

# **SUN-DOG LOOT**

**Wilbur C. Tuttle**

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*This is the Story*

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THERE has been an epidemic of crime in the valley of the Sun-Dog, Montana. "Brick" Davidson, the sheriff, seems unable to handle the situation, and the County Commissioners decide to employ a professional investigator named Santel. Spurred by this move, Brick, with the assistance of "Harp" Harris and "Silent" Slade, his two closest friends, tug into the mystery, which later involves the killing of a stage-driver and the disappearance of his little boy known as "Whizzer." The action moves swiftly as Brick builds his evidence, link by link, against an organised band of range criminals, who stop at nothing to baulk the law, and the climax of the tale comes when Brick finds the little boy, after a killing at a half-breed's shack in the mountains, and carries him to town, where little Whizzer's evidence forges the last link in the chain.

A very striking, effective romance.—*Scotsman*.

The story runs as quickly as a western film.—*T.P.'s Weekly*.

A well-told story.—*Times*.



*By the Same Author*

HIDDEN BLOOD

\* LO LO VALLEY

TUMBLING RIVER RANGE

THE MEDICINE MAN

\* GHOST TRAILS

\* ARIZONA WAYS

\* RUSTLERS' ROOST

THE FLOOD OF FATE

\* HASHKNIFE LENDS A HAND

\* HASHKNIFE OF THE CANYON TRAIL

\* *Uniform with this Volume*

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# SUN-DOG LOOT

*by*  
W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Rustlers' Roost," etc.



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## CHAPTER I

BRICK DAVIDSON hooked his spurred heels over the edge of his desk, shifted his position slightly and began rolling a cigarette, his eyes half-shut, as if deep in thought.

Brick was of medium height, with a thin, freckled face and red hair. It was red hair—not auburn at all; red hair, the colour of a new brick. His mouth was wide, his eyes blue and ears rather prominent. Just now his faded blue shirt hiked up around his ears and his overalls threatened to withdraw from his short-topped high-heeled boots.

Over the wetting of his cigarette he squinted at the wall across from him, where a collection of reward notices covered the rough boards. There were many notices in this collection, with rewards ranging from fifty dollars to a hundred times that amount. Some bore photographs of those wanted, but the majority were mere descriptions, which might fit any one.

Brick Davidson's office was just a small, rough-finished room, about fifteen feet square, uncarpeted, unpapered. The front door opened directly off the sidewalk, and there was one small front window, which bore a ragged shade, and which had not been washed since the original panes had been put in place years before.

On the left-hand side of the room was a rickety old desk. Between that and the front wall was a gun-rack, containing several rifles and a double-barrel shotgun, its barrels sawed off at the fore end. On the opposite side of the room was a rough table. Outside of the printed reward notices, only a state map decorated the walls. There were several chairs, more or less whittled to a state where they were liable to collapse at any time.

At the rear was a narrow door, which led down the corridor, with two jail cells on each side. The upper halves of the cell doors were barred with iron rods; but, as Brick had often said, "A feller with a good pair of front teeth could gnaw his way out of the jail in a couple of hours."

There were three other men in the office with Brick, seated in chairs near the desk; three serious-faced men who waited for Brick to speak. One of them was Bill Grant, a tall, sour-faced, middle-aged man, with a wispy moustache and a nervous manner. Another was Al Hendricks, heavy-set, dark-complexioned, slow of speech; while the third was Sam Leach, slight of physique, bat-eared, and inclined to be sarcastic. Grant and Hendricks were ranchers, while Leach was a cattle-buyer. And the three of them

composed the Board of Commissioners of Sun Dog County, of which Brick Davidson was the sheriff.

Brick lighted his cigarette and shifted his eyes to the three men.

“Well,” he said slowly, “I reckon yuh think, that comin’ to see me will change things a lot, dont’cha?”

Grant cleared his throat, causing the wispy moustache to vibrate, and Brick grinned openly. The moustache amused him. He had remarked anent that futile effort of Grant’s, assuring him that he was too stingy to fill his soul with enough fertilising to grow hair. And Grant was sensitive.

“We just came,” said Grant coldly, “to kinda talk to yuh about it, Davidson.”

“Sure, sure,” interposed Hendricks quickly. “We’ve been talkin’ among ourselves, Brick.”

Brick squinted at Leach, as if expecting some statement from him, but Leach’s sarcastic smile was his only response.

“There was that Red Hill hold-up,” said Hendricks suggestively.

“And the bank robbery at Silverton,” added Brick.

Leach laughed, but his laugh ended in a yawn, when Brick jerked his heels off the desk and turned in his chair.

“What in —— do yuh find to laugh at in that, Sam?” he demanded.

“Nothin’.” Leach was almost apologetic.

“Course it ain’t nothin’ to laugh about,” said Grant. “It’s pretty —— serious, I’d say. In fact, it’s so serious that we’ve sent for a professional range detective to try and hang the crime on to the guilty parties.”

“Ye-e-eah?” Brick’s red mane of hair lifted slightly, as he inhaled deeply to control his temper.

“Yeah,” nodded Grant. “Of course he won’t interfere with yore office in any way, Brick. You jist go along like you’ve been goin’, and let him work it out in his own way. Them detectives *sabe* criminals.”

Brick grinned in spite of his anger. A wave of crime had swept across the Sun Dog country in the past few weeks, causing the sheriff’s office to ride the hoofs off their horses, but without results.

It began with the hold-up of the Red Hill stage, when the bandits had stolen the treasure-box, which held several bars of gold, from the Red Hill mine. A few days later the Redrock stage was robbed, netting the robbers several hundred dollars. Then, to cap the climax, two masked men entered the bank at Silverton and forced the cashier to hand them over five thousand dollars.

And they had left no clues. Descriptions varied until Brick was of the opinion that the jobs had been done by three different outfits. The driver of the Red Hill stage swore that there were only two men. One was a big man and the other rather below medium height. The tall man was the spokesman.

In the Redrock robbery the driver declared that there were two men, one rather tall and slender, the other medium-sized. The medium-sized man was the spokesman. And the cashier of the bank, frightened almost into a panic, could not be positive that there were two or three men, but he did know that the slim one did the talking.

The peculiar feature of the bank robbery was the fact that a fire had started in a shack down at the other end of the town, and that while every one was down there, trying to put out the fire, the robbery had taken place. No one had seen the robbers enter or leave, except the cashier, who admitted that he was so frightened that he did not know which way they went after leaving the bank, nor whether they were on foot or mounted.

And now the county commissioners were employing a professional thief-catcher. Brick reshaped his cigarette and smiled.

"He'll prob'ly catch 'em," Brick mused aloud.

"Y'betcha!" Sam Leach got to his feet, indicating that as far as he was concerned, the meeting was over.

The others got to their feet as a man entered the doorway and halted just inside.

It was "Harp" Harris, the deputy sheriff. Harp was about two inches over six feet in height, but so thin that he looked much taller. His face was set in lines which combined both hope and despair—with despair predominating. His mouth was wide, his nose thin, and almost transparent, while his ears grew at right-angles to his face, giving him a perpetual listening expression.

Harp squinted at the three commissioners and shifted his eyes to Brick.

"Havin' a li'l party, Brick?" he asked softly.

Harp was not any too popular with the commissioners.

"Democrat," replied Brick, grinning.

Grant and Hendricks forced a smile, as they walked past Harp, but Leach gave Harp a sarcastic squint, bestowed upon him a look of disgust and walked past, with his nose in the air. Harp turned and pursed his lips as he watched Leach disappear. Brick grinned, as Harp turned and snorted softly.

"Some day I'm goin' t' just about squirsh that jasper," said Harp slowly. "Jist squirsh him absolute and final. What did them three fried aigs want, Brick?"

“Their main object was to see if I’ve forgotten that there’s crime among us,” replied Brick.

“Oh!”

Harp’s nose twitched slightly, and he sat down against the wall, ignoring the three vacant chairs. From his pocket he took a jew’s-harp, fitting it carefully between his teeth. Brick squinted at him thoughtfully, shaking his head.

“Don’t,” said Brick pleadingly. “My —— ain’t there enough misery in the world without you addin’ to it, Harp?”

Harp removed the offending instrument and dangled it across his knee, clutched in a bony hand. He nodded understandingly, his serious eyes considering the troubled sheriff. It was not often that Harp would quit playing until he was ready. He was not musical, but seemed to derive much enjoyment from his own efforts.

“Aw right, Brick—I won’t regale yuh with music now. Sad music cheers me up, don’tcha know it? Sometimes I wonder——” Harp rubbed the palm of his hand on the tightly drawn knee—“I wonder why paw didn’t educate me for the undertakin’ business. Man, I’d ’a’ sure been a dinger. I jist love to hear them singin’ ‘Rock of Ages’, and by golly, I——”

Brick reached for his gun and Harp threw up both hands.

“You danged pall-bearer!” snorted Brick. “You keep up that kind of talk and there’ll be singin’—but you won’t hear it.”

“That’s right—jump on to me.” Harp grew indignant. “You big bully! I s’pose you’d strike me, wouldn’t yuh? Huh! It’s brutes like yuh that makes this world hard for us frail critters. I do everythin’ I can for yuh, and this is the treatment I get.”

Brick slumped down in his chair and began rolling a cigarette, as some one came clumping along the wooden sidewalk up to the office door. Then a head, surmounted by an ornate sombrero, was shoved inside from an angle that would indicate the man to be of abnormal height. The face beneath the sombrero was both broad and long, serious, except for the wide brown eyes. Brick glanced up at him, but showed no recognition, Harp squinted at the door, looked back at Brick and slapped himself on the knee.

“Now, jump on to me,” he invited Brick. “Abuse me, cowboy. Go ahead and try to be cruel. Ha, ha! Succour is at hand.”

“Sucker?”

The big man came inside and started slowly toward Harp, who threw both hands up to his face, as if to shut out the sight.

“Who’s a sucker?” demanded the big man, shaking himself until the silver *conchos* of his bat-wing chaps creaked under the strain.

He slapped a big palm against his holster and halted in the middle of the floor.

“Love of gosh!” exclaimed Harp. “It’s little Lord Fauntleroy. Welcome home!”

The big man started toward Harp, but Brick slid between them and he halted.

“You danged cow-town comedians can’t bust up my office,” declared Brick. “Set down, ‘Silent’—you runt!”

Silent Slade flapped his big arms dismally and sank down in the nearest chair.

“I seen them three deuces walk out of here; so I come over to see what the rest of the deck was doin’,” said Silent. “I can smell trouble when I see them three pelicans together.”

“Brick’s so danged dumb that they has to come over here every week to remind him he’s the sheriff,” offered Harp seriously.

“Ought to pin his star on the wall,” observed Silent. “Might nail her to the door, so every time he comes up to the place, he’ll know what he’s comin’ here for.”

But Brick did not take offence at their jokes. They knew that Brick was capable, honest, and was doing everything in his power to keep the peace of Sun Dog County. Silent Slade worked for the Nine-Bar-Nine cattle outfit, located about twelve miles southeast of Marlin City, where Brick had been foreman before he had been elected sheriff. Harp Harris had also been one of the Nine-Bar-Nine cowpunchers.

Old Lafe Freeman, owner of the Nine-Bar-Nine, had sworn to high heaven that the gods were against him when he lost Brick and Harp. Old Lafe was a little, old, grizzled cow-man; one of the fast-disappearing type of old-timers, who had carved out a niche in cow-land with the combination of a six-shooter and square-dealing.

After an appreciable period of silence, the big Nine-Bar-Nine cowboy yawned widely and audibly.

“Didja ever try sleep for that?” queried Harp.

“That has all the earmarks of a jest,” observed Silent. “Some day I’m goin’ to date time from the minute yuh made me laugh.”

Silent turned to Brick, opened his mouth to capacity and yelled loud enough to shake the windows:—

“How in —— are yuh?”

“Kinda downcast,” replied Brick softly.

“Uh, huh! Yuh ought to be. Say, old Lafe’s been down to Silverton—kinda ridin’ around—and he says it don’t look a —— of a lot like you was goin’ to be re-elected, Brick.”

“Tha’sso?” Brick showed interest. It was nearing the first of October, and in November the primary election would be held.

“Dang right, it’s so,” nodded Silent. “Lafe says you ain’t noways as popular as yuh was a few weeks ago.”

“What have I done?” queried Brick, grinning.

“Well,” Silent grinned widely, “they seem to think yuh ain’t done nothin’. I s’pose them three high-and-mighties were over here to kinda invigorate yuh, wasn’t they?”

Brick nodded. He realised now that these robberies were happening at a very inopportune time for him. The Sun Dog voters were very likely to judge him on present showings instead of on his past records; and the sheriff’s office was the one big issue in cow-land politics.

His opponent, Henry Stagg, known as “Hank,” had been considered more or less of a joke as a candidate. He operated the stage lines from an office in Silverton, where he could be found at nearly all times, reciting his own deeds of valour.

Hank was tall and angular, with a raspy voice and a wonderful vocabulary of profanity, gained from driving stage teams. He wore his gun in a shoulder-holster, because his hips were too thin to support a belt, and his favourite amusement was shooting magpies on the wing with a thirty-thirty rifle. This latter branded him as a fairly good rifle shot.

“They brought me some very good news,” said Brick. “When it comes to bringin’ good cheer, they’re a fine flock of buzzards. Sun Dog County is to be investigated by a professional detective and I’m to just go along in my own dumb way and let him do the lookin’ through the knot-holes.”

“Is—tha’sso?” Silent exploded and his mouth remained open.

“Relax!” snorted Harp. “My gosh, anybody’d think by yore face that it was in the dead of winter instead of fly-time, Silent.”

“Hm-m-m! I’m dead amazed.” Thus Silent seriously.

“Settled fact,” grinned Brick. “I dunno who he is nor how many of ’em is to come among us; so don’t question me. I didn’t know that the commissioners took my job so seriously.”

“And they don’t even ask us to help him,” added Harp.

“Well, you hadn’t ought to let that worry yuh,” grinned Silent. “As far as the detective is concerned, somebody will probably kill him before he gets far into the mystery; but things are sure breakin’ bad for our li’l sheriff.

“Lafe was talkin’ with ‘Soapy’ Caswell, and Soapy is kinda inclined to the opinion that Brick ain’t exertin’ himself none to speak about. He didn’t come right out and say it, but that’s the impression he handed Lafe.”

“And he swings the vote of Silverton,” said Harp sadly. “He dang near swings Sun Dog County, as far as that’s concerned. He owns the bank here in Marlin, the Silverton bank and the Redrock bank; and when yuh own enough banks yuh kinda controls a lot of them X’s that folks mark down on their ballot.”

Brick straightened up in his chair and reached for his tobacco.

“You two jiggers must ‘a’ got up on the wrong side of the bunk this mornin’, didn’t yuh? Mebbe I better order all flags at half-mast, and put crape on the door. All I’ve got to do is to beat Hank Stagg for the nomination.”

“Yeah, that’s all,” said Silent dryly. “Just beat Hank for the nomination, tha’sall. And then you’ve got to beat the nominee on the other ticket. But let me tell yuh somethin’, red feller: If you don’t put the deadwood on these stick-up jaspers pretty danged quick, you couldn’t beat a drum.

“I ain’t raggin you, Brick. — knows, I’m for yuh. But it’s a cinch that there ain’t another man in Sun Dog County that can do more than you’ve done; but folks don’t stop to consider that part of it. Yo’re hired to catch criminals—so you’ve got to catch ‘em, tha’sall.”

“Tha’sall,” nodded Brick seriously. “I remember when I was a little kid I had to recite a poem in school. It was somethin’ about Napoleon Bonaparte. It had a line like this:—

“A very easy thing to plan, but difficult to do:  
As Wellington made clear to him one day at Waterloo.”

“Or it might be kinda like the Frenchman’s flea-powder, in which the directions said, ‘First catch the little flea.’ ”

“Still, it might be a danged good thing for me and Brick, if he did get beat,” observed Harp. “Livin’ in the city this-a-way is plumb ruinin’ both of us.”

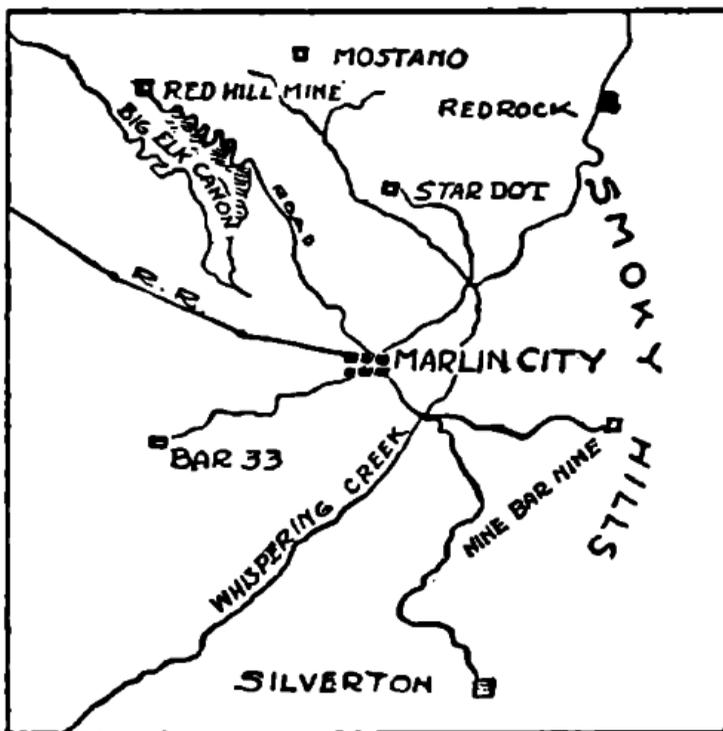
Brick grinned at his deputy, but the lanky one was serious. Marlin City was a city in name only. By virtue of its central location, it was the county-

seat of Sun Dog County, but this honour had never caused it to advance beyond the small cow-town stage.

It had one street, not too straight and not too long, bordered with unpainted buildings, which were mostly of the false-fronted style of architecture. The wooden sidewalks, four feet in width, oozed pitch in the summer; and in the winter the excessive cold caused the nails to snap out of the two-by-four girders, leaving the top-boards free to rattle and clatter underfoot, like walking over an unmusical xylophone.

Of shade-trees there were none. In fact, some one had said that there was only one tree between Marlin City and the North Pole. A branch line of the C. P. Railroad had recently been completed into Marlin City, giving them transportation for stock and mining products; but the advent of a railroad had not caused any perceptible boom in the country.

Brick Davidson had been Sheriff of Sun Dog County for two years, during which time both Silent and Harp had worked as deputies; not because they liked the work, but because Brick had needed the services of trustworthy men. Silent Slade had won his nickname because of his ability to talk continuously. He was never short on conversation, except when asleep. Silent was slow of movement, because of his great size, except when the occasion demanded speed; but he was not slow of temper.



Harp Harris was slow to anger, but loved trouble. He could ride anything he could saddle, and rope with deadly accuracy. But his favourite occupation was playing the jew's-harp. And no one except Harp could recognise his tunes; but there was something about that weird *tung-g-ging* that soothed the soul of the lean, angular cowpuncher and caused him to relax and close his eyes in ecstasy.

Just now he placed the instrument between his teeth, relaxed against the wall and struck a preliminary note.

“My ——!” exclaimed Silent, getting to his feet. “That —— thing is about to start ag’in, Brick. C’mon; I’ll buy yuh a drink.”

“All right,” grinned Brick.

They walked outside, leaving Harp humped against the wall, moaning through the vibrating tongue of the harp, his right hand fanning slowly past one of his bat-ears, his eyes shut; while one of his upturned feet jerked an occasional accompaniment, all out of time with the beat of his alleged tune.

## CHAPTER II

HARP watched them disappear into the Dollar Down saloon before he got to his feet, carefully wiped the jew's-harp on his handkerchief, and sauntered forth. Harp Harris had the faculty of appearing to merely saunter along, when he was really going some pace. In other words, he loafed rather swiftly.

He went past Wesson's store, duly examining the contents of the window display, which had been there as long as Harp could remember, and went on. At what was practically the north end of the main street grew an old cottonwood tree. Harp stopped and looked it over, appearing indifferent. He kicked a piece of loose bark off a protruding root.

From where he stood he could see the Marlin City school-house. It was a rough board structure sans paint, sitting alone amid the sage-brush, about two hundred yards from the nearest house. An enormously long flag-pole had been planted near the front steps; a pole so tall that it dwarfed the little building.

Harp looked at his enormous silver watch, and found it to be almost four o'clock. He glanced down the street and found that no one was watching him; so he sauntered on toward the school-house, where a number of youngsters were already piling out over the steps, swinging their lunch-pails, whooping with joy. Many of them spoke to Harp, who grinned widely.

"Goin' t' see the teacher! Goin' t' see the teacher!" chanted a tow-headed little fellow, and the rest of the children impishly joined the chant. Harp blushed, stared indignantly at the grinning crowd, which went gyrating away, still chanting. Harp hooked his thumbs over his cartridge-belt and grinned with them.

"How do you do, Mr. Harris?" said a feminine voice, and Harp turned quickly to see Della Miller, the school-teacher, standing in the doorway, her eyes smiling at him.

Della Miller was a tall, angular, good-looking girl of about twenty-five. She boarded and roomed with the Wesson family, which place, as Cale Wesson complained, was "Gettin' to be a cowpuncher's headquarters."

Harp Harris had been fancy free until he had met Della Miller. But in one month Dan Cupid had riddled his heart with arrows of love; ruined his perspective, digestion. Of course he had never mentioned this to Della Miller.

He dragged off his sombrero quickly, wondering if she had heard what those children had been shouting.

“Huh-howdy, Miss Miller,” he gulped. “Nice day we’re havin’.”

“Yes, it is nice to-day.”

“Uh-huh,” Harp drew figures in the sand with the high heel of his right boot. “I was just a-walking past.” He looked at her. “This is a right nice lookin’ school yuh got here. I was talkin’ to Barney Allen the other day, and he tells me that his kids are jist a-learnin’ somethin’ fierce since you been teachin’ ’em.”

“That is very nice,” smiled Miss Miller. The fact of the matter was, Barney Allen’s twins were not four years of age, and therefore had never been to school yet. Miss Miller did not quite know whether Harp was lying just to make conversation, or if Barney Allen had drunk enough to make himself unduly boastful.

“Yeah,” said Harp seriously. “Barney shore is pleased. It’s pretty fine to have the folks pleased with yuh. But I told Mrs. Wesson you’d shore learn ’em.”

Harp moved closer and sat down on the corner of the steps.

“How do yuh like Marlin City—what you’ve seen of it?”

“Oh, I like it,” smiled the girl. “At times it gets lonesome.”

“Oh, yeah, I suppose it does. Yuh know,” Harp grew confidential, “I get lonesome m’self. I do, for a fact. Of course, my office keeps me kinda busy, with all these rustlers and such things; but yuh can’t call no rustler a companion.”

“I should think not, Mr. Harris. Yours is a very dangerous calling.”

“Calling?”

“Occupation.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, we ought to have more dances and things like that goin’ on. I come from Cactus City, originally. They’ve got an opry house there. Used to have some good theatricals once in a while, and I shore miss ’em. Didja ever see ‘The Switchman’s Daughter’? No? I seen it seven times one week,” Harp grinned. “Yuh see, they was supposed to play a different show every night, but they didn’t—except the name.”

“Marlin City is hardly large enough to afford a theatre,” said Miss Miller.

“Yeah, I s’pose she is a little small. You goin’ to close up the school-house now?”

“I guess so.”

“All right. I’ll wait for you.”

In a few minutes she was ready to go, and they walked back to Wesson’s home together. Harp was greatly pleased with himself. It was the first time he had ever been alone with Della Miller, and he liked the sensation. He realised that if Brick or Silent saw them he would be in for an unmerciful ragging—but it was worth it.

And Harp’s heart sank just a trifle, as they neared the Wesson home. As a joker, he feared Mrs. Wesson even more than he did Brick and Silent.

“You ever been down to Mexico?” asked Harp, as they sauntered toward the house. Miss Miller glanced quickly at him.

“No, I never have,” she said.

“It’s kinda nice down there, with all them bullfights and the git-arrs. Them jiggers shore can play them git-arrs.”

Harp had never been within a thousand miles of the Mexican border.

“I suppose it is,” said the teacher.

“Oh, yeah. They calls the girls ‘seen-yuh-reetas.’ When a feller picks out the seen-yuh-reetta he wants, he sneaks under her winder at night and plays on his git-arr. If she likes his playin’ she throws a flower down on to him.”

“Rather quaint,” smiled Miss Miller. “I have heard of such a method of courtship, but have never seen it, Mr. Harris.”

“Oh, I’ve seen it time after time,” lied Harp. “It works out fine, too. Half the time them seen-yuh-reetas don’t even know who the feller is; but if they plays pretty good he gets her. And if he can sing along with his git-arr, he’s got a cinch.”

Della Miller laughed softly. “I suppose that is true. Most of the Latin races are romantic. It is really too bad that romance is a thing of the past with our people. I often look at married couples, and wonder just how much romance was in their courtship. For instance, I wonder what Cale Wesson said, when he proposed.”

“I dunno, Miss Miller. But I reckon Mrs. Wesson jist decided to marry him. Yuh see, she makes up *his* mind to most anythin’.”

Della Miller laughed. “Perhaps that is right. They seem very happy together. You could hardly imagine Cale Wesson playing a guitar beneath her window.”

“Cale ain’t musical,” said Harp. “Ain’t many of us that are musical around here. You’ve got to be musical to think of playin’ under a lady’s winder, yuh know.”

“I suppose so, Mr. Harris. Won’t you come in?”

“No, I don’t reckon so, ma’am. There’s prob’ly a lot of work piled up for me around the office. Brick leaves most of it to me. But I ain’t never so busy that I can’t be sociable.”

“Well, that’s fine. We need more social life in Marlin City, Mr. Leach was saying the other day that——”

“Sam Leach would be talkin’,” interrupted Harp. “That’s about all he ever does—that and buyin’ cows.”

“He’s very pleasant,” said Miss Miller.

“Oh, yeah! Pleasant—shore. Well, I’ll be goin’ along, ma’am. Don’t pay no attention to what Sam Leach says. Jist as soon as I git around to it I’ll see what I can do to make a little more social activity in Marlin City.”

Harp bowed so low he almost struck his head on the picket-fence, and went sauntering down the street. Della Miller smiled and turned toward the front door, where Mrs. Wesson, extra broad of frame, withal a huge figure of a woman, stood grinning. She was typical of the ranges; a big, capable woman, who talked in the dialect of the cow-country, swore when she felt so disposed, and was beloved by everybody.

The two women smiled at each other.

“He didn’t go out to the school-house to meetcha, did he?” asked Mrs. Wesson.

Della Miller nodded. “He said he was just passing.”

Mrs. Wesson shook her head wonderingly. “And he’s plumb woman-shy, too. My dear, you’ve shore made a hit with Harp Harris.”

“Made a hit with him?”

“Yeah. My dear, he’s prob’ly accepted you as the first woman in his life.”

Della Miller blushed quickly. “Why—why, I’m sure, I don’t know why you say that, Mrs. Wesson. It was just a—a friendly—he talked of Mexico, and——”

“Mexico? Good Lord! Where do yuh reckon Harp Harris got hold of a geography?”

“Hasn’t he been in Mexico?”

“Born and raised in Eastern Oregon. Migrated to Sun Dog when he came along about seventeen, and here ever since. He didn’t say he had been in Mexico, did he?”

“Well, no; but he led me to believe he had.”

“Then that ain’t lyin’, Della. Harp’s all right. He’s steady, and saves his money. You won’t have much trouble with him. But I’d advise yuh to train

him jist like I've trained Cale Wesson. It shore helps."

"But, I—I——" Della blushed again, groping for words.

"I know yuh ain't, Della," said Mrs. Wesson quickly. "But Harp has. You come on in. I sabe all these cowpunchers pretty well, and I'll put my approval on Harp Harris. Mebby he'll be the next sheriff. That's a good payin' job, my dear."

Della Miller laughed softly at the absurdity of it all. She had no intention of marrying Harp Harris.

"I don't think I would care to be the wife of a sheriff," she said. "Some one might shoot him, and I'd be a widow."

"Yeah, that's true, Della. As the minister says, 'in the midst of life we are in death.' But, still, with Harp you've got better than an even break. If he stands edgeways, it's a fifty-to-one shot that a bullet won't even touch him."

## CHAPTER III

“BY GOSH, you bettair keep away from de grizz-a-lee,” warned Mose La Clede, a gaunt, bearded Canadian Frenchman, hitching his belt higher about his hips and shifting the huge quid of tobacco in his cheek.

“She’s de bad wan, and she’s ’ongry for little boy.”

Little “Whizzer” Malloy, five years of age, lifted his inquiring brown eyes and backed away so quickly that the dragging spur on his little foot tripped him and he fell flat in the dirt.

“Ho, ho, ho!” laughed the big man, as he picked the little fellow up and stood him on his feet.

The big grizzly in the pole cage rumbled deeply and flung his chest against the front of the cage, biting at the barrier. The semicircle of curious onlookers grinned as the youngster backed away, trying to straighten the spur and watch the bear at the same time. A horse, tied to one of the hitch-racks, snorted as the bear-scent assailed its nostrils, and snapped the tie-rope on a backward surge.

A cowboy spat out a curse, ran into the street from a saloon and cornered the animal before it had a chance to leave for parts unknown. That the idle population of Silverton was interested in Mose La Clede’s grizzly was attested by the fact that most of them were already crowding around the cage, which was placed in the street in front of the stage-office.

La Clede had trapped the animal in the Smoky Hills, where he had kept it until making a deal with an Eastern zoo. It was a full-grown specimen, savage as a tiger and as powerful as any four-legged animal could be. The pole cage creaked under its lunges, and the crowd shifted uneasily.

“How much does he weigh, La Clede?” asked Hank Stagg, who stood at a respectful distance.

Hank was in charge of the stage lines, and it was one of his vehicles that was to transport the grizzly to the railroad at Marlin City.

“By gosh, I’m dunno,” replied La Clede, scratching his head. “We weigh her on de hay-scale and she’s twelve hundred, forty pound. De cage weigh—I’m dunno how much, but I’m t’ink de bear mak’ ’bout ten hundred.”

“Then how in —— are we goin’ to load it?” queried Hank. “There ain’t enough of us to lift that weight.”

"I'm know how," grinned La Clede. "We tak' two, t'ree plank and some round pole for de roller, *sabe*? We block de wagon, hitch team to cage by de rope, and pull her up."

"All right," growled Hank. "Get yore planks and rollers."

The crowd, ever ready to assist, went in search of the required articles, while "Baldy" Malloy, the Whispering Creek stage-driver, went to the livery-stable to get the team, followed closely by Whizzer, whose spur tripped him every few feet.

But Whizzer did not whimper. He felt that the spur made him a cowpuncher, and he would wear that spur if it was the last thing he ever did. Whizzer's mother had died shortly after he was brought into the world, and Whizzer had soon learned that there was little sympathy in the world for a cry-baby.

Not that Baldy did not love his son. He thought that the sun arose and set especially for Whizzer, and they were inseparable when Baldy's trip was finished. Baldy was short, fat and bald, with weak blue eyes and an insipid, rope-coloured moustache.

Back they went from the stable with the team of half-wild bronchos, almost unmanageable when they scented the bear. Whizzer carried his spur in both hands, as he trotted along behind in the dust, his brown eyes wide with anticipation.

Two heavy planks had been secured, and some men were coming with a pole, which would be cut into short roller-lengths. One end of the cage was lifted on to the planks, which extended into the rear of the wagon-box, up which the cage was to be dragged.

At risk of losing one or both of his hands, La Clede managed to insert a rope through the bottom and side of the cage, tied it tightly and flung the loose end out over the front of the wagon.

The cage was tilted slightly and a roller inserted beneath.

"By —— I don't like that cage," declared "Slim" Hunter, a sad-faced cowpuncher. "Them there poles ain't fastened with nothin' but rawhide."

"By gosh, dey hold," panted La Clede. "Plenty rawhide. She's put on wet, an den she's dry hout. Bettair den de nail."

Baldy was having trouble with the team which were frantic from the bear-scent and from the angry, deep-throated rumble of the big beast. With the help of two more men he managed to fasten the rope to the double-tree, and was ready for the loading.

“Keep ’way from de cage,” warned La Clede. “Dat —— bear she’s reach hout. All right—hup she’s go!”

There was no chance for a steady pull. The frightened team surged into their collars, fairly jerking Baldy off his feet, and the bear-cage went slithering up the planks and into the wagon-box, catching one corner of the box and ripping it loose from the wagon-bed.

“Whoa!” yelled La Clede. “Stop de team.”

But the team had ideas of their own. They swung sidewise, kicking, plunging, with Baldy digging his heels into the hard surface of the street, trying to stop them. Further around they swung, until at right angles to the wagon they straightened out the rope and fairly yanked the bear-cage through the side-board of the wagon.

For a moment it seemed to hang in mid-air, then crashed down to the hard earth, striking on one corner. Came the snapping of overwrought rawhide, the splintering of poles, and the grizzly, dazed, fighting mad, shook the poles off his roached neck and stood forth as free as he was the day before La Clede’s trap cut off his freedom.

Brick Davidson was riding into Silverton, and drew up his horse about a hundred feet away from the scene of action. He did not know what was being done until the grizzly emerged from the shattered cage.

In the excitement Baldy let loose his lines and the team bolted with the remnants of the cage bounding and crashing along behind them. Horses broke away from the hitch-racks, and dashed wildly about the street, but no one paid them any heed. The crowd had scattered for places of safety, except little Whizzer Malloy, and now they fairly screamed their warnings to the little, brown-faced, brown-eyed baby, who stood there in the middle of the street, spur in hand, facing a blood-hungry grizzly.

They were not over six feet apart. Somewhere a six-shooter cracked, fired by a nervous hand, and the bullet spouted dust between the baby and the bear. With almost incredible speed for such an unwieldy-looking animal, the grizzly closed the gap, knocking little Whizzer flat on his back.

“Don’t shoot!” screamed Baldy Malloy. “My God, don’t shoot!”

The big bear was master of the situation now. With mane erect, rumbling defiance at those who had attempted to send him into captivity, he crouched lower over the dazed child. Suddenly his head dropped and he gathered the child in his mouth. As he swung up his head Brick Davidson was running toward him, six-shooter in his hand.

And Brick was running as fast as he could, handicapped as he was with his high-heeled boots, which were not built for footwork. He was a hundred

yards from the bear, when he started running, with his gun swinging from his right hand.

The bear did not turn its head. Its huge mane reached high over its head, the beady eyes snapping with anger, the jaws slavering over the clothing of the little boy, which hung limp, making no effort to get away.

And straight ahead came the running cowboy sheriff, his boots making dull plop, plop, plop in the dusty street; running straight for an animal which he knew had more terrible vitality than anything in the furred tribe; an animal that few hunters cared to face, even with high-powered rifles. No one of the terrified audience realised what Brick's intentions were.

Some one yelled a warning at the red-headed sheriff, but he did not hesitate. Brick was making his attack from the rear and he was making it at top speed. Some one in the crowd threw a sombrero in the direction of the bear, which swung its head, as though to meet this new danger; and at that moment Brick fairly leaped through the air and landed on the grizzly.

It was so unexpected that the bear remained motionless for a second; and in that moment Brick twisted his left hand into that roached mane and set his spurs deeply into the powerful shoulders of the animal.

With a flip of its neck the grizzly flung little Whizzer aside and the little boy started crawling blindly away. Quick as a flash the bear whirled completely around, seeking to dislodge this new enemy, but Brick was all set for the ride.

Two powerful lunges failed to unseat the rider, and then the bear reared upright, clawing wildly, roaring with rage. Brick was, in range parlance, "pullin' leather," but none of the audience denied him that right. It was the first time that any of them had seen a bucking grizzly.

But no one came to his assistance; no one wanted to get within reach of that terrible mount. And as the grizzly, upright on its hind legs, threatened to fall backward, Brick's six-shooter spouted flame and lead into the animal's brain.

Twice the big .45 roared dully before the grizzly plunged forward from its upright position. It went flat in the dirt, surged to all fours, but went down again from the third shot, sprawling in a grotesque heap. Brick fell off, rolled over once and came back to his feet, ready for more.

But the grizzly was finished. The three big slugs of lead had done their work, and the Eastern zoo would never see the big grizzly from the Smoky Hills.

The crowd surged into the street, too amazed for words. They quickly surrounded Brick and the grizzly, trying to congratulate Brick and to alibi

themselves at the same time.

“I throwed the hat,” announced Slim Hunter proudly. It was like the sparrow’s announcement of, “I killed Cock Robin.”

Baldy Malloy, hatless, his face streaked with perspiration and dust, carrying little Whizzer under his arm, broke through the crowd and halted in front of Brick. He was breathing too heavily for words, and could only stare at Brick, who grinned widely at the serious expression on little Whizzer’s face.

Baldy did not offer to shake hands with Brick; just stared at him in a dazed way. The crowd was silent now. Then the youngster shoved out two little grimy hands, clutching at the big spur, and announced in a triumphant treble:—

“By golly, I held on to her, y’betcha!”

Baldy glanced down at the two hands, shifted the boy to where he could grasp him with both hands, hugged him tightly to his breast and stumbled away with the one muttered exclamation:—

“God!”

The crowd stared after him for a moment and turned back to Brick, whose eyes were suspiciously moist. Mose La Clede’s big, bony hand was thrust out to Brick, and his voice boomed:—

“By gosh, dat was nervy treek! I’m los’ de bear, but I’m glad for save de leetle keed. You mak’ de good ride, sheriff; by gosh, you mak’ de —— good ride!”

“I sure throwed that hat,” announced Slim again. If there was any glory to spare, Slim wanted some of it.

“I’m sure glad yuh thought of doin’ that, Slim,” said Brick warmly. “It attracted him long enough to give me a chance to make my mount.”

“I knowed it,” grinned Slim, “and I sure timed m’ throw. It takes quick thinkin’ in a case like that.”

“I’m buyin’ a drink for everybody,” yelled Otto Falk, proprietor of the Short Horn saloon. “Come and get it.”

The crowd was willing. They needed something strong now.

“I’ve got a perfectly good team out there some’ers, draggin’ what used to be a bear-cage,” complained Hank Stagg. “They’ll prob’ly be plumb ruined; but I’m goin’ to have a drink. By —— I’m through with grizzly bears. That big son-of-a-gun was jist about to glom that poor little kid.

“Wasn’t he sore? Whoo-ee! I betcha that grizzly could ’a’ whipped all the lions in Africky. Might as well try to stop a railroad ingine. Quick, too;

quick as ——”

“My hat’s ruined, too,” complained Slim ruefully. “That —— bear done his war dance on it and then some of these heavy-heeled cow-persons walked all over it. They’re so —— ignorant that they don’t know what a hat is, less it’s on somebody’s head.”

## CHAPTER IV

BALDY MALLOY headed straight toward his own shack, going down the main street, clinging tightly to Whizzer, who was willing to ride, even if he did not understand what it was all about.

As they came past McGill's saloon, McGill, a portly, hard-faced man, stopped them and asked Baldy what had caused all the excitement up the street. There were three other men with McGill.

"Didn't yuh see it?" asked Baldy hoarsely.

"Wouldn't ask you, if we did?" growled McGill. "We was playin' poker and heard them shots fired."

Baldy stood the boy up on the sidewalk while he hastily sketched out what had been done.

"And he rode that bear, straight-up, made him let go of Whizzer, and then killed the bear with his six-gun," finished Baldy.

McGill spat thoughtfully and squinted at the three men in the doorway.

"Made a hero out of himself right in front of a crowd," said McGill sarcastically. "Pretty —— good advertisin', eh?"

McGill laughed hoarsely and turned to Baldy, just in time to receive Baldy's right fist square on his nose; and the fist had every ounce of weight and strength that Baldy possessed behind it.

Baldy's one punch was sufficient. McGill fell into his own doorway, his shoulders striking the edge of the step and the back of his head fairly bouncing off the floor. None of the three men made any move to assist McGill. Baldy blew on his bruised knuckles, picked Whizzer off the sidewalk, and went on toward his own shack.

McGill recovered sufficiently to get back on his feet, spat out a tooth, along with a weird assortment of profanity, and went back into the saloon to try to find out with the aid of a mirror just why his nose seemed so out of proportion to the rest of his face.

"You touched Baldy on a tender spot, Mac," said one of the men. "Yuh see, Brick Davidson jist saved Baldy's kid."

"All right," growled McGill, like a man suffering from a heavy cold. "There can't nobody hit me and get away with it."

"As far as Baldy is concerned, you better let things go as they lie," advised one of the men.

“Yeah, I s’pose,” said McGill darkly, squinting at himself in the mirror. “Didja ever see a nose like that? And I lost a good tooth, too.”

Brick accepted several drinks, along with the adulations of the crowd. Every one had a different version of the affair, and Brick knew that inside of an hour there would be a dozen men who would swear that he had killed at least fifty grizzly bears single-handed.

Slim Hunter had reached the crying stage—sobbing over the ruination of his new sombrero; so Brick managed to sneak out during a heated argument. Across the street, in a general store, he encountered Soapy Caswell and Sam Leach.

Soapy was a typical cattleman, as gray as a badger, and with a similar disposition. He had acquired control of the banking business of Sun Dog County, with banks at Marlin City, Silverton and Redrock; but his personal interests ran stronger to draw poker than to finances. He owned the Circle Cross ranch, located about three miles east of Silverton.

Soapy and Leach had heard of the grizzly incident, and Soapy congratulated Brick with:—

“Hear yo’re ridin’ ’em savage these days, Brick. Ha, ha, ha! By golly, yuh ought to get a medal for that. Shore took a lot of nerve. How are yuh?”

He held out his hand to Brick, but Leach merely lifted his brows slightly and busied himself with looking into a fly-specked showcase. They shook hands and Soapy indicated with a gesture that he wanted to see Brick outside.

Brick bought some tobacco and moved out of the store with Soapy, halting out near the hitch-rack. Soapy was not one to beat about the bush.

“Brick, if you don’t slap the deadwood on some of these stick-up jaspers, yore cake’ll be all dough at the primaries. There’s a lot of folks that has an idea that a sheriff must be smarter’n ——; don’tcha know it?”

“I’m smart,” said Brick seriously.

Soapy nodded quickly.

“I know yuh are, Brick. The smartest man I ever knowed was a plumb ——ed fool.”

“Who was he?” queried Brick.

“Well,” Soapy spat thoughtfully, “I hate to give him away like this, but bein’ as yuh asked kinda point-blank—it’s me.”

Soapy chuckled at his own wit and slapped Brick on the shoulder.

“That Redrock stage hold-up cost me five thousand dollars, Brick. I’m not sendin’ any more money by stage, y’betcha. That other hold-up cost the

Red Hill mine a nice piece of change, and that bank robbery here nicked me for a nice little pot.

“I *sabe* that yo’re doin’ everythin’ yuh can. Don’tcha get the idea that Soapy Caswell is ridin’ yuh, son. I’m just tellin’ yuh how the voters stand. Right now you’d carry Silverton, cause they remember the grizzly. T’-morrow they quit thinkin’ bear.”

Brick nodded. He knew that Soapy was right. Sun Dog County wanted a sheriff to do things right now. Past performances did not count.

“Have you got any idea, Soapy?” asked Brick.

“Not a danged idea, Brick. From the three descriptions, there’s a big man, a medium-sized one and one that’s kinda tall and thin. Of course you’ve got to kinda discount descriptions, ’cause the human eye ain’t noways accurate after it’s looked down the muzzle of a cocked gun. Anyway, I know danged well mine ain’t.”

“Would they nominate Hank Stagg and then elect him?” queried Brick.

“If they nominate him, they’ll sure elect him. He wouldn’t be worth a plugged dime as a sheriff, but that don’t count now.”

“Well,” Brick yawned wearily, “I dunno as I care a lot, Soapy. I’ve had two years of misery for two hundred and twenty dollars per month. I suppose it would be kinda tough to go back to the old forty a month, punchin’ cows.”

“Now you get the idea out of yore mind,” advised Soapy. “Sun Dog needs a reg’lar sheriff—not a —— chilblain like Hank Stagg.”

“Soapy, do yuh think that Bill Grant, Hendricks and Leach will be nominated?”

“Leach don’t have to—he’s a hold-over, Brick. But I reckon Grant and Hendricks will be elected ag’in. They’re as good as we can pick.”

“They don’t like me, Soapy.”

“Well, my ——, what do you care? Are yuh gettin’ so that folks has to send yuh vi’lets?”

Brick laughed widely at the serious expression on Soapy’s face.

“Listen, Soapy,” he said softly, “they’ve hired a professional detective to come here to unravel our troubles.”

“No! A—a—well, that’s fine. I suppose we’ll have to take up a collection to send his body back to Iowa, or to some other ——ed seaport. By golly, that’s fine. Well”—Soapy cuffed his hat sideways on his head, and bit off a generous chew of tobacco—“that settles all our troubles. You can just set down and let him bring yuh the criminals.”

“I wonder whose idea that was. Mebbe all three. By ——, if their combined brains were turned into dynamite and loaded into a .22 shell, it wouldn’t have power enough to kick the bullet out of a two-inch barrel. Professional detective ——! I’m goin’ to find me a poker game, Brick. I crave action, I do. So-long!”

Brick stood at the hitch-rack and grinned at Soapy, who was bow-legging his way across the street toward the Short Horn saloon. Sam Leach came out of the store, started to turn away, but noticed Brick and came over to him.

“You remember we spoke to you about that expert investigator the other day, Davidson?” said Leach.

Brick nodded slowly.

“He will be here almost any day now,” continued Leach. “We told you this in strict confidence, and—well, we want you to keep the information to yourself. His value is gone, if his identity is known.”

“Yeah?” Brick grinned.

“You can see that for yourself, can’t you? He will probably go to work as a cowpuncher.”

“He ought to be worth forty a month,” mused Brick.

Leach scowled slightly. He had crossed verbal swords with Brick before, and he knew that the red-headed sheriff carried a sharp weapon in range-repartee. Brick looked up quickly.

“Seems to me that yo’re takin’ a —— of a lot of interest in my office, Leach.”

“Not in your office—in the good of the county, Davidson.”

“Yeah? She was a pretty good county before you came here, Leach. Mebbe she’ll be a good county after yo’re gone.”

“I don’t think I understand you, Davidson.”

“Don’tcha? Well, that’s all right then. What yuh don’t understand won’t worry yuh none.”

Brick turned and crossed the street to a hitch-rack, where he mounted his horse and rode back toward Marlin City. Leach watched him ride away, shrugged his shoulders indifferently and walked down the street toward McGill’s saloon.

Sam Leach had lived in Sun Dog County about four years and had prospered in his cattle buying. For nearly two years he had held office as a commissioner and had proved himself a capable man, although his disposition had gained him few friends.

He knew the cattle business well, having been a cowboy, cattle-raiser, and previous to his coming to Sun Dog he had been a range detective. He lived alone in a little house on the outskirts of Silverton, but spent a great part of his time in riding over the range, looking at the stock.

As Leach went down the street, Bill Grant came out of the livery-stable, where he had just left his horse, and crossed over to Leach. Jimmy McKeever, the stableman, had told Grant of how Brick had saved Baldy Malloy's youngster.

"Hallo," greeted Grant, "I guess I showed up too late to see the fun, eh? Did yuh see Brick ride the grizzly?"

"No, I didn't see it," replied Leach a trifle sullenly.

"Wish I had," laughed Grant. "Jimmy tells me that it was worth seein'. Brick's got plenty of nerve."

"Yes, that's a cinch."

"Hear anythin' more from that detective, Sam?"

"Not a word. But that don't bother me. Santel said he'd be here as soon as he could make the trip, and he'll be here."

"Good man, eh?" reflectively. "Yuh know we're kinda leavin' this up to you, Sam. I know that Brick didn't like the idea, and I don't know that I do. I had a talk with Hendricks——"

"Want me to send him back?" queried Leach, "——, I thought you fellows——"

"No, we'll let him go ahead, Sam. If he cleans up this gang, it will be fine. Still, I wonder if Brick——"

Two men were coming from McGill's saloon and Grant stopped with his question unasked. It was two of the men who had been there when Baldy had knocked McGill down. They were Bud Keller and Ed Smeed, two cowboys from over in Smoky Hills.

"Did you fellers see it?" asked Keller, laughing.

"No, we got here too late," replied Grant. "Brick must have made a good ride."

"Oh, not that," laughed Smeed. "We didn't see that either. We meant, did yuh see Baldy Malloy knock McGill down?"

"Eh?" grunted Leach. "Knock McGill down?"

"Uh-huh. Baldy was comin' past, packin' his kid, when McGill asked Baldy what was goin' on up the street. Yuh see, we was all playin' poker, and didn't know anythin' unusual was goin' on, until we hears the shots.

“Baldy was kinda excited and his eyes was like saucers, when he tells us how Brick saved his kid’s life. Anyway, McGill makes a remark about Brick tryin’ to make a hero out of himself, and then Baldy almost ruins McGill’s nose. Honest to gosh, he laid McGill stiff.”

“And,” added Smeed, “if yuh meet Baldy, don’t say nothin’ ag’in Brick Davidson. I never knowed that that fat stage-driver had that kind of a wallop. Whoo-ee! He sure caressed McGill.”

Grant laughed widely. He did not like McGill. But Leach did not see anything humorous in the incident.

“What did McGill do?” asked Leach.

“Aw, he spat out a tooth and soaked his smeller in cold water,” grinned Keller. “It sure was right good to look upon.”

“It must have been,” said Leach dryly.

“C’mon up to the Short Horn, and I’ll buy a drink,” offered Keller.

“No thanks,” Leach shook his head. “I’m going home.”

“How about you, Grant?” queried Keller. Grant grinned and started up the street.

“Just to show I’m a hail-feller-well-met, c’mon.”

Leach looked after them, a half-sneer on his face, and went slowly down to McGill’s saloon, where he went inside.

## CHAPTER V

*TUNG-G-G, HUNG-G-G-G, BONG-G-G, BONG-G-G-G, ZUNG-G-G-G.*

Mrs. Wesson lifted her head from the pillow and strained her ears, trying to figure out what was making the peculiar noise. She had been listening to it for quite a while. It was a weird noise, half-metallic, half-human.

She reached over to a chair, where an alarm clock ticked loudly, and, in the dim light, took note of the time.

“Four o’clock,” she said aloud.

“Eh?”

Cale Wesson, her husband, lifted himself on one elbow and squinted at her.

“Whazzamatter?”

“That danged noise,” she replied. “Didn’t yuh hear it?”

Cale yawned audibly and turned his pillow over. He was not interested.

*Hung-g-g, bong-g-g, zung-g-g-g, zung-g-g, bong-g-g-g.*

“What the —— is that?” demanded Cale, sitting up in bed.

“That’s what I’ve been talkin’ about,” said Mrs. Wesson. “I’ve been hearin’ it for quite a while. Sounds like a tight wire in a wind.”

“Um-m-m!”

Cale slid out of bed and went to a window. The sounds seemed to come from almost directly below them.

“It’s sure got me,” declared Cale. “I’m danged——”

“I care not for the star-r-r-rs that shi-i-ine.”

The voice was singing softly, unmusically; dwelling with fervour and longing upon the higher registers.

“I only ho-o-ope that you’ll be-e-e mi-i-i-ine.”

Cale Wesson slid the window up softly and looked down.

Harp Harris was sitting against a corner of the porch, his face lifted in the moonlight, eyes closed, as he poured out his soul in his own kind of melody:—

“I only know I lo-o-o-ove you-u-u-u;  
Love me-e-e-e and the wor-r-r-ld is mi-i-i-i-ine.”

The last wailing note died away. Cale Wesson turned and looked at his wife. Mrs. Wesson was a big, raw-boned woman, with a sense of humour, and just now the curl-papers on her head were jerking from excess mirth.

She shoved Cale aside and leaned out of the window.

“Harp!” she called softly.

“Eh?” Harp’s eyes opened and he gasped up at the window above him.

“You ought to go home and git some sleep,” said Mrs. Wesson.

“Huh?” Harp’s vocal cords creaked slightly.

“We like yore music,” said Mrs. Wesson seriously, “but Cale’s got to have sleep, if he’s going to run a store. Pers’nally, I kinda like it. Yuh better try it agi’n some night when Cale ain’t at home.”

“Uh!” replied Harp.

He stepped off the porch, as if to sneak away, but summoned up a little nerve.

“Ain’t Miss Miller to home?” he asked. “I—I told her I was goin’ to serenade her sometime, yuh know.”

“Gosh, I thought you was serenadin’ me.” Mrs. Wesson was sadly serious. “Well, I s’pose I should have known better. Nope, Miss Miller ain’t home, Harp. She went to Silverton to a dance last night.”

“Uh-huh? She did? Who’d she go with?”

“Mister Leach.”

“Oh! Well, I’m much obliged, Mrs. Wesson.”

“No, yuh ain’t, Harp; but it’s the best I can do for yuh.”

“Sa-a-ay!” Cale Wesson’s voice rasped out angrily. “What in —— do yuh mean by singin’ love songs around my winder at this time in the mornin’? I’ve got a danged good notion——”

“No, yuh ain’t got no notion,” retorted Mrs. Wesson. “You never had any kind of a notion. You let the boy alone.”

The window slammed down, cutting off the argument. Harp put the offending instrument in his pocket, and went back to the deserted street, where he slouched despondently along the sidewalk.

“Gone to Silverton with Leach, eh?” he muttered aloud. “And me wastin’ m’ melody on the Wesson fambly. My ——! Now, everybody in town will know about it. —— Sam Leach!”

He sat down on the sidewalk in front of the sheriff's office and held his chin in his hands, while he mentally picked a quarrel with Sam Leach. It was a dandy quarrel, ending in a fight, in which Harp beat Sam Leach to within an inch of his life.

There was also a big audience cheering Harp on to kill his opponent, but Harp spared his miserable life. He did not want Leach's blood on his head. Anyway, he could afford to be generous. The crowd was cheering him now. Crowds are peculiar things.

Then he hugged his elbows to his sides and started the argument all over again. This time it was man to man, but with guns. The crowd had scattered. It was a tense moment. Harp knew that he was quicker on the draw, a better shot than Leach.

"Pull yore gun, Leach," he said calmly. "Cock it, if you wish. Are yuh ready, Leach? All right. I'm givin' yuh an even break. Now, you give the word yourself."

And as the hero waited for the signal that would cause him to draw swiftly and send shot after shot into the heart of his hated rival, a horse and buggy came into town.

Harp lifted his head and watched Sam Leach drive past him, with Della Miller beside him. They turned off the main street, going toward Wesson's house. Harp spat angrily and tried to conjure up another big fight, but the spell was broken.

In a few minutes Leach drove past him again, went into the livery-stable and was gone for some time. Harp knew that the stableman was asleep and that Leach would have to stable his own horse. After a time, Leach came out, leading a saddle-horse, which he mounted. It was still too dark to distinguish objects clearly. Leach lighted a cigar or a cigarette, and rode slowly up the street, going past Harp once more and heading North.

Harp thought that Leach might be going back to the Wesson house, but he continued out of town.

"In that last fight," said Harp to himself, "I let him draw and cock his own gun. Huh! In that fist-fight I let up on him, when I had him where I wanted him. But if I ever get at him ag'in he's got to look out for himself. Bein' a hero is all right, but I'm all through heroin' around that danged jigger, y'betcha."

Harp went into the office and sat down on his cot. Brick was asleep in the back room, so Harp went cautiously. He knew that Cale Wesson would spread the news and that every one in Marlin City would be informed of the fact that Harp Harris had serenaded Mrs. Wesson at four a.m.

Brick awoke at eight o'clock and found Harp fully dressed. It was not like Harp to be up and doing at that time in the morning. He had left Harp in a poker game in the Dollar Down at midnight, and took it for granted that the game had just broken up.

Cale Wesson was just opening his general merchandise store as they went up the street to the restaurant. Cale saw them coming, and began a clumsy imitation of a troubadour. Brick squinted at him, wondering what it was all about; but Harp knew.

Cale pointed his nose toward the sky and began singing in a voice that was even worse than the one owned by Harp Harris:—

“I care not for the sta-a-ars that shi-hine.”

Cale paused and seemed to be searching for the proper note.

“Well, tha'sall right,” observed Brick. “I never had much use for stars that shine either. I like mine kinda dim, Cale.”

Harp's ears were very red, his jaws shut tight, Brick glanced at him curiously, but Harp remained silent.

“What's the idea, Cale?” queried Brick.

“Li'l love-bug Brick. I can't tell yuh much more 'cause I don't want no scandal in my own family. Me and Ma has been married seventeen years; livin' peaceful-like with nothin' to mar our happiness—but things are changin'. Ma's romantic. I s'pose——” Cale yawned widely, seriously—“I s'pose I've got to learn to play some ——ed instrument and lose a lot of sleep, playin' and singin' beneath her winder—or take a chance on losin' her.”

“Oh, yeah,” Brick grinned widely, but did not look at Harp. “Well, good luck to yuh, Cale. If yuh want to learn the jew's-harp, I can put yuh next to a master of the thing. C'mon, Harp.”

They went to the restaurant and ordered breakfast. Harp was silent and thoughtful but Brick did not question him. Cale had told enough for Brick to have a fair idea of what had happened.

As they came out of the restaurant they met Mrs. Wesson and Della Miller. Harp stood stock-still and wished himself miles away, because at a glance he knew that Mrs. Wesson had told the school-teacher all about it.

“Hallo, Brickie!” greeted Mrs. Wesson.

“Hallo, folks!” grinned Brick.

Mrs. Wesson squinted at Harp, frowned heavily, as though trying to remember him. Then:—

“By golly, that’s Harp Harris, ain’t it?”

“Yeah,” nodded Brick, “this is Harp himself. You’ve met these ladies, ain’t yuh, Harp?”

Harp grunted something unintelligible.

“Wouldn’t hardly knowed him,” declared Mrs. Wesson. “Yuh see, I ain’t used to seein’ him in daylight.”

She turned to Miss Miller:—

“This is Mister Harris, Miss Miller.”

“Aw-w-w, dog-gone it, I’ve met yuh and—and I—I——” Harp stammered to a stop, his face red.

“I think I have met Mr. Harris,” smiled the school-teacher.

“That’s right!” exclaimed Mrs. Wesson. “Come to think of it, yuh have. Why don’t you boys come over and see us once in a while? We like company. Come over any evenin’. Harp can bring his music along and entertain us.”

“Oh, do you play, Mr. Harris?” asked Miss Miller.

“Does he play?” Mrs. Wesson seemed surprised that the girl should ask such a question. “Does he? He not only plays, but he sings. Sings and plays his own accompaniment on a jew’s-harp. Writes his own stuff, too, dont’ cha, Harp?”

“Aw-w-w, for gosh sake!” Harp swallowed heavily and looked around for a place to put his hands.

“Well, we must be getting along,” said Mrs. Wesson. “Pleased to have seen you in daylight, Harp. Come and see us, won’t yuh?”

“Sure be pleased to,” grinned Brick.

The two ladies went on down the street and Harp heaved a sigh of relief.

“Now,” said Brick grinning, “what happened, Harp?”

“Aw, ——!” Harp shoved his hands deep in his pockets and glared at the sidewalk. “I forgot what time it was, Brick; and like a ——ed fool, I—I ——”

“You tried to serenade Miss Miller, eh?”

“Yeah. She wasn’t home either. I woke up Cale and his wife.”

“My ——! Didja sing?”

“Yeah.”

“Uh-huh! Where was Miss Miller?”

“She went to a dance at Silverton, with Sam Leach.”

“Tha’sso? With Sam Leach, eh? Well, don’t let that worry yuh. She’ll soon find out that he can’t neither sing nor play.”

“Brick,” Harp’s voice was strained, “are you tryin’ to be funny?”

“Not intentionally, cowboy. Miss Miller is educated, and she’s bound to recognise talent. I could tell by the way she was lookin’ at yuh that she admires yuh a heap. In fact, she had tears in her eyes. By golly, that’s appreciation. And she ain’t even heard yuh yet.”

“Yeah, I know all about them tears,” snorted Harp. “Mrs. Wesson told her what happened.”

“Well,” hopefully, “mebbe they was tears of sympathy, Harp.”

“Like ——! I suppose I’ll never hear the last of this. What do we do to-day, Brick?”

“I dunno. I’ve got a danged good notion to ride up to the Red Hill mine to-day. I want to have a little talk with Barney Devine. He might have an idea, and I haven’t seen him since that hold-up. Want to go along?”

“Yeah, I’d like to.”

Harp was willing to go anywhere. He wanted to get out of Marlin City.

“All right. We’ll bust out of here about noon, Harp.”

## CHAPTER VI

IT was about eleven o'clock when the stage came in from Silverton, on its way to the Red Hill Mine. Little Whizzer sat beside Baldy on the driver's seat, as proud as a peacock. It was several days since the grizzly episode, during which time Baldy had taken the child with him everywhere. It was a new experience for Whizzer.

Baldy shook hands with Brick, who picked Whizzer off the seat and carried him into Wesson's store after candy.

"Where's yore spur?" asked Brick, noting that Whizzer was not wearing it.

Whizzer removed the candy long enough to gasp for breath and inform Brick that:—

"I ain't no puncher now. Stage drivers don't wear spurs."

"By golly, that's my mistake," laughed Brick. "I'm sure an ignorant jigger."

"Yeah," nodded Whizzer seriously, much to Harp's delight.

He put the boy back on the seat and waved his hat at him, as they swept out of town. It was about two hours later when Brick and Harp saddled their horses and headed north.

It was eighteen miles from Marlin to the Red Hill mines. For the greater part of the distance the road followed the cañon, but about five miles from the mines it led to higher ground, winding along the sides of the mountain where, as Brick expressed it, "a driver is only allowed one mistake."

As they rode out of the cañon and began climbing, a rider came into view, coming down the grade. He was a medium-sized man, possibly forty years of age, slightly stooped in his saddle.

He drew up at their approach, removed his sombrero to wipe his forehead, disclosing a mop of tow-coloured hair. His face was bony of contour, nose slightly crooked. Neither Brick nor Harp had ever seen the man before, but there was something familiar about him—a resemblance to some one they had known.

He was wearing a faded blue shirt, nondescript vest, chaps that were heavy with nickel and brass trimmings, matching the design on his cartridge-belt and holster. The horse was a tall, powerfully built sorrel.

"Is this the road to Marlin City?" he asked.

“Y’betcha,” nodded Brick. “Stay on it and you’ll hit Marlin.”

“Good! By golly, I’ve been on so many wrong roads that it’ll be a surprise to hit the right one once. Say, have yuh got any smokin’?”

Brick handed him a package.

“Gosh, that’s fine, stranger. I tried to buy some Durham back at that mine, but they didn’t have any. I reckon them honyoicks all chaw or snuff. Much obliged.”

He handed back the package, but Brick shook his head.

“You keep it. You’ll need another smoke soon.”

“Well, all right—thanks!”

He put the package into his pocket, and his eyes squinted at the sheriff’s star on Brick’s shirt.

“Sheriff, eh?” he queried.

“Uh-huh!” smiled Brick. “We have to carry our label—like a can of tomatoes.”

“Or a box of dynamite,” added the stranger dryly. “Well, I reckon I’ll be driftin’ on. Much obliged for the tobacco, sheriff. *Adiós.*”

Brick and Harp nodded and rode on up the grades. At the top of the long climb they drew up their horses and looked back. The stranger was but a tiny speck, moving slowly down the cañon.

“Didja ever see him before, Brick?” queried Harp.

“Nope. But there’s somethin’ about him that reminds me of somebody.”

“Me, too,” nodded Harp. “I ain’t got the slightest idea who he looks like though. Sure wears a fancy lot of leather. I hate to see a feller hammer his chaps full of rivets that-a-way.”

They rode on along the narrow grades and drew up at the Red Hill mine office. Barney Devine, a slight, hatchet-faced, nervous sort of a person, met them at the office door and greeted them effusively.

“How’s tricks, Barney?” asked Brick, stretching his legs in one of Barney’s comfortable chairs and accepting a cigar.

“Pretty good,” replied the mine superintendent. “Everything is going along pretty fine. Property is getting richer all the time. We just cut a new vein that runs pretty high. How is everything in Marlin City?”

“So, so! Nothin’ much new goin’ on.”

“I heard about you and the grizzly,” smiled Devine. “Baldy Malloy sure told everybody about it. He seems to think it was the greatest thing that was ever done.”

“It was fun while it lasted,” smiled Brick.

“It must have been.” Devine shook his head. “Some folks have queer ideas of fun. Anyway, what brought you up here, Brick?”

“Oh, just to see if you had dried up and blowed away yet. You get thinner every day, Barney.”

“I knew that was why you came,” said Barney dryly. “But that wasn’t all, was it?”

“Just a little information,” confided Brick. “How much did that hold-up nick you, Barney?”

“Thirty-eight hundred dollars.”

“Uh-huh! How often do you ship by stage?”

Barney shook his head slowly.

“Not any more. Anyway, nobody will know when we do.”

“Who knew about this shipment?”

“Not a darned soul, Brick. Baldy Malloy carries one of those old treasure-boxes for small packages. I gave him this box and told him to deliver it to the bank at Silverton. It was just a plain wooden box, with the cover just nailed on. There wasn’t anything to indicate what was in it.”

“Whole thing would weigh about fourteen or fifteen pounds, wouldn’t it? And it was consigned to the bank?”

“Yes. If the stage was held up the robbers would probably investigate that old treasure-box. But how do you suppose they knew when it was to be shipped?”

Brick shook his head.

“That wasn’t the first shipment you’ve made, was it?”

“No. But there was no schedule, Brick. We shipped when it was ready.”

A man came into the office and deposited a suit-case on the floor. It was one of the office men and Devine introduced him to Brick and Harp. Devine glanced at his watch.

“Baldy will be getting out of here rather late, if he don’t hurry,” observed Devine.

“He’s usually on time,” replied the man. “Anyway, I can’t get a train out of Marlin until near midnight.”

“Goin’ for a trip?” asked Brick.

“Goin’ to ’Frisco. My folks live there. I’ve been here at the mine for almost two years without a vacation; so I think it is about time to see the old folks.”

“That’s right,” smiled Brick. “I wish I could see mine. Goin’ out on the stage, eh?”

“If it ever shows up.”

“If it ever shows up?” parroted Brick. “Hasn’t it been here?”

“Not to-day.”

Brick and Harp stared at each other. They could hardly believe that statement.

“Why, it went through Marlin City about eleven o’clock,” stated Brick.

“And we just came over the road,” added Harp wonderingly.

“Well, it never came here, that’s a sure thing,” declared Devine.

“The little kid was with Baldy,” said Brick, getting to his feet. “What do yuh reckon has happened to ’em?”

“I don’t see how anything could happen to them.”

Brick strode to the door, but turned to Devine.

“Barney, was there a stranger here to-day—a man on a tall sorrel?”

“Yes. He wanted to buy some Durham tobacco, but we didn’t have any. He didn’t say who he was, but he did say that he picked the wrong road.”

Brick and Harp mounted and rode out of the camp, heading back toward Marlin City. They rode at a swift gallop, with Brick riding at the outer edge of the grades, watching the road closely.

There were many sharp curves, where they were forced to slacken their pace; but only long enough to obviate the danger of running into some one coming toward them. About three miles from the mines, Brick jerked his horse to a stop and dismounted. Harp whirled and rode back to him, peering down the steep side of the hill, where the underbrush grew in a tangle among the tall timber.

“Here’s where they went over,” said Brick rather shakily, pointing at the wheel tracks, which had cut deeply into the outer edge of the road.

They could see where the stage had torn into the dirt of the side-hill, like the gash of ploughshares.

“My ——!” gasped Harp. “They tore plumb down through that brush! I’ll betcha they went clear to the bottom of the cañon.”

They dropped their bridle-reins and began the descent. The going was rough and the hill so steep that they were forced to cling to the rocks and brush. Down they went through the brush, following the marks of the stage.

A smashed wheel, driven into the side of a pine-tree, was the first evidence of the crash. Then a dead horse, upside down in a tangle of laurel,

its harness stripped from its body. Beyond that was another horse and the wreck of the stage. It had turned over and crashed into a tree, splintering the body. There was no sign of the other two wheels.

Brick and Harp stood silently, gazing at the wreckage.

“Good ——, what a smash!” breathed Brick. “They must have fell two hundred feet. C’mon.”

They moved down to the stage. Just beyond it, huddled in a bush, they found Baldy Malloy. His clothes were almost torn from his body, and it did not take an expert to tell that Baldy had made his last trip.

“Poor ——,” said Brick sadly. “He stayed with her until they hit the tree. But where is Whizzer?”

“That’s right,” nodded Harp. “The kid was with him.”

They separated and began their search. Twice they combed every inch of ground between the stage and the grade. They went far down in the cañon below the stage, searching closely for any sign, but there was nothing to show that the little boy had wandered down the hill.

After two hours of determined search, Brick sat down and admitted himself beaten.

“He just ain’t here, Harp.”

“He ain’t,” declared Harp. “By golly, we’ve sure looked over every inch of this mountain. But where in —— is he?”

Brick wiped his brow and shook his head.

“That’s the queer part of it, cowboy. He must be—and ain’t. We’ll pack old Baldy up to the horses and take him to town. It’s barely possible that Whizzer wasn’t hurt, and that he got back to the grade and headed for town.”

“That’s right,” agreed Harp hopefully. “By jinks, that’s right.”

It was a big task to get the body up to the grade, and both men were tired out when they swung on to their horses, with the body on Brick’s saddle. They were unable to travel fast, but they did not overtake Whizzer. There were no tracks from his little feet in the dusty road, and Brick’s eyes squinted painfully as he visualised the little fellow wandering alone in that deep cañon, looking for a way out.

Their arrival caused a sensation in Marlin City. Brick turned the body over to Doctor Meyers and went back to the Dollar Down saloon, where he told them about the missing boy. There were several men there who had seen the boy with Baldy that day, and in about thirty minutes a group of

twelve riders, including Harp, Brick and Silent Slade, were heading back for the scene of the wreck.

Several of them carried lanterns, and there were enough blankets along to wrap up a dozen children. Even Le Blanc, the blacksmith, borrowed a horse and went along. It was almost dark when they arrived, and in a short time there were lanterns bobbing around the timbered sides of Elk Cañon, as the men searched in every possible and impossible place.

Some went far down into the bottom of the cañon, while the others examined places far to the sides of where the stage had been wrecked. It was almost daylight when the last of the searchers arrived at the grade, tired and discouraged.

“By gosh, she’s not be here,” panted Le Blanc. “Not’ing on de hill. H’even de brush is clear h’off. I’m h’even dig a little.”

They mounted their horses and rode back toward Marlin City, with every man still straining his eyes for a sight of the boy. The women of the town were waiting for them, hoping that their search had not been in vain. Mrs. Wesson had a mighty pot of coffee waiting for them, and they attacked it with a will.

Doctor Meyers drew Brick aside and spoke softly:—

“Has any one ever threatened Baldy Malloy, Brick?”

“Threatened him?” Brick gulped some strong coffee. “Not that I know of, doc. Why do you ask?”

“He was shot.”

“Shot?”

“Yes. When Baldy Malloy drove off the Elk Cañon grade, he was dead, Brick. There was a bullet through his heart.”

Brick’s jaw set tightly and the hand that held the cup of coffee dropped to his side, spilling the fluid on to the floor.

“He was shot before he went off the grade, eh? Shot through the heart.”

“Yes. It was either a revolver bullet or possibly a rifle, fired at long range. The bullet was still in him, Brick. It is a .45 calibre.”

Brick glanced quickly around. The men were busy with the coffee and none of them had heard what the doctor had told.

“Doc, can yuh keep this a secret?” queried Brick. “Mebbe we better let Harp in on it. Can you do this? It might be easier that-a-way.”

“You are the sheriff,” replied the doctor softly. “I am ready to do as you say. Every one thinks that Malloy accidentally ran off the grade. We can always exhume the body, you know.”

“All right,” nodded Brick. “And I’m much obliged, doc.”

“That’s all right, Brick. And there was no sign of the child?”

Brick shook his head wearily and went back after more hot coffee. Miss Miller and Mrs. Wesson were talking to Harp, who was too tired to even be bashful. But they were not joking him now.

The men gradually drifted away to get a few hours’ sleep before renewing the search. Brick, Harp and Silent went down to the office, with the intention of going to bed, but they had only been there a few minutes when Bill Grant came in, accompanied by the stranger who had met Brick and Harp on the road.

“Hallo, Brick!” greeted Grant. “I want yuh to meet Mr. Santel.”

“I’ve met the sheriff before,” grinned Santel. “In fact I owe him a sack of tobacco.”

Brick introduced Santel to Harp and Silent.

“Can we talk to yuh alone for a few minutes, Brick?” asked Grant.

“Sure thing.”

Brick grabbed his hat and followed them outside. They walked up the street a short distance and stopped.

“Mr. Santel is the man we told yuh about, Brick,” said Grant.

“The detective?”

Santel smiled.

“Not exactly a detective. Leach seemed to think that I could kinda clean up some of the crime around here; so here I am.”

“You with the Cattle Association, Santel?” queried Brick.

“No. I’m not connected with any outfit right now. The men in the association are too well known.”

“I s’pose,” nodded Brick thoughtfully. “Still yuh wasn’t able to find the right road, yuh know.”

Santel laughed softly.

“That’s right, sheriff.”

“Grant, you heard about Baldy Malloy, didn’t yuh?”

Grant hadn’t. He and Santel had just ridden in from Grant’s ranch, the old Star-Dot, located about six miles due north from Marlin City, on Whispering Creek.

It did not take Brick long to tell of the wreck, the finding of Malloy’s body and of their futile search for the youngster.

“Well, how in the ——— did Malloy happen to drive off the grade?” wondered Grant. “He was a good driver.”

“I dunno,” sighed Brick. “It was one awful smash-up.”

“Was it back on those grades beyond where I met yuh?” asked Santel.

“Uh-huh! About the highest point.”

“Where’s the body?” asked Grant.

“Down at Doc Meyers’s office.”

“Let’s go and look at it,” suggested Santel.

They walked down to the office and the doctor met them at the door. Malloy’s body had been laid out on some planks, and a heavy sheet thrown over it. The doctor threw back the sheet enough to disclose the head, but not enough to show any of the body.

Santel stepped in close and peered at the face of the dead man. Brick noticed the muscles of Santel’s jaw set tightly and the blood quickly drained from his face. Grant was talking to the doctor and did not notice this.

For several moments Santel stared into the face of the dead man before he slowly drew back and turned away. Grant had stepped in, and was looking closely. Then he grasped the sheet and drew it down, exposing the bare chest and arms.

“What the ——— is this?” he grunted, turning to the doctor. “This man has been shot.”

Santel whirled quickly and leaned forward, looking at the blue circle on the dead man’s breast. Grant had turned and was staring at Brick and the doctor.

“We both knew it, Grant,” said Brick slowly. “Somebody shot Baldy through the heart before he went off the grade; and we thought it might be easier to find out who done it, if it wasn’t generally known that such a thing was done.”

Grant squinted thoughtfully, half-nodding in agreement.

“He never knew what hit him,” said the doctor softly. “It was a centre shot.”

“A forty-five,” added Brick quickly.

Santel’s right hand dropped to his holster, but jerked away.

“You shoot a forty-five?” asked Brick.

Santel’s eyes slowly turned to Brick, a narrow-eyed stare and a slow nod.

“Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “I shoot a forty-five.”

“A lot of us do, Santel,” said Brick slowly.

“Do you think it was a hold-up?” queried Grant.

“We won’t know until we find out what Baldy was carryin’ from Silverton.”

“How long has he been driving this stage?” asked Santel.

“About seven or eight months, I think,” replied Brick.

“What did he do before he got this job?”

“I dunno; do you, Grant?”

“No. I never seen Baldy until he started drivin’ stage. Prob’ly the only job he ever had in Sun Dog.”

“Have any enemies?” queried Santel.

“Never heard of any,” said Brick. “Baldy was kind of an inoffensive jigger.”

“Not exactly,” Grant smiled slowly. “He knocked McGill down the day you rode the grizzly, Brick.”

“I heard about that,” smiled Brick. “Still, a poke in the nose wouldn’t cause a man to do murder—not this long afterward, anyway.”

“Who is McGill?” asked Santel.

“A saloon-keeper in Silverton. Not exactly a worthy citizen, but tolerated. No, I don’t reckon that McGill shot Baldy.”

They left the doctor’s office and walked back to the street. Grant offered to buy a drink, but the other two men declined with thanks. Santel was very serious, and Brick thought very sad.

“Is Santel goin’ to stay with you, Grant?” asked Brick.

They had halted in front of Wesson’s store, and as Brick spoke Mrs. Wesson and Miss Miller came out of the store and walked past them. Brick and Grant spoke to the ladies. Miss Miller glanced keenly at Santel, but he did not pay them the slightest attention.

“Yeah, he’s goin’ to stay at my ranch,” replied Grant, after the women were out of ear-shot. “I’ve hired him to punch cows.”

“Well, he looks capable,” grinned Brick.

Santel looked up quickly. He straightened his shoulders and shifted his heavy cartridge-belt slightly.

“Are they goin’ to hunt for the kid again to-day?” he asked.

Brick nodded.

“Y’betcha! I’ve got to grab a little sleep. We’ll probably pull out of here about noon. The boys were kinda fagged out, but they’ll be on deck.”

“I’ll go along,” volunteered Santel.

“Me, too,” said Grant quickly. “By grab, I hope we find that poor kid. He was a dinger of a little feller, Brick—him and his spurs.”

“He quit wearin’ spurs,” said Brick sadly. “He told me yesterday that stage-drivers didn’t wear spurs.”

“What was his name?” asked Santel.

“I dunno. Baldy called him ‘Whizzer.’”

Santel looked curiously at Brick, his eyes narrowed to slits, as if looking into a strong light. Then he turned away and looked across the street.

“Well, you go and grab an eyeful of sleep, Brick,” said Grant. “We’ll be ready to ride when you show up.”

Brick nodded and went back to the office. Harp and Silent were already stretched out on the two cots and were snoring a duet. Brick went into the back room and kicked off his boots. He was half-asleep before he stretched out on the bed, but his mind was running in wide circles.

“Who is Santel?” he asked himself. “Why did he act that-a-way when he looked at Baldy Malloy?”

Brick yawned widely and drew the blanket up around his neck.

“I dunno how much of a detective he is,” decided Brick, “but he’s a gunman, if ever there was one. Mister Santel, me and you may not travel well together, but I ain’t goin’ to choose you in case I’m looking for trouble. You’re a salty son-of-a-gun, even if yuh do decorate yore leather panties with dud buttons; and if you don’t mind I’d kinda like to be on yore side.”

## CHAPTER VII

THE search for Whizzer Malloy was a failure. Several men came from Silverton and Barney Devine sent out a big crew from the Red Hill mine, but to no avail. Every inch of the big cañon and the mountains surrounding it had been explored, but there was not even a footprint to show where the little fellow had passed.

“She’s not leave de track,” declared Mose La Clede, who had joined the search. “Up de cañon, ’bout mile be’ond where de stage go bus’, I’m find de track of beeg griz-i-lee. By gosh, she may be so dat de griz-i-lee find her firs’.”

“Aw ——!” snorted Silent. “Even if a grizzly caught the kid, we’d sure find some evidence of it, Mose.”

“I’m be not so —— sure. Griz-i-lee pick her up jus’ like you pick up ol’ hat. Dat —— bear she’s strong. She’s pick up de sheep—w’y not de leetle keed, eh?”

“Well,” growled Silent, “you don’t need to get such —— pleasant thoughts.”

It was hard for the men to give up the search, but there was nothing else to do; so they went back to town. Santel had been with the searchers, as had Grant, Leach and Hendricks. Brick had told Harp and Silent who Santel was, and both of them, while they did not admire Santel, admitted that he looked able to take care of himself.

Hank Stagg hired another stage-driver in the person of Sidney Howley, who had formerly been a “swamper” in the Short Horn saloon. In other words, Howley had been employed to clean up the place.

Howley was an angular-built young man, with a bony face, long nose and lack-lustre eyes; sort of a colourless person, with only enough initiative to roll cigarettes and use a mop. Stage driving was not exactly a lucrative occupation, and perhaps Hank might have been forgiven for adding Howley to his staff.

And, anyway, Hank was too busy electioneering to spend his valuable time in examining applicants for the position. From a word dropped here and there, Brick felt that Sam Leach was behind Hank’s campaign.

“Still, there ain’t nothin’ funny about that,” decided Brick. “Me and Hank and Sam all belong to the same political party—and Sam don’t like me. Naturally he picks Hank.”

“Well,” remarked the philosophic Harp, “if yo’re beat, mebbe I’ll get a little rest. This here ——ed deputy job costs me a lot of sleep. And I’ve always got to be goin’ around, lookin’ like I knowed somethin’, when I don’t know a —— thing.”

“There’s a difference of sixty dollars a month between yore present job and punchin’ cows,” reminded Brick.

“Lot of difference in the sleep, too. By golly, I can go back to the old Nine-Bar-Nine and play m’ jew’s-harp unmolested, too.”

“Nobody stoppin’ yuh from moanin’ it around here, is there?”

“Yeah—moanin’! By golly, you ain’t got no appreciation for music, Brick. Moanin’ ——! Yuh got to sing through it. How in —— do yuh expect me to play it, if I don’t sing into it?”

“I don’t expect you to play it, Harp. Nobody hankers for yuh to play it. Hang the thing up and let the wind play it.”

“Uh-huh!”

“Or go over and serenade Mrs. Wesson. She speaks highly of yore ability. I’d be ashamed to let Sam Leach beat me out of a girl!”

“The —— you would? Well, he’s beatin’ yuh out of a job.”

“I reckon that’ll hold me for a while,” grinned Brick.

Harp had got to his feet and was starting for the door, when Silent Slade came stamping inside. He advanced to Brick’s desk and slapped a piece of fairly fresh cow-hide down on its polished top. It landed with a wet thud, and the concussion knocked several papers to the floor.

“Get that dirty thing off my desk!” snapped Brick. “What do yuh think this is—a tannery?”

“Look at that!” snorted Silent, pointing at the offending object. “Look at that piece of hide, dog-gone yuh!”

“All right, I’m lookin’,” retorted Brick.

“Do yuh see it? Yuh do? See the Nine-Bar-Nine brand on that section of cow-skin? See the edge has been burned? Yuh do? Huh!”

“Yeah, I see all them things,” grinned Brick. “Why didn’t yuh herd the cow in here? The sample looks all right.”

“Funny, ain’tcha?” Silent poked his finger at the piece of hide carefully as though expecting it to snap at him.

“Well, what’s the joke?” asked Harp. “You’ve made a lot of medicine over that piece of eppy-der-mis. What was the matter with the old critter—have dandruff?”

“——’s delight!” roared Silent. “That’s a Nine-Bar-Nine cow. Somebody killed it and burned the hide. But they missed on the important part of the thing. See where it was burnt?”

“Where did yuh find it, Silent?” queried Brick seriously.

Silent sat down and rolled a cigarette. He had excited their curiosity and now he was going to take his own sweet time in answering their question.

“Yuh hadn’t ought to have asked him that, Brick,” said Harp. “He prob’ly don’t remember.”

“Yeah?” Silent shaped his cigarette and scratched a match on the sole of his boot. “I found that hide in Big Elk Cañon.”

“Yo’re the one that’s tellin’ the story,” reminded Brick.

“I got to thinkin’ about that poor little kid,” stated Silent thoughtfully. “I knowed it wasn’t no use lookin’ for him after all this time, but I went anyway. I rode in close to the mouth of the cañon and took plenty of time. About a mile or so up the bottom I cut into one of them side gulches, kinda lookin’ around.”

“I seen horse-tracks and cow-tracks, and I got to figurin’ that was why the grizzly was hangin’ around the cañon. Pretty soon I runs on to the remains of an old fire. It’s several days old, and right there I discovers a piece of cow-hide.

“It looks like it’s been burned, don’tcha know? I turns it over with my foot, and that old Nine-Bar-Nine brand looks up at me. The ground is kinda hard, and I can’t find no tracks, but I sure finds where an animal has been butchered.”

“Somebody needed meat, eh?” mused Brick.

“That’s all right,” nodded Silent. “There ain’t nobody goin’ to begrudge a hungry person a hunk of beef; but whoever killed that animal didn’t set down there and eat it. They burned the hide, and took the rest of the animal away with them.”

“Well,” grinned Brick, “it was probably somebody that needed meat pretty bad. The loss of a cow won’t break Lafe Freeman.”

Silent shook his head slowly and blew rings at the ceiling.

“Nope,” he said slowly, “Losin’ one cow won’t hurt him none, Brick. I don’t reckon there’s a man in Sun Dog that would yelp less over the loss of one cow. After I found that piece of hide I rode on up the cañon.

“There’s half-a-dozen of them side-gulches that come in from the west, and in most every one of them there’s places where hides have been burnt. I tell yuh, Brick, somebody is grabbin’ off a lot of slow-elk meat. I dunno

whether it's all Nine-Bar-Nine stock or not—but one of 'em was, that's a cinch."

Brick frowned at his boot toes and shifted restlessly.

"Meat burglars, eh?" he said slowly. "My gosh, what a place to butcher! If yuh herd a cow into Big Elk Cañon she's yore meat."

"Cinch," agreed Harp. "A cow ain't goin' to climb out. She'd head into one of them side gulches and they ain't much more than blind cañons. I've been in there, but quite a while ago."

"I'm glad yo're interested," said Silent dryly. "When a sheriff takes up ridin' grizzlies and his deputy spends his nights serenadin' married wimmin, it's sure hard to interest 'em in such common things as rustlin' cows."

"If yuh don't like our stock of goods, yuh might go and see what Mister Santel has to offer," replied Harp.

"That hard-faced pelican!" snorted Silent. "I met him out there between here and the Star-Dot. He jist nodded and rode on."

"What did yuh expect him to do—kiss yuh?"

Silent made a dive for Harp and they went rolling across the floor in a grunting tangle, colliding with one of the cots, each one striving with muscle and voice to stay on top of the other. Silent finally managed to secure the advantage and proceeded to straddle Harp and bounce his head on the floor.

"Get smart with me, will yuh?" panted Silent.

"Leggo my ears!" yelled Harp. "Leggo, I tell yuh!"

"Get up, you two-year-olds!" snorted Brick. "What do yuh think this place is—a saloon?"

"Mind papa," chuckled Harp.

His indifference to the situation caught Silent off his guard, and he managed, with a sudden twist of his body to dump Silent sidewise into the cot, and they both stumbled to their feet.

Harp made a feint to grab a chair and Silent ducked for the doorway; but Harp turned from the chair, grasped the piece of cow-hide off Brick's desk, and hurled it at Silent.

The piece of heavy, wet hide sailed like a blue-rock shot from a trap, missed Silent by two feet and stopped with a dismal *splat*, after it had passed through the doorway.

Silent ducked back inside, his mouth wide with astonishment, while from without came a vitriolic curse, and Sam Leach stepped just inside the door, wiping his face with the sleeve of his coat.

"Who in —— hit me?" he demanded.

“Hit yuh?” queried Harp, choking back his laughter.

“Some —— thing,” Leach looked back, spitting angrily.

“Oh, it must ’a’ been that piece of hide,” said Harp slowly. “I throwed it outside. It—it was kinda spoiled, Leach.”

“Um-m-m!”

Leach felt of his face and sniffed disgustedly. Then he whirled on his heel and went away, while the three men proceeded to relieve their feelings with tears.

“Hit him right in the mouth!” choked Silent. “*Ker-splat!*”

“I wonder what he was coming here for,” panted Brick.

“He wasn’t,” Silent shook his head. “He was just goin’ past. When I came to the door he kinda slowed up and looked at me—and that’s when the old hunk of hide hit him dead centre. Didn’t yuh hear it *splat?*”

“Hear it?” chortled Harp. “Never heard sweeter music in my whole life. The only thing I’m sorry about is that I didn’t hit him with the whole cow.”

“And it didn’t smell none too sweet,” chuckled Silent. “He sure acted plumb distressed over it, and he’ll likely be gunnin’ for our little playmate, eh, Brick?”

“Tha’s all right,” Harp grinned widely. “That jasper can’t start trouble none too soon to suit me, by golly.”

“They’re rivals,” Brick whispered to Silent. “Leach thinks that Harp is tryin’ to beat him out of his girl. Harp don’t want her a-tall.”

“Certainly not!” thus Silent indignantly. “Harp ain’t got no use for a girl. Why, he can’t even support himself.”

“The —— I can’t!”

Harp started for Silent, who ducked out of the door, heading for the Dollar Down with Harp close behind him. Brick grinned and sat down in the doorway.

Brick knew that Sam Leach had gone to the Dollar Down, and that Harp and Silent had gone over there to have a drink and to sympathise with Sam Leach. Their sympathy would be with a reverse English, as usual. A couple of little kids were coming from school and behind them came Miss Miller, carrying an armload of books.

“When yuh teach the young idea how to shoot, you’ve sure got to pack a lot of ammunition, ain’t yuh?” smiled Brick, as she came up to him.

“Yes, indeed,” replied the teacher, a trifle wearily.

“Let me pack them books,” offered Brick, taking them from her. “I’ll walk down and see Mrs. Wesson.”

“But I can carry them,” she protested.

“Sure yuh can—but not just now,” grinned Brick.

They walked slowly up the street and were opposite the Dollar Down, when Harp and Silent came outside. The two cowpunchers stopped at the edge of the sidewalk and stared at Brick and the teacher. Brick grinned covertly. He could tell by their attitude that Harp and Silent were making complimentary remarks about him.

A horseman was riding into town, heading for the rack at the Dollar Down. It was Santel. Miss Miller looked toward him and turned to Brick.

“Mr. Davidson, do you know that man?” she asked.

“Yes’m. His name is Santel.”

“What is he doing here?”

“Well, I reckon he’s workin’ for the Star-Dot outfit, ma’am.”

“For Mr. Grant?”

“Yes’m.”

“Do you know anything about him?”

“No, ma’am—not a thing. Did you ever see him before?”

“Yes. It was about a year ago, I think—in Idaho. This man was mixed up in some cattle and sheep trouble. It seems that he was hired as gun-man by the sheep interests. Anyway, a couple of cowboys were murdered, and every one seemed to think that this man was the guilty party. But he left the country ahead of the sheriff.”

“Tha’sso?” Brick was interested. “Are yuh sure this is the same man?”

“As sure as I can be. I have never met him, and he probably does not remember ever seeing me.”

“Well, that kinda makes him worth watchin’,” grinned Brick, as they went up to Wesson’s porch. “You just kinda keep still about this, will yuh, ma’am? It won’t help none to scatter that kind of information; but I’m sure much obliged to yuh for tellin’ me about it.”

“You are certainly welcome, I am sure.”

Mrs. Wesson opened the door. She had seen them from the window, but simulated great surprise.

“Heavenly dove!” she exclaimed. “Brick Davidson!”

“’Lo, Mrs. Wesson!”

Mrs. Wesson squinted at Miss Miller, shaking her head slowly.

“My, my! You girls sure do swing a wide loop. A new one every day. It wasn’t that way in my time. Well, I reckon you can take a look at Cale Wesson and see that I didn’t have much choice.”

“I heard Cale say about the same thing one day,” offered Brick innocently.

“Yuh did? Did that lantern-jawed—? Say, he picked me out of a whole herd. Ha, ha, ha, ha! Come on in, Brickie.”

“Can’t do it, Mrs. Wesson. I’ve got to go back now and square myself with Harp.”

Miss Miller thanked Brick and went into the house.

“No sign of the little Malloy boy?” asked Mrs. Wesson softly.

Brick shook his head.

“No, I guess the kid is a goner, Mrs. Wesson. I don’t *sabe* it at all. He was a dinger of a little feller. Kinda up and comin’ all the time.”

They considered the mystery silently for a while. Then:—

“Well, I’ll be goin’,” said Brick. “There’s a lot of work to bein’ a sheriff.”

“Like packin’ school-books and all that.”

“Uh-huh!” grinned Brick, “So-long, Mrs. Wesson.”

“G’-by, Brick.”

Brick went to the Dollar Down, but did not find Harp and Silent. A poker game was in progress and Leach was in the game. Santel was one of the spectators. He nodded to Brick pleasantly, but not so Leach. He scowled at Brick and devoted the rest of his attention to his cards.

Brick went back to his office and found Silent and Harp, lying on the cots, reading some year-old magazines. Neither of them paid any attention to Brick, who rolled a cigarette and sat down on top of his desk.

“Miss Miller is a danged nice girl,” offered Brick.

“Yeah!” Thus Harp sarcastically.

“Yeah. I don’t care much for a girl that talks all the time about another feller.”

“Who’d she talk about?” demanded Harp quickly.

“If you don’t know, I’m not goin’ to tell yuh.”

“Leach?”

“Nope. Never mentioned his name.”

“Huh!” Harp arose and yawned widely. “Is Mrs. Wesson at home?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I think yo’re a liar, Brick.”

“Well, why dont’cha go and find out for yourself, Harp?”

Harp grinned and sauntered into the back room, from whence came the sounds of razor stropping and splashing water. Silent groaned aloud.

“You touch my red tie and I’ll massacre yuh,” warned Brick.

“Where do yuh think I’m goin’—to a bull-fight?” spluttered Harp. “I’ve got a green one.”

“You must have,” observed Silent meaningly. “She must have astigmatism, too.”

Silent sneaked softly out and Brick went out behind him, while Harp swore softly and searched for something to throw at them.

## CHAPTER VIII

THE following day Brick rode through Big Elk Cañon alone. He found plenty of evidence that cattle had been butchered, but was unable to find anything that would show who owned the animals nor who had done the killing.

The cañon was almost a *cul-de-sac*. On both sides were beetling cliffs which had sloughed off until the slopes were piled high with slide-rock, making it impassable to hooped animals. The bottom of the cañon was not over fifty feet wide at any spot, fairly well timbered. On the left hand side, going toward the head of the cañon, were little tributary cañons, where Silent had found evidences of butchered cattle. At the head of the cañon, a winding trail led up through the timber to the grades which led to the Red Hill mine. Brick took plenty of time to examine the side cañons, and to prove Silent's story.

It was well past noon when he arrived at the Red Hill mine and found Sam Leach and Hank Stagg in Barney Devine's office. They were all smoking cigars, and a half-empty whisky bottle was on the table. Brick knew that Hank Stagg was electioneering.

The men were all civil enough, but Brick knew that Leach and Stagg were not at all pleased at his appearance.

"How's the sheriff?" queried Hank Stagg thickly. Hank had imbibed much of his own liquor.

"He's just about right," grinned Brick.

"It's a good thing that he thinks well of himself," observed Sam Leach sarcastically.

"'Cause nobody else does, eh?" grinned Brick.

"You said it yourself," reminded Leach, helping himself to a drink.

Brick laughed and stretched his legs.

"There's no use of quarrellin', Leach. You don't like me, and I sure hate — out of you; so let's let it go as it lays."

"What'd I ever do to you?" demanded Leach.

"Some folks don't have to do anythin' to me," said Brick coldly. "I'm not that particular."

"Aw, let's be friends," suggested Hank Stagg. "Have a drink, Brick. There ain't none of us perfect. Sam has had too many shots out of the old

bottle to-day, and it's kinda soured on him."

But Brick grinned and declined the drink. Sam got to his feet and picked up his hat.

"You don't mind if we go and talk to some of the men, do yuh, Devine?" he asked.

"Go to it," smiled Barney. He had imbibed enough to make him feel kindly toward every one.

Hank corked the bottle, shoved it into his hip-pocket and followed Leach outside, where they headed for the mine bunk-house. Devine laughed, and held out a handful of cigars to Brick.

"Might as well smoke on Hank Stagg, Brick. I've tried five of 'em, and not one will draw. But that hooch has authority."

Brick accepted one, lit, and discarded it in a moment for a cigarette.

"What's on your mind?" queried Barney.

"You use a lot of meat, don'tcha, Barney?"

"Darned right we do. You can't feed a crew like we've got and not use a lot of fresh meat."

"Who do yuh buy from?"

"Hm-m-m!" Barney frowned thoughtfully, reached for a book and skipped through the pages. "Here it is—Mostano; J. Mostano. I think they call him Joe."

"Joe Mostano, eh? He's that 'breed back on Lick Creek. Bought out that old Hopper Ranch, didn't he? Brands with a big H. Covers half the animal."

"I don't know," replied Barney. "Art Fields runs the commissary and takes care of the buying. You got some beef to sell, Brick?"

Brick shook his head and got to his feet.

"I wonder if I could have a little talk with Fields?"

"Sure thing. He's in that big building on the other side of the cook-shack. You know him?"

"Nope, but I can find him."

"I'll go with you."

Barney got his hat and they walked to the commissary building. Hank Stagg and Leach were talking to several men near the bunk-house. Leach said something to the men, which caused them to laugh.

Art Fields was a little, fat man, with an almost totally bald head and a serious face. He shook hands with Brick and waited for him to state his business.

“Yes, we buy from Mostano,” he said, in answer to Brick’s question. “He has been supplying us with beef for several months. It is cheaper than having it freighted in. Mostano packs it in on his horses. His ranch is only about six miles from here.”

“Is it good meat?”

“Fine.”

“Does he bring the hides with it?” asked Brick.

“The hides? Why, I don’t think so. We don’t buy hides.”

“Sure yuh don’t,” grinned Brick, “but it’s a law, Fields. When yuh sell meat that-a-way you’ve got to show the hide.”

“Oh-h-h, I get the idea.” Fields looked very wise. “I never thought of that, sheriff. Why, sure, it would be easy to kill somebody’s cattle and sell ’em to us. I don’t know whether Mostano knows about this or not, but I’ll see that he does. Next time he shows up, he better have the hide.”

“Has somebody been killing cattle?” asked Barney softly.

“I don’t think so,” smiled Brick. “I got to thinkin’ about you havin’ to buy so much meat, and I thought yuh ought to know what the law was. It might save yuh trouble.”

“That’s right,” agreed Barney. “We want to stay inside the law, you bet.”

“I guess that Mostano is all right,” said Fields. “He seems to be a pretty good ’breed, and he is sure prompt on delivery. He will bring in a load tomorrow some time.”

“Well, I’m much obliged,” smiled Brick. “See yuh later.”

“Come any old time.”

Brick and Barney walked back toward the office, and met Hank and Sam Leach, who were coming toward the commissary.

“Land any converts?” asked Brick.

“Got a lot of promises,” grinned Hank drunkenly. “Thish here polit’cal business is hard on the stummick.”

“Aw, come on!” snorted Leach.

“Foller papa,” laughed Brick.

Leach snorted and started to say something, but evidently changed his mind. A man was riding in on a pinto horse and Barney called Brick’s attention to him.

“That’s Mostano, Brick.”

The rider was of medium height, rather heavy, sitting humped in his saddle, his face completely shaded by a wide sombrero. He rode around the

corner of the cook-shack, heading toward the commissary building. Brick stopped and looked back.

“I reckon I’ll go back there, Barney,” he said. “I’d kinda like to get a look at Mostano.”

Brick started back and Barney went with him. They stopped at the corner of the building, where they could hear the men talking. It was evident that an argument had started, in which Hank and Leach had joined.

“It’s none of my business,” said Fields, “but it’s the law. You’ve got to have the hide of the animal, Mostano. I didn’t know it until the sheriff told me about it, to-day.”

“Aw, to —— with the sheriff!” Thus Sam Leach. “Let’s all have a drink. Fields, I want you to meet Hank Stagg. Hank is our next sheriff.”

Fields grunted an acknowledgment.

“Why do I bring hides?” queried Mostano. “My meat is good.”

“I’m not kicking about the meat,” replied Fields. “I’m just telling you ——”

“Nobody pays any attention to that law,” interrupted Leach. “It’s a law all right, but what the ——? We’ve got too many laws.”

“Hides make big load,” complained Mostano. “I have to pack one more horse. Too much work.”

“That’s right,” agreed Leach. “Here, have a drink, Fields. That ——ed sheriff is too officious. Wait until Hank is elected.”

There was silence while the bottle was being passed, and then Mostano’s voice grew a trifle more belligerent.

“I no like to pack hides.”

“All right,” grunted Fields. “Take a chance, if you want to. You never know when the sheriff is going to pop up on you. It’s your funeral—not mine.”

“He don’t come out here very often, does he?” asked Leach.

“I never met him until to-day. I may not be any judge of human nature, but I don’t want him catchin’ me breakin’ the law.”

“Aw, he ain’t so much,” said Hank thickly.

“You better take your sheriff prospect and put him to bed,” observed Fields, laughing. “He’s buckling at the knees.”

“I no bring hides,” declared Mostano.

Brick touched Barney on the arm and they walked back to the office. Brick was very thoughtful over what he had heard.

“That’s what whisky does,” said Barney. “Fields was all right, until he got that drink.”

“Don’t worry about him,” smiled Brick. “He’s just human. We’d all say the same thing, if we were in his place. Hank and Leach have the idea that whisky and cigars will bring votes. Maybe it would, if they could vote ’em right at the time. Well, I’ve got to be driftin’, Barney. Don’t say anythin’ to Fields.”

“It won’t get him into trouble, will it, Brick?”

“No-o-o. Maybe it’s better that way. So-long.”

Brick mounted and went slowly down the road about a quarter of a mile, where he swung up the side of the hill, heading northwest of the Red Hill property. A narrow hog-back ridge led back to the top of the hill, from where he could get a bird’s eye view of the big mine.

The Red Hill mine consisted of a shaft-house, ten-stamp mill, commissary building, cook-house, office and several other log buildings, which were used as bunk-houses and as homes for the married employees. The buildings were huddled close together in a fairly narrow cañon, through which ran a small stream. Much of the timber had been cut away from the slopes and used in the construction of the buildings and for mine timbering.

As he rested his horse he saw Mostano ride away from the mine, travelling in the same general direction as Brick was heading. Brick waited for Mostano to disappear in the timber before going on.

The ridge led back through fairly heavy timber, forcing him to travel slowly. About two miles from the mine he stopped. He knew that the old Hopper ranch was located about due north of where he was, and that Mostano must cross that ridge on his way home.

In a few minutes he was rewarded by seeing Mostano ride up the side of the hill, cross the ridge about two hundred yards beyond him and ride down into the next cañon. Brick moved on and found the trail. He gave Mostano plenty of time before following him.

The trail led around the head of the next cañon, twisted down the opposite side and came out into more open country. There were several head of cattle on this side, and Brick noted that all of them were branded with the big H.

The trail led to the edge of a high bluff, where he drew rein. Below the bluff, about half a mile away, he could see the buildings of the old Hopper ranch, standing in the middle of a big, partly cleared meadow. But he could see nothing of Mostano now.

There was no sign of life about the place. The corrals were empty. Brick considered the place for quite a while. He was suspicious of Mostano. Whoever was killing the beef must have a ready market for meat. There were other big mining crews at Redrock, but that was too far away for any one to transport the meat at a profit.

Finally he decided to take a closer view of the place; so he spurred down the bluff trail and rode boldly up to the old ranch-house. A half-breed woman came to the door, as he dismounted, shading her eyes from the sun. She was a slatternly looking woman, poorly dressed, bare of feet.

“Howdy” grinned Brick. “You Mrs. Mostano?”

“Um-m-m!” She was not at all friendly.

“Where’s Joe?” he asked.

She squinted at him and shook her head. A number of mongrel dogs came from behind the house and created a din with their barking. Brick slapped at them with his hat and they went yelping for cover. It was evident that Mostano had taught them their place.

“Nice dogs yuh got,” offered Brick.

“Um-m-m!”

“Me and you don’t seem to be able to find things to talk about,” grinned Brick. “Don’tcha get lonesome livin’ up here?”

The woman squinted down at her bare feet and up at Brick.

“Wat you want here?” she demanded.

“I want to talk to Joe?”

“W’y you want Joe?”

“Mebbe I want to buy some cheap meat.”

She considered this thoughtfully. Brick thought he had made an impression, but this was quickly dispelled by:—

“I think you —— liar.”

Then she turned, stepped into the house and shut the door. Brick laughed and swung back on to his horse.

“Mebbe that’s right, too,” he chuckled. “My reputation must ’a’ got here ahead of my winnin’ personality.”

He rode past the house and looked over the corrals. There was no sign of any one having butchered stock there, and Brick decided that Mr. Mostano must do the butchering in the hills. He was sure that Mostano had not come home, as there was no sign of himself nor of the pinto horse.

As he rode back past the house he noticed that the place commanded a fine view of the high bluff and trail. It would be impossible for any one to approach the ranch unseen in daylight from that direction.

At the top of the bluff he looked back, but there was no sign of any one moving around the house. He swung to the left, heading in almost a direct line toward Marlin City, taking a chance that he would be able to strike the Big Elk grades about where they sloped down on to the lower ground.

Brick had never been through that part of the hills, but felt that it would be easier than going back to the Red Hill mine. The timber was fairly heavy and that side of the hill was grown up with jack-pine and willows, making it rather difficult travelling.

He had just skirted a willow thicket and was looking for a good place to cross a rocky swale, when he caught a glimpse of a rider skirting the side of the hill about an eighth of a mile beyond him. The heavy cover made it difficult for him to catch more than a glimpse.

Brick drew his horse into the cover of a willow bush and waited. His sorrel horse blended in well with the colours of the hillside, and he was curious to know who the rider might be.

But try as he might he could not locate him again. He felt that the rider was not coming toward him, because it would be impossible for a horse to travel silently. He scanned the hills in all directions. There was something further up on the hill—something that moved.

“Prob’ly a cow,” said Brick to himself. “That jigger couldn’t ’a’ got up there that quick.”

Then came the smashing report of a gun. The reverberations clattered from hill to hill, dying away in diminishing echoes. Brick dropped out of his saddle, gun in hand. He had not heard the bullet. Whoever it was, they were not shooting at him.

Again the rifle awoke the echoes. Brick grinned to himself.

“Shootin’ cattle,” he told himself. “Somebody is killin’ a load of meat for the Red Hill mine, and here’s my chance to put the deadwood upon him.”

There was no more shooting. Brick squatted on his heels and waited. He intended to give the man a chance to get busy on his butchering before making a search. He knew that this man might wait quite a while after his kill, to make sure that no one was going to make an investigation of the shots. Brick was a good waiter.

It was possibly fifteen minutes after the last shot had been fired, when Brick heard a noise. It came from below him, and sounded like the snapping

of a dry stick. Brick's horse was well concealed by the willows from any one coming up the slope.

Just below Brick was a jack-pine thicket, growing up out of a tangle of rocks and old logs, and he studied this closely. One of the jack-pine tops jiggled, as if something had struck it slightly. Brick humped a little lower and drew back the hammer on his six-shooter.

Something was coming out through the thicket within ten feet of Brick. At first he thought it was a bear. Brick did not want trouble with a bear just now. A six-shooter is an unreliable bear weapon—and Brick was after bigger game.

Then the bear resolved itself into a man—Santel. He lifted his head slowly, his eyes searching ahead—and looked into the muzzle of Brick's six-shooter.

For several moments they looked at each other. Then:—

"It's yuh, eh?" said Santel softly.

"Yeah," nodded Brick. "Yuh better let go that gun, Santel."

"I know it."

Santel sat up, leaving his gun on the ground, while Brick moved down and secured it. Then he sat down and they considered each other.

Santel seemed so indifferent over his capture that it rather amused Brick, who mentally decided that this Santel person was, in range parlance, very salty. There was no question in Brick's mind that Santel was very cold-blooded, and still he rather liked the man.

"Where's your rifle?" queried Santel. He did not seem greatly concerned over his capture.

"I haven't any," replied Brick.

"No?" Santel wrinkled his nose thoughtfully. "No rifle? Huh! You didn't kill my horse with a six-gun?"

"I didn't even shoot at your horse," declared Brick.

"No?" Santel's brows lifted slightly, and a grin twisted his lips. "Well, somebody did, sheriff. My horse is dead—neck broke."

"Yeah?" Brick's blue eyes squinted thoughtfully. "This must 'a' been a three-handed game, Santel. Just what are yuh doin' over here?"

"Just lookin'. No law against lookin' around, is there?"

Brick grinned and handed Santel his gun.

"Not a bit."

"Thanks," Santel holstered his gun. "What was it all about?"

Brick shook his head. He was as much in the dark as Santel. He told Santel what he had seen, but he did not say that he was of the opinion that the shots were fired by a meat-thief.

Santel got to his feet and looked around. Brick walked back to his horse and picked up the reins.

“You ride a sorrel, too, eh?” remarked Santel thoughtfully. “My horse is a sorrel.”

“Mebbe,” said Brick seriously, “it was a good thing for me. We’ll cache yore saddle and ride my horse double.”

They found Santel’s horse, unsaddled it and hid the saddle in the heavy foliage of a fir-tree. Santel studied the landmarks to get his bearings, mounted behind Brick and they headed for Marlin City.

“Have yuh got any idea who done that shootin’?” asked Santel.

“Not for publication,” replied Brick. “Anyway, the county commissioners told me to let yuh alone, Santel. They said that yuh wouldn’t need any help in findin’ out things.”

“Tha’sso?”

“Yeah, yo’re supposed to be a regular finder, yuh know.”

“I’m tryin’ to find out some things, sheriff.”

“Well,” laughed Brick, “they can’t expect to have yuh find out everythin’.”

“They prob’ly will be ——ed sorry if I do.”

“Oh, yeah,” grunted Brick. “I’ll betcha that’s right.”

But Brick hadn’t the slightest idea what Santel meant.

They rode to the Star-Dot ranch, where they found Hank Stagg and Sam Leach sitting on the porch, talking with Bill Grant. Their coming, mounted on one horse, must have caused a certain amount of speculation in the minds of the three men, but no questions were asked.

Santel dismounted and held out his hand to Brick.

“I’m sure much obliged to yuh, sheriff,” he said.

“Same here,” smiled Brick.

“Get off and rest yore feet, Brick,” invited Grant.

Brick shook his head and gathered up his reins.

“Not to-day, Bill, thank yuh. I’m kinda busy these days, lookin’ after the morals of our feller-men.”

“That’s a good job for you,” declared Sam Leach.

“Y’betcha. There’s a lot of ’em that need looking after, Leach. I don’t want to be personal, but I will say that there’s a lot of loose cinches in this country, and if they ain’t tightened up pretty quick—somebody’s saddle is goin’ to turn.”

“Meaning what?” queried Leach.

Brick swung his horse around and headed for the gate, without answering Leach’s question. In fact, he couldn’t have answered it. He disliked Leach, and he knew that such a statement would rankle in Leach’s bosom for quite a while.

That some one had mistaken Santel for him—Brick—was almost a certainty, Brick decided. Just what Santel was doing in that part of the hills, he had no idea. Brick had left the Red Hill mine and had ridden up the hog-back in full view of the mine. It was possible that Mostano had seen him and had tried to kill him.

It was not a place frequented by cowboys, and it would have been easy for Mostano to mistake Santel for Brick, as they were both mounted on sorrel horses. At any rate, thought Brick, Joe Mostano was worth watching.

Santel’s statement regarding the county commissioners set Brick to thinking. Just what would it make them sorry for him to find out, he wondered. Miss Miller had recognised Santel as being a bad man—a gun-fighter. According to her Santel had been a hired gun-man for the sheep interests, and had been suspected of murdering two cowpunchers in Idaho.

Brick was willing to discount the murder statement. He knew that, under those circumstances, an ordinary killing would be termed murder. Santel did not look like a murderer, but he did look like a gun-man, whose gun might be for rent.

“Well,” Brick resolved, “I’m not goin’ to worry about Santel. Mebbe between us we can launder old Sun Dog and hang her out to dry in the sun. Anyway, somebody has fired the first gun of the battle—and all they got was a horse.”

## CHAPTER IX

It was several days later that Soapy Caswell came to Marlin City, driving a spirited pair of bronchos, hitched to a buckboard. He tied them at the Dollar Down hitch-rack and met Brick in front of Wesson's store.

"Goin' some place, or just got there?" queried Brick.

"If I wanted to go some place, I wouldn't stop here," grunted Soapy. "Don't like yore town. What do yuh think of that?"

"That's fine," grinned Brick. "Mebbe we better call a meetin' and let everybody grieve. What do yuh know, Soapy?"

"Danged little, Brick. Doin' any good for yoreself?"

"Not much."

"Uh-huh!" Soapy lowered his voice. "Did that detective ever show up?"

"Been here quite a while, Soapy. Name's Santel."

"Tha'sso? I reckon I might as well expect to get all that stolen money back pretty soon, eh?"

"Yuh might as well expect to, Soapy."

"Gosh, that's fine! I'm all excited, like an old lady. It's too bad he wasn't here to find the little Malloy boy."

"He was here. He helped hunt for him, Soapy."

"Pshaw! Then he ain't no wizard, is he? Well, mebbe I won't get that money back. What are yuh doin' to-day, Brick? Anythin' special?"

"Nope."

"Then come and take a ride with me, will yuh? I've got to go out to the Red Hill mine and see Barney Devine, and I sure hate to travel alone. We'll be comin' right back. What do yuh say?"

"Well, all right, Soapy. I'll tell Harp that I'm goin'."

Brick went to the office, where he found Harp stretched out on a cot, groaning out an alleged tune on his jew's-harp.

"I'm goin' to Red Hill with Soapy Caswell," stated Brick. "If anybody tries to break into jail—stop 'em, Harp."

"Aw-w-w right. Leave me plenty of shells for the riot-gun and I'll sure keep the place sanitary. I've got a new tune, Brick. Listen to this, will yuh? It's a dinger. Wa-a-ait a minute!"

But Brick ducked out through the doorway and hurried up to the hitch-rack, where Soapy waited for him. Harp got up and went to the doorway, where he watched Soapy and Brick drive out of town.

Slim Hunter was dismounting in front of Wesson's store, so Harp wandered up there. Slim was talking to Cale Wesson about putting up an announcement in his store, when Harp came in.

"Hallo, yuh long-eared ant-eater!" greeted Harp.

"Same to you, you bat-eared cattywampus!" grinned Slim. "How are yuh?"

"Finer'n frawg-hair. Whatcha doin', Slim?"

"Advertisin' a dance."

"Tha'sso? Where—Silverton?"

"Y'betcha. Next Friday night. Oyster supper, too. Goin' to have some reg'lar music, too, Harp. Yuh want to be there."

"Friday night, eh?"

Harp was thinking fast. Here was his chance to take Miss Miller and he was not going to lose any time in asking her.

"See yuh later, Slim," he grunted, turning to the door. "I'm kinda in a hurry right now."

Harp went outside and headed for Wesson's home, going as fast as he could walk on high heels. Mrs. Wesson answered his knock, squinting at him quizzically.

"Miss Miller to home?" asked Harp.

Mrs. Wesson shook her head.

"No, she is still at the school-house, Harp. She won't be home until after four o'clock."

"Uh-huh!" Harp shifted his feet nervously. "There's goin' to be a dance at Silverton next Friday."

"So I heard."

"Yuh did? Who told yuh, Mrs. Wesson?"

"Why, Sam Leach was here kinda early this mornin' to ask Miss Miller to go with him."

"Oh, yeah," said Harp in a far-away voice. "Uh-huh! We-ell, I reckon they'll have a real nice dance. Much obliged, Mrs. Wesson."

"I'm makin' some doughnuts," offered Mrs. Wesson, knowing Harp's fondness for such delicacies. But this was one time when Harp's sweet tooth had turned sour.

“Just as much obliged,” he said painfully. “I’ve been havin’ a touch of indejest-shun. Mebbe next time, thank yuh. Nice weather we’re havin’, Mrs. Wesson. Well, I’ll be jiggin’ along.”

Mrs. Wesson stood in the doorway and watched Harp go back to the street, walking dejectedly. She tried to laugh, was a failure; so she went back to her kettle. Harp went back to the street and headed for the Dollar Down.

His soul was sore within him and he needed a bracer. Slim Hunter had given the bartender one of the notices to put on the back-bar, and Harp gazed upon it with sad eyes.

“Drinkin’ anythin’?” queried Slim.

“Yeah—anythin’,” replied Harp sadly. “My stummick is kinda antegodlin’, and mebbe a shot or two will fix her up.”

They had a drink on Slim, one on Harp, and then the bartender opened his heart enough to shove out the glasses. After these three drinks, Slim began to dilate upon the wonders of the coming dance.

“Naw, I don’t want to listen to it,” declared Harp sadly. “If you’ve got any tale of sufferin’—tell it to me, Slimmie. My soul is in the slough of despond. Stummick trouble sure does paint things blue.”

“You ought to do somethin’ about it,” stated Slim. “Feller like you ain’t got none too many insides; so yuh got to protect what yuh have got. Mebbe another drink, eh?”

“Yuh sure diagnose, cowboy,” applauded Harp.

But liquor only served to make Harp more sad. He became maudlin in his grief, trying to tell the story of his life and only remembering some sad stories he had read. His grief affected Slim, and they cried crocodile tears on the top of the bar and swore eternal friendship, while the bartender begged them to go away and let him sleep.

While Harp bathed his soul in tears, Brick and Soapy rode along the Big Elk grades, rattling along at a good pace over the narrow road. They were nearing the spot where the stage had gone over the edge, and Brick was telling Soapy about how he and Harp had passed the wreck without knowing it.

Suddenly the team swerved widely on a hairpin turn, throwing one rear wheel off the grade. Brick grabbed the side of the seat, as he was thrown violently over the side, and his eyes caught a flash of a masked man just ahead of the horses, his rifle pointing at them.

The next moment he landed in a heap on the steep side-hill and rolled into a clump of brush, so badly jarred that he was unable to move. It was

possibly a minute before he could realise what had happened to him.

He sat up and looked around at a landscape that would not hold still. His eyes gradually regained their focus on objects and he got painfully to his feet. He was bruised all over and his face was bleeding from several cuts. He looked back at the grade, but was unable to see anything on account of the extreme angle.

He remembered the flash he had had of the masked man. His holster was empty, but about half-way up to the grade he found his gun, wedged in the rocks. It was a stiff climb back to the grade, where he found Soapy trying to untangle his team.

Soapy gawped at him and swore wonderingly.

“By ——, I thought you was killed,” he told Brick.

“I was,” panted Brick. “What in —— was it, Soapy? Was it a hold-up?”

Soapy yanked the team straight on the grade.

“Whoa! You ——ed rattle-brains! Was it a hold-up?”

“Well, was it?” queried Brick, hanging to a rear wheel.

“Git in,” ordered Soapy. “I can’t keep these ——ed hummin’-birds on the grade, if we don’t git goin’.”

Brick climbed into the seat and Soapy got in beside him. The team started with a jerk and they rattled away toward the Red Hill mine. Brick noticed that Soapy’s jaw was set at a belligerent angle and that his profanity was even more cutting than usual.

“Mind talkin’ about it?” queried Brick. “Yuh must remember that I unloaded early in the game, and all I got was a glimpse.”

“You was pretty ——ed lucky at that,” said Soapy. “Did yuh notice the stuff I had in the back of the rig? That old gunny-sack and an old rug?”

Brick glanced back. There was nothing in the rear of the buckboard now.

“Yeah, I remember it, Soapy. Where’d it go?”

“It didn’t go—it was taken. I’ve been held up, by ——!”

“Held up? Then it was a——”

“Appears that it was,” dryly. “Do yuh remember——” Soapy jerked the team to a slow trot, “do yuh remember me tellin’ yuh once that I was the biggest ——ed fool I had ever met?”

“Yeah, I remember it,” grinned Brick, wiping some blood off his face.

“Well, I ain’t been improvin’,” stated Soapy bitterly. “That old gunny-sack and that old rug was concealin’ the monthly pay-roll of the Red Hill mine.”

“Love of gosh!” exploded Brick. “The pay-roll? Why, Soapy, that must ’a’ been——”

“Right dog-gone close to twenty-seven thousand dollars.”

Brick caressed his bruised face and tried to collect his thoughts.

“I’m smart,” said Soapy bitterly. “I was afraid to take a chance on the stage. Just one man, Brick; one man with a Winchester. He didn’t say much. By ——, I don’t think he said anythin’, come to think of it.

“The team swerved into the bank, after you fell out, and I stopped ’em. He motioned for me to get out—and I got. He made me unbuckle my belt and drop it. Then he walked past me, kicked the belt and gun along with him and lifted the sack out of the buckboard.

“It was a mighty heavy sack, Brick. The team got to fussin’ and I had my hands full with them. When I looked back, he was gone around the turn—and that’s all.”

“What did he look like?” asked Brick eagerly.

“I dunno. The hole in the muzzle of that rifle was perfectly round—if that’s any description. He knowed how to do it.”

“Didn’t yuh get any idea of what he looked like, Soapy? Was he a big man, small man, thin man, or what did he look like?”

“He sure was,” nodded Soapy seriously. “I’ll betcha that’ll cover him to a T. He was wearin’ clothes, too.”

“And he didn’t talk, eh?”

“——, he didn’t need to, Brick. A man with a gun don’t have to tell me what to do. Now, I’ve got to go to the Red Hill and tell Barney to wait another day. To-morrow is pay-day, too.”

“Twenty-seven thousand dollars!” muttered Brick. “That’s a lot of money, Soapy.”

“Uh-huh! There’s over two hundred men at that mine, and their wages runs about five dollars a day apiece. Figure it out for yourself. I’m the loser, Brick.”

“Soapy, yo’re the best loser I ever seen,” complimented Brick seriously.

“No, I ain’t. If I had any sense, I’d get so mad that I’d bite myself. Yessir, I’d just faunch around until I got me a temperature, bust a blood-vessel or a ham-string. But I’m just —— fool enough to set down and make fun of myself.”

“Well, why didn’t yuh tell me what yuh was carryin’?” asked Brick. “I’d ’a’ brought the sawed-off shotgun and we’d ’a’ stopped his play.”

“Yeah, you’d sure looked fine doin’ a high-dive with a short shotgun in your hands, wouldn’t yuh? Prob’ly shot yourself and me, too.”

“Who knew you was goin’ to carry the pay-roll?”

“Not a danged soul. I hope Barney won’t be put out about it.

“I suppose I should ’a’ sent it by stage, with half-a dozen-guards—but I didn’t. No-o-o, I got real smart and tried to take it in for myself, thinkin’ that nobody would think that I had the danged stuff. Too ——ed much thinkin’, tha’sall.”

## CHAPTER X

IT was almost four o'clock when Harp began to get back to normal. Whisky had only made him feel his troubles more keenly. He left Slim arguing with the bartender and started back toward the office. He was not on exactly an even keel and his vision was slightly impaired.

As a result he almost ran into Mrs. Wesson, who was coming out of the store, carrying some groceries.

"How doo-o-o?" he said thickly.

"Hallo, Harp!" she smiled. "Did yuh see Miss Miller?"

Harp scratched his head and gawped at her.

"Shee Miss Miller? Whaffor?"

"Wasn't you goin' to ask her to the dance at Silverton?"

"Oh!"

Harp rubbed his long nose and reflected deeply with both eyes closed. Then:—

"But you said she was goin' with Sam Leach."

"I didn't say she was goin' with him, Harp. I said that he asked her to go with him. She told him that she had already been invited."

"By whom had she been invited—by whom?" asked Harp.

"I don't think she has been invited by any one, Harp. I know she didn't want to go with Leach; so that was her excuse."

Mrs. Wesson bustled on down the sidewalk, leaving Harp looking after her. He cuffed his hat over one ear and hitched up his belt, as he headed for the office. He wanted to find a place where he could sit down alone, because his soul was filled with joy and he wanted to express his feelings with music.

It was nearly supper-time when Brick and Soapy drove into Marlin City. Soapy had promised Barney Devine to have the money for that pay-roll out to the mine by noon the next day, and now he hungered for a session of poker. Brick was stiff and sore from his fall off the grade, but he got a bite to eat at the restaurant, saddled his horse and headed for Silverton.

Brick was certain that some one knew about Soapy going to take the pay-roll money to the Red Hill mine. Soapy had sworn that no one knew about it, but Brick knew that Soapy was just a trifle absent-minded.

Brick tied his horse to the Short Horn hitch-rack and went into the saloon. The games were in progress, but there were few players. Several men nodded to Brick as he came in and went to the bar. Brick knew Charley Meecham, the cashier of the bank, but did not know where Meecham lived; so he inquired of the bartender.

“Charley Meecham? Yeah, I know where he lives.” The bartender leaned on the bar and drew an imaginary map on the top of the bar with a stubby finger.

“That’s the old Wheaton house, ain’t it?” queried Brick.

“Yeah, sure. Meecham has been livin’ there nearly a year now. Nice feller, Charley is.”

Brick nodded and went down the street, past McGill’s saloon, turning to the left and going to an old two-storey dwelling-house, which was set back considerable distance from the street.

Mrs. Meecham answered his knock. Brick had never met her, but knew her by sight. Mrs. Meecham was a thin, angular, rather young woman, with a mop of blond hair and a knack of talking about everything that was none of her business.

“Charley’s up at the bank,” she told Brick. “He went up to do a little work. Won’t you come in? You’re Mr. Davidson, the sheriff, ain’tcha? Uh-huh! I’m Mrs. Meecham. Come on in and set down in the parlour.

“Nice weather, ain’t it? Charley will be back pretty soon, I think. How is everythin’ in Marlin City? I met your new school-teacher at the last dance. Nice girl. Take that chair over there. This one looks solid, but it ain’t. Sam set down on it the other night and it spread out on him.”

Brick sat down and balanced his sombrero on his knees. Mrs. Meecham made him feel nervous. The parlour was a stuffy little room, high-ceiled, with the walls plentifully hung with crayon portraits. An upright organ occupied one corner, and Brick prayed internally that Mrs. Meecham wouldn’t attempt to entertain him with music.

“We’re going to have another dance Friday night,” continued Mrs. Meecham. “You ought to come, Mr. Davidson. I hear that you are quite a dancer. I sure do love a good dance. Sam is a good dancer. He had the Marlin school-teacher down here to the last dance. He’s kinda crazy about her.”

“Sam Leach?” asked Brick.

“Yes. Sam’s my brother. He’s over here quite a lot.”

“Oh, yeah,” Brick crossed his knees and leaned back in his chair. “Your brother, eh? I didn’t know that.”

“Say, you go ahead and smoke, if you want to. Charley and Sam smoke all the time, and I don’t mind it. Keeps out moths.”

Brick nodded and began rolling a cigarette.

“You been livin’ here long?” he asked.

“About a year—in this house. We’ve been in Silverton for about two years.”

“Like it here?”

“Not so very. Still, it’s all right. Silverton folks are real sociable, what there is of them. Charley’s got a good job and I ain’t got no kick comin’.”

“You came here from the East, didn’t yuh, Mrs. Meecham?”

“I should say not! My folks came from Ohio, but I was born up in the Okanagan country. I never been East. In fact, I ain’t never had no hankering for the East. We came here from Idaho. That’s where me and Charley were married. I liked it up there. It was more like home. Of course we knew everybody, and that helps a lot.”

“Yeah, it sure helps,” agreed Brick, inhaling deeply. “Is Sam from up in that country?”

“Oh, sure. He came down here a couple of years before we did. You know Hank Stagg, don’tcha? Sure, you do. Hank used to be up there. I never knew him, but Sam did. Hank used to drive a stage up there. Him and Baldy Malloy worked for the same outfit. Wasn’t it too bad about Baldy’s little kid. Gee whillikens!—that was awful. Just think of that poor little tyke getting lost like that. And Baldy getting killed. I wonder if he went to sleep and ran off the grade?”

“I think so,” said Brick slowly. “Yeah, I don’t think he knew when he went off.”

“That must have been it. Baldy was a good driver, too. You and Hank are rivals for the sheriff’s office, ain’tcha? Well, that don’t have to make enemies out of folks. Hank is a good scout.”

“Well,” grinned Brick, “I ain’t sore at anybody.”

“Sure you ain’t. I’ve always heard that you was good-natured.”

The front door opened and Mrs. Meecham got to her feet.

“That’s Charley. Hoo-hoo, Charley! C’mon in; I’ve got company.”

Meecham came to the doorway and squinted at Brick. He was a fleshy, black-haired man of about thirty-five, quietly dressed. His eyes were deep-

set, cheeks florid and his mouth full-lipped. He smiled and came into the room.

“Hallo, Davidson!” Meecham held out his hand to Brick. “How are you?”

Brick shook hands with him and they both sat down.

“I’ve been doing a little work,” explained Meecham.

Brick smiled and rolled a fresh cigarette.

“I wanted to ask you a few questions,” stated Brick slowly. “Did you get a good look at the man who held you up in the bank?”

“Well, there were three of them, sheriff. Anyway, I think there were three. I’m sure that one stayed near the door. The one who did the talking was a thin sort of a fellow.”

“Couldn’t recognise his voice, if yuh heard it?”

“Hardly. Still, I might.”

“Wasn’t there a fire broke out about that time?”

“Yes, there was,” said Mrs. Meecham quickly. “It was down at Baldy Malloy’s shack. His wood-shed burned down.”

“Didja ever hear how it got started?”

Meecham pursed his lips and shook his head wisely.

“Mebbe it was set on purpose, eh?” suggested Brick.

“Possibly.”

Brick got to his feet and picked up his hat.

“Well, I reckon that’s about all. It kinda looks like somebody was gettin’ rich off Sun Dog banks. It sure hits Soapy Caswell hard. I reckon I’ll have to ride out and see him soon.”

“I saw him this morning,” volunteered Mrs. Meecham. “He was in front of the bank in a buckboard.”

“He uses a buckboard most of the time,” said Meecham.

“Gray team?” queried Brick.

“Yes.”

“By golly, that must ’a’ been him at the Red Hill mine. I was back on the hill and saw the rig drive up to the mine office. I never thought about it bein’ Soapy. A little later I was down at the office and talked with Barney Devine, but he never mentioned that Soapy had been there.”

As Brick manufactured this out of whole cloth, Meecham stepped over to the organ and arranged the scattered sheets of music. He turned back to Brick, nodding indifferently.

“Possibly he drove out there,” he said. “He didn’t say where he was going.”

“He wasn’t there long—if it was Soapy,” added Brick. “I seen ’em take something from the buckboard and take it into the office. They were in there just a minute, when one of ’em came out, got into the buckboard and drove back down the road. Well, I reckon I’ll be movin’, folks.”

“You ought to come to that dance Friday night,” urged Mrs. Meecham. “We’ll sure have a good time.”

“I’ll betcha yuh will,” smiled Brick. “I dunno whether I’ll have time or not. I’ve got a lot of work mapped out ahead of me and I’ll prob’ly be too busy.”

“Electioneering?” queried Meecham.

Brick thought there was just the hint of a sneer in the question.

“Nope. Just tryin’ to make good on what’s left of this term of office, Meecham.”

“Oh, I see. Well, come and see us again, sheriff.”

“Thank yuh,” nodded Brick. “Come and see me too. *Adiós.*”

Brick walked back to the Short Horn saloon, but did not go inside. Leach was in there, standing at the bar, talking to several other men. Brick went to the rack and got his horse, mounted and headed for Marlin City.

He had found out several worth-while things, which paid him for the ride to Silverton. It was interesting to know that Meecham was Leach’s brother-in-law, and that both of them, together with Hank Stagg and Baldy Malloy, were from Idaho. Leach had come first. Brick decided that he would find out from Soapy just how he happened to employ Charley Meecham.

“It’s kinda danged funny, anyway,” observed Brick, as he rode back through the night. “Leach got established, and then he gets his brother-in-law to come down. Then comes Hank Stagg and Baldy Malloy. They used to work for the same outfit. I’ll have to talk with Soapy about this. But if Meecham knew anythin’ about Soapy takin’ the pay-roll to the Red Hill he didn’t show it. Mebbe I’m barkin’ up the wrong tree; I dunno.”

It was after nine o’clock when Brick got back to Marlin City and stabled his horse. Soapy’s team was still at the rack; so Brick felt sure that a big poker game was in progress. He was tired and sore, so he rubbed his bruises with liniment and went to bed. There was no sign of Harp, but Brick knew that Harp would never think of going to bed as long as there was anything going on in town.

And Brick was right. Harp sat between Soapy Caswell and Bill Brant at the poker-table, trying to make his meagre stack of chips weather the storm. Harp knew that he had no business in a game with these two men. Banty Harrison, owner of the livery-stable, and Lew Slater, a professional gambler, were the other two in the game.

Harp played carefully, hoarding his money, and drinking hard liquor at regular intervals. He had failed to get up nerve enough to ask Miss Miller to go to the dance with him. Luck and keen judgment kept Harp in the game until three o'clock in the morning, when he grew bold enough to try to make two deuces beat Bill Grant's full house.

"I'm through," announced Harp. "I've done well to last this long."

"I've got a-plenty too," agreed Soapy.

They shoved back from the table, while Slater counted their chips, and then all went to the bar for a final drink. Harp was the first one to leave the place. He stopped on the porch of the saloon and gulped in deep breaths of the cool air.

He turned his head quickly and glanced toward the corner of the building. It seemed to him as though some one or something had moved there. But he was unable to see anything. Anyway, it was probably a dog or a cat.

He stepped off the sidewalk, and started to cross the street, going diagonally, toward the office. He heard some one step out on to the sidewalk, and a moment later came the roar of a heavy gun-shot.

Harp almost fell down, as he whirled quickly, jerking out his gun. But there was nobody in sight. A gust of smoke drifted past the open doorway, showing that the shot had been fired from near where he had heard the noise.

Men were crowding out of the doorway now; so he trotted back to the edge of the sidewalk. Some one was stretched out on the boards, and now Bill Grant scratched a match, looking down at the man on the sidewalk.

"What in —— happened?" queried Harp.

"It's Soapy," grunted Grant. "Somebody help me to take him inside."

They carried him into the saloon and laid him out on the floor. He was unconscious and bleeding badly.

"I'll get the doctor," offered Slater, and went out of the door on the run.

"Now, who in —— shot him?" demanded Grant. "By ——, they must have waited for him to step out."

“I heard somebody there,” offered Harp. “When I went out I heard a noise over by the corner, but I thought it was a dog.”

“Well, he’s still alive,” said Banty Harrison. “While there’s life there’s hope. By ——, I’d like to get my hands on that dirty murderer. I’d sure ——”

Banty stopped when Brick Davidson, half-dressed, came through the doorway. He squinted around at every one, stepped in close to Soapy and looked down at him.

“I heard the shot,” said Brick. “Tell me about it somebody.”

“Not much to tell, Brick,” said Grant. “Soapy stepped out on the porch and somebody shot him. They must have been layin’ for him. Slater has gone after Doc Meyers.”

A few moments later the doctor came, half-asleep, half-dressed. He knelt down beside Soapy, while Brick assisted him with his examination.

“Buck-shot,” said Brick angrily. “They wasn’t takin’ no chances, boys.”

The doctor was counting the wounds and estimating just what to do.

“What’s his chances, Doc?” queried Brick.

“Odds against him, I’m afraid. Five of them hit him above the waist and he’s got a couple in his thigh. Somebody get a blanket for a stretcher and we’ll carry him down to my place. None of the lead hit him in a vital spot. But he will have a fight ahead of him. I suppose that some of ’em will be hard to locate, but we’ll do our best.”

“I’ll beat it for Silverton to tell his family,” offered Banty.

They carried Soapy to Doctor Meyers’s office, where the doctor immediately went to work, trying to locate the buckshot. Brick and Harp went to the office and sat down. Brick held his head in his hands, thinking of every angle of the affair; trying to find a reason why any one would murder Soapy Caswell.

“They waited for him,” said Harp hoarsely. “—— ’em, they was there when I come out. But why did they shoot old Soapy? Why, he’s a good old jigger, Brick. Soapy barked a lot, but he never hit anybody.”

“They robbed him of twenty-seven thousand dollars to-day,” said Brick. “He had it in the back of that buckboard, and we were held up on Big Elk grade, near where Baldy went over the edge.”

“You jokin’, Brick?” Harp did not believe.

“Look at the skin off my face,” suggested Brick. “One wheel went off the edge, and I took a header down the hill. One man pulled the trick. He was masked—and he knew Soapy was carryin’ that pay-roll money, Harp.”

Harp swore softly and looked closely at Brick. He still thought that Brick was joking.

“Twenty-seven thousand dollars, Brick? My ——, how much money is that?”

“Well, it’s twenty-six days’ wages for over two hundred men. Soapy said that their wages would average about five dollars per day. Figure it out, cowboy.”

“Well, I’ll be ——ed, if this country ain’t gettin’ awful salty, Brick. But what can we do? When they start shootin’ buckshot from ambush in the dark, what’s the use of us, I’d like to know? By cripes, I’d sure like to swap lead with the jigger that shot Soapy.”

“I hope we will, Harp. In fact, I’m kinda sure we will.”

“When?” Harp jumped out of his chair and grabbed Brick by the shoulders. “When do we start, Brick?”

“As soon as we find out who shot him.”

“Aw-w-w, ——!” Harp exploded his disgust and walked to the doorway. “I thought you had some idea who done it.”

“It was somebody who wanted to kill Soapy Caswell—and they wanted it bad enough to bushwhack him with a shotgun. Now, if we can find out who wanted him dead——”

“That ought to be easy, Brick. We’ll start askin’ questions as soon as it gets daylight, eh?”

But the sarcasm of Harp’s question was lost upon Brick, who sat staring intently at the floor, trying to convince himself that certain things might be true. Bill Grant came to the office and sat down with them.

“Doc’s pickin’ out shot,” he told them hopefully. “Soapy don’t know what it’s all about, but he’s doin’ a lot of cussin’ over it. Soapy’s a tough old customer and he’s got a fightin’ chance, boys.”

“We’re pullin’ for him, Bill,” said Harp. “Brick is pullin’ for him—or for somethin’. When Brick gets to thinkin’ that-a-way, somethin’ is due to rattle real hard.”

Brick looked up, his brow furrowed deeply.

“Got an idea, Brick?” queried Grant.

Brick sighed and reached for his cigarette makings.

“It’s far-fetched, Bill. Mebbe it’s too ——ed far-fetched, but I’m goin’ to work on it.”

“I dunno,” said Grant gloomily. “It seems as though the more we try to do the more trouble comes up, Brick. I just go around in a circle. Why

would anybody shoot Soapy Caswell? For that matter, why would anybody shoot Malloy? I'm darned if I can figure any of it out.

"But I want you to understand that I'm not against you. I don't like Santel. Leach was the one that hired him. As far as I can see, he's just as much puzzled as we are. As far as Hank Stagg is concerned, I'd as soon vote for a yaller dog for sheriff."

"It ain't the office, Bill," said Brick softly. "That don't interest me at all, I'd give it up to-morrow, if I could clean up this gang of killers. They're desperate, Bill. They've got to a point where they think they've got to kill in order to save their own necks."

"Do you think so, Brick?"

"I'd bet my own neck on it."

"Well," said Grant hopefully, "I'm glad somebody has an idea why all this killing is being done. But, can yuh stop it?"

"I'm goin' to," gritted Brick. "I dunno if I can stop it ahead of my own demise, or not—but I'm hopin'."

They sat and talked until daylight, when they went over to the Dollar Down and searched for evidence. Some distance away from the saloon they found the empty shotgun cartridge. It was a 12-gauge, brass shell. Brick examined it closely and dropped it into his pocket.

"No clue in that," he told them. "Every shotgun in the country is 12-gauge, and mostly every one reloads their own shells."

They went down to the doctor's office and found that Soapy was doing as well as possible. Grant got his horse and rode back to his ranch, while Harp and Brick went back to the office to get some sleep.

"You goin' to that Silverton dance Friday night?" asked Brick, as they pulled off their boots.

"I dunno." Harp shook his head sadly. "I was goin' to ask Miss Miller, but I kinda lost my nerve. I found out about that dance after you went away yesterday; so I went right down to Wesson's. Mrs. Wesson told me that Leach had been there early that morning to ask Miss Miller to go with him.

"I thought that ended it. Later on I met Mrs. Wesson, and she said——" Harp snapped off a boot and flung it across the floor. "Mrs. Wesson's the dangest joshier I ever seen, Brick. She said that she only told me that Leach had asked Miss Miller; but she didn't say that Miss Miller had refused him."

But the point of the joke was lost on Brick, who was looking straight at Harp, a queer expression in his blue eyes.

"Leach asked her, eh?"

“Yeah.”

“Before you knew about the dance, Harp?”

“Yeah, it must ’a’ been before Miss Miller went to school.”

“Uh-huh!”

Brick rolled a cigarette thoughtfully, but did not light it. Then he removed his clothes, placed the cigarette on a chair beside the cot and got into bed.

“Well,” Harp yawned and rolled into his blankets, “you’ve lost yore sense of humour, Brick—or didn’t yuh hear what I told yuh?”

“I heard it all right, Harp, and I thank yuh.”

“Yuh thank——”

Harp raised up and squinted at Brick, but there was nothing to see, except the mop of tousled red hair against the pillow. Harp snuggled back down into his blankets and grinned to himself. He knew that Brick’s mind was pretty busy, when he failed to see a joke.

## CHAPTER XI

It was nearly noon when some one hammered on the office door and awoke Brick, who wrapped a blanket around himself and went to the door. It was Barney Devine. He stepped inside and Brick closed the door behind him.

"Kinda forgot to wake up," smiled Brick, shoving out a chair for Barney. "Set down while I put on some clothes."

Harp awoke and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Hallo, Barney!" he said hoarsely. "How yuh comin'?"

"With a little news," said Barney seriously. "I heard about Soapy Caswell a few minutes ago, and I'm bringing more grief. Last night, or rather about two o'clock this morning, somebody dynamited my safe."

"Dynamited your safe?" Brick had his shirt half-way on, and his head popped out of the collar like a jack-in-the-box.

"Completely," nodded Barney. "In fact, they ruined it."

"I'll be ——ed!" exploded Harp.

"What did they get?" asked Brick.

Barney spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"About ten dollars. They ruined some books and a quart of good whisky —and a good safe. They also ruined one of the walls of the office."

"They must 'a' thought there was money in that safe, didn't they?" queried Harp.

Barney looked questioningly at Brick, who grinned.

"I told Harp about the hold-up, Barney."

"Well, what's the answer?" asked Barney. "It looks to me like two gangs working, Brick. One of them evidently thought that the pay-roll got there O.K. Don't it look like it to you?"

Brick picked up the cigarette he had rolled before going to bed, moistened it with his tongue and scratched a match on the floor.

"Yeah, it looks somethin' like that, Barney."

"What about your pay-roll?" asked Harp.

"I'll have to take it from here, I suppose. Soapy told them that the pay-roll money would go from here to-day. It's a lucky thing he spoke to them about it, because I've got to have that money at the mine before quitting-time to-day."

“We’ll go with yuh, Barney,” stated Brick softly, and added, “And I hope somebody tries to hold yuh up. Get yore clothes on, Harp. We’ll devour some ham and eggs right away, Barney; and then we’ll see that yuh get safely to the mine, if we have to shoot every crook in Sun Dog County.”

“They won’t try any monkey business with us,” declared Harp.

“Tha’sso?” Brick grinned and buckled on his belt. “Yuh must remember that my presence didn’t help much yesterday.”

As a measure of precaution and convenience they split the money into three parts, and rode away. Harp and Brick carried Winchesters handy, and after they reached the Big Elk grades they rode in single file about fifty feet apart.

And there was no wild riding this time. They took plenty of time, and if there were any hold-up men on the Big Elk grades they changed their mind about trying to hold up the second pay-roll of the Red Hill mine.

Barney was profuse in his thanks and asked them to stay a while, but Brick shook his head. Barney had enough trusted men to look after the money until pay-time, and Brick was anxious for action. They rode back along the grades to where Soapy and Brick had been held up.

Beyond the curve, where Brick had been thrown off the grade, they dismounted and led their horses along the upper side of the grade, trying to find where the robber had left the road. About a hundred yards beyond the curve, where the road curved sharply around the head of a ravine, they discovered an old trail, which angled up through the brush. They mounted and followed the old trail to the top of the divide, where it disappeared. There was nothing to show that the bandit had taken that trail, except that it was the nearest available place where he could have left the grade and travelled under cover.

It was not far from where Santel’s horse had been killed; so they rode down there and found that Santel had taken his saddle away. Brick had told Harp about his suspicions of Mostano, and they decided to ride over and take a look at Mostano’s place.

But, instead of approaching it from the bluff, Brick led the way around to the east, about half a mile from the ranch-house. From their elevation they were able to command a good view of the place. There were two horses in the corral, and the half-breed woman was out in the yard.

“Too danged bad we haven’t a pair of glasses!” mused Brick. “I’d like to get a good look at that place.”

“Let’s go down there,” suggested Harp.

They had dismounted and, as they climbed into their saddles and started angling down the hill, they heard the report of a rifle. The shot had been fired from considerable distance away. They drew up and studied the house. The woman was hurrying into the house, as though the rifle shot had been a signal for her to get under cover.

Brick laughed and began rolling a cigarette.

“No use goin’ down there now, Harp,” he said. “We’ve been spotted. Mostano is no fool. My visit to his place warned him that we might be dangerous; so he’s watchin’ for us. I’m bettin’ that he sees everybody that comes over Big Elk grade. Next time we won’t play the game to suit him, and he’s goin’ to be a sorry half-breed. Let’s go home.”

“Do you think he had anythin’ to do with the shootin’ of Soapy?” asked Harp.

“Prob’ly not. Mostano is a meat-thief, Harp.”

“Well, what has meat-thieves got to do with all this dirty work?” demanded Harp.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Brick yawned and swung his horse around. “I’ve just got a fool idea, tha’sall. C’mon!”

• • • • •

“And I’m here to state that Brick Davidson is jist about all through bein’ sheriff of this county.”

Ike Welden, driver of the Redrock stage, hooked his prominent shoulder-blades over the top of the Dollar Down bar and spat viciously. Ike was a sallow-complexioned young man, with wry-neck, tobacco-stained chin and very bony wrists.

Ike had little imagination, which made him dangerous. Danger had little terrors for him, because his mind was of the single-track variety, and his future did not extend beyond the next meal time. Just now he was rather drunk and inclined to be quarrelsome. His thin waist-line sagged sidewise under the drag of the heavy, holstered gun on his thigh, as though weakening under the strain.

There was a motley crew in the Dollar Down, but only one of them, Silent Slade, paid any attention to Ike’s remark. Silent was standing beside a poker-table, watching the play, but now he considered Ike Welden closely.

Several of the men were from Silverton, who had come to Marlin City upon receipt of news regarding Soapy Caswell. Leach was in the poker game, as was Al Hendricks. Santel was tilted back in a bar-room chair,

seemingly paying little attention to any one. Banty Harrison and Slim Hunter were engrossed in a game of pool, while several others stood around the table and offered advice.

“And I know ——ed well what I’m talking about,” declared Welden loudly.

Hank Stagg came into the room, nodded to every one who paid him any heed, and went to the bar.

“Ain’t I right, Hank?” queried Ike.

“I dunno what yo’re talkin’ about, but I’ll bet yuh are,” laughed Hank. “Have a drink!”

“I can’t refuse,” grinned Ike widely. “I’m a he-buzzard and I’m soarin’ strong. I jist said that Brick Davidson is all through in this county, Hank. Nobody had guts enough to say that I was wrong. No, I don’t want no water with mine. I’m a he-buzzard. Here’s how.”

A moment later Ike squealed like a rabbit. As he lifted his glass of liquor, a strong hand grasped his collar, while another gathered up the slack of his pants. He twisted his head enough to see that Silent Slade was behind him, and then he was lifted bodily, carried to the door and cast out into the street.

Ike landed on his hands and knees on the hard ground, bursting the knees out of his overalls, and bruising his hands on the gravelly earth. His gun went spinning out of its holster and skidded into the dust.

It was an ignominious thing to happen to a man such as Ike thought he was. He got slowly to his feet, cursing wickedly, and looked at Silent, who stood in the doorway. He turned from Silent, dusted off his sore knees with his sore hands and went to his gun. As he stooped over to pick it up, the dust fairly exploded under his hand, while from behind him came the crashing report of Silent’s six-shooter. Ike yanked away and almost fell down.

“Yo’re kinda ignorant, ain’t yuh?” queried Silent coldly. “Better leave that gun alone until yuh sober up.”

Ike squinted at Silent for a moment, straightened up and went across the street. He stopped in front of Wesson’s store and looked back, before he headed down the street. Silent went back into the saloon, where the poker game was resuming play. Banty Harrison and Slim Hunter had crowded in behind Silent, carrying their billiard cues, and now they whooped loudly and dragged Silent to the bar.

“That’s bouncin’ ’em!” applauded Banty. “I’ll betcha he won’t do much crawlin’ for a while. I jist knowed that Ike was goin’ to talk himself out of here.”

Banty lowered his voice and glanced at Hank Stagg, who had moved over by the poker-table.

“Look out for Ike, Silent. He’s a dirty little pup, and he’s a streak with his gun.”

“Kill him first, that’s my motto,” grinned Slim.

“That’s right,” nodded Banty. “Every man that Slim has killed has been killed in just that way.”

They finished their drinks and went back to their game. Silent remained at the bar, where he could watch both front and rear. He noticed that Santel had paid no attention to the trouble, not even getting out of the chair to see what was going on outside.

“A salty gent,” decided Silent, “and worth watchin’!”

Silent had hoped to find Brick and Harp in town, but had been informed that they had ridden away with Barney Devine. Soapy Caswell was still unconscious, but the doctor was optimistic.

Slim and Banty finished their game and Silent joined them.

“Yore fussy friend decided to sleep off his jag, I reckon,” opined Slim.

“Mebbe.” Silent wasn’t so sure. “How does it come that Ike ain’t drivin’ stage to-day?”

“He quit the job,” laughed Slim. “It was prob’ly too much for his brain. The strain must ’a’ been awful.”

They walked outside and stood on the porch. Ike’s gun was not in the street and they all noticed this.

“Sneaked back and got it,” said Silent seriously. “It’ll take him quite a while to clean the dust out of it, I’ll bet.”

Brick and Harp were riding into town and the three men crossed to the office to meet them.

“Hyah, pleecemen,” greeted Silent. “What do yuh know that’s worth the wear and tear on our ear-drums?”

“Not much,” grinned Brick, turning his horse over to Harp, who took them away to the little stable at the rear of the office.

“Silent just threw Ike Welden out of the saloon,” laughed Slim. “Took him by the collar and the seat of his pants and threw him plumb into the middle of the street.”

“What for?” queried Brick.

“Too much talk about you.”

“Yeah,” Brick grinned affectionately at Silent. “What’s the latest from Soapy?”

“Last report said he was still alive,” rumbled Silent.

Bill Grant and Al Hendricks came out of the Dollar Down and went towards the doctor’s office. In a few moments Santel came out and went to the hitch-rack, where he mounted a gray horse and rode toward the Star-Dot. Banty and Slim started arguing over their respective pool abilities, and adjourned to the Dollar Down to settle the championship of the world, as far as they were concerned.

Silent, Brick and Harp went into the office and sat down.

“I ain’t gettin’ a square deal,” declared Silent seriously. “There’s a lot of dirt blowin’ around and I ain’t in on it, Brick. Somehow, I’ve kinda got a feelin’ that somebody is goin’ to burn powder, and that I ain’t goin’ to smell none of it.”

“Just be danged thankful yuh ain’t, Silent.”

“How in —— do yuh figger it? I’m a strong, good-lookin’ young feller, and it ain’t no ways fair. I just had a taste of action a while ago, and I kinda hankers for somebody to shoot at me.”

“Yo’re crazy all right,” declared Harp. “Any old time that I wish somebody to shoot at me, he don’t. I ain’t been shot at for quite a while, but with all these things happenin’ around here, I’m gettin’ so’s I duck every time anybody sneezes.”

“Sun Dog is gettin’ so she ain’t no place for to live into. Every day there’s a hold-up or a murder. When I think of these ——ed fools fightin’ for the sheriff’s office, I have to laugh. They sure must seek suicide, by golly!”

“All right,” grinned Silent. “You resign, Harp! I’m willin’ to take yore job, if yo’re gettin’ scared. No use frazzlin’ out all yore nerves, cowboy.”

“Yeah?” Harp stretched out on a cot and crossed his knees. “Any old time, Silent. It ain’t because I hanker for the job, but I’d hate to leave Brick in the lurch. Right now he needs a man with brains—so I stay with him; *sabe?*”

At supper-time there was no change in Soapy Caswell’s condition. His wife and daughter had come from Silverton and were with him at the doctor’s home. Ike Welden had come back to the Dollar Down, but now he minded his own business and drank alone.

It was nearly dark when Brick called Harp aside.

“Sneak the horses out, Harp,” he said, “and tie ’em back of the stable. Don’t let anybody see yuh, if yuh can help it. Mebbe yuh better wait ’till it’s a little darker.”

“Y’betcha,” grinned Harp.

He had visions of a ride and of possible trouble. Silent had taken a seat at the poker-table, and would stay there as long as the game or his money lasted.

A little later Harp joined Brick at the saloon, where they stayed until about nine o’clock.

“Want to set in on the game, Brick?” asked Grant.

Brick yawned and shook his head.

“No-o-o, not to-night, Bill. I’m goin’ to fold up a little of the sleep stuff.”

“Same here,” grinned Grant. “I’m gettin’ old, I guess. Just a few more hands and I’ll be ridin’ toward the blanket.”

Brick got up and started for the door, with Harp behind him. They went to the office, drew the curtains, lighted the lamp and sat down.

“What’s the idea?” queried Harp.

Brick did not reply, so Harp did not repeat the question. For probably fifteen minutes they sat there before Brick blew out the light. Then they went to the rear of the place, crawled out through a window, closing it carefully behind them, and went out to their horses.

They led the horses quite a distance from the stable before mounting, and then Brick led the way straight back toward the Big Elk grades. There was no moon to light their journey, but Brick set the pace at a steady gallop until they reached the up-grade of Big Elk cañon. Harp asked no questions. He knew that Brick would explain things to him when he got good and ready, and not before.

They turned off the grade at the little trail and wormed their way up through the brush to the top of the divide. There the rising moon silvered the timbered hills and lighted their path, making it much easier for Brick to lead the way to where he and Harp had been when the warning shot had been fired.

Here they stopped and rested the horses. There was a dull glow, as from a fire, at Mostano’s place, but it was impossible for them to tell whether it was within the house or outside. Then they saw some one go from the house to the fire, carrying a lighted lantern.

“We’ll take a li’l trip over and look at ’em,” decided Brick. “But we’ve got to be danged careful, Harp.”

They rode down the hill, circled the ranch, and came in on the opposite side from the fire. At a tumble-down corral they left their horses and went on afoot. There was no light in the house, so they sneaked up to the side and circled toward the rear.

At the corner they were able to get a look at the fire, which seemed to be burning inside the corral. There was an odour of burning hair, mixed with wood-smoke, and Brick chuckled to himself as he instructed Harp:—

“They’re butcherin’ inside the corral and burnin’ the hides. We’ve got ’em dead, Harp; but look out. Keep down low.”

Brick led the way toward the corral, both of them almost crawling the last fifty feet. They gained the side of the corral unseen, and it was then that Brick realised that he had miscalculated the gate. It would be suicide to try to climb the fence, and possibly disastrous to try to arrest them from that distance. And it would be almost impossible to go as far as the gate without being detected.

The fire was burning briskly, but the green hides were cutting off the blaze to such an extent that it was impossible for them to see how many men were there and just what they were doing. The lighted lantern was sitting on the ground, but it did little to light up the scene.

“Got to take a chance on ’em, Harp,” breathed Brick. “If they look this way they’ll see us. C’mon!”

Slowly, cautiously they rose up, gun in hand, and started to climb the fence. Some one took up the lantern, swung it around, and the yellow light picked them up instantly.

Came a quick word of warning, a guttural grunt, and the lantern was dashed out. Then a tongue of yellow light flashed at them, and Brick felt the bullet brush his cheek. He and Harp were only half-way up the side of the fence, and in a bad position to shoot.

Brick climbed swiftly to the top, while Harp dropped to the ground and raced for the gate. Two more shots licked out into the night toward Brick, who was shooting at the flashes, while Harp was pounding along, trying to block the one exit.

He gained the gate, shooting swiftly at a shadowy figure, when he felt a thudding blow against his shoulder and the gun fell from his fingers. Some one darted past him and faded into the night. Brick came running across the corral, calling for Harp, who was leaning against the fence, searching dizzily for the thing that was searing his shoulder.

Brick almost ran into him.

“Where’d they go, Harp?” he panted.

“I dunno,” muttered Harp. “Come and help me, will yuh, Brick? I’ve got hit with somethin’.”

“You got hit, Harp? For —— sake! Wait a minute.”

Brick lighted a match and held it between them. Then he whistled softly.

“Hang on to yourself, Harp,” he cautioned. “They knifed yuh. Grit yore teeth, cowboy.”

They both grunted softly and Brick laughed shortly.

“There she is, Harp. I don’t think it was deep enough to be dangerous. Does it hurt much?”

“Not so much now.” Harp’s voice sounded weary. “The ——ed thing kinda paralysed my whole arm. It feels a lot better, but it’s soakin’ me plenty. Didja get any of ’em, Brick?”

“No, I don’t think so. How many did you see, Harp?”

“Just one—the one that threw the knife at me. I think it was the squaw. Now what do we do?”

“Go back and have your arm fixed up. Aw, ——, this was a fizzle. We don’t know any more than we did before, except that we’re dead sure that Mostano’s outfit are the meat-thieves.”

Brick went over to the smouldering fire and kicked the green hides aside. The flames flared up, and as Brick leaned over to search for brands on the hides, a bullet splatted into the fire and threw sparks up into the air.

Brick swore at himself for being such a fool, and ran back to Harp, dragging the hides with him.

“We better be high-tailin’ it out of here,” panted Brick. “Can yuh run all right, cowboy?”

“I never got hit in the leg,” retorted Harp. “—— this moonlight! C’mon!”

They ducked low and started back toward the house, running as fast as possible. A rifle bullet screamed past them and hit the old ranch-house a resounding *thwack*. Brick had glimpsed the flash of the rifle and knew that the shooter was off to their right; so he ducked to the left and led the way around the other side of the ranch-house, where he halted their headlong flight.

They were in the heavy shadow now. Brick stepped back to the corner and peered in the direction where he had seen the flash, but the light was not

good enough to distinguish objects clearly. The fire in the corral was blazing merrily, painting the old pole corral with red high-lights.

“We’ve got to bust out across that open space to the horses,” declared Brick. “Mebbe we better separate quite a ways apart, ’cause one man is a hard target in this light.”

They went to the other corner of the house and looked in the direction of the horses. Brick grasped Harp by the arm and pointed toward the bluff trail, where two shadowy objects were plainly visible in the moonlight, going away.

“Our broncs!” snorted Harp. “By ——, they’ve set us on foot, Brick.”

“It sure has all the earmarks of such a deed,” agreed Brick sadly. “Our rifles are on them saddles, too; and we’ll have one sweet waltz home, cowboy. How’s the arm?”

“Feels kinda numb, but I think it has quit bleedin’. I don’t care a dang how sore it gets, but I can’t afford to lose a lot of blood. What’s the next thing to do, I wonder?”

“Walk home, I reckon.”

“Yeah—and get plugged when we start.”

“Looks that-a-way,” reflected Brick, squinting out into the hazy distance. “We bit off more than we could chew, cowboy. If we’d had any sense we’d ’a’ cached them broncs.”

“Hind-sight ain’t no ways valuable,” sighed Harp, and a moment later a bullet showered splinters off the side of the house.

They dropped flat on the ground and swore foolishly.

“Somebody is prospectin’,” opined Harp. “A foot lower and they’d ’a’ made a strike. Mebbe yuh like this, Brick, but old man Harris’s offspring desires a change of climate. Right above me is a window-sill, Brick; and from my point of view I’d rather be inside that house.”

“Might be a happy idea,” admitted Brick. “Get up and see if the window is locked.”

“Thank yuh very kindly—but that ain’t my suggestion, Brick.”

Brick slid to a crouching position, straightened up close to the wall and examined the window. It slid up silently.

“C’mon!” whispered Brick.

Swiftly they slid in through the window and the cheap calico curtain dropped behind them, leaving them in total darkness.

## CHAPTER XII

SILENT SLADE lowered his head and looked at himself in the back-bar mirror. He tilted his hat down over his eyes, lifted his head as he sang:

“When I’m dead don’t bury me a-ta-a-a-a-all,  
Pickle m’ bones in alcoho-o-o-ol.  
Put a bottle of boo-o-o-oze at m’ head and feet  
And then I kno-o-ow I’ll surely kee-e-ep.”

He turned and looked at Sam Leach, who was leaning on the bar, looking solemnly at a glass of liquor. The poker game had just broken up, leaving Silent Slade winner. And Silent was just intoxicated enough to crow over his poker-playing ability.

“Aw, you were just kinda lucky,” observed Leach.

“Tha’sso?” Silent laughed. “Lucky, eh? Any time you whip-poor-wills from Silverton mingle cards with a Marlinite—look out. They tell me that yo’re backin’ Hank Stagg for sheriff.”

“Well, what if I am?”

“Are yuh tryin’ to be funny—or dont’cha know any better?”

“What’s the matter with Hank Stagg?”

“What?” Silent stared at Leach in amazement. “My ——, yuh don’t expect me to stand here and tell yuh everythin’ that’s the matter with him, do yuh? I’m limited to just so many words, and they ain’t enough to tell yuh more than half what’s wrong with Hank Stagg.”

“Let’s all be good friends, eh?” suggested the bartender, lifting a bottle to the top of the bar. “Election ain’t nothin’ between friends.”

Silent squinted gravely at the bartender.

“Li’l dove of peace, this ain’t between friends.”

“Well, I’m not goin’ to quarrel with you, Slade,” said Leach. “Yo’ve got your own opinions on the matter.”

“You ain’t goin’ to quarrel with me?” Silent seemed sad over the information. “You ain’t? Well, I won’t quarrel with the bartender; so I guess I’ll go home. My ——, I’m sorry yuh won’t quarrel with me, Leach. I’m feelin’ quarrelsome, I am.”

Silent adjusted his hat to his satisfaction and walked out of the door, heading straight for the hitch-rack. It was almost midnight, and Marlin City was truly a deserted village. At the hitch-rack Silent stopped and studied the situation. His horse was not there.

Just to be doubly sure he put his hand on the rail of the rack and walked all the way around it.

“If there was a horse there I’d encounter same,” he said aloud. “The question is this: Where’s my horse?”

As far as he could see there was not a horse at any of the hitch-racks. He deliberated deeply. It might be that some one had put the horse in the livery-stable, he thought. Perhaps Brick and Harp had done this as a joke.

He wended his way to the stable and woke up the stableman, who swore witheringly at Silent for dumping him off his cot.

“You want your horse? ——, you ain’t got no horse here.”

“Ain’t I?” Silent seemed surprised. “Well, now, that’s funny.”

The stableman turned up the light of his lantern and spat thoughtfully.

“You never brought your horse here, Silent.”

“Nope. But she ought to be here, Jimmy?”

“Why?”

“Well,” Silent spread his big hands, “she ain’t at the rack where I left her, that’s why.”

“Oh, for gosh sake, can yuh beat that?” Jimmy Meeker’s voice was squeaky with disgust. “Go on home, Silent.”

“Hu-huh!” Silent had a new idea now. “Say, Jimmy, didja see anythin’ of Ike Welden this evenin’?”

“He left here about nine o’clock, I think.”

“It’s a —— good thing he did, too,” growled Silent. “I’ll betcha he turned my bronc loose. That ornery little pup? When I catch him he’ll wish ——”

“Go and catch him,” advised Jimmy sleepily. “Either do that or hire a hall. Good-night.”

Silent turned on his heel and went outside. He did not want to go to the hotel and he couldn’t walk to the Nine-Bar-Nine. There was only one thing for him to do—wake up Brick and occupy one of their cots for the night. A cold wind was blowing and Silent shivered. He knew that Brick and Harp would swear at him for waking them up, but he did not care.

He crossed the street and went up to the door, where he knocked several times. There was no response. Silent deliberated. They were probably sleeping in the rear half of the office, with the door shut in between.

He walked through the narrow alley between the sheriff's office and the old feed-store and went up to the back door. There was some one going away from the rear of the office, going past the little stable, and Silent wondered who this might be.

It looked suspicious to Silent, who started after this mysteriously-acting person, but turned and came back to the door. He felt that there was no use in chasing around in the dark after some one.

"Anyway, I dunno who he is," said Silent to himself. "Mebbe it's all right. Hey, Brick!"

He hammered on the back door until the lock threatened to rattle loose, but no one answered him. He grasped the knob and gave it a twist, finding the door locked.

"That's funny," he mused, and as he started to turn away from the door, the world seemed to come to an abrupt end.

Came a deafening crash, a glaring flash of light. Silent was dimly conscious of these things, and felt that he was being hurled away by a great force. Then he seemed to hear men shouting and the world was lighted with the glow of a fire.

He managed to get to his feet and take stock of himself. His body felt numb, but his mind was clearing swiftly now. Just beyond him the flames were eating swiftly into the flimsy old frame buildings, while men and woman darted in and out of the glow, fighting it with buckets of water and axes. There were more people arriving at each moment, until every man, woman and child in Marlin City fought to save the town.

Silent went slowly to them. He was unable to walk fast, but he knew that none of his bones had been broken in the explosion. Swiftly the flames were eating toward Wesson's store, and a gang of men began removing the stock.

"Watch the other side of the street, boys!" yelled Cale Wesson. "The —— himself couldn't stop it from takin' this side."

Silent took hold of Cale Wesson's arm and pointed to the spot where the sheriff's office had been.

"Where's Brick and Harp?" he croaked. "Did they get out?"

Wesson stared at him.

"Were they in the office? My ——, look at your face, Silent! What happened to you?"

“Where are they?” insisted Silent.

“By gosh, I’m ’fraid for scare,” said Le Blanc, the blacksmith. “De sheriff h’office she’s gone for good. Don’ somebody know w’ere Breek and Harp be?”

“They went to bed about nine o’clock,” volunteered the bartender. “I know that much. But what in —— happened, Wesson? Was it some dynamite exploded?”

“It hit me,” said Silent. “I was tryin’ to wake Brick up at the back door.”

“If they were in the office they’re done for,” declared Cale Wesson. “That was a heap of ruins when I got here, and I was one of the first.”

Mrs. Wesson and Miss Miller, their dresses scorched, faces red from the heat, heard Cale Wesson’s opinion.

“Do you mean to say that Brick and Harp were in their office?” demanded Wesson shakily.

“They went to bed at nine o’clock,” declared the bartender.

“My ——!” gasped Mrs. Wesson. “I can’t believe it. What was it, Cale? What started it?”

“I dunno.” Cale was glumly watching the flames eat through the buildings toward his store. “I’ve got to save what I can, Ma. You keep out of it, can’tcha?”

Cale hurried away towards the store, while Silent, Mrs. Wesson and Miss Miller went as near as possible to the blazing heap that had been the sheriff’s office and stood together watching it.

The bucket-brigade had shifted their operations to putting out any small blaze that might occur on the opposite side of the street, as they knew that their puny efforts would avail nothing against that blaze, which sent fire-streamers far up into the sky, showering blazing cinders in the wind.

“Can it be possible that they were in there?” asked Miss Miller wearily, pointing to the flames.

“Somebody dynamited the office,” declared Silent.

His mind was functioning perfectly again, and he remembered the man he had seen leaving the rear of the office.

“Do you think it was done on purpose?” queried Mrs. Wesson.

“Yes’m, I sure do. Brick and Harp never kept any dynamite in the office.”

“But why would any one do a thing like that?” asked Miss Miller. “Surely no one would do it.”

“Wouldn’t they?” Silent laughed hoarsely and began feeling of his face. “By grab, I come danged near bein’ included.”

His face was badly skinned. In fact, one eyebrow was almost obliterated, his nose flattened, lips swollen.

“I reckon the door patted me in the face and I slept fifteen minutes,” he said, trying to grin. “I’m full of splinters, that’s a cinch.”

“Well, who would do it?” demanded Mrs. Wesson hotly.

“If I knowed, I’d sure tan his hide and make me a new *latigo*. Somebody stole my horse, too. I tell yuh this country is gettin’ ornery, Mrs. Wesson. What this country needs is a good old wholesale killin’. And——” Silent pointed toward the flames—“if old Brick ain’t in there, I’ve got a danged good hunch that there will be.”

“Oh, do you think there is a chance that they were not in that office?” asked Miss Miller anxiously, hopefully.

“I couldn’t wake ’em up,” explained Silent. “I hammered on the front door and then the back door hammered on me.”

“The store is on fire, ma,” said Cale Wesson, joining them. “There goes everythin’ we own—almost.”

“Well, we ain’t in it, Cale. There’s always somethin’ to be thankful for.”

“Yeah, I reckon so, ma. Don’t get too close, folks. There’s a drum of kerosene in there and a lot of ca’tridges. The kerosene will go straight up, I s’pose; but nobody knows which way all them shells are pointin’.”

“I hope they’re pointin’ toward the jigger that set off that dynamite,” said Cale after a moment’s pause.

“I don’t,” grunted Silent. “I want that pleasure m’self.”

Nothing could be done to save that side of the street. The weathered old frame buildings burned like tinder, and the flames crackled high in the air, throwing burning embers far into the sky. The Wesson store seemed to fairly belch flame. The drum of kerosene exploded, throwing a mass of embers, but the exploding cartridges made no sound in the crackle of burning timbers.

Where the sheriff’s office had been was only a glowing pile of ashes, twisted timbers; so hot that no one could go near it. Without visible sign of emotion, Mrs. Wesson saw their store disappear in a roar of flames, but her eyes filled with pain as she looked at the desolation of the sheriff’s office.

“Oh, do you think they were in it, Mrs. Wesson?” asked Della Miller. Her face was very white and she looked tired, heartsick.

“Mebby not, Della. God knows, I hope not. Everybody seems to think they was. If they was, they never felt it. That explosion would have killed ’em, and they’d never feel the fire.”

Silent came to them, his big face streaked with grime and perspiration. He limped slightly, and the lines of his face seemed deep, hard-edged, like unfinished sculpture.

“You ought to go home,” he said slowly. “Nothin’ yuh can do. If they’re there,” he indicated the smoking ruin, “they won’t get away. There ain’t much left on that side of the street, and if the wind don’t start blowin’, we can save the rest of the town.”

“Do you think they are in there?” asked Della hoarsely. Silent patted her on the shoulder.

“I dunno, ma’am. I’m jist kinda staggerin’ around, prayin’ to God that they ain’t. It don’t seem to me that Brick and Harp was borned to be burned. Aw, I dunno. You better go home.”

The two women went back down the street, where men were still throwing pitifully small buckets of water on the flames, which were already dying out for want of more fuel.

## CHAPTER XIII

FOR several minutes Brick and Harp remained motionless. The house was as silent as the tomb. Then Brick scratched a match, shielding it with his hands, as he reflected the light around.

To the right of them was the rear door, while directly across the room was another window. Brick went to the door and locked it securely, crossed and looked at the window, finding it nailed down.

Another match lighted them into the living-room, where they locked the front door and took stock of their surroundings. There was a candle in the neck of a bottle on the table, which Brick lighted. The front and side windows were nailed down and heavily curtained.

“How’s the shoulder?” asked Brick.

Harp flexed his arm carefully and grimaced a little.

“It ain’t goin’ to stop me,” he declared. “But it sure had me guessin’. My shirt’s all blood, but the cut is sealed shut.”

The Mostano family kept house in one room only. There was a rusty cook-stove, on which was a greasy looking stew-kettle and a battered frying-pan. A home-made table fitted into one corner, on which were piled the rest of their utensils. In the other corner was a built-in bunk, with a collection of tumbled blankets.

The floor was filthy and the air was filled with odours of long-departed food. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling in profusion.

“Ugh!” grunted Harp disgustedly. “What a place to live!”

“Yeah, that’s right,” grinned Brick. “And what a place to die!”

Harp laughed and laid his six-shooter across his knees, as he tried to roll a cigarette.

“Let me do that,” said Brick. “Yore hand ain’t workin’ so good.”

He reached for the tobacco and papers and had just started to roll the cigarette, when a peculiar noise sent both of them on to the floor, clutching their guns. Swiftly their eyes searched everywhere and came back to each other’s faces.

“What the —— was that?” whispered Harp.

Brick shook his head. Then it came again:—

“Ye-aa-a-a.”

Brick squinted at the bunk. There was a curious expression in his eyes, as he turned and looked at Harp. Then he got to his feet and strode across the room to the bunk.

“C’mere!” he whispered to Harp, who went over to him.

Brick threw back the blanket, disclosing a little copper-coloured baby about a year old, possibly less. The little one was looking up at them with its round, black eyes. Then it grinned widely and kicked both feet up against the blanket.

The two men looked at each other and laughed foolishly.

“Little son-of-a-gun!” whispered Brick. “Ain’t he a dinger?”

“Why not ‘she’?” grinned Harp.

“Mebbe,” Brick grinned down at the baby. “I dunno much about ’em, but I’d say that this one is kinda cute. Look at the son-of-a-gun kick.”

Harp looked around quickly and went back to the door, where he listened closely.

“We don’t want to forget where we are, Brick. I’m thinkin’ that the Mostano family will be kinda curious to know how that kid is gettin’ along.”

“I know danged well I would if it was mine,” grinned Brick. “Anyway, it kinda stops ’em from promiscuous shootin’ around here; so we’ll set tight and wait for mornin’.”

“Tha’sall right,” said Harp thoughtfully, “but what are they so anxious to kill us off for? I should think they’d be danged willin’ to let us get out of here.”

“Does look curious,” admitted Brick. “Mebbe they think that they can kill us off and do as they please the rest of their lives. A ’breed is a queer character, Harp. He prob’ly figures that I’m the law; and when I’m wiped out—blooey goes the law.”

They sat down against the wall, where they could watch both doors, and enjoyed a smoke. The baby began to cry fitfully.

“Betcha it’s hungry,” declared Harp. “They allus weep that-a-way when they’re needin’ food.”

“A sweet chance it’s got of gettin’ a feed to-night.”

But the baby did not appreciate that fact, and raised its voice in lamentations. Brick grew nervous over the prolonged wailing.

“How long does it take a kid to starve to death, Harp?”

“I dunno. Prob’ly a couple of hours, at least. That little jigger won’t never live to starve to death, Brick.”

“Why not?”

“Why, he’ll bust his windpipe squallin’ that-a-way. Didja ever hear such wheezy yelps? Mebbe it’s got the croup.”

“It has sure got somethin’,” declared Brick. “They ought to call that kid A. S. Mostano.”

“Why the A. S., Brick?”

“Almighty squawk! Whoo-ee, listen to him yowl!”

“Well, don’t yuh know anythin’ about babies?” demanded Brick. “Can’t yuh think of anythin’ to stop him from wailin’?”

“Pat him on the stummick,” suggested Harp. It sounded like a good suggestion, and Brick made the experiment. But it evidently was not the proper thing, because the wails became louder.

“Put him upside down across yore lap and pat his seat,” suggested Harp seriously. “Mebby he’s got wind on the stummick.”

“Wind? My ——, this one is all wind,” exploded Brick, jiggling the baby up and down on his knee.

“Try singin’, Brick.”

“Yea-a-a-ah. Say, I’ve got it, Harp—play it a tune.”

“By gee, that might work.” Harp sat down on the edge of the bed, fitted his jew’s-harp between his lips, and began.

*Tung-g-g-g, hung-g-g-g-g, bong-g-g-g, bong-g-g-g, zung-g-g-g.*

The baby quit crying, stared at Harp in amazement for a few moments, and then fairly doubled over backward, letting out a shriek of alarm. Brick barely saved the baby from a fall to the floor, and hastily put it on the bed again.

“That,” said Brick slowly, “wasn’t exactly what it needed.”

“No ear for music,” said Harp sadly, pocketing the instrument.

The baby was giving a good imitation of a discordant accordion now; every breath a yelp. Brick got to his feet and started toward the bunk, intending to do everything within his power to soothe the child, but stopped midway of the room.

Some one was knocking gently on the front door. Brick and Harp exchanged glances of wonderment. Brick stepped over beside the door and said:—

“Who’s there?”

“I mus’ have baby, please,” It was Mrs. Mostano’s voice.

Brick turned his head and grinned at Harp.

“You want the baby, eh?” questioned Brick. “Who’s with yuh?”

“Nobody with me. I want baby.”

“Uh-huh!”

Brick motioned Harp to come over beside him and they backed close to the wall.

“If she ain’t alone, smoke —— out of ’em, Harp,” whispered Brick.

“I wouldn’t let her in,” declared Harp. “To —— with the whole gang, Brick!”

“I’d rather be shot than to listen to that yowlin’ all night. Get set, cowboy.”

Brick reached over and lifted the bar off the slots, letting the door swing open. For a moment there was silence, then the half-breed woman poked her head inside. Her eyes bored into Brick’s face, but his grin reassured her and she stepped inside.

“Put that bar across the door,” ordered Brick.

She turned and barred the door. The two men relaxed and watched her hurry across to the bunk, where she picked up the crying baby.

“That’s the female person that threwed the knife into me, I reckon,” grinned Harp.

The squaw glanced quickly at Harp, but turned back to the baby. It was evident that she understood what Harp had said.

“Goin’ to take him with yuh?” queried Brick.

The woman shook her head, as she wrapped the baby in a piece of bright-coloured blanket. Brick grinned and stepped back to the connecting door. For some reason he was suspicious of this woman. Still he could not see where she could do them any harm.

Brick and Harp exchanged quick glances. Both men seemed to realise that everything was not just right. The squaw was too indifferent. It seemed to them that she had a double purpose in coming into the house.

She was crooning an Indian song to the youngster, as she bundled him up well and placed him on the bunk. Harp was still standing near the front door, listening intently for any noise outside.

The Indian woman flung another blanket across half of the child. Then she took hold of the bunk with both hands, drew it away from the wall and swung it completely around. Brick squinted at her and wondered why she should change the position of the bunk.

“Whatsa idea of switchin’ that bunk?” asked Brick. The squaw did not reply; so Brick repeated the question. She looked at him, her eyes half-

closed, and it seemed to Brick that a half-smile flashed across her full lips.

Brick gripped his gun tightly. The squaw picked up the baby and began moving slowly away from that corner. Brick saw her eyes flash toward the floor, where the bunk had been before she moved it.

Then he knew. In the half-light from the candle he saw the floor lift up where the bunk had been. In a flash he realised that the bunk had stood over a trap-door and that the woman had used the baby as an excuse to uncover that entrance.

Harp had seen it, too. He darted toward Brick, shouting a warning. But Brick had already swung up his gun and fired one shot at the black mass under the trap-door.

“The back door!” snapped Brick, as Harp darted past him.

Then he swung his gun around and his next shot smashed into the bottle under the guttering candle and the room went dark.

Brick whirled and ran to Harp, who had managed to claw the bar away from the door, and without a thought of what might be waiting outside for them, they darted out into the night.

But no one tried to block them now, as they pounded heavily away from the house, circling toward the bluff trail. After about two hundred yards at top speed, Brick stopped and looked back. Not a light was showing in the old ranch-house. They listened, but there was not a sound.

“By ——, that ’breed female came darned near to bein’ the death of us,” panted Harp. “Didja see anybody, Brick?”

“No. I shot once at the trap-door and once at the candle, but I didn’t see nobody. Pretty foxy, eh? Their foolish move was in openin’ that trap so soon. If they’d ’a’ waited a little while, we’d ’a’ been easy pickin’, I reckon.”

“By golly, there was more than one person in that deal, Brick.”

“Oh, yeah. Well——” Brick drew a deep breath and hitched up his belt, “I reckon we’ve got to walk to Marlin City, cowboy.”

It was at least fifteen miles; and fifteen miles is a long way, walking on high-heeled boots.

“Let’s go over to the Red Hill mine and borrow a couple of brones from Barney Devine,” suggested Harp.

“That’s a pious idea,” agreed Brick. “And if he ain’t got no rollin’ stock, we’ll stay all night and ride in on the stage to-morrow. It’s sure a nice thing for the sheriff to let somebody steal his horses. But,” he added

optimistically, “I reckon I’m about the only one in Sun Dog that could have his horses stolen without yellin’ to high Heaven for a new sheriff.”

“I’m kinda in favour of a new one m’self,” grunted Harp. “And I hope to gosh he ain’t so friendly to me that I can’t refuse to be his deputy.”

## CHAPTER XIV

MARLIN CITY was a sorry-looking place in the gray dawn. One whole side of the main street was a smouldering mass of ruins, while the buildings on the opposite side were badly scorched and warped from the extreme heat. The street was like an ash-heap, and strewn with everything that was possible to salvage from the doomed buildings.

Silent Slade, his face covered with strips of plaster, poked moodily among the blackened ruins of the sheriff's office, hoping against hope that he would not find anything resembling human remains. A number of men wandered about the street, talking about the fire, and Slade noticed that some of them were from Silverton.

Ike Welden sat on the sidewalk in front of the Dollar Down, and Silent scowled at him. He blamed Ike for the loss of his horse and wondered how he could prove it sufficiently to take Ike and tie him into a bow-knot. A rider was coming up the street, and Silent recognised him as Meecham, the cashier of the Silverton bank.

He dismounted and looked at the results of the fire.

"Pretty bad blaze!" he said to Silent.

"Yeah, pretty bad!" admitted Silent.

"How did it start?"

"With a —— of a crash."

Meecham looked curiously at him, but Silent did not feel in any mood to talk about it.

"Did you hear how Mr. Caswell is this morning?"

Silent shook his head. He was not interested in Soapy. Meecham glanced up the street, where Leach, Bill Grant, and Slim Hunter were coming toward them. There was a bullet-hole in the cantle of Meecham's saddle, which was plainly visible, and Silent wondered how it came there.

The three men spoke to Meecham, and from them he gathered the information that Soapy was conscious again and stood a good chance of complete recovery. Then Meecham mounted and rode up the street toward the doctor's home.

"Find anythin', Silent?" queried Grant.

"Not a thing, Bill. They wasn't in that fire, that's a cinch. That fire wasn't hot enough to——"

Silent paused to stare at two saddled horses, which were straggling into view, coming toward the ruins of Brick's old stable.

"By ——, there's their horses," exploded Silent.

He ran across the smouldering mass and managed to catch Brick's sorrel. The other men joined him, and Slim Hunter captured Harp's roan filly.

Neither horse had been injured in any way, and the reins had been tied to the saddle-horns. From under the right-hand fender of each saddle extended a gun-scabbard, and in each one was a rifle—fully loaded.

Silent scratched his head wonderingly.

"By grab, there's dirty work here," he declared. "These horses were turned loose. Both of them broncs are rein-broke, and they never wandered away, y'betcha."

Leach laughed scornfully and shook his head.

"Does it sound funny to you?" growled Silent.

"For the sheriff to lose his horse—yes."

"Yeah?"

Silent squared around and studied Leach, who drew slightly away from the menace of the big man's expression.

"Somebody stole my horse last night," said Silent, after a moment. "Now yuh might try laughin' at that information, Leach."

"But you are not the sheriff, Slade."

"No, but I'm jist such a ——ed good friend of his that it's all in the famby. I hope yuh laugh, yuh darned pole-cat."

Leach drew back and his face went dark with anger, but Grant stepped between them.

"There's enough trouble around here without you two takin' shots at each other," he said quickly. "Forget it, both of yuh."

"I'm gettin' tired of it," declared Leach. "I can't talk to the sheriff, deputy nor anybody connected with the ——ed office without gettin' insulted."

"Nobody asked yuh to talk to 'em," retorted Silent hotly. "They'll get along without yuh."

"Well, here's one satisfaction," said Leach. "We'll soon be rid of the present incumbents."

"What's incumbents?" queried Silent.

Leach growled something about ignorant people and walked across the street toward the saloon. Silent watched him moodily before turning to

Grant and Slim Hunter.

“When did Ike Welden come back to Marlin City?”

“He rode up with me,” said Slim. “We just got here a while ago. I found him in the Short Horn saloon, half-drunk, and talkin’ about the big fire in Marlin City. They could see it from there. I told him I was comin’ up here to see what it was all about; so he came along.”

“They could see it from Silverton, couldn’t they?” asked Silent.

“Yeah, you bet they could!” replied Slim.

“How come yuh didn’t get here sooner?”

Slim grinned widely and dug his toe into the ashes.

“I was out settin’ up with m’ best girl, and I never knowed there was a fire until I came into town.”

Bill Grant laughed and looked toward the street. A rider was coming toward them and they all recognised him as Brick Davidson. He was riding a mule bareback. Silent whooped like an Indian and fairly dragged Brick off the long-eared beast, while the others crowded around and shot questions at him so fast that he could answer none of them.

“For gosh sake hold on!” he begged. “Yeah, Harp’s all right. He stopped at the doctor’s place to get his arm dressed. He got stuck with a knife. Now, what in —— happened to Marlin City?”

And between the three of them they managed to give Brick a fairly good idea of what had taken place the night before—or rather, that morning. Brick said nothing during the telling.

“And I’ve been huntin’ for yore danged carcasses ever since,” declared Silent.

“Uh-huh!” Brick squinted at the ruins and back at their two horses. “When did our broncs show up?”

“Just a few minutes ago,” replied Grant.

Brick looked over his sorrel carefully, and then removed his rifle from the scabbard. It was loaded and with a cartridge in the chamber. He grinned at the three men, cocked the gun, pointed it at the sky and pulled the trigger.

Only the dull click of the hammer came to their ears. Brick shoved the gun back into the scabbard and went over to the mule.

“I’ve got to put this animile in the stable,” he told them. “He ain’t much of a vehicle, but he was all I could get.”

He started away with the animal and Silent turned triumphantly to Grant and Hunter.

“Somethin’ is due to drop pretty danged hard, gents. He knowed them guns had been monkeyed with, didn’t he? Grins all over his face, too. Don’t want to talk, does he? That’s Brick Davidson. He’s got somethin’ on his mind, I tell yuh.”

“I hope so,” sighed Grant.

“I’ve got to see Harp,” declared Silent. “Stuck with a knife, eh? By golly, they sure do use every old kind of a weapon. Next thing we know somebody will get bit.”

Silent strode away, shaking his head, while Grant and Hunter crossed the street to the saloon.

“Do yuh think Brick has got any ideas?” queried Slim.

“I’ll betcha,” nodded Grant. “And what’s more, I’m glad that I can stand investigation.”

“Holy cats, me, too!” snorted Slim.

Brick turned the mule over to Jimmy Meeker and went back up the street, where he spent a little time looking at what was left of that side of the street. Miss Miller came down the street, but did not see Brick until face to face with him. She was carrying some school-books. He tipped his hat and grinned, and only real quickness on his part saved her books from falling into the ashes.

She was staring at him, as he handed the books to her, and she caught his hand.

“Mr. Davidson,” she faltered, “you—you are all right?”

“Uh-huh! Sure I’m all right. What’s the matter?”

She had turned and was staring at the tangle of burnt buildings.

“Nun—nothing. I—you see, we thought that you——”

“Yuh mean that folks thought we was in that fire, ma’am?”

“Yes. You see, we thought—somebody said——”

“That we went to bed at nine o’clock?”

“Yes.”

Brick grinned widely and shook his head.

“Harp’s at the doctor’s office,” he volunteered.

Miss Miller turned and glanced quickly in that direction.

“At the doctor’s office? Why—what is the matter?”

“Somebody stuck a knife in his arm last night.”

“A knife? Is he——”

She paused anxiously.

“Nope. It wasn’t much of a cut, ma’am. He’ll be all right. Harp is so darned tough and ornery that cold steel won’t never hurt him. I’ll betcha they’ll have to grind a new point on that knife.”

Brick grinned, lifted his hat and walked on, watching her from the corner of his eye. She seemed undecided what to do, but finally went on toward the other end of town where the little school-house was located. Brick laughed to himself and shook his head.

“That’s what’s the matter, eh?” he chuckled. “School-teacher worryin’ about a skinny puncher. Huh! I won’t dare to tell Harp, that’s a cinch. Plumb ruin him for my use. By golly, I never do understand women. Still, she may like jew’s-harp music so much that she’s willin’ to overlook anythin’ else.”

Bill Grant crossed from the saloon and joined Brick.

“What do yuh make of it?” queried Grant. “Do yuh think that somebody tried to kill you and Harp last night?”

Brick grinned, but without mirth.

“Looks that-a-way, Bill. We were supposed to be in bed, yuh know.”

“Sure.”

“But we wasn’t, Bill. Me and Harp busted into some meat stealin’ last night and we danged near got our needin’s. They sure did outsmart us in great shape. Even stole our horses, and we had to borrow a couple of mules from the Red Hill mine. Harp got a knife in his shoulder—and we don’t know a —— of a lot more than we did before.”

“Who were the thieves, Brick?”

“I can’t swear to anybody. That’s the worst of workin’ in the dark.”

## CHAPTER XV

HARP and Silent were coming from the doctor's office, leading the mule that Harp had ridden in from the mine. Aside from being slightly pale Harp showed no ill-effects from his knife wound. He nodded to Grant and looked over the ruins. Silent had told him all about the explosion and fire; so he had no questions to ask.

"Must 'a' been warm around here," was his only comment.

"It sure was," agreed Bill Grant. "My neck is still hot, and it was mostly all over when I got here. I'll buy a drink."

As they started toward the saloon, Silent stepped in beside Brick and whispered:—

"There's a saddle at the hitch-rack with a bullet-hole in the cantle."

"Who owns it?" asked Brick.

"Meecham, the Silverton bank cashier, rode in on it a while ago."

"Sure it's a bullet-hole, Silent?"

"Y'betcha!"

Brick squinted thoughtfully, as they lined up at the bar. Meecham was sitting at a card-table, reading a paper, paying no attention to any one. Leach and Cale Wesson were standing near the front of the room, talking about the fire and, near the rear, Ike Welden and Slim Hunter were playing a listless game of pool.

The bartender greeted Brick effusively, and insisted that the drinks were "on the house."

"I was afraid yuh died in that fire, Brick. By golly, I'm sure glad to see yuh. And old Harp, too."

Brick grinned and looked over at Meecham.

"Have a little drink, Meecham?" he asked.

Meecham looked up at Brick and shook his head.

"No thank you."

"Oh, that's all right," said Brick pleasantly. "I just thought yuh might be one of the sufferers."

Meecham stared at him closely.

"What do you mean, Davidson?" he asked.

“Oh, I just didn’t know but what somebody had tried to kill you off, too. There’s a bullet-hole in the cantle of yore saddle, yuh know.”

“A bullet-hole?”

Meecham’s tone had been rather loud and attracted the attention of every one. Leach came back toward the bar, and the two cowpunchers stopped their pool-playing to listen.

“In yore saddle,” nodded Brick. “Of course it ain’t likely that you was in the saddle at the time, Meecham.”

“Well, I—you see, that horse and saddle belongs to the livery-stable. I merely rented it.”

“What about the bullet-hole?” asked Leach.

“I don’t know anything about it,” declared Meecham. “It must have been there when I got it.”

“They’d know at the stable,” opined Silent.

“Yeah, that’s right,” agreed Brick, “McKeever would know.”

“Let’s take a squint at that saddle,” suggested Grant. “It might not be a bullet-hole.”

“Well, what if it was?” snorted Ike Welden. “My ——, yo’re makin’ a lot of fuss about a bullet-hole in a saddle. You act like it had hit all of yuh.”

Silent turned and looked at Ike.

“Welden, yo’re breedin’ a lot of misery for yourself,” he declared. “I dumped yuh into the street once, yuh remember. Last night somebody swiped my bronc—and I better not find out that it was you.”

“You tryin’ to make out that I stole yore bronc, Slade?”

“If I thought yuh did I’d fill yuh so ——ed full of holes that they’d have to use ce-ment instead of embalmin’-fluid, if they wanted yuh to keep.”

“Yeah, I s’pose,” Ike sneered openly, but was careful to keep his hands above waist-level. He was the equal of any man on the draw, but he was afraid of this big man—afraid that he might not be able to stop him.

“Don’t argue with that worm,” said Harp impatiently. “He ain’t goin’ to take any chances. Now, if it was dark and he had a tree or a rock in front of him—aw, c’mon, Silent!”

They went out through the doorway, leaving Ike to swear and buy himself a drink. At the hitch-rack they examined the saddle. There was no doubt of it being a bullet-hole. The saddle was a cheap affair, and the bullet had smashed through the cantle, but was lodged between the wood and the leather covering of the back.

With a slash of his knife Brick cut through the leather and salvaged the bullet, which was so badly battered that it was impossible, except by weight, to tell what calibre it had been.

“Well,” said Grant dryly, “there ain’t much question about it bein’ a bullet-hole.”

“Yeah, it is a bullet-hole,” admitted Leach, although he did not seem greatly concerned over it.

“Well, I don’t know anything about it.” Meecham was inclined to be a trifle peevish over it. “I hired this horse and saddle to ride up here and see how Mr. Caswell was getting along, and if they gave me a saddle with a bullet-hole in it——”

“Well, that’s all right,” grinned Brick. “Nobody’s blamin’ you for it, Meecham.”

Brick turned and went back toward the saloon, as though dismissing the subject. Meecham talked with Leach and Grant for a few minutes before mounting his horse and going back toward Silverton.

Harp got their two horses and took them to the livery-stable. In a few minutes he came back, carrying the two rifles, and found Brick talking with Cale Wesson.

“You fellers come down to my house,” suggested Cale. “We’ve got plenty of room. You ain’t got no office, jail or stable, Brick; so yuh might as well hive up at my place until yuh get somethin’ built.”

“By golly, that would be fine,” agreed Harp joyfully.

Brick and Cale exchanged amused glances and Cale drawled slowly:—

“I’d rather have the music inside my house at a reasonable hour than to have it outside at four o’clock in the mornin’. Ma kinda likes music, too. Of course Miss Miller won’t mind. Anyway, she’s too danged much of a lady to say what she thinks.”

“All right, Cale,” grinned Brick. “It would be mighty nice, if yuh could take care of us for a few days.”

“Sure would,” nodded Harp, and without further argument he headed for the Wesson home, carrying the two useless rifles.

Leach, Slim Hunter and Ike Welden went to the hitch-rack, mounted their horses, and rode out of town toward Silverton. They nodded to Cale and Brick as they rode past. Santel came in from the other end of town and left his horse at the hitch-rack. He had not been there during the fire, and now he came over and considered the wreckage.

His examination was very brief and he came past Brick and Cale, on his way to the Dollar Down. He nodded curtly and Brick felt instinctively that Santel had been drinking. His eyes were bloodshot and he walked rather too deliberately, as though trying to show that he was perfectly sober. He met Bill Grant in the doorway and, after a moment of conversation, they both went into the saloon.

“I couldn’t like that Santel,” observed Wesson. “I ain’t got a darned thing against him, yuh understand, but there’s somethin’ so dog-goned cold-blooded about him that it kinda gits me.”

“He’s salty,” grinned Brick. “He’s also drunk right now, Cale. Let’s go down and help Harp arrange them two rifles. That’s all we’ve got left to move.”

“Yo’re lucky. I lost danged near everythin’ I owned. But Ma says we’re kinda lucky, and I s’pose that’s a good way to look at things. We’ll go down and see if she’s got anythin’ to cook for a meal.”

Mrs. Wesson gave Brick and Harp an upstairs room where they decided to grab a few hours’ sleep. Both of them were weary, and the peacefulness of the Wesson home sent them quickly into dreamland.

Mrs. Wesson woke them up at supper-time and they came down to the outdoor wash-bench to clean up a little.

“Bill Grant has been over twice to see yuh,” stated Mrs. Wesson.

“Tha’sso?” Brick lifted his wet face from the basin and blinked the soap out of his eyes. “What’d Bill want?”

“He didn’t say. I asked him if it was important, but he never said whether it was or not. Said he’d come again.”

They were just sitting down at the table, when Bill Grant knocked on the door and informed Mrs. Wesson that he wanted to see Brick. He wouldn’t come in; so Brick went out to him.

“I don’t like to take yuh away from a meal, Brick; but I’ve got somethin’ yuh ought to know. Santel’s drunk. He got me in a corner this afternoon and talked for an hour. He’s been detectin’ to beat ——, so he says. And here’s his solution of the thing:

“You and Silent Slade and Harp Harris must be the three men who done the dirty work; *sabe*? Yo’re the medium-sized one, Silent is the big one, and Harp is the tall, skinny one. Now, what do yuh think of that, Brick?”

Brick squinted hard over the information, and Grant watched him closely. Then Brick’s face broke into a grin, as he looked up.

“Well, Bill, I’m s’prised that Santel ever found out that much. It sure does look like us three jiggers have been featherin’ our nests, don’t it?”

“Aw, ——, I didn’t believe him, Brick.”

“Thank yuh, Bill. Where is Santel now?”

“He’s gone to Silverton. I reckon he’s through around here. He told me that he was, anyway.”

“Yeah, I reckon he is,” Brick grew serious.

“He said he was goin’ to put his case up to Leach and Hendricks and let them do what they dang pleased about it.”

“That’s real thoughtful of him, I’m sure. Bill, I’m glad yuh told me this, and I thank yuh kindly.”

“Yo’re welcome, Brick. But dang it all, I wish yuh could put the deadwood on the guilty parties. I’m for yuh.”

“Well,” Brick grinned widely, “mebbe I will, as soon as I get time. I’ve been so dog-gone busy lately. Say, didja see Silent around the Dollar Down when yuh left?”

“He’s playin’ single-handed black-jack with Le Blanc.”

“Fine! Tell him to come down here right away, will yuh, Bill?”

“Sure.”

Grant turned and walked back toward the street, while Brick went back to his supper.

Miss Miller smiled at Brick as he sat down beside Harp.

“I have been trying to get Mr. Harris to tell me how he came to get that wound in his shoulder,” said Miss Miller, “but he refuses to tell me.”

Harp squinted at Brick, who grinned covertly and shook his head.

“I don’t blame him for not talkin’ about it,” declared Brick. “Mebbe next time he’ll look out for knife-throwin’ women.”

“Knife-throwing women?”

Miss Miller glanced sharply at Harp, whose ears immediately assumed a scarlet tint.

“Half-breed,” nodded Brick. “Married woman, too. Her husband was shootin’ mad, too.”

Harp shoved back his chair and got to his feet.

“That’s all a danged lie!” he wailed. “I—I——”

“I can’t understand this risin’ generation,” interrupted Mrs. Wesson seriously. “They do the darnedest things. Why, when I was young, if a man monkeyed around a married woman——”

Harp whirled around, picked up his hat and stamped out of the house, while Brick put his head on his arms and cried tears. Mrs. Wesson hammered Cale on the back until the poor man slid sideways out of his chair; but Miss Miller failed to see the humour of the situation.

“It’s a —— shame,” declared Cale. “Dont’cha believe a danged thing that either of these critters try to make yuh believe, Miss Miller. That’s their idea of fun.”

“O-o-o-oh, that was good,” wailed Mrs. Wesson. “The look on his face! Ha, ha, ha, ha! Brick, he’ll hate us both for life.”

“I fail to see anything funny about it,” stated Miss Miller. “Why accuse a man of something that isn’t true, Mr. Davidson?”

“It was true,” choked Brick. “But not the way it sounded. He did get knifed by a woman. Anyway, I think it was a woman. And her husband was shootin’ mad, too. Me and Harp caught ’em stealing cattle—butcherin’ at night and burnin’ the hides.”

Brick wiped away his tears and was about to tell them what had happened the night before, when Silent knocked loudly at the front door.

“What happened to little Harp Harris?” he asked. “I met him up the street and asked him what you wanted. He said he didn’t care a —— what you wanted, but he knew what you was goin’ to get.”

“He’s got indigestion,” said Mrs. Wesson. “He told me the other day that he had it real bad. You know that upsets a man somethin’ awful. I’d sure hate to marry a man that has indigestion. I sure know what it’s like, ’cause Cale has touches of it.”

“I never had anythin’ like that in my life!” snorted Cale.

“I’ll betcha yuh got it right now,” grinned Brick. “Anybody that would speak to Ma Wesson that-a-way has got stummick trouble.”

Cale picked up his hat and started for the door.

“All right, all right! I s’pose I’ve got to stand for it. If I’d ’a’ had any sense I’d never invited the sheriff’s office to settle down in my house. Between Ma and Brick, I’ll prob’ly have to pitch a tent, if I want to have any peace.”

“Didja want me, Brick?” queried Silent, “or is that part of the joke?”

Brick laughed and shook his head.

“I was just wonderin’ if you’d like to ride to Silverton with me this evenin’.”

Silent squinted closely at Brick’s face. Their eyes met for a moment and a grin overspread Silent’s lips. He knew that Brick was not riding to

Silverton just for the ride.

“Yeah, I’d like to go along,” said Silent indifferently. “I’m ready any time you are. Is Harp goin’ along?”

“No, I don’t think so. He better take care of that shoulder for a day or two.” Brick turned to Miss Miller. “Are you goin’ to the dance to-morrow night with Harp, Miss Miller?”

“Not that I know of,” she replied.

“I must remind Harp of that,” said Brick seriously. “He told me to be sure and remind him to ask yuh—but it slipped my mind completely.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Miss Miller’s brows lifted slightly, and she glanced at Mrs. Wesson, who was still chuckling.

“And if I forget it, Ma will remind him of it when he comes back.”

Brick picked up his hat and walked out behind Silent, while Ma Wesson wiped away her tears and patted Miss Miller on the arm.

“Don’t mind him, dearie,” she choked. “Brick don’t lie, but he sure does twist the truth around until it won’t neither lay down nor stand up. Harp would do the same to Brick, if he had the chance. They’re both salt of the earth.”

“And you——” began Miss Miller accusingly.

“Oh, me!” Ma Wesson laughed heartily. “I’ll back either of ’em, ’cause I love ’em both. Don’t mind me. If Harp don’t ask yuh to go with him, I’ll have Cale take both of us. By golly, I’d like to tramp around over a dance floor ag’in myself.”

“I think that would be fun, Mrs. Wesson.”

“Fun, ——! It’d be a riot.”

## CHAPTER XVI

IT was dark when Santel rode into Silverton. He took his horse to the livery-stable and turned it over to a skinny youngster. Santel had bought a bottle of liquor at Marlin City and had emptied it on the way down. He threw it away, as he came out of the stable and went toward the Short Horn saloon.

He was pretty drunk, but did not stagger as he went into the saloon and stopped at the bar. Leach was in the rear of the room, talking to Al Hendricks, and Santel went to them. They gave him a chair and he sat down with them at a card-table.

“Well what’s the news?” asked Hendricks guardedly.

“I’m quittin’ the job,” announced Santel. “I told Grant what I decided upon, and he didn’t seem to believe me.”

“You mean to say that you couldn’t find out anythin’?” asked Hendricks.

Santel laughed angrily. Leach watched him closely. He knew that Santel was drunk.

“I reckon I could find out enough,” said Santel hoarsely, “but what the —— is the use? We all know that these robberies were done by three men, don’t we?”

“Well?”

“Three men,” continued Santel. “A big man, a medium-sized man and a tall, thin man. I’ve been lookin’ for three men of that description—three men who are close enough together to do this work. And——” Santel shook his head slowly, “there’s just three men in this county that answer that description, and that is the sheriff, his deputy, and the big fellow, Slade.”

“Aw, ——!” snorted Hendricks.

“There yuh are,” Santel shrugged his shoulders wearily.

“And why not?” queried Leach. “Are they so ——ed pure that they wouldn’t do a thing like that, Al?”

Hendricks frowned heavily and looked at Santel.

“Is this the best yuh could do, Santel?”

“Suits me.”

“Where’s your proof?”

“Proof? What in —— do yuh want—a confession?”

Hendricks shook his head quickly.

“You couldn’t convict anybody on that evidence.”

“There’s a murder or two connected with this,” reminded Leach meaningly. “It might not be a jury case, Al.”

Hendricks laughed and shook his head.

“Don’t be a fool, Leach. Brick Davidson never done these things. Santel may be a good detective, but he sure got off on the wrong foot that time. I’d stake my life on Brick.”

“There yuh are,” said Santel disgustedly. “It’s about time for me to quit.”

“It sure is—if Brick finds it out.”

“All right,” Santel got to his feet. “I’ve quit. Now I’m goin’ to get drunk, and as soon as I get paid for my work, I’m goin’ to pull my freight, *sabe?*”

“You can’t pull your freight any too soon to suit me,” said Hendricks coldly. “I don’t think much of your ability as a detective, Santel. And I’d just like to give you a little word of warning: don’t bump into Brick Davidson, after he hears what you said about him and his two men.”

Santel sneered openly. “I’ll go when I —— please, and I’d as soon say it to Davidson’s face as to you. He’s a dirty little red-headed bluffer, and if I get a chance I’ll show yuh just how yaller he is.” He swaggered back to the bar, leaving Hendricks and Leach at the table.

“You sure picked a good man,” observed Hendricks.

“Did I?” Leach smiled crookedly. “I guess that Santel found out what he came here to find. It’s no fault of his if we don’t agree with him.”

“It’s a free country, Leach, and—here comes Brick now.”

Brick was coming into the place, with Silent behind him. Santel was at the bar, taking a drink, but he turned and looked at Brick, who stopped short and faced Santel.

Hendricks started to get up from the table, but Leach grasped him by the arm, drawing him back. Santel was just drunk enough to forget caution, and his lips drew up in a wolfish grin.

“Well,” he said, as his voice carried to all parts of the room, “here’s Sun Dog County’s little tin god.”

The bartender scuttled to the upper end of the bar, out of line with the two men, and those at a card-table behind Brick immediately lost all interest in their play and moved quickly. Brick was grinning and it irritated Santel.

“You I’m talkin’ to,” snarled Santel.

“To me?” Brick laughed. “Well, that’s nice of yuh, Santel. I sure wondered who yuh meant, and I’m glad that Sun Dog likes me so well.”

“Tha’sso?” Santel sneered. “You ain’t got sense enough to know when yo’re insulted.”

“Have you insulted me?” questioned Brick wonderingly.

He turned his head and looked around the room, as if asking some one to confirm it. Hendricks caught his eye and tried to signal a warning. Silent moved in beside the bar and began rolling a cigarette, as if nothing was the matter. Santel shot a glance at Silent, and it seemed that the big man’s unconcerned attitude irritated him.

Brick turned back to Santel:—

“You didn’t really mean to insult me, didja, Santel?”

“Well, I’ll be ——ed!” Santel’s voice was hoarse with indignation. “Did I really mean it?”

Santel leaned forward until his face was within a foot of Brick, his hands spread out from his sides. His anger had made him forget that Brick was egging him on.

“You red-headed pup!”

Santel had evidently figured that Brick was afraid of him, but he was jerking back as he spoke; jerking back, as his right hand flashed for his gun. As quick as a cat Brick shifted just a trifle, slashing out with his right hand; a cutting stroke with the side of his hand, which caught Santel just at the middle of his throat and made him lose immediate interest in his gun.

He straightened up, with both hands going to his throat, his face twisted with the agony of it, as he slithered along the edge of the bar.

“Ambulance on the job!” snorted Silent; and before any one could prevent him he stepped in, caught Santel with both hands, swung him over his shoulder and went striding out of the saloon.

The crowd rushed to the doorway and windows in time to see Silent step to the edge of the sidewalk and fairly hurl Santel into the street, where he rolled over and over.

“Hookum cow!” yelled Silent. “Yee-ow-w-w! Cowboy!”

Santel got slowly to his feet, but fell down once before he got himself steadied enough to stagger away across the street.

“Mebbe he don’t know what it was all about,” stated Silent, “but he’s got sense enough not to come back for information.”

“I never seen anything like it,” declared a cowboy. “Brick hit him with the side of his hand. Right on the old apple. I’ll betcha that jigger will have an apple-juice taste in his mouth for a month.”

Hendricks congratulated Brick silently and Brick grinned.

“I seen yuh wig-waggin’ me, Al. Santel was on the prod, eh?”

“He sure was, Brick. You ain’t heard about what he found out, have yuh?”

“Grant was tellin, me, Al.”

“What do yuh think of it?”

“Well,” Brick grinned widely, “I feel suspicious of myself.”

“I told Santel he was crazy.”

“Thank yuh, Al.”

“But look out for Santel, Brick. I don’t know a thing about him, but I’ll bet he won’t forgive yuh.”

“If he does, he’s plum loco. Anyway, I ain’t lookin’ for forgiveness. See yuh later, Al.”

Brick and Silent went down to the livery-stable and found the gangling youth in charge, sitting in the office, playing a game of solitaire.

“Where’s McKeever?” asked Brick.

“I dunno. I come to work at four o’clock, but he wasn’t here.”

“He didn’t say where he was goin’, did he?”

“He didn’t say he was goin’ anywhere. I suppose he got into a poker game and forgot he owned a livery-stable.”

“He wasn’t at the Short Horn.” Thus Silent.

“Tha’sso? Didja look in at McGill’s place? He plays over there once in a while.”

“That’s probably where he is,” said Brick.

“Was it anythin’ I can do for yuh, Sheriff?”

“No-o-o, I guess not. I just wanted to ask Jimmy how one of his saddles happens to have a bullet-hole in the cantle.”

“One of his saddles?” The youth squinted at Brick, as he lighted a limp-looking cigarette. “I didn’t know about that.”

“The saddle that Meecham rode to-day,” explained Brick. “It’s a cheap saddle—one of them red leather hulls, with a rawhide-covered horn. Meecham was ridin’ a Triangle Eight bay filly.”

“Uh-huh?” The youth squinted thoughtfully. “I know the saddle and the bronc. Lemme see.”

He led them out into the stable and examined the saddles, but was unable to find the right one. The bay filly was in a stall, and Brick knew it was the same animal that Meecham had ridden to Marlin City.

“I dunno where that ——ed saddle is,” declared the boy. “I know it. McKeever bought it from a mail-order catalogue. One of the worst forks I ever set into. Cost about fifteen dollars, I reckon. Are you sure that’s the horse he was ridin’?”

“That’s the horse.” Brick was positive.

“What about the bullet-hole? Been some shootin’ goin’ on?”

“Bullet-holes don’t occur by themselves,” grinned Brick. “We’ll see if we can find Jimmy.”

They left the stable and crossed the street, going past McGill’s saloon, but there was no sign of McKeever. McGill was behind the bar, reading a newspaper, alone in the place. They went on up to the Short Horn, but found no trace of McKeever.

They asked the bartender, who said that he had not seen McKeever since about noon. At the Boston hotel, where McKeever lived, they were informed that he had not been around there since morning.

They went back to the Short Horn and had barely entered the place when the youth from the livery-stable followed them in. He was hatless, pasty-faced, and in one hand he carried an old tin bucket.

“For ——’s sake, come on!” he panted to Brick. “Come on with me! My ——!”

He turned and ran out, with Brick and Silent close behind him. Several of those in the saloon, who had heard, followed them down the street.

Straight to the stable they went, and the boy stopped in the middle of the floor, under the light of the lantern.

“Tut-take the lantern,” he faltered. “You go ahead, will yuh? Look in the grain box. My ——!”

Brick grabbed the lantern and ran into the grain-room, a built-in room, adjoining the little office. A big grain-bin extended the full length of the room, with three different covers.

“That’n on the end,” panted the boy.

Brick lifted the cover and held up the lantern. Lying doubled up on some loose oats was Jimmy McKeever, his head a welter of blood. Silent and the men from the saloon crowded in and took a look.

“I—I ju-just found him that-a-way,” explained the boy. “I dunno how I did it. We didn’t use that bin any more. Sus-somethin’ made me look in there, I reckon.”

Brick fastened back the cover and climbed into the bin.

“One of yuh go after the doctor,” he ordered, and a man hurried away.

Brick lifted McKeever up to where they could all get hold of him, and they placed him on the floor of the stable.

Brick examined, while Silent knelt down and held the lantern.

“I don’t reckon he needs a doctor,” observed Silent.

Brick shook his head slowly.

“Don’t look like it, that’s a cinch. Somebody beat his head all up.”

“Somebody—yeah.” It was an old cattleman from the southern end of the range. “I’d admire to know jist who that somebody was.”

The man who went after the doctor had shouted the news in at the Short Horn, and the stable soon filled with curious and interested people. Doctor Bridger came bustling in and the crowd gave him room. His examination was short and to the point.

“Been dead quite a while. Skull crushed. Who found him?”

Doctor Bridger was the coroner. The youth shouldered his way inside the circle.

“I found him, Doc. I—I thought he was out some’ers, playin’ poker, and I finds him in that danged old oat-bin. I told the sheriff jist as quick as I could.”

“I reckon he did,” agreed Brick. “He was still packin’ his oat-can with him.”

“But why would any one kill Jimmy McKeever?” Thus Banty Harrison indignantly. “Jimmy was a good guy.”

“Didn’t have an enemy that I ever heard about,” offered Slim Hunter. “By gosh, this country is gettin’ too salty to suit me. Mostly every day there’s a robbery, a killin’ or a dynamitin’. Makes a feller scared to do anythin’, I tell yuh.”

“Anything missing around here?” questioned the doctor. “It might have been done by a horse-thief.”

“There ain’t no horses gone,” declared the boy.

He was about to mention the missing saddle, but Brick’s eyes signalled him a warning and he turned away.

“Better take the body down to my place,” suggested the doctor.

They rolled the body on to a blanket and four men carried it away. Brick and Silent left the stable ahead of the crowd, and were half-way to the Short Horn when the doctor joined them.

“Murder, wasn’t it?” he asked.

“The dirtiest kind,” said Brick slowly. “They probably put him in there until they got a chance to dispose of him.”

The doctor shook his head wearily.

“I can’t understand men doing a thing like that, sheriff. Murder is so unnecessary.”

“From yore angle,” said Brick softly.

They left the doctor and went to the hitch-rack, where they mounted and rode out of town. Just at the outskirts, Brick swung off the road, and led the way into the hills with Silent’s horse pounding along behind him.

“Can’t take a chance on the road,” declared Brick, as the lights of Silverton faded from view. “There’s too much —— to pay in Sun Dog. We’ll stay at the Nine-Bar-Nine to-night.”

## CHAPTER XVII

OLD LAFE FREEMAN, owner of the Nine-Bar-Nine, welcomed them effusively. The world had seemed all wrong since Brick had left the old ranch. He fairly giggled his delight, when Brick informed him that they were going to stay all night.

“This is about the only safe place for us,” grinned Brick, and proceeded to tell Lafe all about the dynamiting of the office, the knifing of Harp Harris, the death of Jimmy McKeever.

Old Lafe’s whiskers bristled angrily, and he clenched his gnarled hands.

“I knowed Jimmy,” he said slowly. “By ——, I’d like to git my old six-gun to workin’ on some of these dirty murderers. And they’ll git yuh, Brick—jist as sure as God made little apples. They won’t stop at nothin’. When they’ll use dynamite on yuh—aw, whatsa use? But, Brick, ain’t yuh got no knowledge of who it is?”

Brick grinned tight-lipped. “I ain’t sure, Lafe. I wish I was awful smart—but I ain’t. I can’t see no further than anybody else. I’m kinda gropin’ around in the dark. How’s the old ranch?”

“She ain’t so very good. I can’t even keep one hired man now.”

He looked at Silent meaningly, and the big man shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, I ain’t chidin’ yuh, Silent,” he hastened to assure him. “Brick needs yuh, I reckon. I can wiggle along, because it’s the slack season. But it’s danged lonesome. Why don’t Harp never ride out to see me?”

“Harp’s in love,” said Brick. “He’s tryin’ to hold hands with the Marlin City schoolma’am.”

“Heaven is my home!” gasped old Lafe. “Yuh don’t mean it! Is he playin’ his harp to her, Brick?”

“Yeah, he is, Lafe.”

“And she stands for it? Love must be wonderful.”

“I reckon it is, Lafe. Harp ain’t worth much to me. I reckon he’s glad to be wounded; so I’ll leave him to watch the jail.”

Old Lafe grinned widely. “I wish he was here. Honest Injun, I hate that danged jew’s-harp, but I’d let him play for me, if he’d jist come out. I don’t git any news. Ain’t been to Marlin for a long time, and I don’t like to go to Silverton, because some one is always a-tellin’ me what’s goin’ to happen to you next election.

“I met Soapy Caswell the other day, and he’s sure dubious. Them robberies has shore put an edge on Soapy. But he likes yuh, Brick. He don’t want Hank Stagg to be sheriff.”

“Well, I reckon he will be sheriff, unless somethin’ happens,” sighed Brick. “I dunno as it matters. Sometimes I kinda wish I was livin’ here again, Lafe. I don’t like to have somebody takin’ pot-shots at me all the time. But,” Brick’s jaw tightened, “if I get half a chance, the new sheriff will have a clean county to start bossin’.”

“Yeah, I believe yuh will, Brick. I’ve got a hunch that you’ll find out who’s who. C’mon in and help me cook supper. I want to hear all the scandal. Tell me about this here Santel, the detective. I tell yuh, I’m plumb ignorant of conditions. About the last news I got was the time yuh rode the grizzly at Silverton. Yeah, I heard about the little Malloy boy gittin’ lost, but you can start in anywhere along about that time.”

Brick sat down in the kitchen and smoked a cigarette, while old Lafe mixed up biscuits and Silent sliced some huge slabs of sirloin steak.

“Keep yore story until after we eat,” said old Lafe. “We’ll have a reg’lar family reunion. If yuh start now, the Lord only knows what I might put in them biscuits.”

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Harp Harris knew that Brick and Silent had ridden away in the direction of Silverton. But Harp didn’t care where they went. In fact, he mentally consigned Brick to a much warmer place than any spot in the Sun Dog County.

He wanted to take Della Miller to the Silverton dance, but after what Brick had said he was ashamed to ask her. Brick had insinuated that Harp had tried to come between a half-breed and his wife, and this insinuation made Harp mad. His shoulder pained him, and he tried to make himself believe that he was in no shape to go to a dance.

Finally he went over to the Dollar Down, where he bought himself a drink. Santel was there, drinking alone, but Harp did not invite him to have a drink. He did not like this bony-faced, crooked-nosed person, who wore so much silver on his chaps and cartridge-belt. There was something sinister-looking about Santel, the look of a man who had no sense of humour.

Santel merely glanced sideways at Harp and busied himself with his own drink. The bartender was loquacious.

“How’s the shoulder, Harp? They tell me yuh got stabbed by a woman.”

“Do they?” Harp’s nose twitched. Santel glanced sharply at the bartender.

“Women are pretty tough with a knife,” stated the bartender. “I ’member a female of the species I knowed down at Mexicali. I made love to her jist like I would to any girl, and she’s plumb receptive, yuh understand. Anyway, there’s another girl, who kinda takes a likin’ to me, and I don’t repulse her none to speak about. Not bein’ promised to this here Mexicali maid, I feels free to smile upon this here other female. Well, it was all right, until this here Mexicali female finds it out; whereupon and right sudden she tries to pin my shoulder to a door. Then I has to kill seven Mexican policemen before I gets across the border.”

Harp’s tired eyes scanned the face of the bartender slowly.

“Lyn’,” said Harp slowly, “is still in its infancy around here, but it’s shore advancin’ rapid-like.”

“You don’t think I’m lyn’, do yuh, Harp? Any time yuh don’t play square with a brown-coloured woman, yuh get knifed.”

“Oh, go to ——!” snorted Harp. He went outside and sat down on the sidewalk. Mrs. Wesson came down the street and went into the store. This meant that Della Miller would be alone at the Wesson home.

This time Harp Harris did not saunter—he hurried. Della met him at the front door, and for several moments Harp lost his power of speech. Then he blurted:—

“Miss Miller, ma’am, you don’t believe what Brick told yuh, do yuh?”

“What was that?” she asked coldly.

“Oh, about me and that half-breed woman.”

“Why, I don’t know,” indifferently. “Mr. Davidson said——”

“Yeah, I know,” Harp twisted his sombrero nervously. “Brick is the biggest liar in Sun Dog County.”

“Mrs. Wesson said that he probably told the truth, but——”

Harp groaned. It looked as though the case was going against him.

“He did tell the truth,” gulped Harp. “She did knife me. But she didn’t know it was me, yuh see. She——”

“If she had known it was you, she wouldn’t have knifed you?”

“No, ma’am—yes’m. Yuh see, she——”

“I don’t know why it should make any difference,” said Miss Miller loftily. “I’m sure it is none of my affairs.”

“Yes, ma’am,” gulped Harp. “Yuh see, me and Brick—aw, lemme tell yuh the truth about it, ma’am.”

Harp was in deadly earnest; so earnest, in fact, that he did not note the approach of Mrs. Wesson, who came softly through the front gate and was standing behind him, her face wreathed in smiles, her arms full of groceries.

“I do not think it interests me,” said Miss Miller evenly, trying to keep her serious expression.

“The truth don’t hurt nobody,” declared Harp, inclined to be wrathful.

“It would be an experiment around here,” said Mrs. Wesson solemnly. Harp turned quickly, and his knees sagged.

“Go ahead, Harp,” said Mrs. Wesson. “I’d like to hear just why yuh got stabbed by a jealous half-breed woman.”

“My ——!” groaned Harp. “If I ever git my hands on Brick Davidson, I’ll massacre him.”

“Why dont’cha sit down, Della?” Mrs. Wesson motioned to a chair on the porch. “Sit down, Harp. If we had a little soft music, you could tell us the story of yore life; all about yore adventures in Mexico.”

Harp’s ears flamed, and he did not look at Della Miller, whose eyes were wet with mirthful tears. He sat down on the edge of a step and wiped his sleeve across his brow.

“I never made love to no half-breed woman,” he said hoarsely. “Her and her husband was butcherin’ cows at night, and when me and Brick found ’em, they shore tried to take our minds off what they was doin’. And the woman stuck me with a knife. At least, I think it was a woman. And that’s the honest truth.”

Harp looked up, his jaw set defiantly.

Mrs. Wesson chuckled joyfully, picked up her groceries and went into the house. Harp squinted at Della Miller inquiringly.

“You goin’ to the dance to-morrow night with Sam Leach?”

“With Mr. Leach?” Della looked quickly at him. “Why, I’m not sure.”

“You ain’t sure? Yo’re goin’, ain’t yuh?”

“I—I hope so.”

“Uh-huh! And yo’re not sure whether yuh go with Leach or not?”

“No, I’m not at all sure, Mr. Harris.”

“Well, jist why ain’t yuh sure?”

“Because he hasn’t asked me—yet.”

“Oh, yea-a-a-ah!” Harp opened his mouth widely. “Say!” he blurted quickly. “How about goin’ with me? I ain’t as pretty as Sam Leach, but I—I—what do yuh say?”

“Do you think Sam Leach is pretty?”

“Well, I can’t exactly say he is, ma’am. No-o-o, I’d hate to have to prove it to anybody that knows him. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! How about it, ma’am? Will yuh go with me?”

“Why, I think I should be delighted, Mr. Harris.”

Harp got to his feet, his face beaming. “By golly, that shore sounds like the song of a medder-lark to me. I’ll git the best danged rig there is in the livery-stable. Gee-e-e-e!” Harp fairly danced. “That shore is good of yuh. Shake!” He grasped Della’s hand in a bear-like grip, and was half-way to the gate before she could get her fingers pried apart. He did not look back, but went straight up town, shoulders back, chin up.

“Well,” said Mrs. Wesson from the doorway, “you’ve got a pardner. I was scared to death he wasn’t goin’ to ask yuh.”

Della coloured slightly and massaged her right hand carefully. “To tell you the truth, I was a little afraid myself. He was so deadly in earnest in explaining about that half-breed woman.”

“Harp’s a good boy,” smiled Mrs. Wesson. “There ain’t a mean bone in his body. I just love him, too.”

“Love him, too?” Della blushed and turned her head away.

“Well, the Lord love yuh!” exploded Mrs. Wesson. “I didn’t know just how it was goin’ to sound. But it goes as it lays. They’re three of the lovin’est boys on earth—Harp, Brick and Silent. Any woman that gets one of them three is sure goin’ to get a he-man. Oh, they’re hard-boiled, Della. They have to be. Cale was the same way. He used to pack three guns. Yep. One on each hip, and a derringer in his vest pocket. Now,” she smiled softly, “he don’t pack nothin’ but a half-sized grouch.”

Della laughed lightly. “But I don’t intend marrying any of them, Mrs. Wesson.”

“Sure yuh don’t, honey. Ain’t any of ’em good enough for yuh. But if yuh should happen to feel the need of a husband, they’re worth pickin’. And lemme tell yuh one thing, young lady; there ain’t many men that have got the nerve to sneak under a lady’s winder at four o’clock in the mornin’ and serenade her with a jew’s-harp. That’s pure, unadulterated love.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

IT was about four o'clock the following afternoon. Brick and Silent crouched in the brush and watched the ranch-house of Mostano. They had been there since the middle of the forenoon but had seen nothing of interest.

Their few hours of sleep at the Nine-Bar-Nine had only been an aggravation to Silent, who complained wearily against accompanying a half-witted sheriff on a foolish quest. They had left the Nine-Bar-Nine before daylight, having cooked their own breakfast, and had ridden the entire distance away from the road.

The sun was getting low behind the western ranges, and the trees in the valley cast long shadows of purple across the yellow of the meadow-like bottom land. Directly across the little valley from them was the bluff, where the trail led in to the Mostano ranch. Already part of this bluff was a blue shadow. To the right of them were the broken hills, partly timbered, which led back to the main divide.

There was no sign of life about the Mostano place. A rooster crowed shrilly from somewhere behind the corrals. Several magpies, winged scavengers of the cattle country, quarrelled with each other from the vantage points about the corral, their voices sounding almost human; parrot-like, arguing incessantly. A coyote came into view beyond the ranch-house, evidently lured into the little valley by the scent of butchering. But the coyote did not approach too close. After a casual inspection of the ranch, it turned and faded into the dark mass of jack-pines.

Brick was taking no chances now, and he was forced to admit that his spying on the Mostano ranch was inspired by a "hunch." Something seemed to tell him that the answer to the riddle was at that ranch. He knew that Mostano was not the only man at the ranch when he and Harp were chased out of the house.

The dynamiting of his office proved that the criminals feared him and felt that he knew too much. Just why they would dynamite the Red Hill mine safe, after stealing the pay-roll, was more than he could figure out. In some way it was connected with the attempted killing of Soapy Caswell, he decided.

Perhaps he thought there were two different gangs, or they might have blown the safe to make him think that there were two different outfits working. He grinned as he thought of Santel's findings. Still, the

descriptions covered the three of them. Baldy Malloy, Ike Welden and Meecham had all been robbed by men of the same description. Suddenly Brick laughed aloud and Silent looked at him curiously.

“What’s so ——ed funny?” Silent was tired and uncomfortable.

“Somethin’,” Brick’s brows were drawn in a thoughtful frown and the ball of his right thumb caressed the stubble on his chin. “Somethin’ good, Silent.”

“Oh, yeah!” Silent turned away, squinted at the ranch-house and nudged Brick on the knee.

A man was riding toward the ranch-house on the bluff trail, and both of them knew that it was Santel. They watched him ride up to the front door and dismount. But before he had time to go to the door, Mostano came out.

“Now, what the —— is Santel doin’ there?” queried Silent.

“That’s a question,” grinned Brick. “I wish my ears were as good as my eyes, ’cause I’d sure like to hear what they’re sayin’.”

After a few minutes of conversation they walked around the house and back to the corral. Mostano, judging from his gestures, was doing most of the talking. They stopped at the corral gate and continued the conversation.

After a time Santel turned away and took several steps toward the house, as though going to leave, but turned. Mostano had stepped away from the corral, facing Santel. They were too far away for the two men in the brush to distinguish the detail of their movements, but just in front of Santel appeared a puff of smoke.

Mostano fell sidewise into the fence, trying to keep his feet. Another puff of smoke, and the closely spaced reports of two shots sounded. Brick and Silent could not see Mostano now, because he had fallen into the shadows of the pole corral.

Santel stood still for several moments, looking around, before he turned and hurried to the house. He knocked on the front door, but no one let him in. Then he stepped back, took a short run and hit the door with his shoulder. Brick grinned as Santel fell back. Brick knew that the oak bar was thick.

“He’s goin’ to smash the window,” observed Silent.

Santel had picked up a short length of pole, and now he proceeded to demolish a front window. He made short work of it, tore the curtain away and crawled inside.

“What in —— is he doin’ in there?” wondered Silent.

Brick shook his head and watched the house. In a few minutes Santel came out, looked around and mounted his horse. He did not seem to be in a

hurry, but finally rode away up the bluff trail and disappeared toward the Red Hill mine.

“Well,” said Silent dryly, “we’ve got another dead man.”

“They’re almost as common as live ones around here,” said Brick sadly, his eyes glued on a certain patch of brush about a hundred feet to the east of the house. Something had caught his attention.

“Watch that patch of brush beyond the front of the house, Silent. There’s somethin’ there.”

And as an answer to his statement a woman left the patch of brush and went swiftly out of sight on the far side of the house, only to reappear going toward the corral.

Brick got to his feet and motioned for Silent to follow him. They went swiftly down through the brush and out into the open, where they ran toward the house. The woman had discovered Mostano’s body and was too interested to see anything else.

They ran past the house and out to the brush patch before the woman saw them. She ran toward them, stopped, as though undecided what to do and went back to the corral. Brick crashed into the brush and stopped short. Just at his feet was the entrance to a tunnel, and in this entrance lay the half-breed baby and—little Whizzer Malloy.

Silent crouched in beside Brick and stared at the children. Little Whizzer looked up at them, but there was no recognition in his face. His little feet were tied tightly together with a whang-leather string, and he was as dirty as a child could possibly become.

Brick lifted him out and cut the string.

“Don’tcha know me, Whizzer?” he asked gently.

But the child only whimpered, his eyes filled with fear.

“My ——, I’ll betcha they’ve treated him tough,” declared Silent. “But how in —— did he happen to be here? Can yuh figure it out, Brick?”

Brick shook his head, his jaws shut tight. The half-breed woman was coming slowly toward them now, her shoulders drooped, her face set in lines of deep grief. She stopped in front of Brick, but would not look at him, as she said:—

“My man dead—shot.”

“Yeah, I know it,” said Brick. “I reckon he had it comin’.”

“He dead,” she repeated.

“Where did you get this child?” asked Brick, not unkindly. He thought he could get more out of her by not adopting a threatening attitude. She

looked blankly at him.

“Where did you get this boy?” he asked again. “You tell me where you get him.”

“Don’t know,” she said slowly, blankly.

“You don’t know? Come on now, tell me where yuh got him.”

“Don’ know.”

“She sure is a good witness,” observed Silent. “Where her kind don’t want to talk, they can sure ruin the parade. Ask her why Santel killed Mostano?”

“She don’t know that either.”

“Don’ know,” she muttered blankly. “My man dead—shot.”

“Well, that’s one thing she does know.” Silent was inclined to sarcasm.

Little Whizzer Malloy whimpered and looked at Brick, as if trying to remember who Brick was.

“Don’tcha know me, Whizzer?” he asked.

But the child only looked blankly at him. Brick noticed that the little fellow had a bad bruise on the right side of his head and his right arm was painfully bruised.

“What the —— was that hole over there?”

Silent pointed back toward the brush patch.

“That’s the tunnel that opens under the house,” said Brick. “They had a slick getaway. When Santel showed up Mostano put the woman and kids into the tunnel and slid the bunk over the trap-door. No wonder Santel didn’t find anythin’.”

“What do yuh reckon he was lookin’ for, Brick?”

Brick squinted at Silent and back toward the house.

“Does seem kinda funny, Silent. I’ll betcha this woman would know—if she made a sneak with the kids.”

“Don’ know,” persisted the woman blankly.

“Is there anythin’ yuh do know?” snorted Silent.

She looked blankly at Silent and turned her gaze back toward the corral.

“My man dead,” she said simply.

They walked over to the corral and looked at Mostano. Either of Santel’s bullets would have killed him. Mostano’s six-shooter was lying in the dust beside the corral, several feet away, proving that he had made an attempt to defend himself, but had dropped the gun as he fell.

Brick studied the face of the squaw, as she looked down at the still form of her former lord and master. But her expression told him nothing. There was no sign of emotion. She might as well have been looking at the dead body of a horse.

“Santel shore shoots straight,” observed Silent.

“Don’t he, though?” muttered Brick. He turned to the squaw.

“You better tell why this man kill your husband,” he said warningly. “You no tell, mebby we put you in jail.”

She looked blankly at him, and back at the body.

“You go to ——,” she said thickly.

“Pickin’ our destination,” said Silent dryly.

“Do you know the man who shot Joe Mostano?” asked Brick.

“I don’ know.”

“Did they quarrel?”

“Mebbe so; I don’ know.”

“There ain’t nothin’ we can do for him,” observed Brick, “so we’ll just put the body in the house and take this kid back to Marlin.”

Little Whizzer’s legs had evidently been bound ever since he had disappeared, and they were too weak to support his body. They propped him against the fence, while they placed Mostano’s body in the house, but made the woman accompany them.

“We’ll send somebody out here,” Brick told the woman, as they picked up Whizzer and started for their horses.

“Don’ want nobody,” she declared. “You keep away.”

“Write yore own ticket,” said Brick shortly, and walked away.

They got their horses and rode back toward Marlin City with Brick carrying Whizzer in his arms. The youngster seemed to be trying to figure out what it was all about, and Brick grinned encouragingly.

“Don’tcha worry, Whizzer,” he told him. “Yo’re plenty safe now.”

They crossed the hills and came out on the grade at the little trail, just south of where Baldy had gone over the bank with the stage. Whizzer had straightened up a little and seemed less dazed now, so Brick led the way back to where the stage had gone over.

The youngster looked around, as though he recognised the spot, and finally looked up at Brick.

“Where’s my daddy?” he asked.

“For the love of mud!” exclaimed Silent. “He’s rememberin’.”

“Do yuh remember the stage, Whizzer?” asked Brick. “Remember what happened the day you rode with your daddy?”

“I fell off.” Whizzer’s eyes were round and excited.

“Yuh did?”

“Yeah!” He looked around. “I fell off on the road. Where did my daddy go?”

“And then somebody picked yuh up,” prompted Brick, ignoring the question. “Who picked yuh up, Whizzer?”

“I hurt my head. Somebody shoot a gun.”

“Didja see anybody before yuh fell off the wagon?”

Whizzer shook his head.

“I hear the gun shoot and then I fall off. Where’s my daddy?”

“Whizzer, old-timer,” said Brick earnestly, “you’ve got to remember some things for me. After yuh fell off the stage, you hurt yore head. When yuh woke up, who did yuh see?”

Whizzer’s forehead puckered, as he stared at Brick.

“I seen two mans in house. One man got somethin’ on his face, like stage-robber. Woman and baby there.”

“One man was masked, eh? It wasn’t the Indian man, was it?”

Whizzer shook his head and looked around quickly.

“Don’tcha be afraid of him,” said Brick. “He’s dead.”

“He hit me,” said Whizzer simply. “They make me stay in the mine and I can’t git out.”

He began crying softly, still terrified at what he had experienced in the few days. Brick swore softly and hugged the youngster.

“Don’t cry, buddy,” he said. “Ain’t nobody goin’ to hurt yuh ag’in, y’betcha!”

They swung their horses around and galloped away toward town.

“Do yuh think Santel done it, Brick?” queried Silent, as they swept along the grade.

“I dunno, Silent. Me and Harp met Santel just below here that day. Anyway, he knows somethin’ about it, and I’m goin’ to find out what he knows, if I have to drill him plumb full of lead to let the information leak out.”

Whizzer was asleep when they rode up to Wesson’s home and dismounted. Mrs. Wesson met Brick at the door, and gasped with surprise at sight of his burden. Whizzer woke up and began crying, but the sleep had

refreshed him and he quit crying as soon as he realised that he was no longer in the tunnel.

In a few words Brick explained how they had found him, and in less time than that Mrs. Wesson had placed him at the table behind a big bowl of bread and milk. He ate ravenously, while Mrs. Wesson sat across the table from him, her eyes filled with tears, and promised him a nice warm bath and a soft bed.

She turned to Brick, who was sitting against the table, his tired eyes staring at the blank wall in front of him.

“What is it all about, Brick?” she asked. “What’s the answer?”

“I dunno yet, Mrs. Wesson.” Brick’s voice was weary. “It’s a bloody trail, and I’m wonderin’ why they didn’t kill this kid. Mebby they wanted the Injun to do it, and he wouldn’t. They’re queer critters.”

“But why would they want to kill the child, Brick?”

“Because he saw too much. Yuh must remember his father was—you know—and the kid saw the men that done it. They had to get him out of the way, don’tcha see?”

Little Whizzer looked up quickly, his mouth full of bread and milk. There was still a great fear in his little soul, and he glanced behind him, as though afraid.

“Poor little devil!” said Silent softly. “Still scared!”

“You don’t need to be afraid now, Whizzer,” said Mrs. Wesson. “Nobody is ever goin’ to hurt yuh any more, Honey Boy.”

“Gotta find my daddy,” he told her. “They didn’t give me no bread and milk.”

“What did they give yuh, honey?” asked Mrs. Wesson.

Whizzer swallowed a big portion of bread, almost choking over it.

“They gimme ——,” he said simply.

“Yuh can’t beat him, can yuh?” grinned Brick. “He’s a buckaroo.”

“I lost m’ spur. Mebbe——” he smiled at Brick, “mebbe my daddy’s got it. He said he was goin’ to git me ’nother one.”

“Where’s Harp?” asked Silent.

“Him and Miss Miller went to the dance at Silverton,” smiled Mrs. Wesson. “Harp had a sweet time squarin’ himself with her, but he made Brick out to be the biggest liar in the State—and she believed him. By jinks, I think she likes him. Human nature is one queer thing. I’ll betcha Leach will be sore as a boil. He sure did want to go with her.”

Whizzer laid aside his spoon and sighed deeply.

“Had enough, Buddy?” asked Brick.

“Uh-huh! I can’t hold no more.”

“Now I’ll give him a good hot bath and put him into a nice bed,” said Mrs. Wesson. “Mebbe we better have the doctor over to fix up them bruises, Brick. He’s sure been skinned awful bad.”

“Don’t hurt.” Whizzer shook his head.

“That’s fine, buddy,” nodded Brick. “Now if yuh could only tell us what that masked man looked like.”

Whizzer shook his head.

“Dunno. He had a cloth on his face.”

“But his clothes, Whizzer? Wasn’t there somethin’ yuh could remember?—somethin’ about how he looked?”

Whizzer shook his head. Brick lighted a cigarette and studied the youngster.

“Sleepy, Whizzer?”

“Nope. Say, when do I find my daddy?”

Brick sighed and shook his head sadly. He did not want to tell him now. Silent swore softly and counted the cartridge-heads in his belt.

“Want to take a ride to Silverton, buddy?” queried Brick.

“Sure.” Whizzer hopped off his chair and almost fell down. “My feet don’t feel good,” he told Brick. “They ache.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t take him plumb down there, Brick.” Thus Mrs. Wesson quickly. “He needs a bath and some good sleep.”

“I know it, Ma,” nodded Brick, “but I’ve got to take him. It might be kinda hard on Whizzer, but he’ll pull through.”

“Sure,” nodded Whizzer. “I’ll go.”

“But is it necessary to take him down there?” asked Mrs. Wesson. “It’s a long ways, Brick, and this kiddy is worn out.”

“Yeah, I think we better go,” said Brick firmly. “I’ve got to show up down there ahead of word about findin’ him, Mrs. Wesson.”

Mrs. Wesson grumbled to herself, as she wrapped him up in a light blanket. She knew that Brick must have a good reason for taking the youngster to Silverton; but she did want to clean him up a little.

“Lemme carry him,” begged Silent. “I’ve got a strong horse, and it takes a strong horse to carry two cowpunchers.”

“Sure,” agreed Whizzer. “I lost m’ spur, yuh know.”

“Yuh can have both of mine,” offered Silent, as Brick handed the youngster up to him.

“Oh, good! If daddy gives me one, I’ll have three. Mebbe he won’t though.”

“Mebbe not,” said Silent softly.

## CHAPTER XIX

A DANCE in Silverton was almost a county affair. They had the largest hall in the county and boasted of the best orchestra. The dance usually began about eight o'clock in the evening and rarely if ever ended before eight o'clock the following morning.

And it was not strange on this night that every bit of space in the livery-stable was taken and practically every inch of space at the several hitch-racks was occupied. It was also a big night for the games at the Short Horn saloon, as every cowpuncher made it a point to borrow or draw enough money to make the trip worth while.

Already the rasping notes of a fiddler tuning his instrument filtered out through the open windows of the big upstairs dance-hall across the street from the Short Horn saloon. Cowpunchers, suffering in celluloid collars, tight boots, and exuding odours of Jockey Club and cologne, were at the bar; trying to appear at ease, as if this sartorial splendour were nothing unusual.

From somewhere Slim Hunter had procured an old dress coat, which exhibited a vast expanse of his red-and-green striped shirt, and did not blend well with his light blue trousers and yellow boots. Banty Harrison, sans vest, but with a great striped Ascot tie, was perspiring freely, trying to keep the thing on his collar. But no one criticised their apparel. Every one was there to have a good time, regardless of clothes.

Men shouted at each other and flung their money on the bar or across the green cloth, while the roulette-wheel whizzed and the dealer's voices blended into the babel of voices. Harp had left Miss Miller to the tender mercies of some Silverton ladies and had invaded the Short Horn for a nerve elixir.

Grant, Hendricks, and Leach were at the bar when Harp came in, and Grant went directly to him.

"Where's Brick?" he asked.

Harp shook his head and gave his orders to the busy bartender.

"I dunno, Bill."

"When did yuh see him last, Harp?"

Harp rubbed his nose thoughtfully. Leach had moved in close enough to listen in on the conversation; so Harp did not answer. He took his drink and drew Grant away from the bar, leaving Leach with Hendricks.

“I dunno where he is,” declared Harp. “He didn’t come home last night. I never knowed that McKeever was killed until late to-day.”

“Got any idea where he is, Harp?”

“Not a danged idea. Him and Silent sneaked away from me yesterday, and I ain’t seen ’em since.”

“It’s kinda funny,” mused Grant. “They wanted to hold an inquest over McKeever to-day, but they had to put it off until Brick and Silent showed up. Do yuh suppose they ran into somethin’?”

“Who seen ’em last here?”

“Doctor Bridger. He saw them ride out of town.”

“Uh-huh!” Harp squinted reflectively. “Well, I dunno, Bill.”

Leach walked up to them and spoke directly to Grant.

“Well, does he know anything about them, Grant?”

Grant shook his head and looked at Harp, who was looking curiously at Leach. Harp grinned softly. He could afford to grin now, because he knew that Leach had seen him bring Miss Miller to Silverton.

“Seems funny that the sheriff would avoid the inquest,” said Leach. “Perhaps he had a reason for not wantin’ to be here.”

“I’ll betcha he did,” said Harp. “Brick usually has a good reason for doin’ things.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. Yuh see, Brick ain’t no detective—he’s a man-hunter.”

“Man-hunter?” Leach laughed sarcastically. “Who did he ever catch?”

“You better read local hist’ry,” advised Harp.

“Brick got a few of ’em,” nodded Grant.

“History, eh?” Leach grinned. “I suppose he has had it all written out and bound in books.”

“All except the last chapter,” said Harp seriously. “He’s writin’ that now, I reckon.”

Leach laughed and walked away.

“He don’t like you, Harp,” smiled Grant.

“By golly, that just about breaks me all up, Bill. When I look at him and know he don’t like me, I just tremble with emotion. Yes, sir, it’s just like havin’ a chill. Yuh goin’ to the dance?”

“No, I don’t think so. I ain’t dressed for dancin’.”

“Yuh might borrow Slim Hunter’s coat. He looks just like one of them there doctor’s charts, which shows yore insides, after yore kinda opened up that-a-way. That shirt sure does correspond to them coloured heart, liver, and lung things.”

Banty Harrison came shoving his way past, but stopped to shake hands with Harp.

“Let’s go over and dance, Harp,” he panted. “It’s too danged hot in here. I’m goin’ to git a string, if I can find one, and tie this imported necktie to the top button of my pants. Dang anybody that would sell a tie like this! Yuh got to be a civil engineer to even tie it. C’mon!”

“Won’t she stay down, Banty?” queried Harp.

“Stay ——! Every time I start talkin’ and kinda wigglin’ my throat, the darned thing comes up and bumps my lower lip.”

Hank Stagg came past them and went to the bar. He was already half-drunk and talking loud. Ike Welden joined him at the bar, but Welden was still sober. Santel came in and walked past them, his eyes sweeping the smoke-filled room. Hank called to him, asking him to have a drink, but Santel either did not hear him or did not want to drink with him.

“There’ll be —— to pay before mornin’,” declared Banty. “Yuh can’t put a gang like that together, along with plenty of hooch and not have trouble. Whisky and six-guns don’t mix. —— this necktie!”

“Why don’tcha pin it down to yore shirt?”

“Yeah—and have it pull my shirt off, eh? Harp, you ain’t got no idea of the —— in this necktie. What I need is a collar with a pistol-grip finish instead of this ——ed slick thing.”

“Cowboys goin’ to a dance, eh?” Slim Hunter stopped to look them over.

“Introducin’ to you,” said Harp seriously, “the effect of tobacco and alcohol on the intestines.”

“Jist when do I laugh?” asked Slim.

“Next time yuh go to the bar.”

“Uh-huh!” Slim grinned and went on. He had no idea what Harp meant.

“What’ll make him laugh when he goes to the bar?” queried Banty.

“He’ll be facin’ the bar,” said Harp wearily, “and the back-bar mirror ought to show him what I meant.”

“Haw, haw, haw! Aw, —— this tie! Can’t even laugh. C’mon and help me find a guy-rope. By golly, I won’t stand for my own clothes slappin’ me in the mouth.”

They crossed the street and procured a length of string at a general store, with which they secured the tie to a suspender button, much to Banty's delight. Then they went upstairs into the dance-hall, where the floor was rapidly filling for the first quadrille.

It was possibly an hour later when Brick and Silent dismounted at the hitch-rack across the street from the Short Horn saloon. Whizzer had slept nearly all the way, but he was awake now and Silent turned him over to Brick.

The music had just stopped in the dance-hall, and a number of men were straggling across the street toward the Short Horn, laughing and talking. Brick heard Harp's voice, arguing with somebody over the proper way to hold down a necktie.

"C'mon!" said Brick softly.

He hoisted little Whizzer up on his shoulder and walked boldly into the saloon. The place was filled with men, hazy with tobacco smoke. Brick shoved his way to the bar and stood Whizzer on its polished top.

It was several moments before any one recognised the youngster, who was looking them over with his wide brown eyes. It was Mose La Clede, the big trapper, who made the discovery, and his voice boomed loudly above the roar of conversation:—

"By ——! De los' boy! Look! I'm be a —— liar, if it ain't de leetle boy 'imself."

The roar of conversation broke abruptly. It was not a slowing down, but a sudden silence. Even the whirr of the roulette and the rattle of poker-chips was stilled, as the crowd stared at the little overall-clad, dirty-faced youngster on the bar, who was looking at them.

There was a cleared space of several yards between Brick and the crowd. Silent had halted nearer the door. Brick could see Santel in the crowd. Hank Stagg was at the bar, just beyond Brick, staring wide-eyed at the youngster.

And before any one could voice a question Leach came striding in past Silent, but stopped quickly, wondering at the silence. He turned his eyes and saw little Whizzer. Meecham, well-dressed, came in, glanced quickly at the crowd and stopped almost against Silent.

"Well, I'll be ——ed if it ain't the kid!" exclaimed Bill Grant. "Where did yuh find him, Brick?"

But Brick did not reply. He was watching Whizzer.

"Baldy Malloy's kid, eh?" Leach's voice sounded as if he were suffering from a cold.

A man laughed, and Brick glanced in that direction to see Ike Welden standing up in a chair against the wall. Ike was partly drunk. Brick's sweeping glance included Santel, who was leaning forward, his face tense, shoulders hunched.

"Take her easy, Brick."

It was Harp speaking from the far end of the bar. He knew that trouble was coming. A man began crying. It was Hank Stagg. Perhaps it was from the effects of liquor—perhaps not. Meecham started to back away, but Silent blocked him.

Leach forced a smile and moved slightly closer. Whizzer was staring at Leach and now he grasped Brick's shoulder.

"Don't let him touch me!" The childish treble sounded loud in the silence of the room.

Leach stopped.

"Why not, Whizzer?" Brick's lips barely moved and he did not turn his head. "Are yuh afraid of him, buddy?"

"He's got warts on his hands. And there's the frog on his holster."

"Warts? Frog?"

Brick's eyes shifted to Leach's hands, which were turned away, as if Leach were trying to conceal them. But he could not conceal the holster, on which was the leaping-frog design in silver. Perhaps it was the symbol of a swift draw.

The crowd shifted uneasily, and many of the men craned their necks for a sight of the warts and silver frog. Leach turned the backs of his hands against his body, as though to hide the tell-tale markings.

"What about the warts and frogs, Whizzer?" whispered a cowboy.

Leach's face had gone white, his jaw tensed. Hank Stagg's sobs were the only audible noise, except the heavy breathing of the crowd.

"Tell us about it, buddy," said Brick softly. "He ain't goin' to hurt yuh."

"He's got warts on his hands," repeated the little fellow. "The man had 'em—the man who wore the cloth over his face—and he had the frog on his holster. Frogs make warts, don'tcha know it? I don't like warts—and he's got 'em."

The little fellow, in spite of his treatment, had seen the warty hands and the leaping-frog, and they had impressed him so strongly that there was no chance of a mistake.

"Good boy," breathed Brick, and then a little louder, "Bartender, will yuh please put this boy on yore side of the bar?"

The frightened drink-dispenser shuffled down behind Brick, lifted the youngster down and went quickly back to the farther end of the bar. Leach laughed. Somewhere a handful of poker-chips slid from a table and rattled to the floor.

“What’s it all about, anyway?” demanded Leach.

Brick leaned back against the bar. His face was drawn, blue, in that weak light, and he seemed tired. But those who knew him well, knew that he was dangerous now. The light-hearted, devil-may-care Brick Davidson was gone, and in his place was the sheriff of Sun Dog, a man-hunter—not a detective.

“It took quite a while,” Brick’s voice was pitched low, but plainly audible to every one in the room. “Sometimes things take a long time to work out. A lot of yuh don’t know that Baldy Malloy was shot through the heart before he went over the grade. I knew it, Doctor Meyers knew it, and Grant and Santel knew it. I reckon it’s been kept sort of a secret.

“I reckon that Baldy was shot because he bucked against doin’ any more crooked work. It kinda looks like Baldy wanted to go straight on account of his little kid; but they couldn’t let him get away, ’cause he felt indebted to me for savin’ his kid.”

“You ain’t guessin’ everything are yuh, Brick?” queried Bill Grant anxiously.

“Not all of it. A lot of it is guesswork, Bill; but I’ll bet my life that I’m close to the bull’s-eye. It’s a funny thing——” Brick shifted slightly and a grin passed his lips——“we’ve had several robberies, which never occurred. Baldy Malloy was held up, Ike Welden was held up, and the Silverton bank was robbed.

“The robbers in each case were described as bein’ the same men. And the funny part of it all is the fact that the descriptions cover me, Harp Harris and Silent Slade. Nobody seen ’em except Baldy Malloy, Ike Welden and Meecham. Gents, those robberies never occurred.”

“The —— they didn’t!” Ike Welden’s voice squeaked like a discordant fiddle. “What in —— do you know about it?”

“Why——why, that is ridiculous,” faltered Meecham.

“And yuh better stay where yuh are,” warned Silent, as Meecham moved slightly backward.

“Baldy Malloy’s shack caught fire just before the bank robbery,” continued Brick. “Everybody went to the fire. It sure was a good chance to rob the bank.”

“Just what is all this conversation about?” queried Leach.

He folded his arms and squinted at Brick, trying to cover his nervousness.

Brick laughed at him—with his mouth; the rest of his face tensed, serious. The crowd shifted audibly.

“Mebbe yuh don’t get the drift of it, Leach,” said Brick. “I’ll start a little further back in hist’ry and give yuh a chance to foller me.”

“It began in Idaho.”

Leach jerked slightly and his eyes flashed to Hank Stagg, who was slouched at the bar, looking down at the floor. Hank had stopped crying now and his thumbs were hooked over his cartridge-belt.

“Some folks got to understand each other—in Idaho,” continued Brick. “One of ’em came to Sun Dog and got in kinda solid. He made money, I reckon. But all the time he was lookin’ for bigger money; so he got them Idaho folks to migrate down here, and they formed kind of a little corporation to loot Sun Dog.

“It sure worked, too. But they got scared of the sheriff’s office. The big haul wasn’t pulled yet, and they wanted to keep me quiet until that was cinched; so they imported a detective to handle the mystery.”

Every eye in the place flashed to Santel, but he never moved. His eyes were watching Leach. Even Brick’s statement did not seem to impress him.

“They got him in Idaho, too,” said Brick softly. “He was known as a killer in that country. There’s prob’ly several sheriffs up there that would like to put handcuffs on him.”

But even the direct accusation did not affect Santel. Men moved away from him, but he remained as immovable as a statue.

And Brick knew that Santel was a gun-fighter. His gun had been swung around on his thigh, all ready for a quick draw. Brick’s eyes narrowed as he studied Santel’s pose. The room was as silent as a tomb.

“I kinda blame myself for Soapy Caswell gettin’ shot,” said Brick. “Yuh see, I lied about that hold-up. I told ’em down here that Soapy got through to the Red Hill mine with the twenty-seven-thousand-dollar pay-roll, when I knew better.

“It must ’a’ been that Soapy got hold of a dummy pay-roll, and that the gang couldn’t get in touch with the man who was to pull off the job to see if he had failed; so they shot Soapy and blew the mine safe to try and save themselves. They thought that I knew it was a dummy pay-roll and that I could trace ’em through the man who fixed up the dummy for Soapy; so they dynamited my office and burned half of the town of Marlin.”

Santel laughed hollowly, as if greatly amused. Leach shot a glance at Santel and his hands dropped to his sides.

“Didn’t trust me, eh?” said Santel.

There was a stony stare to his eyes, the flat, baleful stare of a rattlesnake. He was looking straight at Leach, paying attention to Brick’s conversation, but not looking at him.

“Who didn’t trust yuh?” asked Leach hoarsely.

“Didn’t trust me,” repeated Santel flatly. “Oh, I knew you wouldn’t, Leach.”

“I seen you shoot Mostano to-day, Santel,” said Brick.

“Yeah,” Santel nodded, but did not look at Brick. “What about the frog on the holster? What did the kid mean?”

“He remembered that much,” said Brick tensely. “When his dad was shot and the stage swung off the grade, Whizzer was dumped off on to the grade. He was kinda badly hurt, but he remembers hearin’ the shot fired. The man who fired the shot wore a mask, but the kid remembers that he had a frog on his holster.”

“Leach!” It was Santel’s voice. He took a step ahead, his shoulders hunched, his right hand swinging like a slow pendulum at his side. Now he swayed forward on the balls of his feet, and his eyes were almost closed. In fact, it was impossible to see that he had any eyes. His shoulders twitched slightly. At sound of his name, Leach jerked forward, his right arm crooked at the elbow, his right hand splayed open above the butt of his gun.

For a space of possibly five seconds these two men faced each other silently. There was not a sound from any part of the big room. Then Santel said slowly:—

“—— you, I thought you was the one.”

As Santel spoke he whipped out his gun. But Leach was not caught napping, and two guns thundered almost at the same time. There was only a short space between them—too short for either to miss. It was all being done in split-second time.

Brick felt the burning shock of a bullet into the muscles of his left arm, which staggered him back against the bar; but his gun came up and he fired at Ike Welden, who was standing on the chair shooting at him. Leach was falling into Brick, who fended him away with his gun-hand. Santel was on his hands and knees, coughing his life away, and Silent, with Meecham clutched in a wrestling grip, came crashing down in the middle of the floor.

Ike Welden was still on his feet, trying to pull the trigger, a vacant look on his face, as he leaned against the wall. The crowd had scattered like a covey of frightened quail. Some of them were flat on the floor, several were behind the bar, and many of them had faded out through the rear exit.

Hank Stagg was the only one who did not show fight. He still leaned against the bar, dazed, half-crying. The shooting had ceased now. Harp stepped away from the far end of the bar, a smoking gun in his hand, and stared at Ike Welden, who seemed asleep, standing up in the chair.

“He’s dead, Brick,” said Harp in an awed voice. “He’s dead, but won’t lay down.”

Then Hank Stagg suddenly came to life. With an animal-like scream he sprang away from the bar, drawing his gun, and whirling on Brick, only to be met with a bullet that caused him to spin on his heel, and a second later he went crashing to the floor, with Harp on his back.

Brick backed against the bar and looked at the wreckage. Leach was sprawled on his face, arms outstretched; Silent was sitting on the prostrate figure of Meecham, while Harp sat on Hank Stagg and tried to find out just how badly hurt his victim was. Santel was still on his hands and knees, but now he sat down, supporting himself with one arm, while he tried to brush the mists away from his muddled brain.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” laughed Santel chokingly. “That was a good fight. I didn’t think Leach was so fast, —— his murderin’ soul! But,” he shook his head dazedly, “it’s good to go out in a fair fight.”

The crowd came drifting back in, questioning, wondering, coughing from the fumes of burnt powder which clouded the room.

There was silence, as the crowd realised the tragedy which had just been enacted. Came a crash, as Ike Welden fell from his standing position on the chair, and the crowd started to duck for cover again.

“He decided to quit,” said Harp blandly. “Takes some folks a long time to find out anythin’.”

Santel looked around the circle of faces until he found Brick. He seemed dazed, sick, but his voice was still strong enough.

“Much obliged, Davidson,” he said. “I was in on the deal, but you found out more than I could. Leach had me come here to keep you from investigating. He wanted me to kill yuh.” Santel hesitated, forcing a grin. “I suppose I would, if they hadn’t killed Baldy Malloy.”

“They offered me a thousand dollars to force yuh into a gun-fight, and I—I fell down on the job. I’m glad I did—now.

“I held up you and Soapy Caswell. That was a dummy sack. They didn’t trust me. Meecham fixed it up. They took a —— of a big chance, didn’t they? Leach wanted to loot Sun Dog, just like yuh said. Baldy and Ike Welden robbed themselves, and then Ike set the fire that day while Meecham hid the bank money.

“They all gave the same description. Leach thought it might put you three fellers in bad—and he wanted to elect Hank Stagg. Leach wanted too much, I reckon. I—I never got my split of the money, but it’s in the cellar of Meecham’s house. Welden set the dynamite off under your office, and Hank Stagg shot Soapy Caswell.

“Meecham was out there the night you found Mostano killin’ the beef, and one of your bullets hit his saddle. He came huntin’ for me to find out about the pay-roll. I don’t know who killed the livery-stable keeper, but it was some of the gang. They didn’t want you to question him about the bullet-hole in the saddle.

“You play a square game, Davidson. Some of them tried to tell me that you wasn’t a gun-man; that you was a dirty coward, but I know men—and yo’re one.”

“Thank yuh, Santel,” said Brick weakly. “That all proves that I’m a good guesser. But I don’t know yet why yuh killed Leach.”

Santel smiled softly and his eyes wandered around the circle of interested faces.

“Some of yuh take care of the kid, will yuh?” His voice was weaker now. “Baldy was my brother. I—I took the name of Santel, because I was no good—a killer. Baldy must ’a’ been led into doin’ wrong. They named the kid after me—Whizzer. Hank knew this, but Leach didn’t until later—and he was afraid I’d find it out. I killed Mostano to-day, but I couldn’t find the kid.”

“By golly, that’s where the resemblance came in, Brick,” exclaimed Harp. “Little Whizzer looks like Santel.”

“I’ll take care of Whizzer,” said Brick.

“We’ll all take care of Whizzer,” amended Silent. “Don’tcha never worry about that, Santel.”

Santel nodded, as if satisfied, and little Whizzer came out from behind the bar, his eyes wide with fright, and ran to Brick.

“Geeminy gosh!” he shrilled. “Is all that shootin’ over?”

“It’s all over, buddy,” said Brick weakly. “There ain’t goin’ to be no more shootin’—not for a while, I hope.”

“I hope there never will be again,” said Santel slowly. “It don’t pay.”

He swayed sidewise on his hands and sank down on his face.

“When do I see my daddy?” asked Whizzer impatiently.

Brick drew the youngster to him with his one good arm, and looked around at the crowd, as if appealing to them for an answer.

“You better see a doctor, Brick,” advised Harp. “You’re losin’ a lot of blood.”

“Ain’t nobody goin’ to tell me where my dad is?” demanded Whizzer. “Is he out on his trip?”

“Yeah, he’s out on his trip,” whispered Brick.

Whizzer turned his head and looked out through the open door into the darkness. He knew that his father always came home before dark. His eyes came back to Brick, as he said:—

“He must be takin’ a long trip this time.”

“Yeah, a long trip, buddy,” breathed Brick.

There was a silence. Then:—

“Aw-w-w, —— the luck!”

It was Banty Harrison. Tears were trickling down his cheeks, and his lips trembled. He started angrily toward the door, but turned and looked back at the crowd.

“Wh-what’s the matter?” choked Harp.

Banty pointed at his flopping necktie, which had crawled up above the top of his celluloid collar.

“That —— string busted—that’s what’s the matter.”

Some one had blurted out the news of the big gun-fight, and the dancers were crowding into the street, trying to find out just who had been killed. Harp came ambling across the street and ran into Della Miller, who grasped him by the arm.

“Oh, Harp, they didn’t hurt you?” she blurted. It was the first time she had ever called him by his nickname.

“Never touched me, Della,” he choked. “We cleaned ’em all up. There ain’t no mystery in Sun Dog no more. Everythin’ is settled. Santel confessed everythin’ before he died. There’s only one big thing to be settled yet.”

“What is that?” she whispered. Harp put his arm around her shoulders, oblivious to everyone and everything.

“It’s just a personal matter, honey,” he said softly. “The lootin’ of Sun Dog is over.”

She turned her face and looked up at him smiling, while Brick Davidson, with little Whizzer clinging to his hand, went down the street hunting for a doctor, and the dance orchestra struck up a waltz.

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## 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 *Sun-Dog Loot* by Wilbur C. Tuttle]