

MAX
BRAND

MORE TALES OF
THE WILD WEST:

DEATH IN
ALKALI FLAT

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THE QUEST OF LEE GARRISON
SAFETY McTEE
TWO SIXES

**MAX
BRAND**

(as Hugh Owen)

DEATH IN ALKALI FLAT

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Death in Alkali Flat

I

Silver Snake

At the pawnbroker's window, Sleeper dismounted. He had only a few dollars in his pocket, but he had an almost childish weakness for bright things, and he could take pleasure with his eyes even when he could not buy his fancy. But on account of the peculiar slant of the sun, the only thing he could see clearly, at first, was his own image. The darkness of his skin startled him. It was no wonder that some people took him for a Gypsy or an Indian. He was dressed like a Gypsy vagrant, too, with a great patch on one shoulder of his shirt and one sleeve terminating in tatters at the elbow. However, he was not one to pride himself on appearance. He stretched himself; his dark eyes closed in the completeness of his yawn. Then he pressed his face closer to the window to make out what was offered for sale.

There were trays of rings, stick pins, jeweled cuff links. There were four pairs of pearl-handled revolvers; some hatbands of Mexican wheelwork done in metal; a little heap of curiously worked *conchos*; a number of watches, silver or gold; knives; some fine lace, yellow with age; a silver tea set—who had ever drunk tea in the mid-afternoon in this part of the world?—an odd bit of Mexican featherwork; spurs of plain steel, silver, or gold; and a host of odds and ends of all sorts.

The eye of Sleeper, for all his apparently lazy deliberation, moved a little more swiftly than the snapping end of a whiplash. After a glance, he had seen this host of entangled curiosities so well that he would have been able to list and describe most of them. He had settled his glance on one oddity that amused him—a key ring which was a silver snake that turned on itself in a double coil and gripped its tail in its mouth, while it stared at the world and at Sleeper with glittering little eyes of green.

Sleeper went to the door, and the great golden stallion from which he had dismounted started to follow. So he lifted a finger and stopped the horse with that small sign, then he entered.

The pawnbroker was a foreigner—he might have been anything from a German to an Armenian, and he had a divided beard that descended in two points, gray and jagged as rock. He had a yellow, wrinkled forehead, and his thick glasses made two glimmering obscurities of his eyes. When Sleeper asked to see the silver snake key ring, the bearded man took up the tray that contained it.

“How much?” asked Sleeper.

“Ten dollars,” said the pawnbroker.

“Ten which?” asked Sleeper.

“With emeralds for eyes, too. But I make it seven-fifty for such a young man.”

Sleeper did not know jewels, but he knew men.

“I'll give you two and a half,” he said.

“I sell things,” answered the pawnbroker. “I can't afford to give them away.”

“Good-bye, brother,” said Sleeper, but he had seen a shimmer of doubt in the eyes of the other, and he was not surprised to be called back from the door.

“Well,” said the pawnbroker, “I’ve only had it in my window for two or three hours . . . it’s good luck to make a quick sale, so here you are.”

As Sleeper laid the money on the counter, he commenced to twist off the keys.

“Hold on,” said Sleeper. “Let the tassels stay on it, too. They make it look better.”

“You want to mix them up with your own keys?” asked the pawnbroker.

“I haven’t any keys of my own,” said Sleeper, laughing, and went from the pawnshop at once.

As he walked down the street, the stallion followed him, trailing a little distance to the rear, and people turned to look at the odd sight, for the horse looked fit for a king, and Sleeper was in rags. There were plenty of men in the streets of Tucker Flat, because, since the bank robbery of three months ago, the big mines of the town had been shutting down one by one. They never had paid very much more than the cost of production, and the quarter million stolen from the Levison Bank had consisted chiefly of their deposits. Against that blow the three mines had struggled, but failed to recover. The result was that a flood of laborers was set adrift. Some of them had gone off through the mountains in a vain quest for new jobs; others loitered about Tucker Flat in the hope that something would happen to reopen the mines. That was why the sheriff had his hands full. Tucker Flat always was as hard as nails, but now it was harder still.

The streets were full, but the saloons were empty, as Sleeper soon observed when he went into one for a glass of beer. He sat at the darkest corner table, nursing the drink and his gloomy thoughts. Pop Lowry had appointed this town and this evening as the moment for their meeting, and only the devil that lived in the brain of the pseudo-peddler could tell what new and dangerous task Lowry would name for Sleeper.

He had been an hour in the shadows, staring at his thoughts, before the double swing doors of the saloon were pushed open by a man who looked over the interior with a quick eye, then muttered: “Let’s try the red-eye in here, old son.”

With a companion, he sauntered toward the bar. Sleeper was at once completely awake. For that exploring glance that the stranger had cast around the room had not been merely to survey the saloon, it had been in quest of a face, and, when his eye had lighted on Sleeper, he had come in at once.

But what could Sleeper be to him? Sleeper had never seen him before. In the great spaces of his memory, where faces appeared more thickly than whirling leaves, never once had he laid eyes on either of the pair. The first man was tall, meager, with a crooked neck and a projecting Adam’s apple. The skin was fitted tightly over the bones of his face; his hair was blond, his eyebrows very white, and his skin sun-blackened. It was altogether a face that would not be forgotten easily. The second fellow was an opposite type, fat, dark, with immense power swelling the shoulders and sleeves of his shirt.

The two looked perfectly the parts of cowpunchers; certainly they had spent their lives in the open. There was nothing to catch the eyes about them as extraordinary except that both wore their guns well down the thigh, so that the handles of them were conveniently in grasp of the fingertips.

Having spent half a second glancing at them, Sleeper spent the next moments in carefully analyzing the two. Certainly he never had seen their faces. He never had heard their names—from their talk he learned that the tall fellow was Tim, and the shorter man was called Buzz. They looked the part of cowpunchers, perfectly, except that the palms of their hands did not seem to be thickened or callused.

What could they want with Sleeper, unless they had been sent to the town of Tucker Flat in order to locate Sleeper and relay to him orders from Pop Lowry?

Several more men came into the saloon. It was apparent that they had nothing to do with the first couple. However, a few moments later both Buzz and Tim were seated at a table with two more. By the very way that tall Tim shuffled the cards, it was clear to Sleeper that these fellows probably had easier ways of making money than working for it.

Hands uncallused; guns worn efficiently although uncomfortably low—these were small indications but they were enough to make Sleeper suspicious. The two looked to him more and more like a couple of Lowry's lawbreakers.

"How about you, stranger?" said Tim, nodding at Sleeper. "Make a fifth at poker?"

"I've only got a few bucks on me," said Sleeper. "But I'll sit in, if you want."

He could have sworn that this game had been arranged by Tim and Buzz solely for the purpose of drawing him into it. Yet, everything had been done very naturally.

He remained out for the first three hands, then, on three queens, he pulled in a jackpot. Half an hour later he was betting his last penny. He lost it at once.

"You got a nice spot of bad luck," said Buzz Mahoney, who was mixing the cards at the moment. "But stick with the game. If you're busted, we'll lend you something."

"I've got nothing worth a loan," said Sleeper.

"Haven't you got a gun tucked away, somewhere?"

"No. No gun."

He saw a thin gleam of wonder and satisfaction commingled in the eyes of Tim Riley.

"Empty out your pockets," said Tim. "Maybe you've got a picture of your best girl. I'll lend you something on that."

He laughed as he spoke. They all laughed. Sleeper obediently put the contents of his pockets on the table, a jumble of odds and ends.

"All right," said Tim at once. "Lend you ten bucks on that, brother."

Ten dollars? The whole lot was not worth five, new. But Sleeper accepted the money. He accepted and lost it all by an apparently foolish bet in the next hand. But he wanted to test the strangers at once.

"I'm through, boys," he said, and pushed back his chair.

He was eager to see if they would still persuade him to remain in the game. But not a word was said, except that Buzz Mahoney muttered: "Your bad luck is a regular long streak, today. Sorry to lose you, kid."

Sleeper laughed a little, pushing in his cards with a hand that lingered on them for just an instant.

In that moment he had found what he expected—a little, almost microscopic smudge that was not quite true to the regular pattern on the backs of the cards. It was a tiny thing, but the eye of Sleeper was a little sharper than that of a hawk that turns its head in the middle sky and sees in the dim forest of the grass below the scamper of a little field mouse.

The cards were marked. Mahoney or Tim Riley had done that. They were marked for the distinct purpose of beating Sleeper, for the definite end of getting away something that had been in his possession.

What was it that they had wanted so much? What was it that had brought them on his trail?

II A New Job

It was pitch dark when Pop Lowry reached the deserted shack outside the town of Tucker Flat. He whistled once and again, and, when he received no answer, he began to curse heavily. In the darkness, with the swift surety of long practice, he stripped the packs from the mules, hobbled and sidelined them. Presently they were sucking up water noisily at the little rivulet that crossed the clearing.

The peddler, in the meantime, had kindled a small fire in the open fireplace that stood before the shack, and he soon had the flames rising, as he laid out his cooking pans and provisions. This light struck upward on his long jaw and heavy nose, merely glinting across the baldness of his head and the silver pockmarks that were littered over his features. When he turned, reaching here and there with his long arms, the huge, deformed bunch behind his shoulders loomed. It was rather a camel's hump of strength than a deformity of the spine.

Bacon began to hiss in the pan. Coffee bubbled in the pot. Potatoes were browning in the coals beside the fire. Soft pone steamed in its baking pan. Now the peddler set out a tin of plum jam and prepared to begin his feast. It was at this moment that he heard a yawn, or what seemed a yawn, on the farther side of the clearing.

The big hands of the peddler instantly were holding a shotgun in readiness. Peering through the shadows, on the very margin of his firelight he made out a dim patch of gold, then the glow of big eyes, and, at last, he was aware of a big horse lying motionless on the ground, while close to him, his head and shoulders comfortably pillowed on a hummock, appeared Sleeper.

"Sleeper!" yelled the peddler. "You been here all the time? Didn't you hear the whistle?"

"Why should I show up before eating time?" asked Sleeper.

He stood up and stretched himself. The stallion began to rise, also, but a gesture from the master made it sink to the ground again.

“I dunno why I should feed a gent too lazy to help me take off those packs and cook the meal,” growled Pop Lowry. He thrust out his jaw in an excess of malice.

“You want to feed me because you always feed the hungry,” said Sleeper. “Because the bigness of old Pop’s heart is one of the things that everyone talks about. A rough diamond, but a heart of gold. A . . .”

“The devil with the people, and you, too,” said Pop.

He looked on gloomily while Sleeper, uninvited, helped himself to food and commenced to eat.

“Nothing but brown sugar for this coffee?” demanded Sleeper.

“It’s too good for you, even that way,” answered Pop. “What makes you so hungry?”

“Because I didn’t eat since noon.”

“Why not? There’s all the food in the world in Tucker Flat.”

“Broke,” said Sleeper.

“Broke? How can you be broke, when I gave you fifteen hundred dollars two weeks ago?” shouted Pop.

“Well,” said Sleeper, “the fact is that faro parted me from five hundred.”

“Faro? You fool!” said Pop. “But that still left a whole thousand . . . and, from the looks of you, you didn’t spend anything on clothes.”

“I ran into Jeff Beacon, and old Jeff was flat.”

“How much did you give him?”

“I don’t know. I gave him the roll, and he took a part of it.”

“You don’t know how much?”

“I forgot to count it, afterward.”

“Are you clean crazy, Sleeper?”

“Jeff needed money worse than I did. A man with a family to take care of needs a lot of money, Pop.”

“Still, that left you several hundred. What happened to it?”

“I met Steve Walters when he was feeling lucky, and I staked him for poker.”

“What did his luck turn into?”

“Wonderful, Pop. He piled up nearly two thousand in an hour.”

“Where was your share of it?”

“Why, Steve hit three bad hands and plunged, and he was taken to the cleaners. So I gave him something to eat on and rode away.” Sleeper added: “When today came along, somehow I had only a few dollars in my pocket.”

“I’d rather pour water on the desert than put money in your pocket!” shouted Pop Lowry. “It ain’t human, the way you throw it away.”

He continued to glare for a moment and growl. He was still shaking his head as he commenced champing his food.

“You didn’t even have a price of a meal?” he demanded at last.

“That’s quite a story.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” snapped Pop Lowry. “I’ve got a job for you.”

“I’ve just finished a job for you,” said Sleeper.

“What of it?” demanded Pop Lowry. “You signed up to do what I pleased for three months, didn’t you?”

“I did,” sighed Sleeper. He thought regretfully of the impulse that had led him into putting himself at the beck and call of this old vulture. But his word had been given.

“And there’s more than two months of that time left, ain’t there?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then listen to me, while I tell you what I want you to do.”

“Wait till you hear my story.”

“Rats with your story. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Oh, you’ll want to hear it all right.”

“What makes you think so?” asked the peddler.

“Because you like one thing even more than money.”

“What do I like more?”

“Trouble,” said Sleeper. “You love it like the rat that you are.”

In fact, as the peddler thrust out his jaw and wrinkled his eyes, he looked very like a vast rodent. He overlooked the insult to ask: “What sort of trouble?”

“Something queer. I told you I was broke today. That’s because I lost my last few dollars playing poker. I played the poker because I *wanted* to lose.”

“Wanted?” echoed Pop Lowry. “That’s too crazy even for you. I don’t believe it.”

“I’ll tell you how it was. I was sitting with a glass of beer, when two *hombres* walked into the saloon . . . by the look they gave me, I knew they were on my trail . . . and I wondered why, because I’d never seen them before. I let them get me into a poker game and take my cash. I knew that wasn’t what they wanted. When I was frozen out, they were keen to lend me a stake and got me to empty my pockets on the table. I put a handful of junk on the table, and they loaned me ten dollars, and I let that go in the next hand. They didn’t offer to stake me again. They wanted something that was in my pockets. When they got that, they were satisfied. Now, then, what was it that they were after?”

“What did they look like?” asked Pop Lowry.

“Anything up to murder,” said Sleeper promptly.

“What was the stuff you put on the table?”

“Half a pack of wheat-straw papers, a full sack of tobacco, a penknife with one blade broken, a twist of twine, sulphur matches, a leather wallet with nothing in it except a letter from a girl, a key ring and some keys, a handkerchief, a pocket comb in a leather case, a stub of a pencil. That was all.”

“The letter from the girl. What girl?” asked Lowry.

“None of your business,” said Sleeper.

“It may have been *their* business, though.”

“Not likely. Her name wasn’t signed to the letter, anyway. She didn’t say anything, except talk about the weather. Nobody could have made anything of that letter.”

“Any marks on the wallet?”

“None that mattered, so far as I know.”

“I’ve seen you write notes on cigarette papers.”

“No notes on those.”

“What were you doing with a key ring and keys? You don’t own anything with locks on it.”

“Caught my eye in the pawnshop today. Little silver snake with green eyes.”

“Anything queer about that snake?”

“Good Mexican work. That’s all.”

“The letter’s the answer,” said Pop Lowry. “There was something in that letter.”

“They’re welcome to it.”

“Or in the keys. What sort of keys?”

“Three for padlocks, two regular door keys, something that looked like a skeleton, and a little flat key of white metal.”

“Any marks on those keys?”

“Only on the little one. The number on it was one two six five.”

“You’ve got an eye,” said Pop Lowry. “When I think what an eye and a brain and a hand you’ve got, it sort of makes me sick. Nothin’ in the world that you couldn’t do, if you weren’t so doggone honest.”

Sleeper did not answer. He was brooding, and now he said: “Could have been the keys? I didn’t think of that.” Then he added: “It *was* the keys!”

“How d’you know?” asked Pop.

“I remember now that, when I bought them, the pawnbroker said that he had just put the ring out for sale a couple of hours before.”

“Ha!” grunted Pop. “You mean that the two gents had gone back to the pawnshop to redeem the key ring?”

“Why not? Maybe they’d come a long way to redeem that key ring. Maybe the time was up yesterday. They found the thing gone . . . they got my description . . . they trailed me . . . they worked the stuff out of my pockets onto the table . . . and there you are! Pop, they were headed for some sort of dirty work . . . something big.”

Pop Lowry began to sweat. He forgot to drink his coffee.

“We’ll forget the other job I was going to give you,” he said. “Maybe there ain’t a bean in this, but we’ll run it down.”

“I knew you’d smell the poison in the air and like it,” said Sleeper, grinning.

“What would put you on their trail? What would the number on that little key mean?”

“Hotel room? No, it wasn’t big enough for that. It couldn’t mean anything . . . in this part of the world . . . except a post office box. No other lock would be shallow enough for it to fit.”

“There’s an idea!” exclaimed Pop Lowry. “That’s a big number . . . one two six five. Take a big town to have that many post office boxes.”

“Weldon is the only town big enough for that . . . the only town inside of three hundred miles.”

“That pair is traveling for Weldon,” agreed Lowry. “They wanted that bunch of keys. Get ’em, Sleeper! That’s your job. Just get those keys and find out what they’re to open. And start now!”

III In Weldon Pass

Buzz Mahoney, opening the door of his room at the hotel in Tucker Flat, lighted a match to ignite the lamp on the center table. Then he heard a whisper behind him and tried to turn around, but a blow landed accurately at the base of his skull and dropped him down a well of darkness. Sleeper, leaning over him, unhurried, lighted another match, and, fumbling through the pockets, found almost at once the silver snake key ring. Then he descended to the street, using a back window, instead of the lobby and the front door. Before he had gone half a block, he heard stamping and shouting in the hotel, and knew that his victim had recovered and was trying to discover the source of his fall.

Sleeper, pausing near the first streak of lamplight that shone through a window, examined the keys with a swift glance. There had been seven keys before; there were only six now. That was what sent Sleeper swiftly around the corner to the place where Pop Lowry waited for him.

“I’ve got them,” he said, “but the one for the post office box is gone. Mahoney had the rest . . . but Tim Riley is gone with the little key.”

“There’s something in that post office box,” answered Pop. “Go and get it.”

“He’s got a head start,” answered Sleeper.

“He’s got a head start, but you’ve got your horse, and, if Careless can’t make up the lost ground, nothing can. Ride for Weldon and try to catch Tim Riley on the way. I’m heading straight on for Weldon myself. I’ll get there sometime tomorrow. Quit the trails and head straight for Weldon Pass. You’ll catch your bird there.”

Sleeper sat on his heels and closed his eyes. He was seeing in his mind all the details of the ground over which he would have to travel, if he wished to take a short cut to Weldon Pass. Then he stood up, nodded, and stretched again.

“I’ll run along,” he said.

“Have another spot of money?” asked the peddler.

He took out fifty dollars, counted it with a grudging hand from his wallet, and passed it to Sleeper, who received it without thanks.

“How long before somebody cuts your gizzard open to get your money, Pop?”

“That’s what salts the meat and makes the game worthwhile,” said Pop Lowry. “Never knowing whether I’m gonna wake up, when I go to sleep at night.”

“How many murders do you dream about, Pop?” pursued Sleeper casually.

“I got enough people in my dreams,” said Pop Lowry, grinning. “And some of ’em keep on talking after I know they’re dead. But my conscience don’t bother me none. I ain’t such a fool, Sleeper.”

Sleeper turned on his heel without answer or farewell. Five minutes later he was traveling toward Weldon Pass on the back of the stallion.

If Tim Riley had in fact started so long ahead of him toward the town of Weldon, it would take brisk travel to catch him in the narrow throat of the pass, so Sleeper laid out an air line and traveled it as straight as a bird. There were ups and downs that ordinary men on ordinary horses never would have attempted. Sleeper was on his feet half the time, climbing rugged slopes up which the stallion followed him like a great cat. Or again Sleeper worked his way down some perilous steep with the golden horse scampering and sliding to the rear, always with his nose close to the ground to study the exact places where his master had stepped. For the man knew exactly what the horse could do, and never took him over places too slippery or too abrupt for him to cover. In this work they gave the impression of two friends struggling toward a common end, rather than of master and servant.

So they came out on a height above Weldon Pass, and, looking down on it, Sleeper saw the moon break through clouds and gild the pass with light. It was a wild place, with scatterings of hardy brush here and there, even an occasional tree, but on the whole it looked like a junk heap of stone with a course kicked through the center of it. Rain had been falling recently. The whole pass was bright with water, and it was against the thin gleam of this background that Sleeper saw the small shadow of the other rider coming toward him. He went down the last abrupt slope at once to intercept the course of the other rider.

He was hardly at the bottom before he could hear the faint clinking sounds made by the hoofs of the approaching horse. A whisper made the stallion sink from view behind some small boulders. Sleeper himself ran up to the top of a boulder half the size of a house, and crouched there. He could see the stranger coming, the head of the horse nodding up and down in the pale moonlight. Sleeper tied a bandanna around the lower part of his face.

Ten steps from Sleeper’s waiting place, he made sure that it was tall Tim Riley in person, for there Riley stopped his horse and let it drink from a little freshet that ran across the narrow floor of the ravine. It was a magnificent horse that he rode—over sixteen hands, sloping shoulders, high withers, big bones, well-let-down hocks, and flat knees. *A horse too good for a working cowpuncher to have*, thought Sleeper. And his last doubt about the character of Tim Riley disappeared. The man was a crooked card

player with a crooked companion; he was probably a criminal in other ways, as well. Men are not apt to make honest journeys through the middle of the night and over places as wild as the Weldon Pass.

When the horse had finished drinking, Riley rode on again. He was passing the boulder that sheltered Sleeper, when his mount stopped suddenly and threw up its head with a snort. Riley, with the speed of an automatic reaction, snatched out a gun. There was a well-oiled ease in the movement, a professional touch of grace that did not escape the eye of Sleeper. He could only take his man half by surprise, now, but he rose from behind his rampart of rock and leaped headlong.

He sprang from behind, yet the flying shadow of danger seemed to pass over the brain of Riley. He jerked his head and gun around while Sleeper was still in the air, then Sleeper struck him with the full lunging weight of his body, and they rolled together from the back of the horse.

The gun had exploded once, while they were in the air. Sleeper remained unscathed. Now he found himself fighting for his life against an enemy as strong and swift and fierce as a mountain lion.

A hundred times Sleeper had fought with his hands, but always victory had been easy. The ancient science of *jujitsu*, that he had spent patient years learning, gave him a vast advantage in spite of his slender bulk. He had struggled with great two-hundred-pounders who were hardened fighting men, but always it was like the battle between the meager wasp and the huge, powerful tarantula. The spider fights with blind strength, laying hold with its steel shears wherever it can; the wasp drives its poisoned sting at the nerve centers.

That is the art of *jujitsu*. At the pits of the arms or the side of the neck or the back, or inside the legs or in the pit of the stomach, there are places where the great nerves come close to the surface, vulnerable to a hard pressure or a sharp blow. Sleeper knew those spots as an anatomist might know them. Men who fought him were rarely hurt unless they hurled their own weight at him too blindly, for half the great art of *jujitsu* lies in using the strength of the antagonist against him. Usually the victim of Sleeper recovered as from a trance, with certain vaguely tingling pains still coursing through parts of his body. But not a bone would be broken, and the bruises were few.

He tried all his art now, and he found that art checked and baffled at every turn. Tall and spare of body, Tim Riley looked almost fragile, but from the first touch Sleeper found him a creature of whalebone and Indian rubber. Every fiber of Riley's body was a strong wire, and in addition he was an expert wrestler. Before they had rolled twice on the ground, Sleeper was struggling desperately in the defense. Then the arm of Riley caught him with a frightful stranglehold that threatened to break his neck before it choked him. Suddenly Sleeper lay still.

Tim Riley seemed to sense surrender in this yielding, this sudden pulpiness of body and muscle. Instead of offering quarter, Riley began to snarl like a dog that has sunk its teeth in a death grip. He kept jerking the crook of his arm deeper and deeper into the throat of Sleeper, who lay inert, face down. Flames and smoke seemed to shoot upward through Sleeper's brain, but in that instant of relaxation he had gathered his strength and decided on his counterstroke.

He twisted his right leg outside that of his enemy, raised the foot until with his heel he located the knee of Riley, then kicked the sharp heel heavily against the inside of the joint. Tim Riley yelled with agony. The blow fell again, and he twisted his body frantically away from the torture. That movement gave Sleeper his chance, and with the sharp edge of the palm, hardened almost like wood by long practice in the trick, he struck the upper arm of Riley.

It loosened its grip like a numb, dead thing. With his other arm Riley tried to get the same fatal hold, but Sleeper had twisted like a writhing snake. He struck again with the edge of the palm, and the blow fell like the stroke of a blunt cleaver across the million nerves that run up the side of the neck. The head of Riley fell over as though an axe had struck deep. He lay not motionless but vaguely stirring, making a groaning, wordless complaint.

Sleeper, in a moment, had trussed him like a bird for market. Still the wits had not fully returned to Riley as Sleeper rifled his pockets. But he found not a sign of the little flat, white key that had the number 1265 stamped upon it. He crumpled the clothes of the man, feeling that such a small object might have been hidden in a seam. Then he pulled off the boots of Riley, and, when he took out the first insole, he found what he wanted. The little key flashed like an eye in the moonlight, then he dropped it into his pocket.

The voice of Tim Riley pleaded from the ground: "You ain't gonna leave me here, brother, are you? And what on earth did you use to hit me? Where did you have it . . . up your sleeve?"

Sleeper leaned and looked into the hard face of the other. Then he muttered: "You'll be all right. People will be riding through the pass in the early morning. So long, partner."

Then he took Riley's horse by the reins and led it away among the rocks toward the place where he had left Careless, the stallion.

IV The Chart

Neither on the streets of Weldon nor in the post office itself did people pay much attention to Sleeper because the Weldon newspaper had published an extra that told that the body of Joe Mendoza, the escaped fugitive from the state prison, had been found. That news was of sufficient importance to occupy all eyes with reading and all tongues with talk. All it meant to Sleeper was the cover under which he could approach his work.

He went straight into the post office and found there what he had expected in a town of the size of Weldon—a whole wall filled by the little mail boxes, each with a glass insert in the door so that it could be seen if mail were waiting inside. In the right-hand corner, shoulder-high, appeared No. 1265. Inside it, he could see a single thin envelope.

The key fitted at once. The little bolt of the lock slipped with a click, and the door opened. Sleeper took out the envelope and slammed the small door so that the spring lock engaged.

On the envelope was written: Mr. Oliver Badget, Box 1265, Weldon. And in the upper left-hand corner: To be delivered only to Oliver Badget in person.



The camping places of the peddler in his tours through the mountains were perfectly known to Sleeper. Therefore he was waiting in a wooded hollow just outside of Weldon, when Pop Lowry shambled into the glade later that afternoon.

Pop Lowry shouted an excited greeting, but Sleeper remained flat on his back, his hands cupped under his head while he stared up through the green gloom of a pine tree at the little splashes of blue heaven above. In slanted patches the sun warmed his body.

The peddler, not waiting to pull the pack saddles off his tired mules, stood over Sleeper and stared critically down at him.

“That gent Riley was a tough *hombre*, eh? Too tough for you, Sleeper?” he asked.

“I got the key from him,” said Sleeper. “There was a box numbered one two six five at the post office, and this was what was inside.” He fished the envelope from his pocket and tossed it into the air. The big hand of the peddler darted out and caught the prize. Jerking out the fold of paper that it contained, Pop Lowry stared at a singular pattern. There was not a written word on the soiled sheet; there was only a queer jumble of dots, triangles, and one wavering, crooked line that ran across the paper from one corner to the other. Beside one bend of the wavering line appeared a cross.

“This here is the spot,” argued the peddler.

“The cross is the spot,” agreed Sleeper. “And a lot that means!”

“The triangles are trees,” said Pop.

“Or mountains,” answered Sleeper.

“The dots . . . what would they be, kid?”

“How do I know? Cactus . . . rocks . . . I don’t know.”

“This crooked line is a road, Sleeper.”

“Or a valley, or a ravine.”

“It’s hell!” said Lowry.

He stared at Sleeper, who remained motionless. The wind ruffled his black hair; the blue of his eyes was as still and peaceful as the sky above them. Pop Lowry cursed again and then sat down, cross-legged.

“Put your brains on this here, Sleeper,” he said. “Two brains are better than one.”

“I’ve put my brain on it, but you can see for yourself that we’ll never make anything out of it.”

“Why not?”

“Well, it’s simply a chart to stir up the memory of Oliver Badget. Oliver is the boy who knows what those marks mean. Call it a road . . . that crooked line. Well, at the seventh bend from the lower corner of the page, there, along that road, there’s something planted. Oliver wants to be able to find it. But where does the road begin? Where does he begin to count the bends?”

“From Weldon,” suggested the peddler.

“Yes. Or from a bridge, or a clump of trees, or something like that. And there’s twenty roads or trails leading into Weldon.”

Pop Lowry groaned. He took out a plug of chewing tobacco, clamped his teeth into a corner of it, and bit off a liberal quid with a single powerful closing of his jaws. He began to masticate the tobacco slowly. “A gent with something on hand wants to put it away,” he said, thinking aloud. “He takes and hides it. He hides it in a place so doggone mixed up that even he can’t be sure that he’ll remember. So he leaves a chart. Where’s he going to hide the *chart*, though?”

“Where nobody would ever think of looking,” agreed Sleeper. “He rents a post office box and puts the chart in an envelope addressed to himself. Nobody else could get that envelope because nobody else has the key, and nobody would call for mail in Badget’s name and get the envelope, either. Because that letter would have to be signed for in Badget’s signature before the clerk would turn the thing over. But now that he’s got the chart hidden, all he has to do is to hide the key. And where would he hide the key? Well, in a place just as public as the post office box, where everybody could see it. So he hocks that key ring and all the keys on it at a pawnshop.”

Lowry sighed. “Nobody would go to all of this trouble, Sleeper,” he commented, “unless what was hidden out was a doggone big pile.”

“Nobody would,” agreed Sleeper.

“Now Mister Badget turns up and tries to get his key, and finds out that his time has just run out. He hurries like the devil to get to that key in time, but he’s too late. Sleeper has the key. He gets it away from Sleeper. . . . Why, that all sounds doggone reasonable and logical.”

“Badget isn’t another name for Riley or for Mahoney,” declared Sleeper.

“Why not?”

“Well, Badget himself could go to the post office without the key and get the letter any time by signing for it.”

“True,” agreed Lowry. Then he added, after a moment of thought: “Badget couldn’t come himself. He had to send friends to make sure that that key didn’t get into the wrong hands. He sent friends to maybe just pay the pawnbroker’s loan and renew it . . . and pay for the post office box. Why didn’t Badget come himself? Sick? In jail?”

“Or dead,” said Sleeper.

“Sleeper, there’s something important hidden out where that cross is marked.”

“We’ll never find it without a key to the chart,” said Sleeper. “It’s a good little map, all right, but unless we know what part of the country to fit it to, we’ll never locate

what's under the cross. It may be a district five hundred miles from here, for all we know."

"What'll we do?" asked Pop Lowry.

"Wait, Pop. That's the only good thing that we can do."

"What good will waiting do?"

"The postmaster has a master key for all of those boxes. Well, the postmaster is going to lose that key today or tomorrow. And right afterward, box one two six five is going to be opened."

"There won't be anything in it," protested Lowry. "Whatcha mean, Sleeper?"

"You can copy the chart, and then I'll put the original back in the post office box."

"What happens then? You mean that Riley and Mahoney come along, rob the postmaster of the master key, get the chart, and then start out on the trail with us behind them?"

"With *me* behind them," corrected Sleeper. "I don't need you."

The big peddler swore. "Yeah," he said, "you can disappear like a sand flea and turn up like a wildcat whenever you want to. You'll be able to trail 'em, all right."

Sleeper sighed. "Copy the chart," he said. "I'm going to sleep. Because after I take that envelope back to the post office, I've got to find a place and stay awake day and night to see who goes into that building, and who comes out again."

Lowry, without a word of answer, sat down to his drawing.

V

Alkali Flat

There was a three-story hotel opposite the post office, and here Sleeper lay at a window night and day for four long days. They were hot, windless days, and he hardly closed his eyes for more than a half hour at a time, but the keenness of his attention never diminished. Over the low shoulders of the post office, from his place of vantage, he could look all around the environs of the building he spied upon. The nights were clear, with moonlight; the days were the more difficult.

He could not tell when Riley or Mahoney would appear in one of the sudden swirls of people who slipped suddenly through the swing doors of the building, disappeared, and came out again a few moments later. It was quite possible that they would attempt to disguise themselves. Even then he would have more than a good chance of identifying them. He had learned long ago to look not only at the face of a man but also at the shape of his head, the angle of nose and forehead, and particularly at any strangeness of contour in the ear. A man may become either thin or fat, but his height is not altered. And the general outline of the head and shoulders, whether the man comes toward the eye or goes from it, may often be recognized. Even so, hawk-eyed as he was, it would be fumbling in the dark—and like a patient fisher he remained waiting. Agonies of impatience he hid away behind a smile.

One cause of his impatience was his desire to finish up the job for Lowry. Pop had helped him in his great need but had expected a three months' servitude in exchange. Sleeper loved danger, and Pop could supply it, but it was unsavory, unclean, and Sleeper liked things as shining clear as the coat of the stallion Careless. His code made him live up to his given word. What he would do to Pop, when his term of service was up, put the only good taste in his mouth in many a day.

It was on the fourth day that tall Pop Lowry stalked into the room and pushed his dusty hat back on his head. The hot reek of the outdoors entered with him.

He said: "Oliver Badget was Joe Mendoza. I just seen a bit of Mendoza's handwriting, so I know. Buzz Mahoney and Tim Riley were the best friends of Joe. Mendoza is dead. Buzz and Tim are carryin' on where Mendoza left off. That means they're starting something big. So big that Mendoza risked his neck to get out of prison. He must've met those two *hombres*. Before he died, he told them things. And it's my idea, Sleeper, that what that chart tells is the location of the cache where Mendoza put away the whole savin's of his life."

The teeth of Lowry clicked together. His eyes grew green with bright greed. "Mendoza never spent nothin'. He never did nothin' but save," he added. "Sleeper, I've got three of my best men, and they're gonna ride with you, when you start the game."

"I work a lone hand or I don't work at all," said Sleeper dreamily, as he lay stretched on his bed, peering steadily out the window.

"Damn it," growled Lowry, "if you try to handle the two of 'em, they'll sure bust you full of lead. Mendoza never had nothin' to do with gents that wasn't murderers. Those are two gunmen, Sleeper, and, when you handled 'em before, you was dealin' with rattlers without knowin' it."

"I'll handle 'em alone or not at all," said Sleeper in the same voice.

"Sleeper . . . you'll carry a gun, then, won't you?"

Sleeper shook his head. "Any fool can carry a gun," he answered. "The fun of the game is handling fire with your bare hands."

There was a muffled, snarling sound from Pop Lowry. Then he strode from the room without another word.

Five minutes later Sleeper shuddered. For a man with a long, linen duster on had just stepped through the front door of the post office. The duster covered him very efficiently, but a certain weight about the shoulders, a certain sense of power in the arms was not lost on Sleeper.

He was off his bed, down the stairs, and instantly in the stable behind the hotel. A moment later he had jerked the saddle on the back of the stallion and snapped the bridle over his head. Then he hurried down the alley and crossed into the vacant lot beside the hotel where a clump of tall shrubs covered him. He could see without being seen. He had hardly taken his post before the man in the linen duster came out from the post office again, paused to yawn widely, glanced up and down the street with quick eyes, and turned the corner.

Sleeper, running to the same corner, had a glimpse of two men swinging on the backs of two fine horses. At once the pair swung away at a rapid canter.

They left Weldon, headed north for five miles, swung sharply to the west, then went straight south through the mountains. For two days, Sleeper shivered in the wet winds and the whipping rains of the high ravines, following his quarry.

It was close work, dangerous work. Sometimes in a naked valley he had to let the pair get clear out of sight before he ventured to take the trail again. Once, coming through a dense fog that was simply a cloud entangled in the heights, he came suddenly around a rock face to face with a starry light. Through the mist, not five steps away, he heard the loud voice of Buzz Mahoney yell out: "Who's there? What's that?"

"A mountain sheep, you fool," suggested Tim Riley.



Six days out of Weldon, Sleeper was riding anxiously through a ravine that was cluttered with such a litter of rocks that danger might have hidden there in the form of whole regiments. It was only the hair-trigger sensitiveness of the nose of the stallion that detected trouble ahead. He stopped, jerked up his head, and the next instant Sleeper saw the wavering of sunlight on a bit of steel, the blue brightness of a leveled gun.

He whirled Careless away. Two rifles barked, sent long, clanging echoes down the ravine, and Sleeper swayed slowly out from the saddle, dropped, and hung head down with trailing arms, his right leg hooked over the saddle as though caught in the stirrup leather and so precariously was supported.

The rifles spoke no more. Instead, two riders began to clatter furiously in pursuit. A good mile they rushed their swift horses along, but Careless, with his master still hanging at his side, widened the distance of his lead with every stride, and finally was lost to view among the sea of boulders.

After that, the noise of the pursuit no longer beat through the ravine. Sleeper pulled himself back into the saddle. His leg ached as though the bone had been broken; his head spun; but there was no real harm done by his maneuver. He turned again on the trail. All that Pop Lowry had told him, all that he could have guessed, was reinforced doubly now. For when men would not delay to capture such a horse as Careless when the rider was apparently wounded to death, it was sure proof that Mahoney and Riley were bound toward a great goal.



They went on securely, now, but steadily. They cleaved through the mountains, following the high Lister Pass, and then they dipped down along the side of the range into the terrible sun mist and dusty glare of Alkali Flat.

Imagine a bowl a hundred miles across, rimmed with cool blue distance on either side, but paved with white heat and the welter and dance of the reflected sun. That was Alkali Flat.

Sleeper, looking from the rim of the terrible depression, groaned softly. He glanced up and saw three soaring buzzards come over the head of the mountain, turn, and sweep

with untroubled wings back the way they had come. Even at that height, they seemed to dread the pungent heat that poured up from the vast hollow.

Sleeper, sitting in the shadow of a rock, sat down to think. He could find no resource in his mind. There was no way in which he could travel out into the desert. Whoever had chosen to hide a treasure in the midst of such an ocean of despair had chosen well. In the middle of the day, a man needed three pints of water an hour. A fellow whose canteen went dry in the middle of that hell would be mad with thirst by the time he had walked fifteen miles, at the most.

They went mad and died—every man the same way. The first act was to tear off the shirt. The second was to commence digging with bare hands in the sand and the rocks. They would be found that way afterward, the nails broken from their fingers, the flesh tattered, the very bones at the tips of the fingers splintered by the frightful, blind efforts of the dying men.

Sleeper, remembering one dreadful picture he had seen, slowly ran the pink tip of his tongue across his lips and sat up to breathe more easily. He had a canteen that would hold a single quart—and the valley was a hundred miles across! He had saddlebags, of course. They were new and strong, of the heaviest canvas. He took a pair of them and went to the nearest sound of running water. He drank and drank again of that delightfully bubbling spring; the mere sight of Alkali Flat had implanted in him an insatiable thirst. Then he filled one of the bags. The canvas was perfectly watertight, but the seams let the water spurt out in streams.

He looked about him, not in despair, but with the sense of one condemned. If he could not enter the desert assured of a fair chance of getting through, why, he would enter it without that chance and trust to luck like a madman. He was drawn by that perverse hunger for danger like a dizzy man by the terrible edge of a cliff.

Then he saw the pine trees that were filling the mountain air with sweetness, and he remembered their resin. Resin? It exuded from them in little fresh runs; it dripped from the wounded bark; it flavored the air with its clean scent. He began to collect it rapidly with his knife, and, as he got it, he commenced to smear the stuff over the seams of his saddlebags, which he turned inside out. He had two pairs, and he resined all four in hardly more than an hour. That was why the stallion was well weighted down with a load of the purest spring water, going down the slope toward Alkali Flat.

His master went ahead of him, jauntily, whistling a little, but the heat from the desert already was beginning to sting the eyes and make the lids of them tender.

VI The Treasure

In Alkali Flat, the earth was not a mother. It was a grave. Once there had been a river running through it; now there was only the hollow trough filled with the dead bones of the stream. Once there had been trees; now there were only the scarecrow trunks of a few ancient survivors. It was worse than the Sahara, because in the Sahara there was never life and here there was a ghost of it.

As Sleeper passed down into the frightful glare of that wasted land, he saw the trail of Mahoney and Tim Riley lead up to the bank of the dead river and then pass down the length of it. He felt that he knew, at once, the nature of the windings that had been depicted on the chart, and he could not help admiring the cleverness of Joe Mendoza, leaving his treasure here in the middle of a salt waste.

The temperature was above a hundred. That is a phrase that people use casually, liberally, without understanding. Actually, every part of a degree above blood heat begins to draw the strength from the heart. A dry heat is then an advantage in a sense, because the quick evaporation of the perspiration cools the flesh a little.

The heat in the great Alkali Flat was above a hundred and twenty. There were twenty-two degrees of fatal heat, and the dryness not merely turned sweat into mist at once, it laid hold on the flesh like a thousand leeches, sucking out the liquid from the body.

The feet of Sleeper began to burn in his boots. There seemed to be sand under his eyelids. The drying lips threatened to crack wide open. Thirst blew down his throat like a dusty wind at every breath he drew. At the same time, the skin of his face commenced to pull and contract, and the dry skin of his body was rubbed and chafed by his clothes.

Careless, indomitable in all conditions, now held on his way with his ears laid flat against his skull.

When Sleeper looked up, he saw a wedge of three buzzards sliding out from the mountain height and hanging in the air. They might shun the air above the horrible flat, but not when foolish living creatures attempted to cross the floor of the oven. What insane beings, even a Mahoney and a Riley, ventured on such a journey by the light of the day?

Sleeper looked from the dizzy sky back to the earth. It was like a kitchen yard, a yard on which thousands of gallons of soapy water, in the course of generations, have been flung upon a summer-baked soil thrice a day. For a singular odor rose from the ground. And it was everywhere gray-white.

Along the banks of the river one could see where water had once flowed at varying levels. The banks had been eaten back by the now dead stream. Here and there, at the edges of the levels, appeared the dry roots of long-vanished plants and trees, as fine as hair.

There was no steady breeze, but now and again a twist of the air sucked up dust in a small air pool that moved with swiftness for a short distance and then melted away. If one of those white phantoms swayed toward Sleeper, he swerved the horse to avoid it. Careless himself shrank from the contact, for the alkali dust burned the passages of nose and lungs and mouth like dry lye, and the eyes were eaten by that unslaked lime.

Yet the other pair still advanced more deeply into that fire. An hour went by, and another, and another, and another. At a walk or a dog-trot, Careless stuck to his work. His coat was beginning to stare as his sweat dried and the salt of the perspiration stiffened the gloss of his hair. When Sleeper stroked the glorious neck of the horse, a thin dust followed his hand.

They had passed the danger point, long ago. That is to say, they had passed the point when a man could safely attempt to journey out of the alkali hell without water to carry. A fellow with a two-quart canteen, no matter how he nursed it, would probably be frantic for liquid before he reached the promise of the mountains which, already, were turning brown and blue in the distance.

And then the two figures far ahead, only discernible in the spyglass that Sleeper now and then used for spotting them, dipped away from the flat and disappeared. They had descended into the stream bed. It might mean that they had spotted the pursuer and were going to stalk him in ambush. It might mean, also, that they had reached the proper bend of the dry draw and that they were about to search for the marked spot on the chart.

Sleeper, taking a chance on the second possibility, pushed Careless ahead rapidly until he was close to the point of the disappearance. Conscience, duty, a strange spirit seemed to ride in his shadow and drive him ahead, but his conscious mind rebelled against this torment. It told him to rush away toward one of those spots of cool, blue mirage that continually wavered into view on the face of the desert; it told him that all was useless, wealth, fame, honor no more real than the welter of the heat waves. But he kept on.

When he was reasonably close, he dipped Careless down into the channel of the vanished river, and watered him from the second saddlebag. The water was now almost the heat of blood, and it had developed a foul taste from cooking inside the heavy canvas, but Careless sipped up the water greedily until the bag was empty. There remained to Sleeper one half of his original supply, and yet one half of his labor had not been completed.

Under a steep of the bank where there was a fall of shadow, he placed the horse and made him lie down. But the shadow was not a great blessing. The dimness seemed to thicken the air; it was like breathing dust, and the sand, even under the shadow, was hot to the touch. Here Careless was left, lifting his head and sending after his master a whinny of anxiety, no louder than a whisper. For the stallion knew as well as any man the reason those buzzards wheeled in the stillness of the hot air above.

Would the two men ahead take heed of the second group of buzzards? Or would they fail to notice, earthbound as their eyes must be, that the vultures wheeled and sailed in two parts?

Sleeper went on swiftly, but with care. And he could wish, now, that he had not left Weldon with empty hands. He had his knife, to be sure, and if he came to close range, that heavy knife with its needle-sharp point would be as deadly in his hands as any gun. It might well dispose of one of the pair, but the second one would certainly take revenge for his fall.

Very clearly, Sleeper knew what it meant if the couple were real companions of Joe Mendoza, that super-murderer. He would have none about him except savages as brutal as wild beasts. He would have none except experts in slaughter.

This knowledge made the step of Sleeper lighter than the step of a wildcat as he heard, directly around the next bend, the sound of blows sinking into the earth. From

the sharp edge of the bank he saw, as he peered around it, both Mahoney and tall Tim Riley hard at work with a pick and a shovel, which they had taken from their packs.

Their two horses, like the stallion, had been placed under the partial shadow of the western bank. One stood head down, like a dying thing; the other, with more of the invincible Western toughness supporting its knees and its spirit, wandered with slow steps down the draw, sniffing curiously at the strange dead roots that projected here and there from the bank.

The two workers, hard at it, had now opened a good-size hole in the earth, and they were driving it deeper and deeper when Mahoney uttered a wild cry and flung both arms above his head. Then, leaning, he tore at something buried in the earth. There was the brittle noise of the rending of a tough fabric; Mahoney jerked up, holding what seemed a torn strip of tarpaulin in his hands, and leaned immediately to grasp it again. Riley helped him. They were both yelling out senseless, meaningless words.

Now Sleeper saw a very strange thing to do, and did it. He slipped quietly out from his post of vantage and went up to the horse that was wandering with slow steps down the bank, the water sloshing with soft gurglings inside the burlap-wrapped huge canteen that hung from the saddle.

Sleeper took the horse calmly by the bridle and led it, step by step, around the bend. He had the horse almost out of view, when Mahoney, leaping to his feet, apparently looked straight at the thief.

Instead of drawing a gun, Buzz Mahoney pulled off his hat and began to wave it and shout with delight. Tim Riley also commenced to prance around like a crazy man.

“The whole insides of the Levison Bank!” yelled Riley. “Kid, we got it! We’re rich for life!”

They were blind with happiness. That was why Mahoney had failed to see the thief in his act of stealing, and now Sleeper was walking steadily down the draw with the horse behind him. He kept on until he reached the great stallion, which rose eagerly to meet him and touched noses with the other horse. Then Sleeper mounted Careless and put two miles of steady cantering behind him. After that, he rode up the bank to the level of the ground above and waited.

He sat in the shade under the side of Careless and ventured to smoke a cigarette that filled his lungs with a milder fire than that of the alkali dust.

One horse, two men, and the long, burning stretch of the desert to cross before the blue peace of the mountains surrounded them. It seemed to Sleeper that there was nothing in the world so beautiful as mountains, these mountains to the north. Yes, perhaps there were other regions even more delightful. There were the great Arctic and Antarctic plains where the ice of ages is piled. But to lie all day where water can flow across the body, where the lips can draw up clear water every moment—that is a bliss beyond words. It was easy to think, also, of the cool shadowy interiors of saloons, and the refreshing pungency of beer. Barrels of beer buried in vast casks of chipped ice and snow.

Men of sense should work with ice. What happy fellows are those who deliver the great, white, ponderous cakes of it, sawing and splitting it up for customers, drifting

comfortably from house to house.



Time passed. He watered the two horses and himself drank sparingly. There was still plenty of sun. It was high, high above the horizon, and those two fellows who had found the treasure of Joe Mendoza did not seem, as yet, to have discovered the loss of the second horse with more than half of their remaining water supply. Well, the wind of joy would cool them for a spell, but afterward. . . .

He thought, too, of the old, white-headed banker, level-eyed, fearless of the hatred that men poured on him since the failure of his bank after the robbery. What fools the officers of the law had been not to suspect that the job was that of Mendoza. Three men shot down wantonly. That was like Mendoza—Riley and Mahoney were no doubt of the murderous crew that attended the chief on that day of the holdup.

It all made a simple picture, now. Escaping with their spoil, Mendoza had attended to the hiding of it. They would disappear from the face of the land for a time. Then, at an appointed date, they would gather. But, in the meantime, Mendoza had been captured on some other charge. He had been put into the prison, and, when he attempted to break out at the allotted moment, he had been shot. He had passed on his information, loyally, to his two men.

That was the story, and Sleeper knew it as well as though he had heard it from the lips of the pair.

And now, at last, the two came up over the edge of the draw and started toward the mountains, one of them in the saddle, the other riding behind.

Sleeper fell in with them.

That terrible dryness of the air, that flaming of the sun no longer seemed hostile. It was performing his work. At the end of a long, long hour, the mountains seemed even farther away than they had been at the beginning. Sleeper saw the pair halt. They took off the big canteen from the side of their horse, drank, and then appeared to be measuring out some of the liquid for the horse.

From half a mile away, Sleeper distinctly could see the flash of the priceless water as it was poured. He could see the poor horse shake its head with eagerness for more. Then tall Tim Riley fastened the canteen back in its place beside the saddle. This was the moment that Buzz Mahoney, snatching out a holstered rifle from the other side of the saddle, dropped to his knee and began to pour shot after shot at Sleeper.

But Sleeper, at a thousand yards, laughed, and the laughter was a dry whisper in his throat. He took off his hat and waved it, as though in encouragement. And the two remounted, and went on.

VII Blazing Guns

For nearly another hour, Sleeper traveled in the wake of the pair, and still they seemed to be laboring in vain, never bringing the mountains closer.

Then trouble struck suddenly. They had dismounted to take water and give it to the horse again, when Sleeper saw by their gestures that they were in a heated argument. Two guns flashed like two dancing bits of blue flame. Then he saw Mahoney fall on his face; afterward the swift rattle of the reports struck his ear.

Tim Riley mounted and continued on his way, looking back toward the spot where his victim lay.

Sleeper, for some reason, looked suddenly up toward the buzzards that wheeled softly in the sky above him. They would be fed. But the figure of Mahoney now lifted from the ground. He ran a few steps in pursuit of Riley, and the small sound of his distant wailing came into the ears of Sleeper. To get mercy from Riley was an impossibility that not even the bewildered brain of a wounded man could entertain long. Sleeper, with a queer sickness of the heart, saw Mahoney tear the shirt from his back and fall to digging in the sand. Already the shock and the pain of bullet wounds, the swift loss of blood, and the burning caustic of Alkali Flat had reduced him to the madness of famine.

Sleeper came up rapidly, calling out. He was almost at the point where Mahoney groveled in the sand on his knees, scooping at the earth with his hands, before the wounded man looked up. He saw Sleeper with the bewilderment with which he might have stared at a heavenly angel. Then he came with a scream of hope, distending his mouth and eyes, his arms thrown out.

Blood ran down his body, which was swollen with strength rather than with fat. But he disregarded his wounds until he had drunk deeply. Then, recovering his wits a little, he looked rather vaguely up to Sleeper.

“You’re still back on the trail, eh?” said Mahoney. “Leave me ride that other horse, will you?”

“You can ride it, if you want,” agreed Sleeper.

There might have been twenty murders on the hands of this fellow, but still Sleeper pitied him.

Mahoney grasped the pommel of the saddle on the led horse, but suddenly weakness overcame him. He looked down with a singular wonder at the blood that rolled down his body. Those wounds were beyond curing, as Sleeper had seen at a glance. Mahoney realized it now, also, and the realization struck him down to his knees. He slumped to the side, his mouth open as he dragged at the hot, dusty air.

Sleeper, dismounting, knelt by him.

Mahoney cursed him. “Leave me be. I’m cooked,” he said. “Go get Riley. Riley . . . he murdered me. I’m the eleventh man on his list. Him and Mendoza was like a couple brothers. If I could live to see Riley crawl. . . . I sure surprised him with my second shot. He’s hurt. And them that are hurt in Alkali Flat. . . .”

He dropped flat on his back, and Sleeper thought that he was gone. But after a moment he spoke again, saying: “He thinks he’ll get loose . . . but in Alkali Flat . . .”

death . . . death . . . will get through a scratch on the skin. Riley . . . Riley. . . .” A little shudder went through him as though he had been touched by cold.

And Sleeper turned to remount, for he knew that Mahoney was dead.



Had Buzz really struck Tim Riley with one of his bullets? It seemed very likely, considering that they had exchanged shots almost hand to hand. Yet Tim Riley was voyaging steadily on across the Flat.

The mountains were closer, now. They had lost their blueness entirely and turned brown. Clouds covered the heads of some of the peaks—a paradise of happiness to wander, however blindly, through the cool dampness of a fog like that above! But in Alkali Flat the heat increased. The life was gone from the air, like the taste from overcooked food. But as the sun slanted from a deeper position in the west, a sort of mist seemed to cover the desert. That was the dust, made visible in the slanting sun rays just as the motes grow visible in the sun shaft that strikes through a window in winter. And this film of dust was what made breathing so difficult, perhaps.

Mahoney was dead. A division of the buzzards had dropped toward the ground, but still others trailed after Tim Riley. Had they scented the death that might even now be working in the body of Riley?

As Mahoney had well said, through the smallest scratch death could enter the bodies of men in Alkali Flat. Where the struggle for mere existence was so hard, the slightest wound, the slightest extra drain on the strength might prove fatal.

Yet Tim Riley, so far as Sleeper could see, even through the glass, rode erect and steady.

Sleeper closed his thousand yards of safety to a quarter of a mile to study the gunman. He had a strong feeling that he was about to lose his long battle. For now the mountains rose like a wall against the sky; the heat of the sun was diminishing; twilight would unroll like a blessing across Alkali Flat before long, and Tim Riley would be among the slopes of the foothills, hunting for the sound of running water in the night, climbing steadily toward a purer, cooler air.

Where the flat ended, Sleeper saw the white streak of it just ahead, like a watermark drawn across the hills. Tim Riley was approaching that mark when, all at once, Sleeper saw that the horse was plodding on with downward head, as before, but with an empty saddle. But no, it was not empty. The rider had slumped well forward and lay out on the neck of the horse. It might be a bit of playing 'possum, Sleeper thought. For Riley must have realized that his pursuer was not armed, and now this might be a device to draw the other into easy range.

So Sleeper pressed forward only slowly until he noticed that the buzzards were swaying lower and lower through the air above the head of the fugitive. As though they conveyed a direct message to him, Sleeper lost all fear at once and closed in abruptly.

As he came, he saw the rider slipping slowly, inch by inch, toward the side. When Sleeper came up, he waited until he actually had a hand on the shoulder of Tim Riley

before he called out. But Tim Riley continued to lie prone, as though resting from a great fatigue.

He was resting, indeed, for he was dead.

When Sleeper stopped the horses at the base of the first foothill, he found that Tim Riley had been shot deeply through the body, a wound that might not have been fatal under ordinary circumstances, but which surely meant death in Alkali Flat. Riley had known that. He had lashed himself in his saddle. With his hands on the pommel, he had ridden erect, keeping his face toward safety and the mountains.

The mere instinct to keep on fighting had driven him on. A queer admiration crept through the heart of Sleeper as he looked at the lean, hard face of Riley, still set and grim and purposeful in death, with a long-distance look in his eyes, as though he were sighting some goal on the great journey on which he was now embarked.

In the saddlebag strapped behind the saddle was what Sleeper had struggled and striven so hard to reach. He knew that but left the thing untouched, while he urged the tired horse up the hill. He walked beside the horse that carried the dead man, to make sure that the body did not slip to the ground. A last, grim hour they struggled up that slope until Sleeper heard the sound of running water. A moment later the horses were standing belly-deep in a pool of blue, while Sleeper drank and drank again from the rivulet that fed the little lake.

By the side of that lake he buried Tim Riley by the simple device of laying the body under a boulder above which a little slide of rocks was hanging. A few stones moved, and that slide was launched. Fifty tons of debris rushed down over the spot where Riley lay, and his funeral oration was the flying echoes that talked and sang busily together for a few seconds all along the cañon.



By the little pool, when it was holding the stars and the thin yellow flickering of the campfire, Sleeper ate hard tack, drank coffee, and examined the contents of the big saddlebag.

It was, in fact, the savings of an entire life of crime. He counted, bill by bill, three hundred and fifteen thousand dollars of hard cash. In addition, there were a number of jewels, choice stones, which had been broken out of their settings.

The blood began to beat fast in the temples of Sleeper.

VIII

Fun for Sleeper

Levison, president and chief shareholder in the Levison Bank of Tucker Flat, still went down to his office every day. He carried himself exactly as he had done when the lifting of his finger was enough to control the wild men and the strong men of Tucker Flat. He had a short, black mustache, his eyebrows and eyes were black, but his hair was a thin cloud of white. He was a narrow, tall, straight man who had looked the world in the

face for so many years that disaster could not teach him to bow his head. When he walked down the street now, people scowled at him, they cursed him in audible undertones, but he walked neither more quickly nor more slowly. His wife knew that Levison was dying of a broken heart, but he was dying on his feet.

Every day he went down to the bank, unlocked the front door, walked past the grille work of gilded steel, past the empty cages of the cashier and clerk, and into his own office, where he unlocked his desk and waited.

Sometimes he was there all day, and nothing happened. Often someone entered to talk over the recent robbery and to curse Levison for not guarding the treasures of others more securely. Levison used to answer: "If there is any fault, it is mine. You have a right to denounce me. No man should dare to fail in this world of ours." He kept his chin high, while grief like an inward wolf devoured his heart.

On this day, his walk down the street had been particularly a trial. For the unemployed from the closed mines were thick in the street, and they had learned to attribute their lack of a job to the failure of the bank that had shut up the mines. So they thronged thickly about Levison, shook their fists in his face, cursed him and all his ancestors. He went through them like a sleepwalker and never answered a word. Perhaps he hoped that one of the drunkards would strike him down and that the rest would pluck the life out of his body; it was not rooted very deep in his flesh, these days.

So, when he came to his office, he sat with his head bowed a little and his hands folded together on the edge of his desk. He wanted to die quickly, but there was that hollow-cheeked woman who waited for him in the house on the hill from which the servants had been discharged. Wherever she went, even into death, she would follow him not more than a step behind.

He heard the front door of the bank open in the middle of the morning. A step sounded in the emptiness of the big outer room, and then a hand tapped at his door.

"Come in!" called Levison.

The door was pushed open by a slender young fellow with black hair and blue eyes. He was very brown of skin, erect of carriage, and his clothes were mere ragged patches. Over his shoulder he carried a saddlebag.

"Were you a depositor in my bank?" asked Levison, opening the usual formula.

"I never was, but I intend to be," said the stranger.

Levison frowned. "The bank has failed," he said gravely.

"Then we'd better bring it back to life again," said the other.

"Who are you?" snapped Levison.

"Name of Sleeper. And here's the stuff that Joe Mendoza and Tim Riley and Buzz Mahoney stole from your vault. All of that and a little more. How much did you lose?"

Levison rose slowly from his chair. He stared into the blue eyes of this young man, and it seemed to him that they were the blue of flame before it turns yellow.

"Two hundred and fifty-two thousand five hundred and fourteen dollars," he said. That number was written across his soul as across a parchment.

“Count it out of this lot, then,” said Sleeper. “There’s plenty more. And then tell me where the rest of the cash ought to go . . . or have I claim to it? It’s the life savings of Mister Murderer Mendoza!”



At the little shack outside the town of Tucker Flat, big Pop Lowry strode back and forth and up and down. Three men waited near the small campfire, never speaking, looking curiously across at Lowry now and then.

“I been double-crossed,” said Pop Lowry. “I ought to send you out on his trail right now. But I’m gonna wait to see has he got the nerve to come here and face me. I’m gonna wait another half hour.”

“Hark at them sing!” said one of the men, lifting his head.

For from the town of Tucker Flat there poured distant rumblings and even thin, high-pitched, half-hysterical laughter.

For the bank of Levison had reopened, and the mines that had recovered their deposits were reopening, also. That was reason enough to make the men of Tucker Flat rejoice.

Here there was a slight noise of rustling leaves among the shrubbery, and then into the dimness of the firelight rode a man on a great golden stallion.

“Sleeper!” exclaimed Pop Lowry.

“Get the three of them out of the way,” said Sleeper, halting Careless.

“Back up, boys,” said the peddler. “Wait somewheres . . . somewheres that I can whistle to you.”

The three rose, stared an instant at Sleeper like dogs marking a quarry, and then stalked away.

Sleeper went to the fire, rinsed a tin cup, and filled it with coffee. He made and lighted a cigarette to accompany the coffee, and blew the smoke into the air after a deep inhalation.

“Well?” said Lowry, growling. “You done yourself fine, I hear?”

“Who told you I did?” asked Sleeper.

“Nobody else would have got the money back. Nobody else would have got it back for Levison and then told him to swear not to use the name. You got the money Mendoza stole!”

“Levison has his quarter of a million,” said Sleeper. “And there was something left over. You get half.” He took out a sheaf of bills tied about by a piece of string and threw it like a stick of wood to the peddler.

“There’s a shade over sixty thousand in that,” said Sleeper. “Count out your half. Besides, there’s this stuff. Levison says that I have a right to it. So you take half of this, too . . . seeing that I’m your hired man.” He threw a little chamois sack into the hands of Lowry, who lifted his head once, and thrust out his long jaw before he began to reckon the treasure.

After that, he was employed for a long time. At last he looked up and said hoarsely: "Where's Mahoney?"

"In Alkali Flat," said Sleeper.

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Where's Tim Riley?"

"In the hills near Alkali Flat."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"You let 'em find the stuff, and then you took it away from 'em?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't use a gun?"

"No."

"What *did* you use?"

"The sun and the buzzards," said Sleeper.

Lowry rubbed a hand back across the bald spot of his head.

"You had the brains to do that . . . and you was still fool enough to turn back a quarter of a million to that Levison?"

Sleeper sipped black coffee.

"You don't even get any glory out of it!" shouted Lowry. "You won't let Levison tell who done the job for him. There ain't a soul in the world but me that knows what you done!"

"Pop," said Sleeper, "glory is a dangerous thing for a fellow like me."

The peddler stared at him. "A hundred and twenty-five thousand to you . . . the same to me . . . and you throwed it away! You ain't human! You're a fool!"

Sleeper sipped more coffee and drew on his cigarette.

"Tell me," growled Pop Lowry. "What you expect to get out of life? If you don't want money, what *do* you want?"

"Fun," said Sleeper thoughtfully.

"This here hell trail, this here work you done in Alkali Flat that even the birds . . . save the buzzards . . . won't fly over . . . was that fun? Where was the fun in that?"

"The look in the eyes of Levison," said Sleeper thoughtfully. "That was the fun for me, Pop."

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 *Death in Alkali Flat (aka Sun and Sand)* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as Hugh Owen)]