leader, a man to cry out a single, right word. And still there was not a voice raised. Still there was only that same muttering, that helpless, groaning sound which only a crowd can make.

Then some of the cleverer heads, foreseeing that it would be hard to start the

fight in that humor, broke away from the crowd and went for horses.

The end of the main street came under the eyes of Dave Bates. He looked out toward the foothills and the great mountains and felt that he was safe with his portion of the loot. Then he heard the beating of hoofs here and there on the outskirts of the town, and then flying down the narrows of the streets, and he knew, with a grim pull at the corners of his mouth, that the trouble was only starting.

II

“THE PURSUIT”

The noise of the horses was almost enough to make Dave Bates call for action on his own part, but he knew well enough that it was best to leave decisions and commands to the outstanding man of the party, and that man was certainly the famous Gene Salvio. So Bates said nothing but, like his companions, kept two steady guns turned toward the crowd.

He had never done anything like this before. To face a gang in this manner was very much like facing a vast, a dangerous, but a witless monster. If it knew its strength, it would be heedless of the small harm that could happen to it and would instantly take revenge. For what would be the death of two or three of its members—to the rest of the crowd?

By a pretense, by a sham, they were holding back the others. And, in that way, they came to the cluster of trees around the bridge at the end of Jumping Creek. There Salvio at last gave the word, and, with a rush, they galloped their horses around the curve, and thunder boomed from the planks as they rushed over the bridge.

A storm of bullets followed them. The bullets crackled like hail through the trees, whistled like invisible, incredible birds through the air. By the thickness with which they flew, the numbers of the crowd could be estimated, but already there was a rising shoulder of ground that gave the low-stooping fugitives shelter, and now they could sit erect, well down the winding road.

Dave Bates looked back at the saddlebags that jumped at the side of the led horses. There must be five hundred pounds, or thereabouts, between the pair. And another hundred pounds of the gold had been given to each rider. Say almost eight hundred pounds of gold nuggets and dust! It was not a very difficult bit of arithmetic to work the thing out. Somewhere around a hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars, at least. Split back one third to Pop Dickerman who had suggested the job and who had fixed the cashier in order to find out when the greatest available sum would be in the safe of the bank. That left about a hundred and twenty thousand. And this carved up into forty thousand bucks per man. Forty thousand dollars—and all in gold!

There was an ache in the head and a pull across the eyes of Dave Bates that had come there from facing out the crowd so long. This ache began to pass away. He

wanted to laugh. He saw that Gene Salvio and Harry Quinn were already laughing. They were good fellows, thought Bates. Quinn was something of a brute, at times, and Salvio was always something of a wildcat. But in a time of necessity you want a man who knows his job and can do it. This pair knew their work, and they could do it. The heart of Bates swelled.

He did not even have to be troubled about the rather dim worry of having robbed poor men. The miners had been paid. There were only the great, million-headed corporations to consider, and to Dave Bates they were not worthy of consideration. He felt, almost, that he had honestly earned forty thousand dollars. Other men had found it and grubbed it. He had earned it by endangering his life.

As they pulled up the road, Salvio swung into the lead from the rear, and, when they came to a cross trail, Salvio without hesitation took the dimmer way, forcing his horse up steep rocks along the slope of a hill. This seemed a dubious policy to Dave Bates. The point of it, however, was clear. Far behind them could be heard the hoofs of many horses, rolling like the rolling of drums, and it was probable that the blind mob of riders from Jumping Creek would pour heedlessly up the wider road, looking for no sign, heads high to catch a glimpse, around a bend, of the three riders and the five horses that they wanted. Therefore, instead of heading straight on toward the mountain wilderness that would give them sure covering, Gene Salvio intended to dodge the first rush of the pursuit, save the strength of the five horses, and angle off at a new direction, even though the mountains in this quarter were farther away.

In fact, when they got over the head of the hill, Salvio actually brought the horses back to a walk. Considering the necessity which spurred them all forward, this seemed to Bates like standing still. He would not complain about it, however. To complain, in a time of need, of what is actually being commanded by the leader, is a foolish thing, as a rule. However, it was all right to ask questions about the past.

“Look here, Gene,” he said. “What happened in there? You started the shooting?”

“Aw,” said Salvio, “there was a fool of a red-headed kid. I never seen a redhead with any brains. Their hair is so hot that it burns their brains dry. You know how it is. Well, this redhead was hanging around. Kind of like a chore boy. After I’d got the gun on the cashier, the redhead pulls a gat out of a drawer. I let him have it. A funny thing . . . I aimed for his head, because I wanted to put him out quick. It’s better to put ’em out quick, in a time like that. Just a wound don’t do so much good. They gotta flop and stay down, dead. That sort of discourages the rest of the boys a little. Well, redhead seen the trouble coming, and, while he swings up his gun, he puts a

hand out before him. Imagine trying to ward off a bullet, eh? Anyway, that slug of mine went right through his hand and his wrist.

“The funny thing was that it *did* seem to turn my bullet a little. It just ripped along the side of his head, and he falls down and starts moaning over his hand. And then he starts screeching. You could’ve heard him in the street.”

“You could’ve heard him in hell,” said Dave Bates sincerely. “He sure raised the hair on my head, and he raised a crowd, too.”

“You handled that crowd fine,” said Harry Quinn.

“Yeah, you done your job,” remarked Gene Salvio, who rarely praised others.

“Then you turned loose three more,” said Bates.

“That was for the cashier,” said Salvio. “Pop Dickerman, you remember, said for us to cover him up pretty good, if we could manage it. So, since I’d already heard the crowd gathering, I thought that a little more noise wouldn’t do any harm, and I turned loose on the cashier. Like I wanted to drop him. I put three bullets in the air, and he curled up on the floor and died . . . he was scared to death, pretty near.” Salvio began to laugh, rather guardedly.

And in fact, the trees that so slowly retreated around them seemed to be looking down gravely, watchfully, disapprovingly upon the trio of robbers.

Then, far behind them, on the other side of the hill, they heard the men of Jumping Creek go by like a storm. They listened, looked at one another, and then grinned.

“The gents that stay inside the law, they don’t seem to have very good brains in their heads,” said Salvio. “Ever notice that? They’re always wrong.”

“But when they’re right, they hang a lot of gents from the trees,” suggested Dave Bates. For his own part, he did not like crowing until a job was well finished and the danger gone.

They came down off the slope and turned up through a pleasant valley that ran near the railroad line. In the distance, they could see the flash of the wheel-polished rails with the sunlight running on them like swift water, tinted blue. The trail was dim. They left it and took the straight way up the valley. This was still a longer way to the higher mountains and security, but, again, it would save the horses. And Dave Bates knew the value of fresh horses in any pinch. His admiration for Salvio was growing every moment when, from behind, they heard a horse neigh.

The three robbers looked suddenly at one another.

“What could that be?” asked Harry Quinn, scowling. He stared back over his shoulder. Then, with a groan, he pointed.

Bates saw the picture that came out of the trees behind them. There were a

dozen men, all with rifles, all riding hard, and at the head of them journeyed a tall man with a face so thin that his features stood out in a relief of highlights and shadows, even from this distance. He rode on a small, mouse-colored mustang, that looked more mule than horse. It took small strides, but so many of them that it easily kept in the lead. This man now turned and waved to his companions, and then pointed ahead where the robbers were in full flight.

Well, it was bad luck that somebody among the men of Jumping Creek had guessed that the fugitives might take the way over the short trail, uphill. However, this would be the point where freshness of horses would tell. Goodness of horses would tell, too, and the one thing on which Pop Dickerman never spared money was the sort of horseflesh with which he provided his missionaries of crime.

All five animals legged it valiantly, and in an instant it was clear that they had the wind and the foot of the pursuit.

They swerved along the edge of a marsh. They sped up a slope. They twisted through a denseness of trees. And then, suddenly, Salvio in the lead drew rein so hard that his horse stopped on braced legs, the hoofs plowing up the ground.

“There’s somebody ahead!” he called softly.

Then Bates heard it, too. Right and left, as though spread out in a long line, he heard horses coming. He heard the shrill, penetrating squeak of saddle leather, and the far-off murmurs of voices. He could see clearly what had happened. The men of Jumping Creek had divided. Half had taken the rear trail of the robbers; half had swung around the hill and blocked the robbers in their advance of the valley. Now they were blocked as neatly as though they had been cooped in a box!

III

“THE MARSH”

They could turn left—up the staggering face of a rocky hill, treeless, bare, open to a sweeping rifle fire. Or else they could turn right into the stench, the mud, the puzzling mists and vapors of the marsh. Gene Salvio took the only possible course. He swung the black horse to the side and struck right into the marsh, and, as Bates followed, last of the three, a sudden uproar of voices, a sudden crash of rifle fire, told him that he had been seen.

That made their chances one point worse. He liked to estimate chances. When the crowd gathered in the street of Jumping Creek, their chances of getting away had been about one in three. After they cleared out of town and escaped the first rifle fire, they had chances of two to one in their favor. When they put the high hill behind them and swung up the easy grade of the valley that contained the railroad, they had chances of four to one in their favor. Even the sight of the pursuit in the rear only decreased their chances by a point. Then that encounter with the unseen line of riders, blocking their way, beat them down to the bottom. They had one chance in five, as they turned into the marsh. They were seen, and they had a chance in six.

Salvio called, with inimitable cheer: “We’ll get to the railroad, and we’ll gallop up the ties and laugh our heads off at those fools!”

Bates looked forward and saw Salvio riding his horse out of a depth of thick, green slime that mantled the fine creature from the ears down and altered its color completely. Salvio was the fellow with the heart and the brain. Of course, that was the trick. To reach the railroad, and then to rush down the open way at full speed, out of the marsh, and then to cut either to one side or to the other—that was the thing, that was the thing. The heart of Dave Bates rose in him. Ah, what a thing a brain is in a good man! You can have your good men, if you want; Dave Bates wanted a man with a brain; he wanted a fellow like Gene Salvio.

The marsh was a horror. It was black water and green wood. And firm, grassy ground turned into a horrible muddy wash through which the horses broke. But they floundered on, keeping right behind Gene Salvio—who had the knowing brain.

They held on. Presently the foulness of the marsh, the thickness of the trees that made a hot twilight, here, in the middle of the day, gave way to glimpses of light, and suddenly they were out on the side of the railroad grade, with Gene Salvio already cutting the wires of the big fence.

Two strands had hardly clanged apart and whipped back under the clippers of Salvio, when voices shouted to the side, and Dave Bates had a sight of a tall man with a face as thin as starvation, riding a little mouse-colored mustang out from the edge of the marsh. He had found a solid way across the marsh—there was hardly a bit of mud above the hocks of his mustang.

Bates, as he backed his horse violently, saw the stream of armed men break out behind that leader. Bates snatched out his right-hand Colt and opened fire slowly, accurately, intent to kill. He wanted to kill that tall man. He wanted to kill that mouse-colored horse. He had a strange feeling that, if he could dispose of either of them, chance would swing back to the robbers.

He steadied his gun for the third shot, when he saw something flash in the hand of that rider. The gun spoke. Bates's right-hand gun, his old favorite, was knocked out of his hand and into a pool of black, stagnant water.

He grabbed his bruised hand between his chin and his breast and rode back through the trees, spurring his horse deep. He uttered no complaint. He was not disheartened by pain. He simply knew, calmly, that the chances were suddenly a hundred to one against them. Some people might have the frankness to admit that they had no chance at all.

Salvio's gun was barking behind them. Voices shouted everywhere, everywhere, everywhere. Human voices talked from the ground, out of the sky. It was very true, that which Bates had said. He thought of it again. When the dummies, the honest people, *do* win, they hang lots of thieves from convenient trees.

With his numb hand—it seemed otherwise uninjured—Dave Bates led the way. His horse seemed to know something, and he let it have its head. Presently, it plunged into water up to its belly. That water shoaled away to knee depth. It forced its way into a hedge of thorny brush, regardless of the stickers. Bates found himself on dry ground—a little ridge that stood up in the center of the marsh. He was glad of that. If they had to die, it was better to die on good, clean ground. As he checked the horse, which stood panting, he saw something slither off into the water, almost soundlessly. He looked the other way. All his nerves gave a great leap, and then he had the sense of falling rapidly. He was not meant for the confinement of marsh ground. This bit of clean earth, and the bit of clean, blue sky over it was all he claimed. The rest was a wet hell.

Harry Quinn came up beside him. Harry's face was gray, and his mouth was pulled back from his yellow teeth, as though he were lifting a great weight, every muscle dragging at it.

"You fool, what you stopping for?" Harry Quinn asked, and pushed his horse

straight past. In a moment he stopped, however. He seemed to be listening to the voices that shouted close at hand or murmured far off. “Yeah,” he said, “I understand.” He dismounted and sat down on a rock. He was still sitting there, rolling a cigarette, when Salvio broke out of the marsh.

Salvio said: “You rat, Quinn . . . are you ratting on us? Jump up and stamp on that smoke. Get down there at the other end of the dry land. I’ll take the middle. Dave, you take this end. Shoot at anything you see. They think they got us, but we’re going to show them a few tricks. Shoot at anything . . . and shoot straight. Hey, Dave, did that *hombre* get you?”

“He lifted the gun right out of my hand. That’s all. I’m all right,” said Dave Bates.

“Get off your hoss then, and stand watch,” ordered Salvio.

Bates obeyed.

They put the horses—and the gold—in the central cluster of brush that covered the middle of the little island. Then each man sank away in a chosen place of concealment, waiting for the approach of the enemy.

But there was no approach. Bates could hear voices shouting close up, or muttering far away. But they never turned into visible humans among the trees of the marsh. For his own part, he had a nest of rocks out of which he could look to three sides; Salvio was taking charge of the center of the island, and his back.

Those voices to which Bates listened were bright with joy, ringing with the certainty of triumph. And Bates could understand. A hundred to one chance—for their lives. The gold? Well, there was nothing to that. It was simply a weight. It was worthless. It was worse than lead that could be shot out of a gun. Well, they could shoot gold out of guns, too. Bates grinned as he had the thought. Then he heard a high-pitched, nasal voice. It was not loud, but it prodded through the silence of the nearby marsh like a needle, and into Bates’s brain.

“Boys,” said the voice, “we know that you’re in there on the island. But it ain’t any good. You’re in there, and we got you. What we wanta know is this . . . d’you wanta come out?”

There was no answer.

Want to come out? Of course—but there would be other things to hear.

The nasal voice went on: “We got you snug, and we got enough men to fence in this whole marsh and keep it fenced. You can live for a while on frogs and snakes. That’s all right. But after a while, you’ll get kind of sick of the mosquitoes, and the marsh water is sure hard on the stomach. What I’m saying is . . . why not come out now, the way you’ll have to come out sooner or later? We’ll give you a fair break. You didn’t kill nobody. And if you march out of there now and turn in the stuff you

stole, you'll have a better chance with the jury. That there jury is goin' to be made up of some of the men out of this party, most likely. And that jury will recommend you to the mercy of the judge. You been and done a good job, but you lost. Now pay, and pay quick, or we'll sure raise hell with you."

The speech ended, and Bates listened for the answer of Salvio.

Presently Salvio called out: "What's your name?"

"Steve Balen," called the nasal voice.

"Are you the gent that rode the measly little mouse-colored bronc?"

"That ain't a lookin' hoss, but it's a ridin' hoss, partner," said the nasal voice.

"Yeah, I'm the man you mean."

"Then the devil with you!" called Salvio, and followed his words with a shot that flew crackling through the woods.

Very cheerfully the voice of Steve Balen replied: "I don't blame you, brother. If I was in your boots, I'd hope to hang on to the finish. I didn't want to come and yarn with you like this here, but I figgered it was my duty. What I aim to wanta do is to string you up by the neck, the three of you, and I reckon we'll have the chance to do that before the month is out."

That ended the parley.

Dave Bates was still staggering under the impact of what he had heard, when he made out the muffled voice of Quinn, which was saying: "Hey, Gene, you ain't gone crazy, have you?" The voice came closer, repeating: "Gene, you ain't gone nuts, have you?"

Bates went to join the conference. It took place in the central cluster of shrubbery, near to the horses. "They're giving us a chance, and you go and chuck it away!" said Quinn.

Salvio was very calm and restrained. He merely said: "You boys can load your stuff onto your hosses, if you want, and go out and give yourselves up. I ain't doing it, that's all."

"Hey, Gene, what's the sense?" asked Quinn.

"You tell the dummy," said Salvio to Bates, after staring for a moment at Quinn.

"They got hanging stuff on Salvio," said Bates, nodding his head.

"They ain't got hanging stuff on me," said Quinn. "Come on, Dave. We'd better get out."

"Get where? Into jail for eight, ten years?" asked Bates.

"Better jail for eight, ten years than hell forever," said Harry Quinn.

"Sure," said Salvio. "Go on and get out." He stood by the black horse, patting its wet shoulder, sneering at them both.

Well, perhaps it was better to go to hell—in brave company.

Bates said: “We started this job with three men. We’re going to wind it up with three men, I guess, Harry.”

Harry Quinn threw out a hand in an eloquent gesture and started to exclaim in protest. Then he checked himself suddenly. A realization came into his eyes. “Oh, I see,” said Quinn. “Sure, I didn’t think of that at all!” He seemed to be vastly relieved, and said to Salvio: “What about a smoke, Gene?”

“Sure, kid,” said Salvio, and smiled.

Quinn was a lot older, but Salvio had a right to call him kid, if he wanted to, thought Bates. Quinn was not very bright, but he meant well. He’d do the right thing, when it was pointed out to him. Quinn built a cigarette and lighted it, and smoked it with enjoyment.

It was very hot. Sweat began to run on all their faces, and the smell of the marsh was heavy and sick in the air. Out of the distance they could hear more horses pounding up the valley, or down it. Reinforcements were coming. The men of Jumping Creek would make a party out of this. Even the boys would sneak away from home with some old .22. It would be a great thing, for the men and for the boys. Bates could put himself outside, in their boots, and he almost smiled as he thought of it.

A mosquito bite sent a thrill of cold down the back of his neck. He struck the place with his hand and brought the hand away with a splotch of blood on it. The mosquito was a small smear of nothingness.

“You take a mosquito,” said Harry Quinn, “and it can drink its weight in blood, eh?”

“Sure,” said Dave Bates.

“Look it,” said Quinn. “Suppose that a gent could drink his weight in booze without passing out cold. That’d be the life, eh?”

Salvio was walking up and down slowly, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bent, and a little veil of mosquitoes trailing unheeded behind that head. Dave Bates listened to Quinn, but his eyes and his mind kept following the leader, step by step, blindly hoping.

IV

“HIDDEN GOLD”

The sun had been sliding slowly down the western sky until, now, it no longer struck the island with its direct light that merely served to show the vapors that rose from the marsh so thickly that breathing seemed more difficult. Then Gene Salvio paused in his walking.

He said: “They’re pulling up more men around us all the time. They’re waiting for three men and five horses to try to charge out through ’em. They’ll be expecting us in the middle of the night. Well, we’ll beat ’em on all those counts. There’ll be no horses with us, and we’ll go now.”

“Wait a minute,” protested Harry Quinn. “Can you carry about three hundred pounds through this kind of a marsh?”

“We’re not carrying out the stuff,” said Salvio.

“Hey! Leaving it with the hosses?” asked Dave Bates.

“Leaving it inside that tree,” answered Salvio. “Shift it into that hollow trunk, boys.”

He set the example and started carrying the small, chamois bags to a tree that grew two strides from the end of the island, thrust out of the black water of the marsh. It was almost dead. Only one branch showed green, and this was turning yellow. There was no gap in the side of the trunk to indicate that it was hollow, but, when Salvio pulled himself up to the crotch, he was able to drop the bags he carried into the interior. They were actually heard to splash in the slime at the roots of the tree.

“How’d you know that it was holler?” Harry Quinn asked admiringly. “You got X-ray eyes, Gene?”

“I tapped ag’in’ it, when I was coming up to the island,” said Salvio. “Rush the stuff inside the tree. It’ll wait there for us, I guess.”

“I dunno,” said Harry Quinn. “It could wait there for a long time, for all of me, the way I feel now. I been feeling my share of it hanging around my neck all this time.”

They got the stuff inside the tree. After the first few bags had fallen, the others dropped without bringing out that splashing sound. There was simply a dull, heavy, thudding noise, and presently the last of the gold had been put out of sight.

“Let ’em try to guess where the stuff is now!” said Dave Bates, gloating. “Just let

'em try to guess. Why, Gene, that's the best idea you ever had. But how'll we get through those *hombres* all around the island? There's still daylight!"

For an answer, out of the distance, a number of rifles suddenly opened fire. The bullets could be heard crackling through the woods, then the echoes rang for a moment, and there was the silence of the marsh again.

"There's a mite of daylight," agreed Salvio. "But it'd be hard to read fine print by it, and it'd be hard to see faces very clear. There's so much daylight that they're not going to expect us to try to come out, and there's not enough daylight to make them very sure of us if we do. They're shooting at shadows already. Come on, Dave. Come on, Harry. We'll see what we can find."

"You remember that they all had a chance to have a good look at us," suggested Bates.

"Yeah. They had a good look at us in the bright of the sun, setting up there in the saddle on our hosses. They ain't going to see us the same way now." He went down to the edge of the filthy water, deliberately picked up a film of slime, and trailed the ugly green of it over one side of his face. "That ain't pretty," said Salvio, "but it'll make a difference."

Without a word, the others imitated him, smearing slime here and there on their clothes, on their faces. Then they followed Salvio across the island, and slowly through the slime and water that sometimes rose higher than their knees.

Salvio went very slowly to avoid making noise. The others came exactly in his wake, and presently he held up a hand. Before them rose a narrow ridge of brush.

"They're out there beyond the brush," said Salvio. "Lemme have a chance to talk to 'em, and then you fellows do what I do. Understand? Lemme think for you, and you do what I do."

"I'm ready," agreed Dave Bates, putting his life readily into the hands of the leader.

Salvio pushed through the brush, rather noisily. "Hey, hello!" he called.

"Who's that?" answered a voice in the near distance. "What fool is that callin' out so loud?"

"Maybe it's one of 'em," suggested another.

"Hey," called Salvio, "is Balen around anywhere?"

"Who wants him?"

"Pete Bennett. Me and Charlie and Chuck, we've found the easy way to the island that Balen wanted to get at."

"It's too late to go in there now. It'll be pitch dark before long."

"Look it here," said Salvio angrily, "what've we been wallering around in the

slush for, if Balen ain't going to use what we've found out for him?"

"Shut up talking so loud and come out."

"Sure," said Salvio. "That's fine for you *hombres* that been staying on dry land all the time. But what about us that been wallering?" He stalked forward through the brush, calling over his shoulder. "Come on, Chuck! Come on, Charlie!"

"Not so loud!" cautioned the other speaker.

"I'm pretty nigh fed up with the whole business," said Salvio, as Bates and Quinn came on behind him.

Beyond the bushes there was another bit of shallow marsh. They crossed this toward some trees under which a number of men were in plain view, except for the increasing dimness of the light and the intervening vapors of the marsh.

"I got half a mind to pull out of the business," Salvio was saying as he advanced into the group. "Dog-gone me, if I ain't spent!"

And, to the amazement of Bates, Salvio threw himself right down among the others, on the grass.

Bates took that example and plumped himself down on a stump, resting his face in his hands, as though exhausted. He saw Quinn settled with his back against a tree, his head also hanging. Then he could hear the man who seemed in charge of this section of the line saying: "Well, I didn't know that Balen sent anybody into the marsh."

"I wish *I* didn't know it," answered Salvio. "I sure had enough marsh. I'm going to have the smell of it in my nose for the rest of my life. And I'm dead beat. Anybody got a drink on him? Anybody got a flask?"

There was no answer to this, and Salvio fell to muttering.

A fellow came up beside Bates and said: "Dirty work in there, eh?"

"Yeah, and damn it," said Bates.

"I wouldn't've thought that Balen would've sent nobody into the marsh," said the other.

Bates said nothing. He merely groaned as with fatigue.

Then he heard someone saying: "Here's Balen now."

Bates stood up. He saw that Quinn was rising, also, but that Salvio, strange to say, remained stretched on the ground, face down, arms flung wide, as though worn out with labor.

"I'm going to see if I can find me a drink of something," said Bates to the man beside him.

"Say," said the other, "you look like. . . ."

He stopped his voice suddenly. Bates went on into the brush with cold snakes

working up and down his spine.

What did he look like? In another moment he would show all those fellows what his back looked like when he was running as fast as his legs could carry him. Off to the side, he saw Quinn moving away, also.

“Here, Balen!” called a voice. “Here’s a gent to make a report to you.”

Bates paused on the farther side of the brush. He could look through and see Salvio rising. Not twenty steps away were a string of tethered horses, which might mean liberty for them. But Bates would not desert his leader, even though Harry Quinn was already striding toward that group of mustangs.

“Wait a minute,” Salvio said quite loudly. “I’ll be back in a minute. I want to get something out of my saddlebag, and I’ll be right back.”

And there was Salvio, stepping unhurried toward the horses. Bates made haste to turn in the same direction. He only risked one glance behind him to see, in the half light, that the man with whom he had been talking was now seriously debating something with two other men, and pointing after him. The same worms of ice began to work again in the spinal marrow of little Dave Bates. He walked right up to the first horse of the group as he heard Balen saying: “Find a way through the marsh? I never told any man to. . . .”

A big fellow jumped out from nowhere and grabbed the arm of Dave Bates.

“Hey, whatcha doin’ with my hoss?” demanded the stranger.

Salvio stepped right up behind the big cowpuncher and clinked the barrel of a gun against the base of his skull. The man dropped like a falling sack.

“Fast, boys!” said Salvio.

They swept into the saddles, each of his chosen horse.

“Cut the other ropes. Cut the ropes and drive the bronc’s with us!” commanded Salvio.

“Stop ’em!” yelled the ringing voice of Steve Balen. “You day-blind owls, you’ve been and let the three of ’em walk right through you! Shoot! Get the hosses down . . . anything to stop ’em!”

But the knives of the three already had slashed right and left at the tethering ropes, and now with busy quirts they beat the horses into flight.

Guns began behind them.

Dave Bates distinctly heard the sound of a rifle bullet bang into the head of a horse running beside him. It was a noise like the impact of a club. The horse went down in a heap and turned a somersault. And then the whole covey of horses and the three riders crashed through the underbrush and stormed up the valley.

Behind them, there was such a yelling, such a frenzy of hysterical rage, that wild

Indians could not have raised a greater tumult. Men were still firing from back there. Pounds of lead were vainly searching the air, but, with every moment, the fugitives sped farther away toward safety, and, with every moment, the night was thickening the air. Salvio had been right. It was the moment of the most treacherous light in all the twenty-four hours of the day. To look down the avenues of the trees was like looking into deep water.

Life was being given back to the three of them, and Dave Bates felt that he was enjoying separately and specially every breath that he drew.

They drew out of the valley and up a steep hill, on the shoulder of which Salvio drew rein and let the horses breathe.

“Gene,” said Dave Bates, “you done that as well as anybody in the world could’ve done it. You sure saved our hides . . . that nobody else could’ve done!”

“And what about Reata?” asked Gene Salvio angrily. “You’re always sayin’ that he can do anything. Could he’ve done what we three just done?”

“He couldn’t’ve done no better. It was a great job, and you did it all the way through, Gene,” said Bates.

And Harry Quinn heartily agreed.

“AT RUSTY GULCH”

Later, the three heard the loud river of the pursuit turn aside out of the valley, heading back, no doubt, toward the main road, and that gave the fugitives a chance to jog softly on through the night. Harry Quinn even suggested that they should turn back and try to get at the gold they had left behind them, but Salvio would not listen to that.

It was night now, he reminded them. Fires would be lighted here and there. By lantern light, people would probably begin to search the marsh to look for the buried treasure, because everyone must have known that the three fugitives could not possibly have taken away any great percentage of the stolen gold. Bates had two or three pounds in his pocket; that was all they had taken with them. Balen would be at the island, working hard to find the hiding place. No doubt it was because Balen was back there with part of his men that the rest of the crowd had taken the wrong trail. Be that as it might, the three had their skins whole, and they could be grateful for that.

Salvio said: “But maybe we ain’t through with a pile of trouble. That Steve Balen, he acted and he sounded to me like a gent that would stick tighter than a corn plaster. We’ll get to Pop Dickerman and find out what he’s got for us in his old brain. He’s always got ideas.”

“Yeah, he’s always got ideas,” said Dave Bates, “and we’ve always got the blood to bleed for ’em.”

All through that night they journeyed on patiently. And in the first thin gray of the dawn they raised the dim outlines of Rusty Gulch and, finally, of the high-backed barn in which Pop Dickerman lived, on the edge of the town.

They put up the horses in the shed behind the house barn. Then they went to the back door of the place, and Salvio knocked three times, paused, knocked twice again.

“Do it ag’in, louder,” said Harry Quinn. “He can’t hear that.”

“You don’t wanta forget that he’s a rat,” said Salvio. “He can hear everything.”

“He ain’t coming. There ain’t a squeak on the stairs or along the floor,” complained Bates.

“Sure there ain’t,” said Salvio. “What would a furry-faced rat like him be making a noise for?”

A moment later a voice said, behind the door. "Go around to the big room. I'll open up for you gents there."

"You see?" muttered Salvio to his companions, as they went around to the side of the old barn. "You gents can see Pop Dickerman every day of your lives, but you ain't never going to get used to him."

"Sure we ain't," agreed Bates. "Poison is hard to get used to, too."

There *was* a poison about the air of the place to those who knew it well. Few people knew the junk peddler as well as did these three henchmen of his. The knowledge of most was limited to the big piles of rubbish that rusted and slowly consumed the outer yard, or to the more valuable stuff that was piled on the floor or hung from the rafters of the mow of the barn. They knew these things, and the skill of Pop Dickerman in driving bargains, and the buzzard-like instinct which led him to appear on the scene the instant that a home was about to be broken up. But his three men could have talked out whole books of information concerning this practiced and consummate fence. They knew his far-spreading knowledge, the underground wires by which he kept in touch with numerous scenes and opportunities for crime which he farmed out, at a high price, to his favored few criminals. They knew scores of his personal idiosyncrasies. But also they were constantly aware of a wall which barred them away from a great intimacy with the strange fellow.

The sliding door was noisily unlocked from the inside and pushed back. They saw the tall, stooping silhouette of Pop Dickerman and the whole room vaguely illumined by a single hanging lamp that was suspended from a central rafter of the mow and cast just enough light to make the nearer heaps of metal work and crystal on the floor glow, and all those great bundles of assorted junk that hung down at the ends of ropes and chains. Some of them were always turning slowly, winding and unwinding.

Before he went inside, Dave Bates looked up at the spectacle and muttered: "Like dead men hanging in rows, Pop. I always think of dead men hanging in rows."

Pop Dickerman made that gesture of his, ten thousand times repeated and always in vain, that attempt to smooth down the fur of whiskers and hair that covered his long face almost to the eyes.

"Maybe it's a kind of a prophecy, Dave," he said. "Maybe it's kind of like a lot of mirrors, and you see what's goin' to happen to you." He slid the door home behind them, the wheels that supported it running soundlessly on the track overhead.

Bates merely said: "You ain't funny, Pop. You ain't hardly ever funny, except when you don't know it."

The three of them gathered under the hanging lantern, and they threw themselves down on the various chairs and couches that were always standing at this point. They were continually changing, as one housewife or another found things here that were to her taste for the furnishing of her home. Only one article remained always, and that was the legless divan on which Pop Dickerman himself sat cross-legged in heelless slippers that were forever seeming about to fall from his feet. He took his place there now in the familiar attitude and lighted and commenced to suck at the water pipe that was his chief consolation. It made a faint bubbling sound that was not unmusical, and a heavy perfume began to spread through the air of the strange old barn.

“So it was a bust for you, boys?” said Dickerman.

“What makes you think that?” asked Harry Quinn, rather angrily.

“Not a bust? You got the goods, but you didn’t bring ’em back with you?” said Dickerman.

“They run us down in the marsh, this side of Jumping Creek,” said Salvio. “You know the place?”

“Yeah. I know,” said Dickerman. “So you buried the stuff, and then you managed to wriggle through ’em and come away?”

“How’d you guess that?” asked Salvio curiously.

“Because you look beat, but not all beat. You missed the money, but you kept your hides for yourselves, eh?” said Dickerman.

His husky voice continued with other words that were not quite intelligible. The sound of that voice made one expect to see the face of a man dying with years, but the bright, rat-like sparkling of the eyes was a continual denial of weakness. He was not a pretty picture in his soiled flannel undershirt, with one half of a pair of suspenders strung across his shoulder.

“We got off with our hides, and lucky,” said Dave Bates. “Lucky because we had Salvio along to bluff a way through for us. I never seen a cooler or a smarter thing, Pop!”

“Yeah, Gene is cool, and Gene is smart, but that ain’t money in *my* pocket,” answered Dickerman. “When you boys goin’ to go back and get the stuff?”

Harry Quinn generally left the talking for his more clever companions, but now his heart was full, and speech overflowed. “Listen,” he said, “there was seven, eight hundred pounds of gold dust, Pop. And the gents are going to be digging up that marsh for a thousand years till they find the money. And the whole town seen us, when we was riding out of the place.”

“The town didn’t see you, if you didn’t do some shootin’,” said Dickerman. “I

know that town, and I know the way that it sleeps. That time of day, you shouldn't've had no trouble!"

"There was a red-headed fool in the place," said Salvio. "I had to plug him."

"Dead?" said Dickerman.

"No. Not dead. Just enough to make him holler."

"Good," said Dickerman. "It's better not to have 'em dead. A death trail stays red for a long while. The other kinds, they blot out pretty quick. A wind and a rain and a coupla weeks, and they're blotted out. But you boys wouldn't want to go back into that neck of the woods to get at the stuff?"

"Why should we wanta be lynched?" asked Salvio.

"Seven, eight hundred pounds of gold," sighed Dickerman. "Then who else can we get to salvage the stuff?"

"There ain't anybody," said Salvio. "Anybody that was smart enough to get at the stuff. . . would be crooked enough to keep it for himself."

Bates said: "Nope. There's one man."

"Who?" challenged Salvio.

"Reata!" exclaimed Bates.

"Reata? Reata?" said Salvio, in a jealous anger. "You'd think that he was a tin god on a stick, the way you gents talk about him. He's as big a crook as anybody."

"He's big, but he ain't a crook," said Pop Dickerman. "It's fun to him. Bates is right. But how would we get at Reata? He hates my heart. I ain't a clean enough kind of a man, the way I live, to suit Reata. Besides, the Gypsy gal has him."

"Are they married?" asked Bates.

"They ain't married, but they will be as soon as they get the house they're workin' on finished. They're buildin' it together. They're a mighty happy pair, boys! They've raked together a little money. They got their cabin started, and they're goin' to have a little land and start a small herd of cattle chewin' the grass."

"How d'you know all these things?" asked Salvio. "Been up there?"

"I got wires stretched around," said Pop Dickerman. "They keep me in touch. Yeah, and I think a lot about Reata. There's one that would've opened up a lot of money for himself and me. There's a fine, useful sort of a gent. There's an edge on Reata that would cut through chilled steel like butter, and it kind of grieves me, boys, to think that I lost him. So I just keep in touch a little. I dunno another man that could do the job of getting that gold back for us, except Reata. Them that could do it, they'd keep the loot. But Reata, you could trust him with your blood."

"That's the kind of a fool he is," said Salvio, sneering.

"Wait a minute, Gene," said Harry Quinn, scowling. "You're a damned smart

gent, and you're a cool gent. But you and Dave and me, we all owe our skins to Reata."

Salvio's face darkened, but he said nothing.

Bates said: "It's the Gypsy gal that hangs up Reata. Pry him loose from her, and we might get him back to us ag'in."

"Pry him loose?" said Dickerman. "Aye, and I been dreamin' about that, too. How would you pry him loose? Kidnap her? He'd find her, if it took the rest of his life."

"Get *her* to give him the run," said Bates.

"Her? She loves the ground he walks on," said Dickerman. "A kind of a hard gal, she is, but she loves Reata."

"Suppose you made her think it was for his own good?" said Dave Bates.

"How could you make her think that?" asked Quinn.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Dickerman. He raised a grimy hand, commandingly, for silence, and then he said: "Don't speak, nobody. Bates has give' me an idea. Wait till it hatches out of the egg, and it's goin' to fly like an eagle."

VI

“REATA’S HOME”

Up in the Ginger Mountains, the three riders found their quarry. Reata had not picked out the site of his home very wisely. He had it at just the wrong distance from the town of Ginger Gulch. He had chosen a site where no wagon road passed into the town and, therefore, where all supplies would need expensive hauling. He had picked out a small valley with a small lake in the bottom of it like a little blue eye that always had, even in August, some white of snow to reflect as well as the deeps of the wide heaven. There were pine forests on the march up and down the sides of the mountains as far as the bald summits above the timberline. And in fact, there was everything that the eye of the nature lover could ask for, but very little to please the wit of a good cattleman. That valley would be a hot furnace in summer, and it would be an ice box in winter. Furthermore, there were plenty of trees and not enough grass.

The three men of Dickerman, perched like patient birds of prey on a lofty mountain shoulder and looking down, day by day, upon the center of the valley and the little cabin that was growing there, took careful heed of all of these things. They commented upon the picture to one another.

Dave Bates, who had prospected the scene closer than any of the others, said: “They done only one sensible thing. They built the horse shed before they started on the house. But damn me, unless they get a hustle on them, they gotta live in the cattle shed, instead of the house, this winter. They ain’t got it finished, and they ain’t going to have it finished, even if they keep on working all day. You take Reata, he never was made for a worker . . . you take a Gypsy gal . . . was there ever one that ever was worth a hang, when it come to work? But I’ll tell you what, that there Miriam is doing a damn’ sight better than you ever would suspect. She does the licks of hard work, mostly, and Reata, he sets back and gives ideas.”

“I was down there the other day,” said Harry Quinn, “snaking up to the edge of the woods where I could watch. Each of them had hold on an adze, and they was making the chips fall off of the bellies of a couple of logs. But after Reata had hit a few licks, he takes a stop, looks around him, and rolls a cigarette.

“‘Hey,’ says the gal. ‘Go on and work, loafer!’

“‘You don’t understand me, Miriam,’ says he. ‘I’ll tell you what the facts are. I don’t get ideas, when I’m swinging an axe all day long. But now and then, when I

stop, things happen inside my head . . . I get good hunches.’

“‘What sort of hunches have you got now?’ says Miriam.

“‘Well,’ he says ‘just for a sample, I’ve thought of damming up that creek, yonder, some day, and out of that we’ll get the water power to work a sawmill, and then we won’t have to go to all this hard work in fixing the logs for the house.’

“‘Are you going to build a sawmill so that you can build a house?’ says she.

“‘The idea,’ says he, ‘is that afterwards we’ll be able to ship out timber. There’s a fortune in good, clear pine, right around here.’

“‘Sure there is,’ says she, ‘if you can get the mountains to open up so that we can ship the stuff out. It would cost the weight of those trees in gold, pretty near, to haul them from here to Ginger Gulch. And even after you got them there, what sort of a market is there for them? People can cut down enough timber in their back yards to build ten new houses apiece.’

“‘Miriam,’ says Reata, ‘I’m sorry to hear you talk like this. People that haven’t a good faith in a thing, they’re going to have the bottom drop out of whatever they’re doing.’”

“‘Did Reata talk like that?’” asked Dave Bates suddenly.

“‘Sure he did,’” answered Quinn. “‘And I heard him, and I saw him leaning on his adze, and smoking, and making big gestures, and the girl just standing back and sort of laughing at him with her eyes.’”

“‘If that’s what’s in the air,’” said Dave Bates, “‘then I’ve got the idea. Reata’s going to make the trip into Ginger Gulch with the roan mare and a couple of mules. He’ll be back tomorrow afternoon . . . and instead of going down to the village yonder, where she mostly spends the nights, Miriam is going to camp out at the new cabin and hold things down, you might say. Well, boys, listen to me talk. I got ideas. I need some help, but I don’t need very much.’”

In fact, they found that the idea of Dave Bates was so neat, so full of wise invention and novelty, that even Gene Salvio, who was apt to be critical of all ideas other than his own, readily admitted the possibilities in this scheme. That very afternoon, as soon as Reata was seen to ride out of the valley and out of sight along the newly worn trail to Ginger Gulch, the three criminals descended to their work. They began at the cattle and horse shed, and they worked there for some time, before Dave Bates took his horse back through the woods, and came singing along under the trees, and so out into the clearing beside the lake.

It was so beautiful, down here in the valley, that Dave forgot all about the practical difficulties of raising cattle in any numbers on such a site. For the lake had a small beach of white sand and crystal quartz pebbles to set off the blue of the water

from the green of the meadow. The small waves washed in on the shore rapidly, filled with light out of the west, for the sun was still above the western summits; and the blood of Dave Bates also began to rush and hurry with happiness. He felt that he could decide, on the spur of the moment, that this was the most beautiful spot in the world; he would not need to hunt any farther.

The girl was still making her axe ring against the log. The chips flew far as she wielded the broad blade of fine steel that gave out a bell-like note at every stroke. Even a strong man can easily grow exhausted by such work, but the girl, swinging the tool with exhaustless grace, made rhythm take the place of muscle. She was in a sleeveless jacket of brown doeskin, and she was as brown as the soft leather.

She was still working, when a mite of a dog ran out, yipping, toward the horseman, a slender little thing with a body as sleek as that of a rat, and a fuzzy face like a duplicate, in the small, of the head of a wire-haired fox terrier. Dave Bates had almost forgotten Rags.

The barking made the girl turn. She was looking straight into the west, so that she had to shade her eyes to see Bates clearly. Then she stepped back to where a good new Winchester rifle leaned against a sawbuck.

“Why, if it isn’t old Dave! Hullo, Dave!” called the girl. “Glad to see you, old scout. Get down and rest your feet and tell me how’s things?”

“Hullo there, Miriam,” he said. “Things were never better.”

He swung down from the mustang and advanced with his hand stretched out. Little Rags, in a barking fury, planted himself in the path, with bared teeth ready to bite.

Bates, inwardly cursing the little dog, had to pause, while he saw the girl throw one fleeting glance at the rifle. After that fractional hesitation, she came straight up to him and shook his hand with a firm grip. She always dazzled him a little. In spite of the ruddy bronze of her skin and the roughness of her clothes, she looked to him like the sort of a jewel that should be laid up in velvet. Perhaps, he thought, it was because of the deep blueness of her eyes under her black hair and lashes.

“How’s every little thing with you?” she was repeating heartily. “Found any good fat beef to rustle lately, Dave? Any bank safes been open when you were going by?”

The nearness of that hit made him stare at her a bit.

“You look right up to yourself,” he told her. “Stop that dog yapping, will you?”

She snapped her fingers. Rags jumped back and sat down between her feet, but still he growled very softly at the stranger.

“You know me, Rags,” said Dave Bates. “You know me, boy. I’m a bunky of your big boss, ain’t I? Don’t you know me, boy?”

“Keep your hand away from him, or he’ll take a finger off,” said Miriam. “Reata put him on guard over me, before he rode into town, and Rags knows it’s a serious job. Any old day, a dog-gone mountain lion might walk down here and take a pass at me, if it weren’t for old Rags, here, ready to tear that lion to bits. Same way with men. Rags doesn’t trust anything until his boss comes back and calls him off the job.”

Dave Bates laughed. He sat down on the white of the log at which she had been chipping.

“You look fine,” he said, insisting on that pleasant theme.

“Sure I look fine. Why wouldn’t I look fine? Three squares a day for the old girl, and plenty of exercise to keep up her appetite.”

“And plenty of Reata for sauce,” said Dave Bates. “He keeps the world turning pretty fast, I bet.”

“Yeah. You’d bet that, wouldn’t you?” she said. “Full of rope tricks and fun, you’d think, wouldn’t you? Babbling all day long, and telling stories about places he’s been or ought to have been?”

“He’s a great card,” said Dave Bates.

“Sure he’s a great card,” agreed the girl. “The sort of a card that wins the trick in the poker game, all right. But up here in the mountains, he’s more of a poet. He takes a lot of time off to fill his eye with the scenery. He has his dreams by day, and don’t you ever doubt it, Dave.”

“Good old Reata,” said Dave Bates. “There’s nobody like him. Kind of pleased with this spot?”

“He likes it a lot,” she agreed. “But as I say, he’s getting the soul of a poet . . . or a promoter. He likes the taste of this air so much that he’d like to bottle it and send it to his friends. He’s built a great big hotel there in the meadow, right beside the lake, and he’s filled it with high-class dudes, at ten dollars a day.”

“I can see ’em down there, taking the sun right now, can’t I?” said Dave Bates, staring from under his lean little hand.

“Yeah, that’s easy. But do you see the bucket line that runs up to the top of the mountain, there?”

“No, I don’t quite make that out.”

“Look harder,” said the girl. “That’s for the guests to go up to the top of the mountain and enjoy the view. And maybe you saw the big fences all around the water divide?”

“I must’ve seen them,” said Bates.

“That’s because Reata has made this place into a preserve,” said the girl, “and,

when the dudes take a walk, they find a lot of tame deer wandering around ready to eat sugar out of their hands. The bill for cube sugar is one of the big items over there in the hotel.”

“Yeah, I bet it is,” said Dave. “But outside of the tame deer and what not, and the hotel, and all of that, what are you and Reata going to live on?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “And I don’t care, what’s more. If I can once get him to pass the old ring onto my finger and say, ‘I do,’ a couple of times in front of a preacher, I don’t care what happens, after that.”

“You like that *hombre*, all right,” said Dave Bates.

“Yeah, I’m a little queer that way,” she said.

“There’s nobody like him,” insisted Dave. “But when does the marriage come off?”

“As soon as the house is finished. He’s proud, Reata is. Many a time he sits out here and shakes his head and says that he can’t marry me till he has a home to take me to.”

“Maybe he says that many a time while he sits out here and watches you work?” suggested Bates.

“Many a time,” she agreed, “but what do I care? You know the old boy, Dave. He loves work the way a cat loves wet weather. I suppose we’ll eat more beef than we raise. But that’s all right. It’s a good old world, if you’ve got it on a rope.”

“And Reata has the rope,” said Bates. “What’s his real name, by the way?”

“I’m to find that out the wedding day, for a present,” said Miriam. “But what brought you sashaying down the mountainside, singing so sweet, Dave?”

“I came up here to see Reata,” said Dave.

“You’re not going to, though. Reata’s away in town. He won’t be back till tomorrow. What’s the matter, Dave? Has Pop Dickerman got another job too big for his boys to handle? Is he sending out a hurry call for Reata?”

Bates blinked at her shrewdness. “This time it’s a friendly turn to do Reata,” he said. “You wouldn’t think that rat of a Dickerman, or three roughs like me and Gene and Harry Quinn, would travel very far to do a fellow a good turn, would you?”

“Yes, you’d travel a ways,” said the girl. “How good is the turn?”

“I see it’s no good at all,” said Bates. “You’ve got him nailed down, and he won’t move.”

“You want to move him, do you?”

“I want to keep him alive,” said Bates calmly.

VII

“THE ROAR OF A GUN”

The quiet of Dave Bates's voice gave his words the necessary solemnity. He saw the brightness of her eyes narrow at him.

“Go on, Dave,” she invited presently. “It must be a big idea. Why not sell it to the weaker half of the family-to-be?”

“It's not any good talking to you, Miriam,” he told her. “Sure, you're fond of Reata. You're so dog-goned fond that you've about anchored him. And the waves are going to tear hell out of him, when the first storm comes up. And the storm is coming now.”

“What kind of a storm?” she asked.

Bates shrugged his shoulders as he answered: “They're going to get him, Miriam. They got him located, and they're working on him already. I've said too much already. But as long as you asked, I had to tell you.”

“You think he ought to move away from here?”

“I do.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Just keep moving, or the wave'll drown him sure.”

“Who's in the storm?”

“What's the good of going on?” said Dave Bates. “You know how it is. Reata is a clean-bred one. There ain't a better fellow in the world. I owe my skin to him. I'd be two times dead, except for Reata. But while he was helping me and some of the others, he sure stepped hard on a lot of toes. There's gents been getting together that want his scalp, and they're going to have it, if they can. But . . . oh, well, what's the use?”

“I sort of think you mean what you say,” answered the girl.

“Do I? You bet everything down to the spurs that I mean it,” said Bates. “But what's the good of talking? Anyway, he's pretty smart . . . he may beat them, no matter how many they are.”

“Dave, you've got to talk out,” she commanded.

“It's no good talking out,” he declared. “You've got Reata anchored here, as I said before, and this is where he's got to stay. Maybe I can come over and hang around for a while and help a little. I don't know. Depends on how much rope old Dickerman will give me.”

“There’re going to come up here and try to cut down Reata? Is that the story?” she asked.

“Quit it, will you?” said Bates. “I’ve talked too much. But . . . well, Reata means a whole lot to me. Well . . . show me around the place, will you?”

She hesitated, her face dark with thought, before she said: “All right, I’ll show you. There’s two things to see. The cabin and the shed. Take the cabin first. Those uprights are the cabin uprights, old son. Those beams are the cabin beams, and, when we get the logs laid, we’ll have walls around it, and, when the roof goes on, we’ll have a roof on our little cabin. See?”

“Sure. It’s a great idea.” Bates chuckled. “Let’s have a slant at the shed, then.”

She walked over with him.

“A sliding door, and everything,” said Dave Bates, putting his hand on the finger slot, and pulling back. The natural way would have been to lean a shoulder against the door and walk it back, but he had the best reason in the world for not doing that. As the door opened to the width of a yard, a gun roared, and a huge charge of shot whistled out through the gap.

Bates, with a yell, sprang back, a gun flashing out into each hand.

“Get back to the house!” he yelled at the girl, and raced promptly around to the rear of the shed.

But when he reached the spot, he found the girl turning the opposite corner, her face wild and set, and a lean, dangerous-looking .32 revolver in her grip. She could use that gun, and how efficiently she could use it, Bates knew perfectly well. She stared about her at the trees that advanced right down to the rear of the long shed.

“They’re inside! We got ’em!” shouted Bates.

“Wait a minute,” said Miriam calmly. “There’s the gun that did the trick.” She pointed at a single-barrel shotgun of large bore that was strongly propped up against a sapling, its muzzle projecting through the rear wall of the shed, having been pushed through a large knothole. “That’s it,” said Miriam. “And there’s the string attached to it. You see?”

“I don’t make it out? What do you mean?” asked Dave Bates.

She was pale, but very steady. She gave Bates one long, searching look, and then her doubt seemed to leave her.

“I guess it’s news to you, all right,” she said. “But coming right on top of what you’ve been telling me, I thought for a minute. . . .” She did not tell what her thought for a minute had been, but led the way around to the front of the shed.

Bates grabbed her as she started to go through the door. “You don’t know what hellishness is fixed up inside!” he said.

“There won’t be anything more,” she declared. And she slipped away from him into the interior.

There was nothing to be seen except the long line that ran past the ends of the stalls and connected with the front door. The pull of the door traveled back to the trigger of the gun. It was the simplest and almost the oldest species of deathtrap in the world.

“Now I get it,” said Bates, muttering the words hardly aloud, “Suppose that somebody put his shoulder against the sliding door to walk it open, the way most folks would . . . ? But who would’ve been the first one to open this door ordinarily, Miriam?”

“Reata,” she said faintly. “Reata, when he comes back from town. He’d put Sue up in here and turn the mules loose to graze.”

Bates left her, rounded the shed, and took the shotgun out of the brace. It had been his idea, but Gene Salvio and Quinn had executed it perfectly. He was proud of himself, and he was proud of them. Two heads are better than one, and three pairs of hands are the best of all.

When he went back, he found the girl sitting on the log beside the lake, absently stroking Rags, who lay beside her. The great shadow of the biggest western mountain, streaming palpably through the clean mountain air, had fallen across her and half the lake so that the waves made only a dull glimmering as they kept rushing in toward the shore.

The sound of them pleased Dave Bates. He saw that he was winning; and he determined to say nothing more.

The girl looked up at him. “Have you got the makings of a cigarette?” she asked.

He proffered them to her, and she twisted up a smoke in short order, and accepted his light. Breathing the smoke deep, she blew it out again in wisps.

“It tastes good . . . but a little dizzy,” she said. “First smoke I’ve had since Reata took control.”

“He doesn’t like to see a girl smoke. He’s funny, that way,” said Dave Bates. And he began to guess, grimly, what this breaking of the prohibition might mean to the future of the girl and Reata.

“Yeah. He’s funny, that way.”

She pointed toward the shed, without herself looking in that direction, and Dave Bates stared down at the perfect brown modeling of that arm.

“He wouldn’t have looked so funny . . . with that load of buckshot through him.”

“It was big. I heard it whistle,” said Dave. “I guess it would’ve tore a hole through a tree, all right. But maybe Reata wouldn’t’ve got it. Maybe something

would've happened. . . .”

“Shut up, Dave!” she commanded.

She closed her eyes, smiling very faintly. He could see that she was sick with pain, but she took it like a man, quietly, digesting the poison.

“I've got to cut him loose,” she said finally.

“What you mean?” asked Dave Bates hastily.

“You know what I mean,” she told him. “I've got to do what you came up here to make me do. I've got to cut Reata adrift.”

“You can't,” said Bates. “You can't tell him to leave the place. He's crazy about you, Miriam. He'd never give up marrying you.”

“Wouldn't he?” she asked sourly. “You don't know me, partner. You don't even half know me, yet. Oh, I'll cut him loose. I'll make a free man of him.” She was silent again, with the same sick, grim smile on her face, and her hand went gently over the sleek back of Rags.

“Now I guess I get what you mean,” said Bates. “You mean you're going to pretend that you're tired of him, or something like that?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“You can't do it,” said Bates. “You love him. You couldn't live without him. You. . . .”

“I'd soon be living without him, if a pound of buckshot was socked into him,” she said.

He bowed his head, as though to this convincing argument he could find no possible rejoinder. “I'm sorry,” said Bates at last. And, in fact, there really was a measure of regret in him. He needed Reata. Dickerman needed Reata. The whole crooked gang needed that fearless and cunning magician's touch in their affairs. And yet Bates was sorry for the girl. “You tell me how I can help. Tell me what to do,” he pleaded.

“I'll tell you what to do. Get out of my sight!” she exclaimed.

VIII

“MIRIAM PLAYS A PART”

When Bates was gone, she went slowly about the place, all that evening. In the middle of the night she sat up in the mountain cold and breathed the sweetness of the pine trees until the breath of them was like music to her, and the trees filled her eyes. The next day it was the same thing—and she went from spot to spot, staring, filling her eyes with the many pictures for the last time, until every curve of the mountains, of the lake shore, was fixed in her mind like so many human faces.

Reata would not be back until the middle of the afternoon. He would come down that slope, racing the roan mare, yelling like a happy, wild Indian, and the mules would be left to wander slowly along at their own gait, behind him.

She wished that she could have a longer interim before he returned. She wanted to have longer to steady herself for the part that she had to play. She wanted to school herself more, and build up her resistance. However, that day ran on heedlessly, swiftly, like the last hours of a condemned prisoner in a death house. And when the time came, she was in place and taking the part that she had decided on.

She had dug out some tobacco and wheat-straw papers from among the things of Reata, and, when she heard the long, echoing whoop and then the clatter of hoofbeats coming down the rough of the trail, she was posted beside the lake, seated on that log where she had been working when Dave Bates appeared and darkened the world for her. She made her cigarette, and was smoking it calmly when Reata came whooping into view from among the trees.

She usually met him, running. He would catch her, and she would leap, and so they would finish the trip to the front of the cabin. But today she merely turned and waved a hand at him.

She saw him check Sue abruptly. The long, ugly, unmatchable roan machine fell at once to a trot, then halted nearby. Rags flew into a passion of delighted welcoming, so shrill that it darted needles through the brain.

Reata stopped that demonstration with one harsh word. Rags slunk at the heels of his beloved master.

The girl kept herself smiling, calmly, impersonally. She tried to reduce that brown face of Reata to a mere picture in which she had little interest. She tried to forget that the gray eye could burn with yellow fire, and all the quick, electric nature of this man whose like was not in the world. A hand was gripping her heart, but she kept on

smiling, and, as she smoked, she blew the thin cloud into the air.

He leaned over her. She turned up her face, as one submitting to a kiss, but he stepped suddenly back again.

“Hell’s broken loose, eh?” he said.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Where?” he asked. “Around the place, or just inside you?”

“Just inside me,” she answered.

“Quiet hell?” he said.

“Yes.”

“That’s the worst kind,” answered Reata.

He sat down on a stump opposite her. Even in his sitting and his rising, he was not like other men, but there seemed to be in him springs of steel strength. She looked at the broad shoulders and the strong neck and the high, fine poise of the head. He was all strength above and all wiry speed below.

“Maybe it’s the worst kind,” she agreed, looking out over the lake.

“Stop smiling that way,” commanded Reata.

“Yes, my lord,” she said, and kept on smiling, although every bit of it hurt.

“Smoking, eh? Just to show that the rebellion goes deep?” he asked.

“Oh, you know,” she answered. “Kind of got tired of things.”

“What things?”

“Oh, everything.” She waved at that scene around her.

“And me?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders again. There was a frightful desire in her to fling herself at him and pour out words and weep. For his own sake she had to go through with this efficiently.

“I see,” said Reata, making his voice very bright and cheerful, so that she recognized the steel in him for the thousandth time. He could do it, of course. If she could smile at disaster, he could laugh at it. “You have the old hunger, eh? Want to go back with the Gypsies again? Want to see old Queen Maggie and get the whiff of her big black cigars? All of that?”

“You know, when a fellow gets bored, there’s not much to say about it, is there?”

“No, I don’t suppose so,” said Reata.

He kept sitting up straight on the stump, looking directly at her, while she looked out past him at the scene from which she would soon be cut off. It seemed to her that every line of the thing cried out eternal happiness to her.

“Let’s be logical. Let’s go sashaying right through the details, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” she answered.

“Take it like this. The mountains . . . they’re lonely. If a girl is left up here . . . twenty-four long hours . . . she’s bound to be lonely. You know, Miriam, I suggested that you should go back to the boarding house, down there in the village.”

“I know. I thought I’d try the place out, though.”

“You’ve been feeling it come up in you for a long time, eh?” he asked.

“Well . . .,” she said.

“Don’t mind me. I want to get at the inside of the truth, if you’ll tell me.”

“Talking won’t be much good,” she declared.

“I won’t persuade you,” said Reata. “Not a quarter of an inch. I’d rather burn my tongue out by the roots than say one word to persuade you.”

“Thanks,” said the girl flatly. And she hated the rude, ugly meanness of that single word. After all, she had to make him despise her. That was the only way to cut deep enough.

There was a bit of a pause, because that single word had hit him hard. But after a moment he went on: “The mountains are lonely, eh? Well, we could change that. We could go to a town, or to a city.”

“And live in a dirty flat, eh? No, it’s better to have shanty life in the open than shanty life in a town.”

“Put it that way, then. The worst thing has been I. Is that it?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the girl.

“Try to speak it out. I’ll take it.”

“No, you wouldn’t have a broken heart.” She sneered. She could see that sneer eat at him like an acid, also.

“My heart won’t break. It may bend a little, but it won’t break,” he said.

“Of course not! There are a lot more girls in the world. I know that.”

“Of course, there are,” he said, with that deadly good humor.

“And there’s the other side of it,” she went on, with careful brutality.

“Yes, that’s true. A lot more men. I think you’ve always looked over my head a bit.”

At that, she laughed. It was a thing she had felt that she would be unable to do, but the exigencies of the rôle supplied, suddenly, the strength that she needed for the acting. She was able to laugh, and then to say: “Yes, quite a bit over your head.”

After that he remarked: “Well, it’s the finish, all right. Mind you, I’m not whining, and I don’t want to do any persuading. I’m just saying this . . . and I can be proud, too, even if it damns me . . . but I want to say that I’ll do anything. Anything that’ll help to put things back where they used to be.”

“What could you do?” she demanded.

“I’m a lazy hound. I know that. I’ve sat around here and built castles in the air. I suppose you’ve even done more of the work around here than I’ve done. I’m sorry about that. I think I could change it. I really think that I could change myself for you.”

“Sure you could. For a week. Then you’d be the same tramp that you’ve always been.”

“I want to kill you, somehow, when you say that,” Reata said softly.

“Do you?” asked Miriam sweetly, the devil in her eyes and her smile.

“Because I start thinking of a lot of things,” said Reata. “I start thinking about all sorts of things such as . . . well, the way you’ve sat and looked at me, up here . . . the hours we’ve had . . . good, clean hours . . . the cleanest in my life. I’ve been thinking that the world was all made of blue and gold, and you the middle of it. That’s what I’ve been thinking. That’s what. . . .” He jumped to his feet.

“Go on,” she said. “Finish the speech.”

“All right,” said Reata. “I’ll finish it. If you’ve been double-crossing me all this time, playing a part like a sneaking little actress on a stage . . . why, it’s high time for us to split up.”

“All right, chief,” she said. She began to make another cigarette.

“But I can’t believe it, Miriam,” he said. “I feel as if you’d have to change, even if I touched you . . . and. . . .”

“Try it, honey,” said the girl. And she put back her head and smiled lazily up at him.

“Miriam,” said Reata, “you’re only a. . . .”

“Say it,” said the girl.

“No, I won’t say it. I won’t think it. It makes me sick.”

“Want me to say just one little thing?” she asked.

“Say whatever you please.”

“All the way through I kept remembering, but only lately it’s been beginning to grind on the bone. I mean, what *you* are.”

“Say it, Miriam,” he urged.

“A dirty little sneak thief and pickpocket,” said the girl.

She looked down suddenly. The world was spinning. She knew that she was maintaining the sneering smile, but she also knew that one touch, one breath, one word would shatter the last of her brittle strength. She had struck her last blow.

Well, it was enough.

“All right,” he said. “I’ve been a sneak thief and a pickpocket. All right. You’ve a right to say that. It just seems sort of rotten . . . but that’s all right, too. I’ll sashay

along. I'll take Sue. The rest of the stuff . . . oh, it may be worth something. The mules . . . the Gypsies would like to have 'em, and you can load 'em down with the portable junk. So long, Miriam." He stood over her. His voice remained clear and easy. "You know," he continued, "if you were what you look like to me, I'd get down on my knees and eat dirt for you. I'm going to get out fast, so that I can keep a bit of what I thought you were in the back of my mind. I hope I never have to curse my soul with the sight of your face again."

IX

“REATA’S ENTERTAINMENT”

When Reata rode the roan mare over the trail again, he was heading south, and he went by a clump of trees out of which three pairs of human eyes watched him with interest.

“White and smiling,” Dave Bates said, as the rider passed. “Boys, didn’t that gal do a good job on him? She turned his stomach, and she slapped his face, and all he wants to do now is to find a nice little hot piece of hell so that he can break it apart and scatter it where it’ll do the most people the most good.”

“He’s going to do that same thing, and he’s going to do it quick,” said Harry Quinn. “And what a lot of hell he *could* scatter around, if he made up his mind.”

“Oh, I dunno,” said Gene Salvio, who seemed to be burned by the praise of other men, and physically marred by it. “All he’s likely to do is to get a slug of lead under his ribs. Don’t forget that the fool won’t never carry no gun.”

“It’s a pretty fast hand that can beat him with guns,” said Quinn, “if he’s in striking distance with that reata of his, and anything up to forty feet is his meat. Don’t forget that. Don’t forget all the tough gunfighters that have gone to hell on account of Reata. Don’t forget the damndest man that was ever on this earth . . . I mean Bill Champion, if you got any doubts.”

“He robbed me of my chance at Champion,” growled Salvio.

“He robbed you of a chance to push daisies. Come on, boys,” said Bates. “We better cut along behind him and see where he goes.”

*

Reata went as far as the first town. It was not much of a place. Three roads ran together in a mountain valley, and that was enough excuse to make a bit of a village sprout up.

Reata went to the saloon and looked over the crowd. They were big men, strong men, fierce men. They were true mountaineers, of the sort that swung axes in lumber camps, and fight with hands or knives or guns for the fun of the thing. And there was a sprinkling of hardy cowpunchers in that lot, their Colts bulging under their coats.

He could not have picked out a better crowd for the purpose that he had in mind. He wanted hard rock on which to grind the hard, rough steel of his temper to a fine edge.

He took his rope out of his coat pocket, where the forty feet of that slender line of rawhide and mystery slumped into a not too bulky knot. He unraveled a knot or two with a gesture, and he began to make that rope perform for him.

The men at the bar turned and looked at him and grinned. The men at the tables along the wall grinned, also. Other men came from the back rooms, leaving their card games for a little time and staying till they forgot the course of their play.

For they saw that lithe reata jump snake-like into the air. They saw it twist and turn as though possessed of its own brain and messenger nerves and obedient muscles. They saw it roll in a double and a single wheel on the floor. They saw it tangle and untangle in the air, making swift, melting patterns that kept dissolving into one another.

“And look at here!” bawled a voice, over a round of brisk applause that came in the middle of the act. “What is that stuff all good for, except to make the kids laugh?”

Reata smiled pleasantly on the big man with the big voice. This was no common lumberjack—this the pale face of a professional gambler and the wide, thick shoulders and brutal jaw of a prize fighter.

“It makes gentlemen take off their hats to the music,” said Reata, and the next instant the snaky loop of his reata had jerked the hat from the head of the big man. Once in the air, the good Stetson stayed there. It was sent spinning to the ceiling. It was caught before it reached the floor and driven whirling upward again. In the narrow, encircling arm of the rope it darted toward the window, out through it, and back again, and finally it was deposited, once more, on the head of its owner, although a good deal awry.

At this feat of legerdemain, a loud roar of pleasure burst out of the chorus of those wide throats.

And beyond the window Harry Quinn muttered to Salvio: “Look at the yaller devil in the eyes of Reata. He’s looking for trouble, and the big feller is going to give it to him.”

Reata, at the end of his show, had taken off his hat, and now he was passing it, making a little bow to each man in turn. And a veritable shower of wealth poured into the hat. Quarters were the smallest coins. And there were dollars, too. One man took a whole handful of silver out of his coat pocket and chucked it into the hat, while the others cheered.

But when Reata came to the pale-faced man, that angry gentleman made his contribution by kicking the hat out of Reata's hand. The silver sprang high into the air and rained down in a wide, bright shower. At this jest, the big fellow laughed uproariously.

The others laughed, also. The rougher the jest, the better they were fitted to appreciate it.

Reata, however, laid the flat of his hand along the cheek of the chief jester. The noise of the blow was loud. The spattering sound of it wiped out the loud mirth instantly, and left men staring, wide-eyed. It was apparent that the big fellow was a very well-known man.

He proved it now by whipping out a Colt and shouting: "Dance, you rat!" He plowed one furrow in the floor with his first shot. Then the gun hand was gripped by the supple, iron-hard loop of the lariat. The fingers were crushed flat out by that pressure. The Colt itself was jerked into the air, caught by Reata, and flung out the window.

The gambler, with a low moan of exquisite rage, hurled himself straight at Reata.

"The poor fool," said Harry Quinn, almost in sympathy.

But exactly what happened to the gambler, no eye in the room was swift enough to decipher. Certainly he missed the head of Reata with his long, driving punch, very scientifically delivered. Then he seemed to stumble even on the smoothness of the floor. He kept on stumbling, and, as he went past Reata, his feet flew from beneath him, and he landed flat on his face. There is nothing so discouraging as a belly flop even in the soft of water, but on a wooden floor it certainly shakes the spirits out of a man.

When the gambler got to his feet, there was a deafening yelling all around the room. Men were whooping and leaping in the ecstasy of their content. So the big man charged again. More warily, this time, with the straight left, jabbing in front of him to prepare his way. But if he moved more slowly, Reata sprang like a cat, and barely seemed to touch the gambler, who swerved once more, and fell again, flat on his face.

This time he sat up, sick and dizzy, and he found the noose of that pencil-thin lariat around his throat.

"Get up," said the voice of Reata, "and pick up all that money you spilled a while ago. Get up, but don't get any higher than your hands and knees, because it's better for dogs to keep on all fours. Hop to it, because, from the look of you, stranger, I'd like to take you apart and see what's inside the case."

The gambler was disheartened. It was plain that, if he picked up that money, he

would be shamed for the rest of his days. On the other hand, he felt that he had been involved with a hurricane against which he was helpless. But if he could not win with his own unaided hands, there were others who could help him. Three men had just come out of the gambling rooms at the back of the saloon. These three, the victim now picked up with his eyes, one by one.

Then he said: "I'd just like to see you make me do it."

This was to Reata, and the gambler tried to scramble to his feet. A flying loop of the lariat caught him and jerked him forward on his face once more. It was a massacre, and the crowd yelled, because massacres were what it liked.

But here a cold, snarling voice from the back of the room said: "Stranger, stick up your mitts and drop that rope of yours!"

Reata felt the presence of that leveled gun before he turned his head. He had wanted hot water, but perhaps this was a little higher temperature than he needed to find. And then, just behind him, through the open window of the saloon, two glittering pairs of Colts appeared, looking large as cannons to the startled eyes of the men inside.

"You fellers back up," said the voice of Harry Quinn. "Reata, come out through the front door. We got the skunk covered. Come on out. The three of us is all here, waitin' for you!"

"Come out?" exclaimed Reata. "Like the devil I will. You fellows come inside, and the drinks are all on me!"

Gene Salvio went in first, stepping lightly, head high, a gun ready in each hand, and the gunman at the back of the room faded away, guiltily, softly, from view.

Harry Quinn followed. Dave Bates was the last, because he had kept watch from the window till the last minute.

A thick silence embraced the saloon, till Reata called out: "Set 'em up, bartender. There's plenty of money on the floor, and it's got to be turned into whiskey before I get out of here. Open up your throats, boys, and pour the stuff down. My partner, there, on the end of the rope, he aims to get the money for us off the floor. Start in, dummy, and make the collection, and don't miss a dime!"

The gambler had tried three times, and he had failed. Three times was enough for him. Therefore, he proceeded with the work that Reata had directed, and went on his hands and knees, with a groaning soul, to do the labor. He knew it meant the entire West was closed to him from that moment forward, unless he chose to be followed by grins and muttered comments wherever he appeared. But, for that matter, there were other parts of the world. And certainly the West would be better without him. So he continued his work of gathering the silver, and the bartenders

busily turned the money, as bidden, into whiskey, so that the entire crowd was whooping and shouting long before Reata walked out of the place, followed by his three companions.

When the cool air of the night struck his face, he found that whiskey and excitement had not, after all, diminished the grim aching of his heart, and the world was as empty as it had been when he turned his back on that blue lake in the mountains.

However, a man must meet his obligations. And there was an audience here.

He said to Salvio: "Gene, I owe something to all of you fellows. Just what am I going to do about it?"

"Owe us something?" Salvio said. "Not a thing. We owe our hides to you, partner!"

"Forget it," said Reata. "I want something to fill my hands. Any of the three of you know what I can do to put in my time?"

“AGNES LESTER”

The marshes along Jumping Creek belonged to the estate of Colonel Percival Lester, but even if they had not, he probably would have taken charge of the organized search for the stolen gold of the Decker & Dillon Bank, because Colonel Lester—although his title was entirely complimentary—liked to find himself at the head of large numbers of men. Nothing pleased him more than to be revealed in riding boots and breeches, extending his arm and pointing with a riding crop as with a sword. His English outfit, contrasting with the sloppy casualness of the dress of Western riders, was like a uniform, distinguishing the leader from ordinary men.

The bank, of course, had offered a thumping big reward to the man or men who could find the hidden money, so that there was a hearty crowd of volunteers. However, the work had to be done on the colonel's land, and, therefore, he had the right of excluding any man he did not wish on the premises. The only fellows he could manage excluding would be fools refractory to his will. For the rest, the bigger the crowd the better, so that he could mount his finest horse and let it swagger slowly and proudly from point to point.

The colonel did more than direct the labor. He supplied the mule teams and the wagons and the tools for the moving down of earth and broken rock until a road had been built across the shallows of the marsh to the island in the center of it. For it was obvious that the island was the place where the three robbers must have buried the gold. They had remained there for a number of hours. Certainly they would not simply have thrown the treasure into the oblivion of the mud and water of the marsh.

So the island was searched. It was a hard job, because it was chiefly rock and full of crevices, but the colonel supplied plenty of blasting powder and drills and double jacks, and the work went merrily on. Since everybody in the county could not be employed, the first fifty men were used, every morning—the first fifty to appear at dawn. The colonel arranged this, and everyone admitted that this was eminently fair play. When the gold was found, the reward from the bank would be equitably divided among all the fifty. Even at that, each man would receive a tidy sum. In addition, the colonel hired and paid from his own pocket two armed guards who kept watch on the island every night.

The whole range had to admit that the colonel was an extremely public-spirited man. His high-fangled riding outfit was forgiven. He was quite the man of the day,

and, when he went by with a severe preoccupation on his handsome face, the men would pause in their work, for a moment, and nod good-naturedly toward him before they spat on their hands and resumed their toil. For he was, in fact, as fine a looking fellow as you could wish to see, with his big forehead and regular features and neat mustache. His jowls hung a bit—that was all.

This afternoon his daughter, Agnes, had come down to watch the work, and with her rode her fiancé, Thomas Wayland. If anything could have improved the good humor of the colonel, it was to have sight of this couple. He had faults to find with his daughter. To be sure, she was a very pretty blue and golden girl, but she lacked the poise, the dignity of mind and carriage which, he felt, should be inherent in every Lester. However, Tom Wayland more than made up for the defect. In lands and hard cash, the Waylands were to Rusty Gulch what Lester was to Jumping Creek. Tom Wayland was as tall as the colonel; he bore himself with an air of haughty aloofness that even the colonel could not have improved upon, and, like the colonel, he distinguished himself from the ordinary run of ranchmen by wearing, always, a very neat outfit of English riding togs. He was to marry Agnes Lester this same year, and, as the colonel looked at the pair, he was reinforced by his conviction that a necessary aristocracy, a highly bred and highly educated leisure class, the brains and the culture of a nation, would soon be growing up in the West. For the colonel thought of himself as a bright torch that illumined a portion of the barbarous darkness of the land, and he would hand on that torch to Tom Wayland.

It was a little unfortunate that his daughter did not love Tom Wayland, but, after all, children rarely know their own minds. How can they? He saw that it was, of course, far better for him to select her life mate, and he was glad that he had established, in his household, such a discipline that it would never enter her pretty little head to go against his will in any matter of importance.

So the colonel ranged slowly up and down the little island, overseeing the work, silently taking charge, occasionally extending his arm of authority and pointing out something with his riding crop. He had almost forgotten about the gold, to tell the truth, and he would have been rather shocked if he had known that one of the fellows who toiled here knew perfectly well where the treasure could be found.

That was Reata. When he had asked Salvio and the rest to find something for him to do, Dave Bates had explained the thing very briefly. There *was* a thing for Reata to do. Down there in the marsh by Jumping Creek was a lot of gold that had been buried, a long time ago, in chamois sacks. Lately, people had begun to hunt for the stuff, but they were laboring at the hard rocks of an island in the marsh. As a matter of fact, that gold was hidden in the hollow trunk of an old tree situated near

an end of the island. Why didn't the three of them go and get the stuff? Why, unfortunately, their faces were all known to the people of Jumping Creek, and not known favorably. If they went down to the marsh while the hubbub of the hunt for treasure was on, they would be promptly nabbed and put in jail. How had they come to know about the location of the treasure? They had just picked up a hint. Why not wait until the present search had failed, and the noise had died down? The trouble was that, when the island definitely was proved not to be the hiding place, the search would extend farther, and the first man who tapped that tree would be aware that the trunk of it was hollow.

Afterward, Salvio had drawn Bates aside and told him that it was folly to let Reata go without revealing to him the entire truth. But Bates answered, with a snarl: "Yeah? You think that he'd touch the stuff, if he knew that it was stolen money?"

"He'll hear about the robbery of the bank before he's been down there long," said Salvio.

"He'll have the stuff before he's had a chance to hear much," answered Bates.

That was why Reata was on the ground with nothing on his mind, except the very difficult task of getting the treasure away, and he was glad of the difficulty, because it prevented him from letting his thoughts drift too often back to that valley among the Ginger Mountains and the picture of Miriam. She was back with Queen Maggie and the tribe, by this time, he told himself. She was happy to be free. She was delighted with the old existence, and, when she thought of Reata, she yawned and shrugged her shoulders.

So Reata drew deeper breaths, and swung the big twelve-pound double jack in swifter, harder-striking circles, while his partner turned the drill slowly in the hole. There was no love of labor in Reata, and yet he persisted unwearyingly in his hammering, for those stringy muscles, that robbed his shoulders and his back and tapered down to wire-like tendons at his wrists, were so full of power that even the wielding of the twelve-pound jack was a simple matter to him. The heaviness of the work acted as a cure to his mental sickness. He did not even look up from time to time to mark the passing of the colonel in charge, and never raised his head higher than the body of the huge brindled mastiff that stalked up and down behind his master. As for Rags, he lay curled up in the shadow of a rock near Reata.

And then, as the dull drill was jumped out of the hole and a sharp one was put in its place, Reata stood back to breathe more deeply and wipe the sweat from his face. And it was at that moment that he saw Agnes Lester. He saw her not dimly, not vaguely and far off, as he told himself that he would always see women through the rest of his life, but she came intimately into his mind with the freshness of something

never beheld before. She was a new point; she was a beginning. He did not compare her with the dark beauty of Miriam. They were not comparable. He thought that Agnes Lester was as beautiful as an angel. For angels are blue and golden in their loveliness, surely. Who would paint a brunette as one of the songstresses of heaven or as one of those radiances among the clouds that saints and martyrs have a special permission to see? No, if a brunette is to be an angel, she will certainly not appear ministrant in the summer half of the future life.

But Reata was not thinking about brunettes. He was not thinking about Miriam. He was stepping out of this life, out of this world into—well, into a rosy dawn where all that is noble and true and beautiful and good is not a prospect, but an accomplished fact.

Perhaps Reata was a bit on the sentimental side. Certainly a fellow whose heart was broken by one girl should not be snatched up into a seventh heaven by the mere sight of another. Such changes are not heroic. They are not noble. As a matter of fact, Reata looked on Agnes Lester not as a woman at all, but as a divine being with just a taste, let us say, of sweet mortal femininity about her.

Then he remembered something else. He had seen that face before. He had seen it in the back of the watch that he had purloined from the vest pocket of big Tom Wayland, who rode yonder. Think of such a noble gentleman as Tom Wayland pasting the picture of “his girl” into the back of his watch. But that was what Wayland had done, and, when Reata had opened the watch, he remembered how even the photograph of this girl had moved him to such a point that he had gone into the rodeo crowd once more and restored the watch to the pocket of Mr. Wayland. In that very act of restoration he had been caught; he had been chased; he had been jailed.

Well, that was long ago, and since then the hunting down of Bill Champion had made Reata free of the law and wiped out his past and made people willing to forgive a certain illegal lightness in his fingers. But it seemed to Reata that there had been a fate behind the whole thing. Otherwise, why should he have seen the picture of the girl in the back of that watch? Why should Wayland have done a thing so cheap, common, and out of character as to put the picture in the watch case, except that fate intended Reata to see her image? And now he was seeing her in the flesh.

“All right! All right!” said the man who held the drill impatiently.

Reata missed the head of the drill entirely with the next blow, and his partner grunted. “Hey . . . what’s the matter with you, kid?”

Reata would have found it difficult to say what was the matter with him, unless he were able to burst at once into verse and music.

Music of another sort started just then. For the big mastiff that haunted the steps of Colonel Percival Lester had just spotted Rags, and, being without a sense of humor and trained for nothing but battle, the huge dog let out a growl that was like the harsh rumbling of thunder, and hurled himself at the little mongrel.

“THE COLONEL’S DOG”

Imagine a huge fist grasping at a floating bit of a feather, always so hard that the wind of its own motion knocks the feather away. It was like that, when the mastiff charged at Rags. He came on with his mouth a great red gulf, but he kept champing his teeth on nothingness as Rags dodged from this side to that, letting the monster miss him by fractions of inches.

Work stopped. Men gathered around to shout with delight as the mastiff charged, missed, recovered, lunged again and again, wildly slashing at the air as he went by a target that he knew he could hardly get a tooth into. And always Rags waited for the charges with pricking ears, with little head cocked a bit to one side, and with bright eyes and wagging tail, as though he were sure that this was only a game out of which he could receive no harm. He waited until the red gulf was actually just upon him, and then he jerked himself to this side or to that, until the great mastiff, fairly baffled, stood back and howled out his rage.

Rags, at the same time, got behind his master’s legs. He was a little tired of playing with death, perhaps, and, therefore, he went into the shadow of his god on earth, his all-powerful being, out of whose hand nothing but kindness and protection flowed. Having reached this shelter, little Rags stretched himself comfortably and turned a regardless eye upon the final charge of the great mastiff.

Colonel Percival Lester was not happy. Nothing in the world annoyed him so much as an attack upon his dignity. And the dignity of his very horses and dogs was a part and a portion of his own dignity. It was a personal reflection upon him, therefore, when the crowd bawled out its applause for the little dog and its mirth because of the mastiff’s misses.

“Major takes the mongrel for a rat . . . no wonder he’s trying to get hold of it. Take that mongrel off the island. Get it out of the way!” thundered the colonel.

Before anyone could do this, however, the mastiff was charging. And when Reata saw that the little Rags no longer intended to continue the sport, but was serenely trusting everything to him, Reata took from around his hips, where it was hooked up like a belt, the many folds of his rope. The big mastiff, Major, was intent on charging straight through the fence made of the skinny shanks of this man. But as he came gloriously in to make the kill, a double fold of a thin line, slenderer even than the clothesline in the back yard, a jumping pair of noosed half hitches dropped over

the yawning muzzle of Major and jerked his jaws shut.

His charge he halted on skidding feet. He turned to tear to pieces this stranger—for Major was a guard dog in every sense of the word—but another swift loop of the reata caught about his legs and tumbled him on his side. He lay there, struggling, while the crowd shouted with delight, loudly and more loudly.

The colonel was stifled with rage. But he knew that he had seen a very good exhibition of skill on the part of this sinewy, young fellow with the brown face and the gray eyes. And there was nothing he could say. A man cannot be blamed from defending himself against the attacks of a huge and savage beast like Major.

The colonel, being silenced, was choking. If he could have commanded the lightnings of heaven, he would have brought down a special and a blazing vengeance upon the heads of Reata and Rags at that moment. But he could only choke, and choke, as Reata loosed the mastiff from those humiliating bonds, that sinuous bit of rope that looked no larger than twine to the eye of the colonel.

Reata having loosed the great dog, Rags came around and sat down in *front* of the feet of his master, so assured was he of the defensive power that inhered in the very shadow of the great man. And at Rags—no, only at Reata, now, came Major, slaving with red-eyed rage. He was met by a dart of that rope as inescapably swift as the striking of a snake. The noose caught one forefoot and the neck of Major. It jerked his foreleg up against his throat and caused him once more to topple head over heels, while the crowd fairly howled with delight.

Agnes Lester, touching the arm of big, handsome Tom Wayland, said to him: “Tom, how can *any* man be so wonderful with a rope? I’d as soon have a bear at me, as Major in a rage.”

Tom made no answer. She might as well have touched a stone. In fact, she saw that Tom Wayland was rigid with a pale-faced wrath that exceeded even the wrath of the great Colonel Lester.

The colonel was shouting out something, but it was a lost, a wordless sound, in the great tumult of the happy crowd. Men forgot the heat of the sun in their ecstasy over this improvised entertainment, the more so when they saw Reata actually setting the formidable dog free for a second time.

But mastiffs, no matter how big they are, have brains. Major had an extra supply of them that enabled him to see when he was licked. When he got to his feet this time, he went skulking off with his tail between his legs, and took down-headed shelter in the shadow of the colonel’s horse.

Could anything have been worse for the colonel than to see his favorite dog thus shamed and disheartened publicly? Was it not as if that paralyzing rope had actually

fallen upon his own dignified limbs and constricted them to helplessness?

And there stood little Rags, in perfect dog parlance, laughing his small and silent laughter at the huge dog that was discomfited. If the colonel could have only the least shadow of an excuse, he would have seized upon it with rejoicings.

And behold, a good excuse was thrust into his hands. For Tom Wayland, recovering from his pale-faced rage, now pushed his horse up beside that of Lester and exclaimed not what was in his mind, not that this slender, blond-headed, deft-handed scoundrel had twice laid his lordly bulk heavily upon the ground, but these words: "Colonel, why do you have such a man as that on the place? That's Reata! That's the rascal who was jailed in Rusty Gulch as a pickpocket. I caught him snaking my watch out of my pocket!"

These words were shouted out so loudly that every pair of eyes was sure to hear it. But Reata cared nothing about what the rest might think. They were all men, and among men he could soon prove that he was as hardy as the hardiest—he knew the ways of winning their respect. However, before a woman he would be helpless, and that was why his glance went instantly to the face of the girl.

It was a very striking thing to her to see the head of the stranger suddenly turn in this way, and to feel his gray eyes fixed upon her with something like fear widening them, and with a flush coming into his face. It was as though this formidable fellow, who could handle Major like a mere harmless puppy, could be destroyed in turn by a mere lifting of her hand.

It was such a compliment as even queens rarely receive in the whole of a throned life. It required one full second for the paying, and it was given in silence, like a salute.

No one noticed her. She was glad that all eyes were fixed on Reata. But even if her own father had been staring at her with a forbidding eye, she could not have helped smiling at Reata.

He could not smile back. Not at her, without impertinence that would be too public. But she saw him straighten. She saw him smile, in turn, at Colonel Lester himself.

The colonel was shouting: "Pickpocket? Why isn't he in jail? Isn't there an officer of the law around here? Where's Steve Balen? Steve is a deputy sheriff. Balen, come here and do your duty!"

Tall Steve Balen came slowly through the crowd. He was taller than the rest by a head, and his shoulders stooped a little as though he were trying to shrink himself down to the dimensions of ordinary men. He was almost as narrow as he was long. Only his hands were of the proper size, and those hands were specially fitted, on

occasion, by the big handles of his pair of Colts. He wore a gun on either thigh, strapped low down, just under the grip of his dangling hands.

When Balen came into the inner circle, the colonel was repeating: "How does a rascally sneak thief come to be here among honest men, Balen?"

Steve Balen pushed back his hat and scratched his head. "Are you Reata, partner?" he said. He looked at the slender rope that was magically recoiling in the slim fingers of Reata and saw his answer there. Then he added: "Sure, Colonel Lester, they had something ag'in' Reata up there in Rusty Gulch. And they chased him, and, when he was about to get away, he seen this here snipe of a dog in the river and rode in and saved that dog from drowning, and got himself in jail. And he sawed his way out of jail, and, later on, it was him that trailed down Bill Champion, and got two bullets through himself. But he killed Bill Champion in that fight, Colonel, and the governor thought it would be a good idea to pardon him. The law ain't got anything ag'in' Reata . . . not now."

At that speech, Agnes Lester was so delighted that Reata saw her smile as a shipwrecked mariner might see the rising of the glorious sun.

Why should she not smile, when she had seen her man transformed from a sneak thief into a hero? And did he not belong to her by that special right of possession that only beautiful women understand—those who can distinguish between lip service and a tribute that has come from the heart?

The colonel was shouting: "Get off my place! Get off my land, Reata . . . if that's your name. I won't have scoundrelly pickpockets on my place! Get off, and take your rat of a dog along with you! Take him away, some of you. Tom, herd him off the land! An outrage . . . among honest men . . . a sneak thief!"

Tom Wayland was never given a job more to his liking than this one. He closed instantly on Reata, and with a gesture of his whip he exclaimed: "You heard the music. Get out, Reata! Move along there! Some of you fellows get hold of the man and hustle him along."

None of those "fellows" chose to lift a hand. There was a range of mountains between Jumping Creek and Rusty Gulch, and, therefore, they did not know a great deal about what happened around the other town. But every man jack of them had heard, vaguely, the terrible legend of Bill Champion, and every man knew that Bill Champion was dead, fallen like some heartless, terrible prehistoric beast that had survived by an anachronistic freak of chance into the age of a weaker and a lesser human race. And this was the man who had sent Bill Champion to the long account? This slender fellow whom half of them outmatched in size and in apparent strength? They would sooner have hustled a lion in his native wilderness; they would sooner

have hustled a tangle of rattlers with their bare hands. Only Tom Wayland, malice in his handsome face, crowded his horse close to Reata and urged him on his way.

Reata turned and faced him. A good many men were able to see the yellow come into the eyes of the smaller man as he said: "Don't hurry me, Wayland. Don't come within twelve steps of me, in fact!"

That was all he said, but it was enough. Tom Wayland reined back his horse as though a wild beast had started up under its nose. And Reata, without haste, with happy little Rags leading the way before him, went on his way with a slow step.

He went straight toward the girl and pulled off his Stetson from his tousled head. He had to face straight toward the sun now, in order to see her, but he had the eyes that can look into the sun without being blinded.

He stood beside the head of her horse and said: "Some day I'd like to come and do a little explaining. May I?"

"Yes," she said. "I want to see you again."

Reata walked on, and she saw Tom Wayland sitting motionless on his horse, at a distance, glaring at her with terrible eyes. He had not heard the words, but he had seen the smile with which they were uttered. Well, let him see. Let her father see. Let all men see whom she had favored. Sometime the brown face and the gray eyes would appear before her again, and she would be glad, either by day or by night.

She actually turned in the saddle, shamelessly, and looked after that retreating figure, and watched the light step as he rose on his toes like an Indian runner, and saw the little dog bobbing in front of him contentedly. She saw, with flattering eyes, another scene—a man pursued, and a little dog struggling and lost in a smother of white water. And she saw the rider rush his horse into the current. Well, thief or no thief, she knew that she had seen a man, this day.

“THE TREASURE”

Reata, from the side of an overhanging hill, looked across the marsh as the day ended, and saw the thick mist rising from the wet ground, and saw it take on a ghost of the sunset color. His fingers idly pulled at the fuzzy ears of Rags, who lay asleep on his knees, and the awkward-looking roan mare he could hear plucking at the dried grasses among the tall brush behind him. But what he really saw was like a double photograph, one printed above the other—he saw dark Miriam, and this blue and golden girl. All that he knew was that the pain was gone from his heart, and that, in its place, there was a strange excitement, and a stranger peace.

He saw the workers troop away from the island. He saw them get on horses or into buckboards and go rattling back toward Jumping Creek. He saw the proud colonel giving final directions with extended arm. He saw Percival Lester at last ride off, accompanied by big Tom Wayland and the girl. Then quiet and the twilight gathered over the marshes, and Reata called the mare with a whistle.

Her bridle hung from her saddle horn. He put the bridle over her head. A cheek strap seemed to tickle her, and she rubbed her head with fearless freedom against his shoulder. He swore at her gently and jerked up a hand as though to strike. She merely pricked up her ears at the gesture and then nibbled at the sleeve of the raised arm.

Reata laughed. “Sure,” he said, “I’m only a bluff!”

He walked down the slope, and the mare walked after him. When they came to the narrow roadway that the colonel had expensively built as far as the island, Reata took from a saddlebag a rather odd feature of his equipment, four moose-hide, padded overshoes that he now tied over the hoofs of the mare, and with that gear on her, she went ahead as silently as a moccasined Indian.

This was a hunt. The half-bowed body of her master told her that, and she had been taught how to step with flexed knees, softly, when there was hunting at hand. Little Rags, also, sneaked on ahead. He was better than a searchlight, for showing danger in the way. His body was very, very tiny, but it seemed that his sense of hearing and sight and smell had been correspondingly enlarged to strike a balance between him and others of his race. His master trusted him implicitly, and, when Rags stood still in the dimness of the starlight, Reata paused, also. Then he went stealthily ahead through the fringe of trees that shrouded the inner portions of the

island. Rags went with him cautiously. The mare, at a gesture, had been anchored behind them in the darkness. A whistle would bring her in, when she was needed.

From between two tree trunks, Reata could see the fire that the guards had built. They had made it small. One of them was cooking. The other walked on guard very like a soldier, with his rifle over his right shoulder.

The darkness was thick. The rising mist gave the air almost the dinginess of heavy fog. No stars could be seen now. There were only the splintered, golden rays of the firelight, obscurely lighting the little island. And there, close to the farther end, Reata could barely see the outlines of the tree in which the treasure was actually planted.

Well, there were two armed guards between him and the taking—but neither of them was a Bill Champion. He unloosed the reata that still was around him like a belt of many strands. The fellow who was cooking over the fire could be attended to later on. This one who walked on guard—well, he could be made the first victim and then the bait, perhaps.

The man came near, walking his round close to the covert of Reata. He walked briskly, a man with all his senses about him, a chosen man who was ready to do his part even if there were plenty of fighting involved in it. But with all his wits alert, how could he see the snaky line of the reata as it sprang into the air? There was the thin whistling sound near his ears, and then the invisible noose gripped him, jammed the rifle against his breast, crushed his arms to his sides.

He was jerked straight back against the trunk of a tree with an impact that knocked the breath out of him. And before he was thinking, before he was capable of movement again, a bit of strong twine had lashed his hands behind his back and around the tree trunk. He could not possibly be more helpless, now.

At his ear, he heard a voice whisper: “Call in your partner. Call him over here . . . or I’ll slide a knife under your ribs.”

Reata could have laughed at the thought of using his knife in that way, but it was a device good enough to make the prisoner obey his will, no doubt. He shook out the noose of the reata again.

That silent weapon, why would not other men use its silent power instead of the fatal noise and the blundering inaccuracy of firearms?

“Harry!” shouted the prisoner.

The man bending by the fire jumped erect. “Aye, Pete?” he called.

“The devils have got me! Give the signal . . . they’ve got me! Give. . . .”

A jolting blow from the fist of Reata silenced him. Harry, by the fire, snatched a brand from the blaze and with it lighted a fuse that dangled by a tall, big-headed rod

that stood by the fire. Then Harry ran for the roadway.

Reata went after him, running low and swift, his rope ready in his hands. But behind him he heard a loud explosion. From the corner of his eye he saw the heavy-headed rod shoot up from the ground, trailing a shower of crimson, bright sparks behind it. High up in the air flew the thing, and Reata, groaning, understood. It was a signal rocket, and it would bring men swarming from all directions to the rescue.

He no longer ran after the fleeing guard. A whistle served to bring Sue swiftly toward him. As for the second guard, he had done his mischief, and there was no need in bothering about him. With fear at his heels, he would ran fast and far.

Reata looked up and saw a burst of wild red fire in the middle of the sky. It steamed downward almost to the tops of the trees before that fire went out. Then the report came dimly down out of the sky, and echoes spoke the same sound softly from the hillside. It said to Reata, first loudly and then over and over again: "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!"

He got to Sue, opened the narrow pack behind her saddle, and pulled out of it a strong axe. Then he waded into the water to the hollow tree. The first blow of the axe sheared through the thin rind of the tree. In a moment he had ripped the side open. Then he had to dive his hand into the cold muck and slime of the marsh inside the rind of the dead trunk. When his fingers touched the chamois leather, it seemed to him that he had grasped a water snake's slippery sides. He began to lift out the small sacks. There were twenty-two of them, according to Salvio and the others. And each one was, indeed, a weighty little burden of treasure.

He called Sue and loaded the first lot into the saddlebags. She could carry three hundred pounds of that burden at a load, as well as himself. It was not fair to ask her to lug more through the treachery of the marsh where she might sink at any moment, out of his power to aid her. He loaded her with eight of the bags. Then he mounted, put little Rags on the special place that he had arranged in front of the pommel, and waded the mare through the water.

To go back by the dry road seemed now the better solution of the problem, but he would have to make three trips. And before that, perhaps the rescuers would be pelting out from the town, out from the neighboring ranches. That fellow Lester, he would be sure to turn out, gallantly, at the head of all of his armed cowpunchers, and perhaps the Lester ranch house was not so far away. Hurry, hurry, hurry!

He would follow his first idea. He would get out to the level of the railroad track. He would then hide two-thirds of the treasure somewhere up the track. The remaining third he would carry away on Sue's shoulders and his own.

In the meantime, it was dirty work getting through the slime. Once the water rose

to his knees, and Sue was almost submerged, but she was presently on better footing, and now she took him out to the back of the railroad fence, where the glimmering barbed wires stretched far away to either side. His wire clippers rang on the strands. They flew back with a ringing sound, and he rode out onto railroad property. That was when he saw the tool that might make the rest of his work easier. Of course, Colonel Lester had managed to borrow from the nearest station a hand car on which some of the supplies could be transported to the marsh. And there it stood, derailed, at the bottom of the embankment. Well, what had brought supplies could be made to carry gold away.

XIII

“REATA’S RIDE”

He was out of the saddle at once, and hefted the thing from one side. It was murderously heavy. A heavy coiled chain on top of it did not decrease the weight any. He started to drag the chain off, when it occurred to him that here was a chance to use the power of Sue. Instantly he had the chain looped from the front axle of the hand car to the two stirrups of Sue. Those stirrup leathers were strong, and they would hold. He put his own shoulder to the rear of the hand car and called to the mare.

She walked the hand car straight up the embankment. The wheels clanged against the high rails and stopped her. He found a stick and pried the wheels over the top of the rail. It took another minute of anxious sweating before he had the hand car settled properly on the tracks, and then, to his dismay, it began to roll slowly back.

He understood. He had forgotten that there was a heavy grade here, that climbed as far as the throat of the pass which opened darkly, yonder, through the mountains. There it began to descend with even greater angles. Suppose, then, that he loaded the car and sent it shooting with the grade? Well, in that case he would have to whiz through the station yard at Jumping Creek and, as likely as not, he would find the way blocked, or else the light car would be switched off on a siding and come to a crashing halt.

No, he had to labor up the grade, if he could manage it. And were the stout sinews of Sue there to assist him? He blocked the sliding wheels of the hand car with the stick he had found, loaded the eight sacks onto the car, and hurried back through the marsh. Rags he left with the load.

Halfway back to the treasure tree, he wondered why he was there, wading through the foulness of the marsh. Well, he had wanted something that would fill his hands, and, of course, his three friends had found something for him.

For the first time he asked himself how they could have known so surely where to find the stuff? There were a thousand questions he should have asked, if his wits had been about him on that night. But, now that he had put his hand to the job, he would carry it through while there was still blood in his body. Only, supposing it wrong, what would be the thought of him in the mind of that girl he had seen this day?

He reached the tree. The voice of his prisoner sounded cheerfully from the

island.

“You back there ag’in, brother? You sure knew where the stuff was, all right! Goin’ to flag a train and load it all on?”

Reata said nothing. He was fishing up the dripping sacks, and with them he loaded the mare again and made his second trip, to be greeted with a silent ecstasy by Rags. It had taken time to teach Rags when his voice was permitted to come shrilling out of the air of either day or night, but it was a lesson that the little dog never forgot.

For the third load—it should be the lightest of the lot—Reata returned to the end of the island, and again his prisoner was voluble.

“They’re goin’ to be along on your trail before long, brother,” he said. “And maybe you’re goin’ to have a necktie party before the sun comes up. Maybe you’re goin’ to dance on air, after all.”

“Maybe,” said Reata. He had fished the twenty-second bag out of the muck and loaded it into the saddlebag. He added: “You can tell ’em that I headed off toward the tracks with the stuff. Why shouldn’t I rap you over the head before I go?”

“Why shouldn’t you’ve slid that knife between my ribs the way you promised?” responded Pete instantly and insolently.

“I don’t know why,” said Reata.

“I’ll tell you why, brother,” said Pete. “I dunno your name, and there ain’t been light enough to see your make-up. But I know what you are . . . you got nerve enough to steal, but you ain’t got nerve enough to kill. I’m goin’ to send ’em on your trail, and then. . . .”

There was a picture in the mind of Reata of the gray stallion of Bill Champion leaping from the edge of the cliff into the empty air, and of the gigantic Champion drawn out beside the horse at the end of the lariat.

Well, he knew how to kill well enough, and he was almost tempted to put in practice a little of that art at the expense of Pete, who was bawling: “Listen! They’re comin’ now! They’re comin’ now!”

Reata, straining his ears, could hear it very well. It was not the rapid-fire pattering of his heart. It was the rattling of hoofs of horses that were coming at a dead gallop over hard ground.

Reata turned the mare and urged her desperately through the marsh. To save himself, that was still easy enough with the speed of Sue at his command. But to save the treasure, also? That was the question.

He thought that voices were calling to him out of the damp odors of the marsh as he rode through from the island. He passed the gap of the fence. He rode up to the

hand car and fastened the saddle leathers once more to the double end of the chain. Then he mounted the hand car and gripped the handle to pump it forward.

From the raised position of the railway embankment, he could hear clearly the pounding of many hoofs that turned off the valley trail and took the narrow road that the colonel had built into the marsh. That self-assured scoundrel of a Pete would be telling them, in an instant, exactly the direction in which Reata had ridden through the marsh.

Reata called to the mare, she strained ahead, and he began pumping at the big handles where eight men could find a grip to sway up and down and shoot the car along the tracks, but up this grade there was no shooting to be done. There was only constant and heavy laboring to get the heavy machine rolling at all, with Sue taking most of the burden. She walked; she jogged; she got into a shambling trot with her head down and her weight pulling steadily at the load behind her. She worked as faithfully as though she had been trained at draft labor, or to the plow. So, very slowly, they worked up the grade, with Reata straining like a giant at the reluctant pumping handles, and the heavy wheels of the car clinked over the joinings of the rail sections.

Now and again he turned his head and strained his eyes back toward that point where he had issued from the marsh, and far back there, most vaguely seen through the mist and the night, he saw the riders begin to spill out onto the railroad. He could hear them better than he could see them. He could specially hear them when they began to whoop, and then came up the track after him like so many yelling devils. There was no hurrying possible, for him. He was working his utmost, and he was giving the mare all that she could do.

In the meantime, those shapes behind him grew out of the mist, grew taller, more distinct, and the rolling noise of the hoofs was a weight upon his very soul. Still, he struggled with the pumping handles, and, looking up at the great black mass of the mountains that drew back toward him, he told himself that he would never come to the top of the grade.

But at that moment he felt the speed of the mare increase to a full trot, while the handles began to swing up and down more rapidly and more freely in his grasp. He understood, then. He had actually topped the rise, and now there was a down slope to aid him just as the up grade had been a frightful handicap to overcome. The mare would be a hindrance now, instead of a help. He leaped forward off the hand car, uncoupled the dangling chain from the stirrup leathers, hurled the chain down beside the track, and sprang back onto the hand car. Even without his work at the handles, the car was running along at a good pace, and, when he added the swinging weight

of his body, it began to jump ahead with a swifter and a swifter impulse.

He could not tell whether he still had a ghost of a chance. The mare was running now, at the foot of the embankment, keeping even with the car, and not far behind her came the shadowy troop of the men of Jumping Creek.

“Faster, men, faster!” shouted a voice which he recognized as that of the colonel. “Balén, open fire on the scoundrel! Balén, start shooting!”

That fellow, Balén, he would not be one to miss. And perhaps he had a good target in the form that swayed up and down at the handles of the car.

A rifle clanged, and a bullet hummed with sickening speed close to Reata’s head. Then he felt the swing of a curve take hold on the wheels of the car. The black shoulder of the first mountain gradually thrust out and shielded him from further attack, for an instant. At the same time, the strength of the grade took stronger hold on the car. Moreover, there was suddenly cursing from the pursuers. They were finding rough going for their horses, no doubt, on the slanting foot of the embankment.

The car was shooting now at great speed. As the rails straightened out after the curve, it seemed to Reata that he was rushing down a long flume that narrowed in the distance before him. And the thin glimmer of the tracks diminished to a faint sparkling, probing the darkness of the pass.

More guns crackled behind him, but he did not hear the winged noise of the bullets. Off to the side, he saw even the roan mare losing in the race against him. How badly beaten the rest of the horses must be, if Sue was falling behind.

He was traveling now at such a round rate that the car rocked dizzily at every curve, but still he strained at the handles as they jerked up and down. It was flying speed. The wind of that going hurt his eyes, dimmed them, so that the light which he saw far ahead was at first a dull thing that had no meaning to him. Then he heard it, the faint roar thrown off the flat face of some distant cliff, the sound of a locomotive as it labored at the grade.

He could have laughed, when he thought of being trapped in this manner. Now, on the very verge of shooting away to freedom, distancing all pursuit on this mechanical charger of his, his way was blocked not by intention but by chance. He applied the brakes. A square-shouldered pile of ties not far ahead was his goal, and he worked the brake so that the hand car screamed to a halt beside the pile.

He leaped from the car, shouldered one of the heavy ties, and thrust the end of it under the front of the hand car. The ground was trembling, he thought, with the approaching vibration of the locomotive and its long train of cars, or was it only the humming sound of the rails that seemed to pass into the ground under his feet?

He heaved. The heavy car swayed. He heaved again, and the hand car lurched up, toppled, and rolled down the embankment.

XIV

“DOWN THE CLIFF”

The broad glare of the headlight of the engine, as it pulled slowly around the curve below him, showed Reata the lay of the land. Up to his right there was the steep, erect mass of the black mountain. To his left, a hundred-foot cliff, or something more, dropped sheer down to the narrows of the valley beneath, and at the very foot of the cliff there was a little shanty.

Two or three of the gold sacks slipped over the edge of the height, slithered down its forehead, and then dropped away from sight. Reata instantly thrust the rest of the bags in the trail of the first ones.

He could see, behind him, the flying form of Sue as she tore along the side of the track, but he could not use all her speed and her honest heart, now. He needed, rather, wings to get him off that height of land before the dim troop of shouting riders behind the mare came swarming up to the rock.

Instead of wings, he had the reata, and he used it. As the full glare of the headlight of the train flashed out at him from around the curve, he was already fitting the open loop of the rope around a projecting point of rock.

Swinging over the ledge, he found himself hanging opposite a concave face of the cliff with a narrow ledge a dozen feet beneath him, and the pounding wheels of the train set up a vibration that he thought he could distinctly feel in the rope from which he hung.

Rags was curled on one of his shoulders, with teeth fixed into the collar of the master's coat. Above him, Reata heard the anxious whinny of the mare. Well, she would find her way. It would be as hard to lose her in the mountains as to baffle a wolf, and she would discover some trail back to her old quarters at Rusty Gulch. He need not worry about her or fear that any other man would ever come close enough to daub a rope on her. He slipped down to the very end of the doubled rope, and found his feet resting on the ledge. A shake of the lariat loosed it from its hold above. By the same process he lowered himself from another crag, a dozen feet, and then found a short distance down that he could climb. But still again, at the very bottom of the rock, he had to use the rope for a last time across a sheer concavity of fifteen feet.

They had reached the edge of the cliff above him before he was down there on the safety of the level ground. He could hear their voices growing dim as they spoke

behind the edge of the cliff, or booming loud and clear as they leaned out over nothingness, to wonder what had become of their quarry.

He heard the voice of Steve Balen calling: "Some of you ride up the track. You'll come to a place in half a mile or so where you can work back down into the valley. Go hell-bent, boys, and we'll try to get down this cliff while you're going that way!"

The roar of hoofs began again from the line of railroad track. Reata, pulling down his rope from the rock above him, stood on the level of the valley floor and saw a man come running out of the back of the shanty, carrying a lantern.

Reata ran forward through the bushes and encountered the stranger under the spread of a low tree, calling as he came. "Douse the light, partner!"

The man from the shanty knew how to obey orders quickly. He jerked up the chimney of the lantern and put out the light with a single breath. So in the thick of the darkness Reata came to him. Over their heads the high, nasal, penetrating voice of Steve Balen was calling: "You down there! Don't give no help to that feller! He's a thief, and he's wanted by the law. Hold him up. Grab him and hold him for us!"

"Hey," murmured the voice of the shanty man, "looks like I got good company droppin' out of the sky tonight."

He was so perfectly calm that Reata instantly took heart. He said: "They're hounding me pretty close, partner. But if you can saddle up three or four of those horses in the corral for me, I'll pay you a forty-pound bag of gold coin for them and your time. Does that sound good to you?"

"Brother," said the man of the shanty in the same unemotional voice, "I'd sure sell my soul for five hundred dollars in hard cash. Come along, and we'll slam some saddles on them mustangs."

In the shed they got the saddles, and in the corral they rapidly got saddles and bridles onto four horses. Then, on the run, they swept the mustangs to the foot of the cliff, where Reata rapidly loaded saddlebags with the loot.

Above him, he could hear the noise of the manhunters descending. He could hear them shout to one another. A revolver spoke three short, deep notes. The bullets thudded into the ground nearby, but under the cliff there was not even starlight to show the hunters how to shoot at their quarry. They only knew that he was down there almost in touch of their hands, but still a chasm of dark distance kept them away.

Reata, as he worked, was saying quietly to the man of the shanty: "I pulled a gun on you. For fear of your life, you had to do what I told you to do. You had to saddle the horses. You had to ride away with me the minute the horses were saddled and loaded. Understand? Hop on that horse next to mine, and ride hard, because I can

hear the other half of these lads from Jumping Creek coming down the valley.”

Those other men from Jumping Creek came like mad, in fact, for out of the distance, from the face of the cliff where Steve Balen and his men were working out a perilous descent, they could hear occasional gunshots, and the loud, pealing voice of Balen himself urging them on. The tired horses from Jumping Creek charged valiantly to get to the vital place, but, as they drew near, through the bushes, dim and shadowy, they saw two riders moving; they saw four fresh horses galloping, stretched out straight with speed.

For a few jumps the hunters kept up the pursuit. Then they pulled their guns and opened fire. But weary men with bodies and nerves shaken by long riding cannot shoot straight. And the trees that made a broken screen for Reata and his companion soon thickened between them and the pursuit. Rapidly they drew away. There was no sound of beating hoofs behind them. They were able to draw their horses back to a steady canter, and presently this gait got them into view of a single riderless horse that moved ahead through the night at a trot. Looking closely through the darkness, Reata made out a saddle on the back of the mustang.

A sudden hope made him whistle the call that Sue knew. Instantly the horse ahead of them swung about and came at a gallop to him. It was Sue. He knew the long, low outline of her now, and even little Rags began to murmur a whining welcome.

“Hey,” said the man of the shanty. “How’d you learn to whistle hosses to you like bird dogs, stranger? You teach me that, and I’ll lay off working.”

Reata, pulling up his horse and stopping the cavalcade, dismounted and took the saddle on Sue. “What’s your name, brother?” he asked.

“Pie Phelps,” said the other. “What’s yours?”

“You wouldn’t want to know it, would you?” asked Reata.

“Nope. Sure I wouldn’t. Come to think of it, knowing your name wouldn’t do me no good.”

“The night was so dark, and you were so scared,” said Reata, “that you couldn’t tell what I was like. Is that right?”

“You just looked sort of average to me,” said Pie Phelps.

“Hide out this bag of stuff,” said Reata. “It’s not stolen. It was hidden away on the land of Colonel Lester, that’s all. And he had the neighborhood under guard. But you have as good a right to it as the next fellow. However, you’d better hide the stuff and let it ripen for a while. I wouldn’t go back to that shack again tonight, if I were you.”

“I sort of hanker to sleep out under the open sky, anyway,” said Pie Phelps. He

took the chamois sack and weighted it in his hands. "All gold?" he asked in a low voice.

"All gold," said Reata. "So long, and good luck to you."

"Good luck? I've got it already in my hands," said Phelps. "I've got enough good luck to turn it into a ranch and a cattle herd. So long, stranger!"

Reata headed up the narrows of the valley on Sue. Four loaded horses followed him, and he saw the standing form of Pie Phelps fade into the night to the rear.

“THE WIND-UP”

It was the next night, just when the dusk had faded into the complete darkness, before Reata came down out of the hills with his cavalcade. He had the twinkling lights of Rusty Gulch to guide him, but, when he reached the high-backed house of Pop Dickerman, he halted his animals just inside the south gate of the junkyard and tied them to the hitch rack which stood there. Afterward, he tapped at the kitchen door.

Beyond the shutters he could make out the dim glimmerings of a light, so that he knew someone must be in the room, but it was some moments before the door was pulled a few inches ajar and the husky voice of Pop Dickerman asked who was there.

“Reata,” he said.

The door was instantly jerked wide. “You, Reata? All alone?”

“Yep. Alone.”

“Come in, old son,” said the rat-faced man. “It’s all right, boys!” he added loudly.

A door on the other side of the room was opened by Harry Quinn, with Salvio and Dave Bates behind him. They waved gloomily at Reata.

“Had to give it up, Reata, did you?” asked Salvio. “I told these *hombres* that it wasn’t no one-man’s job. There was too much of it, even if you ever got a chance to lay your hands on it.”

“He had his try, anyway,” said Pop Dickerman. He was eyeing Reata keenly. “He had his try, by the look of him.”

“What look?” demanded Salvio grimly, as Reata took a chair and built a cigarette swiftly.

“Like he’d had his fun,” said Pop Dickerman. “What would it matter to Reata, if he didn’t get his hands on the gold? What would seven, eight hundred pounds of gold mean to Reata, if he could have his fun, eh?”

This bitterness left Reata untouched.

“Did you even get a chance to lay a hand on that holler tree?” asked the gloomy Salvio.

“How many gents was down there?” put in Harry Quinn.

“No one man could do it,” said Dave Bates. “I told you *hombres* that it was no

one-man job.”

“Well,” said Pop Dickerman, “tell us about the story, Reata. What you been doin’ to put the yaller in your eyes?”

A huge tomcat jumped down off a window sill and started stalking Rags. The little dog sat down between the feet of his master and watched that approach without the slightest concern.

Reata said: “I had a ride on the railroad track, boys. Went faster than a horse could gallop.”

“On what?” asked Salvio.

“On a hand car,” said Reata. “But I couldn’t keep on the way as long as I wanted to. I was just working up a good breeze, when the headlight of a train heaved around a corner and looked me in the eye, so I had to pry that old hand car off the tracks and roll it down the embankment, to let the train get by.”

“Where was Sue?” asked Dickerman anxiously.

“She was following along.”

“He’s done something,” said Harry Quinn suddenly. “Reata, what you been and done?”

“I picked up some loose horses,” said Reata, “and brought ’em along. There’s one for each of you fellows.”

“You poor half-wit,” groaned Salvio, “you ain’t been stealin’ hosses, have you?”

“I bought ’em,” said Reata, “but I bought ’em so cheap that you wouldn’t believe what a bargain I got.” He pointed toward the door. “Go out and look at those horses. You’ll like ’em. One apiece for you.” He stood up and went to the stove where a number of pots and pans were simmering.

“What’s in here worth eating, Pop?” he said.

“Look for yourself,” growled Pop Dickerman. “Come on, boys. Let’s see what kind of a fool Reata’s been makin’ of himself.”

They trooped out through the rear door of the house, while Reata examined the pots and helped himself to some beans stewed in a hot Mexican sauce. He poured out a cup of coffee, cut off a large wedge of good bread, and sat down to his supper. From the outside he heard nothing, but presently all four men came in, loaded with burdens.

They piled small, much discolored chamois sacks on the table in front of Reata. He ate on, unheeding that pile of treasure. And the four men stood about the room silently, looking at the sacks, and then at one another. Their faces were a little drawn, and their eyes bright.

Pop Dickerman said: “Harry, you and Gene go out and get the saddles off of

them hosses, and turn the mustangs out where they can roll in the south corral.”

The two men hesitated. Harry Quinn said: “Can’t that wait?”

Dickerman’s lip curled till his yellow teeth showed. “Wait till some gents ride up and spot them hosses. Sure, they can wait, I guess.”

Quinn and Salvio, cursing under their breath, left the kitchen. Pop Dickerman moved softly around the room with long strides. He was rubbing his hands. His furtive eyes kept traveling to the doors and the windows. He even glanced up to the ceiling, as though he felt that glances might be spying upon him from that direction.

“There’s only twenty-one of these here sacks, Reata,” he said softly, at length.

“One of ’em paid for the four horses. Cheap, weren’t they?” asked Reata carelessly.

Dickerman extended his long arms above his head as though he were about to call down a curse, but he only groaned. Then he lowered his hands and stroked the discolored chamois. Strings and shreds of the marsh slime still clung to the leather.

That was Dickerman’s occupation when Salvio and Quinn returned and came in with the breathless haste of men who fear that something very important may have happened during their absence.

Now the four men were standing around the room.

“We’d better split the stuff and break away with it,” said Bates.

“All right, boys. All right, boys,” said Dickerman soothingly. “I’ll take my third. I’ll take my seven sacks, and then you can split up the rest any way you wish.” He began to pull some of the sacks to the end of the table.

Reata swallowed some coffee at the end of the meal and rolled another cigarette.

“You furnished the news about where the stuff could be found, Pop, is that it?” he said. “Well, you ought to get your share for that. But these three fellows saved my hide in a little saloon brawl up the line. The way I see it, we split the stuff into five equal lots.”

Dickerman uttered a low, moaning sound. “Rob me of damned nigh half my rightful share that was agreed on?” cried Dickerman. “What you thinkin’ about, son? It ain’t like you, Reata. I ain’t goin’ to believe my ears!”

Reata lighted his cigarette and blew out some smoke. “Why do you argue, Pop?” he asked gently.

Dickerman stared about him. The other three with lowering brows met his glances. With another groan, Dickerman surrendered. “All right, Reata,” he whined. “If you’re goin’ to do it that way, I suppose that there ain’t anything that I can say. Into five parts, you said? That leaves an entire sack over, and. . . .”

“Take the extra sack, then,” said Reata, careless always.

The clutches of Dickerman were instantly on a fifth of the sacks. “Get the stuff away . . . get it away quick. Up there in the attic in the corner. You know the place, Gene. Stow it all away up there. Here, I’ll help you.”

“Let them cart it away,” said Reata. “What I want is a little more information about the gold, Pop. Sit down here and talk.”

“Aye,” said Pop. “But tell me first what happened?”

Quinn and the other two were instantly at work, burdening themselves with those ponderous little sacks, and their creaking footfalls went slowly up and down the stairs to the attic.

Reata simply answered: “They had fifty men working on the island all day. Tom Wayland was there. He got Colonel Lester to turn me off the place. At night they had a pair of guards watching the island. I roped one of ’em, but the other touched off a signal rocket. I had to cart the stuff away from the hollow tree to the railroad track, and I loaded it on a hand car, got Sue to pull it up the grade, and with half the men of Jumping Creek out behind us, like the tail of a kite, we sailed down the far grade. A train came for us. I had to pry the hand car off the tracks, and roll the sacks down a hundred-foot cliff. I climbed down after ’em, got hold of a fellow who was willing to sell me four horses and saddles for forty pounds of gold, and loaded the stuff on the new nags and rode away. That’s all. They nearly caught me at the finish, but I had fresh mustangs, and the Jumping Creek boys had been doing a lot of riding, by that time. So we pulled away.”

Pop Dickerman, after he had heard this narrative, remained for some time, slowly opening and shutting his mouth as he framed more words, out of his imagination, to fill up the interstices of this tale.

The other three returned from their work, and Dickerman, slowly, always staring fixedly at Reata as though hypnotized, repeated the tale as he heard it.

At the conclusion, Harry Quinn was looking with a faint grin at Salvio, and Salvio made a sudden gesture of surrender. It was as though he had said suddenly: *Yes, he’s the better man.*

“Now I want to find out from you,” said Reata, “just where this gold hailed from.”

“It’s quite a yarn,” said Dickerman. “Didn’t you hear anything about it down there in Jumping Creek?”

“No. I was swinging a twelve-pound sledge on a drill head. I wasn’t talking.”

“The yarn goes back to a gent that found a rich strike up in the hills and worked it for pretty nigh fifteen years,” lied Pop Dickerman. “And he ground his stuff out

with a coffee mill, you might say, and then he loaded it away in sacks, but, when he come to his last sickness, he didn't know where he could hide the money where it would be safe. So he. . . .”

Here was a sudden and loud rap at the rear door. Dickerman, when he heard this authoritative summons, waved suddenly to Quinn and Salvio and Bates. “Out,” he whispered.

They faded silently through the opposite door of the room. Then Dickerman opened the outer door upon the stalwart figure of Sheriff Lowell Mason.

The sheriff came in with a frown, that disappeared when he saw Reata. He gripped his hand heartily, saying: “I'm glad to see you, Reata. I'm glad to see you, no matter where you happen to be!”

“Thanks,” said Reata. “I'm not back in jail, Sheriff.”

“No,” said Mason, darkening again. “And I hope that you never land there again. But bad company makes a lot of trouble in a man's life, Reata. A lot of trouble. I thought you were up north, taking up some land and building a cabin and getting ready to marry, but, of course, that's your own business.” He turned suddenly on Pop Dickerman. “Dickerman,” he said, “the time's come for you to move out of Rusty Gulch.”

“Well,” said Dickerman calmly, “that's kind of bad news. Who's goin' to move me?”

“I'm going to move you.”

“You'll need a lot of drays, brother,” said Dickerman.

“I'll need a warrant and a gun,” said the sheriff. “I think there's enough stuff out to put you behind the bars, Dickerman, and I'm goin' to try to put you there. You've pulled the wool over the eyes of a lot of people, Pop, but I reckon you're more of a fence than you are a junk dealer.”

That accusation made not the slightest change in the expression of Dickerman. “A high board fence is what I gotta have around my junk piles,” he declared.

“You ain't as simple as you make out,” said Lowell Mason. “Let me tell you this. You're a crook yourself, and you're a breeder of crooks. I've seen three of your men, from time to time . . . Quinn is the name of one of 'em . . . and they fit right into the descriptions of the three thugs who robbed the Decker and Dillon Bank in Jumping Creek and got away with eight hundred pounds of gold. I can't hang the thing on them just yet, but I know in my own mind that they were in it. I suppose they're over the border, by this time, but they'll come back, one day, and then I'll get 'em! As for you, I'd rather not handle the dirty job of collecting you for jail. I'm telling you to move on, and you'd better take my advice.”

“Thanks,” said Dickerman. “I always like to hear a gent talk even when he’s wrong, if he talks pretty well. You been talkin’ well enough to get yourself a pile of votes by election time, Sheriff?”

The sheriff turned his back on the furry face of Dickerman and confronted Reata.

“Old son,” he said, “I hate to see you in this place. Come and see me before you leave town. If you ever want a bunk for the night, you can have one with me. But if you stay around Dickerman, you’d going to get yourself into trouble. So long, Reata. It’s great to see you, lad.”

With this, and no further word to Dickerman, the sheriff walked out of the room and disappeared. The hoofbeats of his horse presently were trailing diminishingly toward the center of the town.

Reata and the junk dealer, in the meantime, faced one another silently.

“The old fellow that worked away at his rich strike, and ground out the stuff for fifteen years,” Reata sneered.

“It’s this way, Reata,” pleaded Dickerman. “What I wanta tell you is this. . . .”

“It doesn’t much matter what you tell me,” said Reata. “Call the boys back in here, I want to talk to them.”

When the three came in, in answer to Dickerman’s call, Reata was standing near the door, with his Stetson on the back of his head, and little Rags on his shoulder.

He said: “Boys, the sheriff says that the three of you robbed the Decker and Dillon Bank at Jumping Creek. You got eight hundred pounds of gold out of the safe. Well, I want to know if that’s the gold I’ve just fetched out of a hollow stump in the Jumping Creek marsh.”

“Why, no, Reata,” began Dave.

“Shut up, Dave,” said Salvio. “There ain’t any use trying to pull the wool over his eyes now. He knows.”

“It’s true, then?” said Reata.

None of the three made answer. It was old Pop Dickerman who said: “Listen, Reata. The folks in Jumping Creek knew the three of ’em. They couldn’t go back for the stuff. There was nobody else to trust except you.”

Harry Quinn looked at the grim, pale face of Reata and exclaimed: “Don’t take it hard, Reata! Look it. What else could we do?”

Reata closed his eyes. “I thought I was pulling clear,” he said slowly. “I thought that I’d washed my hands of the crooked work, but I see that I’m back in the dirt again.”

“Go easy, Reata,” urged Dickerman. “Don’t say nothin’ rash now.”

"I'm not saying anything rash," said Reata. "I'm only seeing the truth."

"The truth is," broke out Gene Salvio, "that you're a better man than the rest of us, Reata! I'm not one to throw around the praise, and you know it. But you're a better man and a straighter man than the rest of us. We may've done you wrong in this deal. We thought it was smart for us, and a way of putting a whole lot of money into your hands, too."

"Look here," said Harry Quinn, "you got enough money now to set yourself up right. If you think you wanta be a ranchman, you can do it now, and do it right."

"That's correct," declared Dave Bates, with ardor.

"Set myself up with stolen money, eh?" said Reata. "Thanks a lot. I'm not doing that."

"Hold on!" cried Dickerman. "You mean that you're pulling out and leaving your share behind?"

"What can I do? I'd take the loot back to the Decker and Dillon Bank, if I could," said Reata. "But there are four of you to one of me. All I can do is get as many miles between me and the rest of you as possible. And I'm going to put them between." He took a half step toward them with rage and with hate in his face. "I thought I was going clean, and you've made a swine of me again." That outburst of anger left him on tiptoe, but his rage vanished suddenly. He added sadly: "There's been life and death between us. You've saved my hide, and I've saved yours. And now this is the wind-up. I'm getting out of the country, and I'm staying out. It's like tearing the heart out of my body, but I know what the thing will be like, if I stay around here. One way or another, you'll get your hands on me again and drag me into some rotten business. I haven't the brains to handle crooks like you. Good bye."

He turned and went suddenly out into the darkness.

When the door closed, Salvio slumped into a chair, his head in his hands.

Dickerman said: "Well, we had to lose him some day, boys. But he's left a nice little farewell present for the lot of us."

Salvio jerked up his head suddenly. "You fool," he said. "You poor, rat-faced fool, don't you see that he was worth more than money to us?"

"Aye," put in Dave Bates slowly. "He was worth our blood!"

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Stolen Gold: A Reata Story* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as George Owen Baxter)]