

HOPALONG CASSIDY TAKES CARDS



"Never stop a crooked dealer till the last card falls,"
says Hopalong Cassidy to Mesquite Jenkins in this
latest novel of Mulford's most beloved characters.

CLARENCE E. MULFORD

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Hopalong Cassidy Takes Cards



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Hopalong Cassidy Takes Cards

TWO THINGS, among countless thousands of others, were occurring simultaneously: Hopalong Cassidy, leaving a deputy to hold down the sheriff's office, was on his way to the Double Y, the ranch which he and Buck Peters jointly owned; and a considerable distance south of the town he had just left, another man was riding, bound for this town and for the Double Y beyond it.

On Hopalong's face was the suggestion of a frown, an expression not entirely caused by the deep thought going on behind it. He was puzzled and uneasy, and his easily aroused suspicions were telling him that all was not well, that a game was being played and that it was the kind of a game in which honest sheriffs, by the nature of their office, should take cards. The fact that there was not a thing on which he could definitely lay a finger did not ease him any.

The trail unwound and passed behind him without him being conscious of the progress made, and when the horse turned the corner of a butte and headed across the range toward the Double Y buildings its rider was mildly surprised.

The other man, years younger than Hopalong, rode steadily, his eyes on the farthestmost bit of trail before him. Mesquite Jenkins' eager gaze was at last rewarded, for late in the afternoon the little village of Twin River pushed up into sight, and it was not long thereafter that he crossed the railroad tracks and came to the main street. Although he had ridden steadily since morning he did not draw rein. Having so little farther to go, his hunger could wait. Being hungry and remaining so was no new experience to him. He glanced at the sheriff's office and at the strange man standing at the window, whose badge proclaimed his office. The little room was open to the rider's view and the sheriff himself was not to be seen. One horse, jerking its skin for the dislodgment of flies, stood at the tie rail. It evidently belonged to the deputy. The rider faced forward again, saw a man he knew and raised an arm in salute.

"Seen Cassidy?" he asked without checking his horse's slow walk.

"Hello, Mesquite! Yeah, he's out to th' ranch. You just get back?"

Mesquite nodded and kept on going, glad that his long journey was all but finished. Day after day he had ridden from morning until night on this long trip up from the southern cattle country and now he was almost back to his starting point of more than a year before.

He shook his head and smiled grimly. At that time he had ridden off to pay a visit to Johnny Nelson and the SV ranch and to enjoy any incidental excitements which might arise along the way; but he had tarried in his riding to get mixed up in two range wars which really were none of his business and had escaped matrimony by the skin of his teeth. He had not reached the SV and Johnny and now was almost back to the starting point, eager and hungry for the companionship and understanding of his friend Hopalong. His first impelling need for Hopalong had died out in minute degrees as the miles had flown backward, but he still was eager to meet him.

The bond between these two men was far from casual. It was almost that of father and son, both loyal. Mesquite wanted to talk things over with the man who had done more for him than had been done by any other man on earth. His contract with Sarah Jordan, back on the Three J ranch a thousand miles behind him, had shaken him to the marrow, and it had required all his will power to turn his horse's head and ride again upon his way. He was a tumbleweed and must be free to roll. The shackles of matrimony were not for him or his kind.

At the far end of this steadily shortening trail lay the Double Y, and in its ranch house were three people engaged in a mild argument, which by now was practically settled.

Hopalong smiled across the table at his old friend and partner, whose face was still flushed from the heat of battle, and then let his gaze drift on and come to rest on the face of Buck's wife, a placid face and one which retained most of the beauty of its earlier years. When beauty has brains, steadfastness and an even disposition behind it then it is indeed beauty of a sort which is not so quick to fade. Rose Peters had that kind. Hopalong well knew her strength of character, how well she controlled what temper she had. In all ways she was a sturdy woman. And on the face he looked upon he found a quiet understanding of his position in the argument: Rose Peters did not want her husband to go forth to the wars, but she gave Buck no intimation of it. She knew him too well. She also knew that the quick heat generated in arguments between these two men really would burn nothing.

"Well, I reckon it *is* yore job now," reluctantly growled Buck, shifting restlessly on his chair and having in mind that the duties of the sheriff's office had been his own but a few years before and forgetting that his first deputy had done all the real work. That was his trouble, that remembrance of office: in his mind he was still wedded to those duties, still the man to tell others what to do. The increasing responsibilities of a steadily growing

ranch, the lack of lawless threats against its welfare and the gently increasing inertia of his growing years had persuaded him to step aside in favor of a younger and—if the truth be told—a better man. His present job was better suited to him, for as a cowman he was almost without a peer for hundreds of miles.

He turned suddenly and faced that younger man and felt a slight irritation because of the obvious sympathetic understanding between Rose and Hopalong, an irritation caused by their wordless unity in this matter. That it went no farther he was well aware, for if there was one thing in life of which he was certain, it was the abiding loyalty of these two. It was not the first time that they had quietly joined to oppose him and, he thought with a sigh, it would not be the last; and somehow they were usually right.

“Just th’ same,” he growled, scowling at them in turn, “I *oughta* go with you. Somebody’s gotta go!”

“You’ve got to stay here, where yo’re badly needed,” said Hopalong for the second or sixth or sixteenth time. Buck was not too old to go along; but Buck, having known and exercised authority during all the mature years of his life, would likely feel a burst of it coming on him at the wrong time and take the bit in his teeth to run the wrong way. And for moments where instant decisions must be right, Buck was slowing a little.

“Yes, yes, yes!” snorted Buck. “You’ve only told me that a couple of dozen times! You figger I’m hard of hearin’?”

“It ain’t a matter of yore ears, Buck; it’s what’s between ’em that’s hard,” said Hopalong and laughed.

“That so?” growled Buck and got back upon the main track again. “Why didn’t they say somethin’ about it when they first suspicioned that things wasn’t just right? Why didn’t they make their holler then? First thing we”—from which it might be suspected that he was still sheriff in spirit—“knowed about it was when we was told that we wasn’t doin’ our duty over in th’ other end of th’ county! An’ then we was told roundabout! You reckon they figger we’re mind readers?”

“Reckon not,” replied Hopalong with a smile which was a trifle grim. “But I’m figgerin’ on tryin’ my hand at some mind readin’ just th’ same.”

“What you mean?” barked Buck, his interest flaring.

“Not nothin’ that I can put a handle to,” answered Hopalong, his hand thoughtlessly toying with the badge on his vest. He glanced quickly at Rose and then looked back at his partner. “I don’t know just what I mean.”

“Huh!” said Buck, sitting suddenly upright. “Testin’ th’ wind already, are you?” he demanded. He had heard that remark about handles many times in

the long procession of the years which made up the past for these two men; and always the missing handle had been found, and always it had been found in strife and danger and powder smoke. He was peering out from beneath shaggy eyebrows, intently studying the younger man, and he slowly began to shake his head. This time, too, the handle would be found in powder smoke. If he did not have this triply damned ranch on his hands he would gladly aid in the finding of the missing handle.

"Reckon I better go with you anyhow," he growled, squirming anew. "What you figgerin' to do?"

"I figger to do some hossback ridin'; an' you stay where yo're needed, an' that's right here," replied Hopalong, and his eyes glowed at the expression on Rose Peters' face. Wise old Buck. Huh—few men were wise in the choosing of their mates; they did not choose them by the exercise of wisdom. *Lucky* Buck. "I'd feel a sight easier in my mind if I knowed that you had tight hold of things here on th' ranch."

"Yes!" snapped Buck. "*You* do some hossback ridin', an' leave *me* with th' spring roundup on my hands!"

Hopalong smiled broadly, well knowing the quality of the outfit which would handle that roundup. Their roundups ran like a wheel on a well-greased axle. All Buck would have to do with the work would be to take the tally sheets and then chew pencils in furious but misguided efforts to add up the figures and copy them in the book; and then lose his temper, like as not, and pass the mathematics on to Rose. He looked at Buck and laughed.

"You afraid you can't run a roundup without me?" he asked and saw that the barb had touched tender flesh.

"Run it without you!" snorted Buck. "Hell! I handled roundups before you was born!"

If that were so, thought Hopalong, then Buck had handled roundups from his crib, because there was not nearly that much difference between their ages; but he let the remark pass.

"Then I reckon you've had experience enough to be able to run this one without wantin' me around," he said and chuckled. "It'll mebby work some of th' fat out from under yore hat."

A slow grin slid over Buck's face, and he exchanged smiles with his wife. Then he looked at Hopalong.

"Who you figger on takin' with you on this war party?" he demanded, the roundup forgotten.

Hopalong knew the reason for that question. It sounded selfish, but in matters concerning the welfare of his friends Buck was not that kind of man.

Buck was wondering whether he would have to replace ropers, iron handlers or cutters-out. Every rider was needed on the ranch, and extra men would have to be hired until the last calf was branded and the wagons headed for home; so it was not any threatened shortage of man power which prompted Buck's question. There were men in plenty to be had.

"Nobody," answered Hopalong.

"Huh?" asked Buck in surprise.

"Nobody," repeated Hopalong.

"You mean to say you figger to play a lone hand up in *that* country?" demanded Buck rather sharply. He knew that part of the country: wild, broken on its eastern side, small mountain ranges, with deep valleys between, in its central part. It had been a famous refuge for wanted men and was still somewhat odorous.

"Why not?" asked Hopalong and shook his head gently at the look of concern faintly showing on Rose Peters' face. Rose was remembering how hard this quiet man had taken the loss of his wife and son; and she often wondered if his life meant nearly as much to him now as it once had meant. And then she banished the guilty and furtive thought which followed, for she also remembered that if he ever had had such a thought in mind it would have been in those days closer to the tragedy. Then and not now would have been the time to do foolish and desperate things. Her sudden smile was reassuring.

"I'm tellin' you that you ain't goin' in there alone," said Buck flatly. For a moment he was silent. "Let's see: in th' old days before Johnny got married an' went South you woulda taken him. Why don't you take Red an' Skinny or Red an' Lanky?"

Good old Buck—offering two aces of the roundup operations. Hopalong's eyes glowed for an instant, saw the suggestion of pride on Rose's face and made his own eyes opaque and baffling.

"I'll be too busy to do any wet-nursin'," he said. "Don't want none of 'em." He, too, could be generous.

"Wet-nursin' *them* fellers?" snapped Buck. "You not only think a hell of a lot of yoreself, but yo're as stubborn as ever!" he said, entirely overlooking his own well-known brand of stubbornness. He caught and read the glimmer of a smile on his friend's face, and his own expression cleared. "Huh!" he grunted and grinned. "When you aimin' to start?"

Hopalong shook his head slowly.

"Don't know. Tomorrow, mebby; an mebby later. Seein' they wasn't in no hurry sendin' in their roundabout yap for help, I don't see why I should

be in any hurry helpin' 'em. Somehow it don't smell right; it don't smell right a-tall. Be in plenty of time, whenever I do start."

"Suspicious as ever, huh?" said Buck. "Well, we'll wrastle this all out later; but I'm tellin' you here an' now that you ain't goin' in there alone." He drew a deep breath and relaxed. "Heard th' boys sayin' you got a new pair of guns. Why don't you throw that buffalo Sharps away an' get an up-to-date rifle? Man in yore job oughta have th' best there is."

"I got th' best," replied Hopalong. "I didn't buy no new pair of guns. Just had new barrels and some new parts fitted to th' old frames. An' as for gettin' a new rifle, th' up-to-daters that I've seen are all express an' ain't worth a damn for long range. I'm stickin' to that Sharps. Th' hoss carries its weight, don't he?"

"That's mebbby why there are so many sway-backs in our cavies," chuckled Buck. "Reckon mebbby yo're right; it's a grand old rifle, an' you know her ways. But it's a hell of a load for a man to tote."

Hopalong reached down, picked his hat from the floor and slowly got to his feet. He nodded to Rose and then looked at Buck.

"Figger I'll head for th' bunkhouse an' then go on over to my shack. Want to think a few things over."

"You can head for th' bunkhouse an' yore shack," said Buck, "but you'll eat yore supper right here with us."

"Be right glad to," replied the sheriff and walked from the room.

Rose listened to the slow steps, peculiarly accented by the walker's slight limp. They died out, and she faced her husband. Her smile was gone.

"Will it be all right for him to go into that country alone?" she asked.

Buck thoughtfully scratched his head and accused himself of having talked too much.

"It wouldn't be all right for nobody else to go in there alone, but I reckon that red-headed hombre can get along right well in there or any place else. It's for th' other fellers to do th' worryin'. What are we havin' for supper?"

The shadow of the bunkhouse roof crept steadily farther from the man who sat on the earth and leaned back against the east wall, his legs stretched out before him on the ground. For comfort's sake he instinctively shifted his position from time to time, and from time to time he absently and almost unknowingly rolled and smoked a cigarette, the smoke curling up from his nostrils and flowing along the under side of his wide hatbrim, to stream suddenly upward and become lost.

The bellowing summons from the ranch-house porch did not break through the wall of his preoccupation, and the first that he suspected that supper was ready and getting cold was when heavy footfalls hammered around the corner of the building and Buck stopped and looked down at him. Hopalong came to with a little start, added one more butt to the sizable pile at his side and slowly stood up, stretching and flexing to get the numb feeling out of some of his muscles.

“Reckon I was a long way off,” he said and smiled.

“Reckon you was!” snapped Buck. “You wasn’t in yore shack nor th’ corrals nor th’ bunkhouse. I knowed you was around som’ers because yore hosses was there in th’ corral. When I looked in th’ bunkhouse I saw smoke streamin’ up. Don’t you know it’s time to eat?”

“Yeah, now I do,” answered Hopalong and fell into step with his friend and partner.

“When we’re in th’ house we won’t say no more about that country up there bein’ tough,” said Buck.

“All right,” chuckled Hopalong. “It wasn’t me that said it was.”

“You got anythin’ figgered out?” asked Buck carelessly.

“Well, I kinda got th’ frame made, only there ain’t no picture to put in it.”

“Well, that’s somethin’,” replied Buck rather dubiously.

“It would be except you can put *any* kinda picture in a frame,” said Hopalong. “An’ th’ hell of it is, it’s th’ picture that counts.”

“But you shore shouldn’t go in there alone,” said Buck.

“We’ll talk that over at supper,” replied Hopalong.

“Like hell!” snapped Buck.

“We will unless I take no man from th’ roundup,” countered Hopalong and laughed as he slapped his partner’s back.

LIGHTS SHONE in the ranch-house windows, and Mesquite chuckled with elation; he was back again! Hopalong, likely enough, would be in the bunkhouse with the rest of the boys. He clattered to a stop before the door, vaulted from the saddle and stepped into the big room. Two men whom he never had seen before were eating supper, and they looked up in some surprise at his precipitate entry; and then the cook stuck his head in the galley doorway, opened his mouth and gaped foolishly.

“Damned if it ain’t Mesquite!” he shouted. “Thought you was down South. You back to stay?”

“Hope so,” answered Mesquite, grinning from sheer pleasure. “You look just as ornery as you did when I left. How are you?”

“Fair to middlin’,” answered the cook. “Yo’re lookin’ right good yoreself, though a mite tired.”

“Am tired,” replied Mesquite. “Where’s Hoppy?”

“Up at th’ ranch house, eatin’ supper with Buck an’ Rose. You had yourn?”

Mesquite was very hungry, and he would disturb the ranch-house meal if he went up there now. After so many days, so many miles, a few more minutes would not really matter, keen and eager though he was. But something was not right here. Then he smiled as he scaled his hat across the room onto a vacant bunk and turned toward the outer door to go to the wash bench. He missed the usual bunkhouse crowd, but most of the riders of this outfit were married and ate their meals in their own quarters with their wives. This accounted for there being only two men at the bunkhouse table. He would soon make the number three.

“Dish it up, cook, an’ plenty of it,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll show you how to eat it. I can eat nails.”

The smiling cook laughed loudly.

“You ain’t tellin’ me nothin’ I don’t know. I’ve seen you eat before.”

Mesquite soon re-entered the room, hung his gun belts on the back of a chair and paused at the cook’s gesture.

“Meet Gawrge Shaw an’ his brother Bill,” said the boss of the galley. “Boys, this is Mesquite Jenkins, that you’ve mebbly heard about. He shore got back in right good season. Mesquite, we’re just gettin’ ready to head full

tilt into th' roundup. There's extry hands hired, but Buck will be right glad to see you an' that rope of yourn."

"Glad to meet you, boys," said Mesquite, throwing one leg over the back of the chair and dropping onto it. "An' I'm right glad that there's plenty of hard work ahead. That's jest about what I need to get toughened up ag'in."

"Gettin' soft from loafin', huh?" asked the cook, grinning widely; but he was wondering how a man who looked like whalebone and iron could think that he was soft.

"Yeah, I'm gettin' soft," answered Mesquite and frowned. The softness he was suffering from was not physical.

The table talk was scanty, polite and perfunctory, the latter two often going together. Mesquite pushed his plate from him and reached for a toothpick. Soft? Huh. He was hard as wrought-iron nails from the soles of his feet to the top of his head; muscle, sinew and bone with but few pounds of excess padding; and yet he was soft! But he was not as soft as he had been, thanks to the fight he had waged with himself for nearly a thousand horseback miles. He'd set a pace in the coming roundup that would make somebody sweat and swear to keep up with him. He wondered if that kind of softness could ever be entirely worked out of a man or if some of it would stay with him forever, to pester him in moments of temporary weakness. Hopalong would know about that. At least he ought to: he knew about everything that a man wanted to know.

He nodded to George and Bill Shaw as he pushed back from the table, strode to the door and took care of his horse. He was back again! Back with Hoppy, Buck, Red and the others; back where a man spoke what he thought, but was wise to think before he spoke. He wiped his hands on his trousers and headed for the ranch house, still awkward and stiff on his feet from all that ceaseless riding. The rear door was half open, and he pushed it back, stepped across the kitchen and stopped in the dining-room doorway.

Buck stiffened a little with surprise, and his wife showed hers more plainly; but the red-headed gentleman, sitting back easily in his big rocking chair, smiled widely and nodded. Mesquite swiftly thought that the red-headed gentleman was never surprised by anything.

"Hello, Mesquite," he said casually. "Glad to see you."

"Howdy, Buck. Howdy, Mrs Peters," said Mesquite and looked again at the red-headed gentleman in the big rocking chair. "Glad of that, Hoppy. I'm right glad to see you. All of you."

"By Godfrey, here's th' answer!" exploded Buck. "You won't have to go in those damn' hills alone now, Hoppy! An' seein' who yore partner is, I

ain't doin' no more worryin' about you."

Hopalong chuckled, nodded to Buck and looked at the newcomer.

"I don't want to go in alone now," he said, and his face showed a little warmth of feeling. He knew the quality of the young man before him. While he had not made that quality, he had shaped it and directed it and watched it closely. No one he could name would be a better partner. His eyes narrowed a little. "Mesquite, you an' me have got us a job to do."

"Plenty of job, from what I just heard down in th' bunkhouse," replied Mesquite, a little confused. His own face warmed a trifle. The man to whom he was speaking had preached the doctrine of coldness to him, preached it earnestly and often. Right now he knew that he would be better off if he had paid more attention to that advice. He could not change his nature, and by nature he was a tumbleweed. "I reckon my luck's comin' back, me runnin' right smack into th' beginnin' of a calf roundup like this. Shore looks like it."

Hopalong was quietly studying the speaker. So his luck was coming *back*, huh? And he thought he was lucky to run into the hard work of a roundup. He could name plenty who would not call it luck. He smiled again, gently shaking his head.

"That won't be our job, kid," he said. "We may do some roundin' up—we'll have to if we make good on our play—but we won't do it with ropes an' stampin' irons."

Mesquite kept his gaze on his friend's eyes, but he could see the sheriff's badge fastened to the sagging vest. The badge explained the words, and his answering smile was faint but grim. This promised to be even better than working with the cattle.

"You deal 'em, Hoppy; I'll play 'em as they fall," he said, and his pale blue eyes became icy.

"Good Lord. *Sit* down, Mesquite," said Hopalong with a laugh. He leaned over and dragged a rocker closer to his own, patting it suggestively. "Come over here an' sit down," he invited and found pleasure in the catlike smoothness of the youth's answering movements. The bobcat quality was still there.

"Well," said Rose, sighing as she suddenly relaxed. "You boys are in for a long talk, and I've got these dishes to get out of the way." She looked at the newcomer and smiled. "Mesquite, I'm very glad to see you again, and I hope you stay right here where you belong; except, of course, what Hopalong has in mind."

"An' I'm right glad to see you an' Buck an' Hoppy; right glad."

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Rose. “Have you had any supper?”

“Just come from it an’ th’ bunkhouse,” answered Mesquite and seated himself in the rocker as Rose left the room. Hopalong’s heavy hand dropped onto his knee, and the strong fingers bit in. Then it slipped away. Mesquite tingled and reached for tobacco sack and papers. So they had a job to do—to do together! His luck had come all the way back. He carefully rolled the cigarette and waited for someone to speak.

Hopalong glanced at Buck, smiled a little at what he was about to say and then faced the man at his side.

“Th’ reason I wouldn’t take Red or Lanky or Skinny with me on this roundup expedition of mine was not because Buck needed ’em to work th’ cattle,” he said, “but because they are all married. You an’ me, kid, ain’t got nobody dependin’ on us, which is one way of sayin’, too, that we ain’t hobbled. An’ we ain’t been slowed up by too much eatin’, an’ too much loafin’ in an easy chair from suppertime to bedtime, seven nights a week, week in an’ week out.” He gave Buck a sly look and chuckled, the wrinkles deepening around his eyes. Then he sobered. “It’ll mebbly be right tough goin’, unless we can find a way to soften it a bit; an’ we mebbly won’t know friend from enemy.”

“Which means we treat everybody alike,” replied Mesquite, his face hard. “Tough goin’ ain’t strange to me. When do we start?”

“That’s somethin’, or somethin’ more, that I ain’t shore about,” answered Hopalong slowly. “You see, th’ complaint we got was made kinda left-handed, kinda roundabout. It wasn’t made direct to me. I been thinkin’ it over ’most all afternoon, an’ I couldn’t get nowhere a-tall. But I sorta got to suspectin’ that it was a feeler; that somebody wanted to find out, without showin’ any cards, just where I’d set in th’ game, if it was a game. I thought fast enough, however, to send word back th’ same way: roundabout. I gave ’em, whoever they are, th’ idear that I didn’t see no reason to go ridin’ off on no wild-goose chase, workin’ up a lather tryin’ to put salt on th’ tail of some rumor.”

He paused, glanced at Buck and then looked at Mesquite again.

“You see, kid, I went up into that country twice last year,” he continued. “Twice—chasin’ rumors. I didn’t find nothin’ wrong as far as I could see. This is th’ third time that somebody’s hollerin’ wolf, an’ I took it plumb placid.”

Finding that no one had anything to say, he went on again.

“Mebby somebody just wanted to see if I’d let myself get fooled th’ third time,” he said and chuckled softly. “Twice oughta be enough for ’most

anybody, but three times would be enough for even a damn' fool. I'm lettin' it ride at twice, far's anybody knows. Twice fooled an' not fool enough to be fooled ag'in. I just ain't made a move, though it's been more than two weeks since th' last squawk got around to my ears. But after time enough has passed to tempt somebody to start dealin' some cards off th' bottom of th' deck, up there, then me an' you will disappear from around here."

Mesquite looked a little disappointed, for he had hoped for quick action.

"Then we have to hang around here an' wait," he said.

"No, *we* won't," replied Hopalong with a smile. "I do, because a lot of them fellers must know me by sight. If only one of 'em knows me that's enough. I'm figgerin' they don't know you. Now there's a town called Hackamore, about fifty miles on th' other side of that rough country. It's not only outside this county, but it's outside th' state. Although as far as my jurisdiction is concerned one is as bad as th' other. If they're bothered up in th' hill country from this side they just move over to Hackamore an' wait for things to settle. If they're bothered from th' other side they just stay in th' wild country an' don't go to town. More than half that wild country is in this county. What does that tell us?"

He rolled a cigarette and waited for an answer, but none came.

"I don't know how long they been raisin' hell on th' other side of th' line," he went on. "That wouldn't be none of my business, an' they know it. Looks like they was figgerin' to spread their deviltry out a little more an' in my direction. That bunch of hills an' little mountain ranges an' them valleys is a nice layout for somebody that wants to put it to some use. I'm curious to see how soon somebody will use it when they find that I ain't lettin' myself chase down no more rumors. Twice was enough, and I said so, profane. They must reckon that I'm just about a dozen kinds of a plain fool to let myself get fooled three times in a row."

Buck laughed gently, and Mesquite's cold face permitted a faint smile to slip across it.

"Took me four weeks, each time," continued Hopalong. "I wore out my hoss, tired out myself, ran outa grub. I'm tellin' you that some of that country is *wild* country. Only a few trails an' no roads. Lot of little God-forsaken ranches in there, squattin' in good grass valleys, with mountains and high, steep ridges in between. I talked with every one of them fellers that I could find, after I'd looked 'em over without them knowin' it. None of 'em had a complaint to make. I just rode around an' around like a fool dog chasin' his tail. Spent three, four days in Hackamore with some tough eggs that seemed glad to see me. All I did in town was play poker for little stakes

an' buy drinks. Th' poker paid for th' drinks. Then I come on home. I did that twice last year. Nobody who had any brains would do it ag'in. Mebby some of them fellers figger I got brains. What's th' answer?"

"That you won't be fooled ag'in," said Mesquite almost in a whisper.

"Right!" snapped Hopalong, his eyes glinting. "An' this time I won't be fooled because I feel in my bones that somebody is goin' to start dealin' 'em from th' middle of th' pack. *This* time when I go in, it won't be on no wild-goose chase. You never want to stop a crooked dealer till th' last card falls, because until then it ain't a deal; an' no amount of fixin' a deck does anybody any harm until th' play begins. I been settin' back, givin' 'em time to finish th' deal an' mebby push in a few chips. When I figger th' time is right I'm goin' in. I won't know when that time comes around unless somebody tells me. You are goin' in ahead of me."

"Tell me when an' where," said Mesquite.

"It should be now, an' up to Hackamore, ridin' into town from th' other direction," said Hopalong. "What business would you have in Hackamore, what innocent business? You can't tend bar, you can't play cards nor anythin' else that's useful to me right now. What excuse will you have to hang around th' town? Th' town is th' place to watch until it tells you somethin' to go on. Damn it all, vices come in handy!"

"Then you oughta be a right handy man," chuckled Buck, injecting himself into the conversation. He quickly raised a hand. "Wait a minute, Hoppy! When you were up in Hackamore you didn't ride on a few days farther an' visit Whit. That's mebby where you overlooked a bet."

"Whit," said Hopalong and smiled. "H. Whitby Booth. When he was here, years back, I liked him well enough. He was honest an' had plenty of brains, an' he helped us when we needed help. If anybody goes up to pay him a visit it oughta be you. It was yore ranch, yores an' yore partner's then —an' he just about saved it. He turned from cattle to hosses, didn't he? Thought so. Well, that would come easy to an Englishman of his kind, for they shore love hosses. No," he said, shaking his head and dismissing the affairs of H. Whitby Booth, "I didn't visit him."

"No, you didn't," said Buck, a thoughtful expression on his face, "an', like I said, you mebby missed a bet."

Hopalong sensed that there was more than idle talk in Buck's mention of the horse-raising Englishman.

"That's twice you said that," remarked Hopalong. "What bet did I miss?"

"Yes, I said it twice," replied Buck flatly and emphatically. "But it ain't too late to make it now. You just said Mesquite ain't got a real excuse to be seen up around Hackamore or in it. Whit struck me as bein' th' kinda man, once a friend, allus a friend. Him an' me got along right fine. If I wrote him a letter, or *you* did, I reckon mebby he'd fine a job for Mesquite, driftin' a herd of hosses summer grazin'." He chuckled. "Mesquite would have to choose *some* direction to drift that herd, an' if it happened to be in th' general direction of Hackamore, what of it?"

"He'd be lookin' for good grass," mused Hopalong, "an' th' grass north an' west of Hackamore is good enough—or was when I was there. Huh!" He looked at Buck and smiled as he nodded. "You ain't nowhere near as fat under th' hat as some folks figger, Buck. Question is, will Whit do it? I wouldn't want no hoss herd of mine very close to Hackamore."

"Th' way to find that out is to find it out," said Buck, turning to Mesquite. "I'll give you a letter to him, Mesquite; me or Hoppy. I don't reckon he's wearin' no single eyeglass; but if he is don't let it fool you. An' if his talk strikes you as bein' foolish an' funny you want to copper that. He's a real man with plenty of brains an' guts. I'd back him in any play he makes."

"Yes," said Hopalong with a nod, his thoughts racing through the past, "so would I, I reckon. Whit thinkin' of th' cattle dip that time just about saved every head of cattle on this ranch." He shook his head. "I'll never forget that fight ag'in th' itch as long as I live! It was touch an' go. We shore had more than our share of trouble in them days, Buck."

Buck nodded, and his mind went back to the days in question, the days of the last ditch stand.

"No question about it," he said. "He saved th' Double Y. Of course he was lookin' after McAllister's interest; but seein' that George McAllister was my partner then, Whit was helpin' me as much as he was George." Realizing that all this was puzzling to Mesquite, Buck explained briefly.

"Frenchy McAllister was my partner in this ranch when we started it years ago," he said. "Frenchy died, an' his brother George inherited his share. Th' time came when I could buy George out, an' then Hoppy bought a part of that. I reckon George staked Whit to his hoss ranch. Anyhow, Whit's raisin' hosses, an' I'm willin' to bet they're right good hosses."

"I ain't hardly even thought of Whit th' last dozen years," Hopalong admitted. "Funny how a feller can drop right outa yore life like that."

Buck nodded.

“Whit an’ I have swapped letters three, four times since he left here,” he said. “That’s how I come to know that he’s raisin’ hosses.” He suddenly slapped his thigh. “I’m shore goin’ to take time off some of these days an’ ride up there an’ pay him a visit.”

Hopalong’s expression became serious, and he looked steadily at his friend and partner.

“Seein’ how you’ve waited all these years,” he said, “I figger you’ll wait a little longer. There’ll be time enough to pay Whit a visit after we clean up this rumored trouble in th’ hills. Be no use of sendin’ Mesquite up there for a job if you show up a-visitin’ Whit. That’d couple up Whit right close to th’ ex-sheriff of Twin River County! An’ that’d couple him up to me!”

“What you gettin’ all lathered up about?” demanded Buck with more spirit than politeness. “I ain’t said *when* I’m goin’, have I?”

“No, you ain’t,” admitted Hopalong sharply. “But *I*’m tellin’ you when you ain’t goin’!” He turned to Mesquite. “Come on, kid; let’s get outa here before he tries to bite us.”

“Bite you!” snapped Buck. “*I*’m th’ one that’s in danger of gettin’ . . .” And that was as much of it as they heard, for they were striding toward Hopalong’s quarters, and neither knew that the sky was filled with millions of blazing jewels.

MESQUITE RODE at a walk past the outer buildings and corrals of the ranch. Breaking pens, branding chutes, a bunkhouse, a blacksmith shop with its fire stone flush with the earth went slowly past. The ranch house itself was a one-story frame structure spread out over considerable ground. He stopped before the rear porch, swung from the saddle and paused before the open door. The sounds of his steps across the porch had been heard inside the house, and a figure moved toward him in the gratefully dim interior.

The figure became a tall, fair-haired, well-set-up man of middle age, whose tanned face was gently and kindly lined, and it boasted no single eyeglass.

“Oh,” he said, pausing just inside the door. “What can I do for you?”

“H. Whitby Booth?” inquired Mesquite.

“Ah—yes; that is my name.”

“I have a letter for you.”

“That so? Come in.”

Mesquite clamped an arm over his hat and followed the ranchman into the reasonably cool interior, passing through an immaculate kitchen and stopping in a living room, the like of which he had never seen before. The front half of the room had windows on three sides, their drawn curtains reducing the outside glare and heat. The room was large enough to hold a parlor grand piano and not be crowded by it. Shelves piled high with music and books lined one wall. A violin case lay on the piano, a sewing basket nestled in the upper arms of a short, double-ended tripod, and a toy wagon lay under it. The black, shadowy maws of two large fireplaces gave mute testimony in regard to the kind of winters this house had to face.

H. Whitby Booth slowly turned and faced his caller, a hand outstretched for the letter the other was taking from a pocket. His eyes were on the hard cold face of the caller. He had quickly sized up the visitor as a hard-bitted range rider.

“An offer, I presume, to sell me my own horses so they may be again stolen?” he ironically inquired as his fingers closed on the soiled envelope.

“So Hoppy was right, huh?” muttered Mesquite, reading his companion’s eyes. Not much chance to summer graze this man’s horses toward Hackamore.

For a moment the rancher's face remained stony as the half-heard words ran through his mind, and then suddenly a faint light kindled in his eyes.

"Did you say 'Hoppy'?" he asked quickly.

"Yes. Short for Hopalong," replied Mesquite, glancing at the envelope.

"Sit down! Pardon me while I look this over," said the ranchman, his long fingers tearing paper. He glanced quickly at the last sheet, saw the signature and then read slowly from the beginning. He read it again and then, walking slowly to a fireplace, touched a match to the sheets and thoughtfully watched them curl and writhe. "I've said so more than once, and I say it again."

"Yes?" asked Mesquite politely. There was nothing Englishy about this man, according to his definition of the term. True, his words had a trace of accent which they would never entirely lose, but it was not very noticeable. He did not realize it, but he was looking at one of the stalwart breed of men who can be found in all of the out-of-the-way, far-flung corners of the world, self-reliant, courageous and dependable, the foundation stones of a mighty empire.

"Yes," said the ranchman, a warm smile on his face. "A bit cryptic, eh? Well, it's all simple enough. Years ago I suspected that Hopalong Cassidy and that Ewalt fellow were gifted with second sight. I'm damned well certain of it now. How are they all? How is the Double Y doing? Well, I hope. You are a new name to me; how well and how long have you known Hopalong and Buck?"

"Th' Double Y is doin' right well," answered Mesquite, "an' so is everyone on it. As to how long I've knowed Hopalong and Buck, and how well, both long an' well enough for me to be handin' you that letter."

"I see," said the ranchman, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Then I'd say it was both long enough and well enough." The name written on the envelope came to his mind. "Ah, when you again see Buck, would you mind telling him that for some years there has been no such person as H. Whitby Booth? Those who know me call me either Hank or Whit; those who don't, Mr Henry Booth. That just seemed to blossom out of my citizenship papers. Oh; forgive me—what do you drink?"

"Water, mostly," answered Mesquite with a smile. "Then you've changed yore mind about buyin' back yore stolen hosses?" He was gazing at the workbasket and the toy wagon under it, and for some reason he was frowning slightly. Two months ago they would have been like a slap in the face.

“Yes, rather,” answered Whit, following the other’s gaze. “That wagon belongs to little George, named after my wife’s father. Hope he turns out as good a man. I miss them greatly, but they’ll be back one of these days, and the sooner the better.”

“Off visitin’?” asked Mesquite.

“Yes, back East with my father-in-law. Margaret was born and raised in Chicago and of course has many friends there. She’s an awfully good sport, and I really don’t begrudge her the yearly visit. Her father is getting to be rather well along in years, and her company is good for him.”

Mesquite thought that it might be a good idea for Margaret and little George to remain in Chicago much longer than they had planned, but he could offer no defensible reason for this as yet and kept the thought to himself.

“You must figger that you’ve lost some hosses,” he said, abruptly changing the subject.

“Yes, I have.”

“When did you first begin to lose ’em?”

“That I can’t answer, because I certainly was losing them before I began to suspect it.”

“Yeah. When did you first begin to suspect it?” persisted Mesquite.

“Shortly after the snow went off, this spring.”

“You rounded up yet?”

“No, but it won’t be long before we start.”

“Then it wasn’t you that sent word down to Twin River that things wasn’t just right in th’ hills southeast of here?”

“No, I sent no word; but whoever did send it was not very far wrong. Only it is west instead of east.”

“It was sent a year ago,” said Mesquite. “Hopalong spent a month in th’ hill country an’ found nothin’ wrong.”

“Then that’s easy: nothing was wrong then,” replied Whit with a broad smile. “When Hopalong spends a month anywhere, looking for something, and doesn’t find it, then there is nothing to be found.”

“That’s a good way to figger, I reckon,” replied Mesquite with a smile. “Then later on some more rumors drifted down our way, an’ he spent another month in th’ hills. An’ he couldn’t find nothin’ wrong then neither.”

“I repeat my last remark,” said Whit.

Mesquite smiled again. He liked this rancher better the more he saw of him and the more he talked.

“An’ this spring you lost some hosses, huh?”

“Yes, I just said so. We won’t know how many until after the roundup.”

“Yes,” replied Mesquite. “You know anybody down in Hackamore?”

“No. I get my supplies from the other direction, from a town on the railroad.”

“Any of th’ other ranchers up here been losin’ stock since th’ snow melted?” asked Mesquite.

“Yes. Cattle. This is the only straight out-and-out horse ranch in this region.”

“You figger any of them fellers mighta sent that word down to us?”

“No. We are not in your county, not even in your state. Complaints were made to the proper authorities, two men came down, rode around for a week or two and then went back again. That’s all it amounted to.”

“Huh,” mused Mesquite. “An’ they were not in our county. No raids. Easy, quiet workin’. Driftin’. If those two men had not been sure that everythin’ was all right then they would have sent some word down to us, and it woulda been official an’ not just rumors. What part of yore range did them hosses disappear from, if you know?” he asked, believing that he already knew the answer.

“From the southern. Of course that’s more of a guess than anything else.”

“Well,” said Mesquite, looking at a clock standing on a long shelf. It had been bothering him subconsciously. “That changes things quite a lot.” Now he knew what it was: the clock was going, but it did not tick. “I ain’t figgerin’ to summer graze no herd of improved hosses down toward Hackamore. They’re handy enough to ’em as things are right now.” All the clocks he had ever seen had ticked loudly enough to be heard in another room. “I guess we got to figger out somethin’ else.”

The “we” pleased the ranchman, and he sat suddenly erect.

“I beg your pardon,” he said hastily and stood up. “I’m not usually so poor a host. What *will* you drink?”

“Water,” answered Mesquite with a smile. “But not now,” he added as Whit half turned toward the kitchen.

“But you smoke?” persisted the ranchman.

“Yes, I have that vice,” chuckled Mesquite, recalling Hopalong’s words. He looked at the large glass container, took a cigar and watched the ground-

glass stopper put back in place. The odor of rum was strong about him, and he wondered if the stuff tasted as good as it smelled. His smile grew; you could handle this cigar without danger of it going to pieces in your fingers.

“Well,” said the ranchman, again leaning back in his chair and letting a trickle of smoke filter down his nostrils, “we certainly have some problems on our hands, but why not let them wait until after supper? Let’s talk about Buck and Hopalong and the rest of that forthright outfit.”

And so they sat and smoked and talked, and the sun sank lower in the sky and made the shadows long and wide. And as they sat and smoked and talked their liking for each other grew. Their common multiple, of course, was the Double Y and Hopalong. This served as few other things would have served to vouch to each for the other and to tear down fences of habitual reticence which otherwise would have required a much longer time for their breaching. They both were thinking what they owed to the Double Y and to Hopalong, although neither would put the thoughts into words.

Mesquite was thinking of how Hopalong had torn him from a life of outlawry and its inevitable consequences, guided and trained him and made a man of him, very much against his own wishes in the beginning.

The ranchman was thinking of how he had been living on remittances when the opportunity came for him to go to the Double Y; of how Margaret had refused to marry a remittance man. He never had any doubt on that score. When his work with the Double Y was at last finished he returned to the East, ready and able to stand on his own feet. That gave him Margaret. It was the only way he could have gotten her. She had given him little George. And he had long since repaid the capital he had borrowed for the starting of this horse ranch. Looking at things fairly, the Double Y had made him. He no longer was H. Whitby Booth, for out of his naturalization papers had blossomed other names. English born and raised though he was, he gave an intimation of his feelings when he replied to a natural and innocent question of his caller.

The talk was beginning to swing back to the serious matters regarding the hill country to the south and west, and Mesquite, his mind on brands and artful work with brands, suddenly looked up.

“I didn’t see any of yore hosses on my way in,” he said. “What’s yore brand?”

“Double Y.”

“What?”

“Yes. It’s made differently from Buck’s and very much smaller, and it’s in a much less prominent place. Officially it’s the Long Diamond.” Whit

waved his hand, but his expression was suddenly warmer, softer. "You see, Margaret and I prefer to live on the Double Y."

Bits of biographical data related to Mesquite before he had left the Double Y now came back to him, and his liking for his host grew a little more.

"Huh," he muttered, looking at the silent but busy clock. His hidden softness began to gnaw at him a little. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the sewing basket, the toy wagon. He, too, was in deep debt to the Double Y and to Hopalong, and he wanted to say something about it, but he did not know how to begin. He was still looking at the unbelievable clock, and it was natural for him to make use of what was handy. He had to say something.

"Why don't that clock tick?" he asked with a suddenness which was abrupt to say the least. His voice was hard and harsh.

Whit's look of surprise gave way to one of partial understanding, and his own feeling of friendliness climbed another rung.

"It ticks, but you can't hear it unless you get so close that your ear almost touches it," he said. "It's full jeweled and exquisitely made. Has it something to do with changing brands?"

Mesquite's swift look rested for a moment on the speaker's face, and what he saw there made him smile.

"Well, no, it hasn't," he slowly admitted, and then an analogy streaked into his mind and helped him out a little. "It's a slick job, that's all; an' so is first-class brand changin'."

Whit nodded his appreciation and glanced out of a window. The curtains had been raised some time before. A glance at the clock confirmed it: it was time for supper. He announced the fact and asked his guest's preference in the matter of food, naming what was available. Mesquite had no preference but admitted to having an appetite.

Whit not only knew how to cook, in the better meaning of the term, but he also knew how to disguise the common food of a ranch until his guest was somewhat at a loss, judging by taste alone, to know exactly just what he was eating. Supper over, they both fell to and soon had the dishes cleared up and out of the way, and when Whit ushered his companion before him into the living room he left the kitchen as spotless as he had found it.

Again they sat and smoked and talked, and this time the talk touched a very little closer on intimate things. Then Mesquite hid a yawn, and Whit stirred and sat up straighter in his chair.

“Reckon I’ll have to roll up an’ call it a day,” said Mesquite and hid another yawn. “I’ve done a lot of ridin’ today,” he explained.

Whit got up, went to the kitchen and came back with a lighted lamp. He stopped, looked down at his companion and smiled.

“The bed is made up, and everything is ready,” he said.

Mesquite slowly arose and faced his host.

“We ain’t runnin’ no herd of improved Long Diamond hosses over near th’ south part of this ranch,” he said flatly.

“I think quite a lot of my horses, and they are quite valuable,” replied the ranchman, “but if Hopalong needs them to back up a play or bait a trap you take them south, and I don’t care how far.”

The two men stood and regarded each other for perhaps half a minute, and soft lights glowed in their eyes, although they might have come from the lamp in the ranchman’s hand. He stepped forward and led the way into the spare room, placed the lamp on a table, waved at the bed and strode toward the door. He stepped out into the living room and drew the door behind him, but he checked it for an instant, turned and thrust his head into the narrow opening.

“If you want anything, shout. Good night, Mesquite.”

“Don’t want anythin’. Good night, Whit.”

And this time the door closed all the way, and the latch bolt of the lock snicked home.

Mesquite awakened shortly after sunrise and heard faint sounds coming from the kitchen. In a few minutes he was in the washroom, exchanging an occasional word with his host. The sound of a toothbrush being vigorously applied made Whit glance curiously around, and a look of surprise flashed over his face and quickly disappeared. He gave his attention to the cooking food, but his guest had climbed one more rung in his estimation.

Mesquite accepted the third egg and another helping of the crisp bacon, watched Whit unfold the napkin from the stack of toast and reach for the butter. This was real butter and not the oleaginous concoction known on the ranges as bull butter. Whit buttered the toast thickly and passed it to his guest, and then looked at the empty cup and held out a hand for it.

“If a man can get drunk on coffee I figger I’m on my way to it,” said Mesquite with a chuckle. If this was coffee then what was that other stuff he had been drinking most of his life? Again he inwardly winced; Sarah Jordan had made coffee like this.

Whit laughed softly.

"I'm a temperate man, Mesquite," he said, "but if coffee led to drunkenness then I'm afraid that I'd be a sot."

Mesquite nodded and looked up at his companion.

"I'm askin' you for a job, Whit," he said, smiling a little. "It's too bad you don't need a man right now."

Whit pondered the remark for a moment and then smiled.

"It is too bad," he replied. "As it is I've got more than I need. Even one more would just clutter up the place."

"Well," mused Mesquite, "I'll just have to keep on ridin' till I find somebody that's hirin'. I've got to get a job or starve to death." He chuckled. "Seein' that I've only got near two hundred dollars with me, as expense money, I'm practically broke." The chuckle grew into a laugh. "Not havin' none of them vices that Hopalong finds so valuable, I'll just have to keep on driftin'—just have to act natural an' keep on driftin'."

"That will make you like plenty of other riders," replied Whit, nodding his head slowly. "There'll be nothing in that to make you stand out."

"Yeah," grunted Mesquite. "This country is full of tumbleweeds, two laigged an' otherwise. I'm just rollin' across th' range, lookin' for work. My kind are either lookin' for work, workin' or leavin' work behind; but we do get to see a lot of country an' meet up with a lot of interestin' folks." He signified his fullness by pushing slightly from the table and reaching for tobacco sack and papers. "A mighty lot of country," he repeated, the picture of one bit of country strong and vivid in his mind; and again in his mind's eye he could see the workbasket and the little toy wagon out there in the other room. Why must he be the battleground for two such opposite and natural instincts? He frowned darkly and blew out a little breath of anger. "You ever been down to Hackamore?" he abruptly asked.

"Yes, once or twice," answered Whit, "but I don't know anybody down there and don't want to."

"How come I haven't seen anybody on th' ranch but you?" asked Mesquite curiously.

"They're all up on the north section, building a fence. I'm putting a square mile of my best grass behind wire."

"Ain't you got troubles enough now without buildin' fences?" demanded Mesquite sharply. Why was he always running into and taking a liking for people who were building fences on the range? And his mind went back to the last fence he had anything to do with, and Sarah Jordan was again brought into his thoughts.

“It’s off where it’ll bother nobody but thieves,” answered Whit, “and it won’t bother thieves at all. They’ll just cut it and let it lay. There’s a few mustang stallions left in this country, and I’m going to keep them from my mares. I’m breeding *up*, not down.”

Mesquite nodded. Another man who had a good and defensible reason for fence building. Mustang stallions. Huh. A lot of fool nonsense had been said about wild stallions. Once in a while they were good animals, but more often poor horseflesh because of inbreeding. But they did make a pretty picture at a distance.

“What’s th’ shortest way to get to Hackamore, Whit?” asked Mesquite suddenly.

Whit smiled at this indication of directness.

“West of here a few miles is th’ trail you want,” he answered. “All you have to do is follow it south. It’s a good trail too.”

“I don’t want that trail,” replied Mesquite, smiling a little grimly. “I wanted to know th’ shortest way so I wouldn’t blunder into takin’ it. By th’ time I get to Hackamore, if I ever do, I’ll want to know quite a lot about th’ country around it. You see, meetin’ you has made me change my plans.” The workbasket and the toy wagon again came into his mind. There was no need to mix this ranch up in any range war, if it should come to one. He pushed back his chair and stood up. “Let’s get these dishes outa th’ way, an’ I’ll ride on ag’in.”

Whit was quietly studying him.

“If you want to drive a herd of my horses to graze down near Hackamore you go ahead,” he said.

“Won’t be no need for that,” replied Mesquite. “I got other ideas. You wash or wipe?”

RIDING ON HIS WAY AGAIN and bearing southwesterly, which would take him farther from Hackamore with every mile, Mesquite noticed that the country was losing the aspect of the flatter range behind him and gradually growing rougher. The slopes became longer and higher; the little valleys between them, wider and deeper; and then the valleys increased their depths as they lost in width.

About midafternoon he rested the horse on the top of a high ridge and slowly and carefully examined the country below him. His keen eyes had passed over the wagon without seeing it, but as his gaze swept back again he made it out. It stood in a little draw on the other side of the valley, and while he watched it he thought he could see a thin, pale feather of smoke climb upward beside it. A quick glance behind him at the sun confirmed his opinion: the camp cook was getting his fire going. This pleased him, because he was hungry. He pressed his knees against the horse and sought out the best way down the slope. Now he was certain of a supper cooked by somebody beside himself, for range etiquette assured him as to that. If things were as bad as Hopalong suspected he might run into gunplay, but he was pretty certain of his supper.

Night had fallen by the time he reached the wagon, and the light from the cook's fire cast huge shadows of the seated men while it shone greasily from greasy faces. It picked out his gleaming belt buckle and made intense points of light on his riding equipment as he slowly rode into its radius. He stopped at the wagon and lazily and slowly swung down from the saddle. On his face, a gargoyle of highlights, was a fatuous grin.

"I made it," he said, glancing around the fire-lighted faces. "An' I shore am ready to eat."

"You — — — grub-line riders are allus ready to eat," growled the cook, waving at the tailboard of the wagon. "Help yoreself if you ain't too helpless." Then the cook waved at the coffeepot at the edge of the fire. "Hot or warm?" he asked, grinning despite himself.

"Just like it is," answered Mesquite, filling a plate at the tailboard. He carefully carried it to the fire, placed it on the ground, filled a tin cup with coffee and sat down cross-legged beside the plate, which was as full as he could pile it.

He saw the sly glances from one man to another without appearing to. And then as his gaze moved swiftly around the circle it gave him a confused

image of expressions, the total of which did not seem to be very friendly. His gaze dropped to the plate resting on his knees and remained there while he gave his whole attention to the food, which he wolfed. There was no pretense to his hunger. He dragged the last bit of bread across his plate and chewed on it as he arose and stepped to the fire for another cup of coffee. He poured carefully to reduce the number of dregs going into the cup. He emptied the cup, put it, the knife and plate into the wreck pan and slowly returned to his place in the seated circle. Sighing with satisfaction, he rolled a cigarette, lighted it and then looked slowly from man to man. Then his eyes rested on the cook.

"I'll wash th' dishes," he offered with a grin.

"Lend you a hand," grunted the cook. "I'm afeared you might scratch 'em," he said and grinned.

Mesquite nodded and then looked at the man to whom the others had most often glanced.

"I reckon it'll be th' same thing I been hearin' for two, three weeks," he said. "You ain't hirin'." He frowned in the short interval of silence. "Nobody's hirin'. Nobody needs a hand. An' th' cooks all had a lot to say about this-an'-that grub-line riders. Flat busted an' no work; but th' old belly keeps acallin' for grub just th' same. It's a case of eat or starve, ain't it? An' a man'll do a lot of things before he'll starve. But I'll ask th' question just th' same: you need a hand?"

The straw boss was slowly shaking his head, his gaze on the little fire.

"Sorry, stranger, but you called th' turn. We're like all th' rest of th' fellers you been meetin'—we ain't hirin'." He seemed to be turning something over in his mind, and after a moment he looked from the fire to the newcomer. "Why don't you ride on to town? You may find somethin' there to do."

"I been ridin' to towns an' on ag'in," growled Mesquite. "What is this town, an' where is it?"

"Hackamore, two days' ride east of here," answered the straw boss. "Cook'll stake you to grub enough to see you there, an' th' trail is plain."

Mesquite recrossed his legs and nodded. The straw boss had named Hackamore. That suggested that it was his town, his supply point.

He nodded slowly and smiled a little ruefully.

"Well, that means that I'll eat for two more days anyhow. Much obliged." He turned and looked at the cook. "You don't have to lend me no hand with th' dishes," he said. "I needed that grub, an' I'll be glad to do somethin' for it. Grub-line ridin' really ain't in my line."

"I've rid th' grub-line myself an' mebby will ag'in," replied the cook. "Water's hot enough, I reckon. You rather wash or wipe?"

"I'll do what you don't," chuckled Mesquite and joined the cook.

"Where was th' last place you tried to get a job, stranger?" asked the straw boss idly, pulling at a weed near his knee.

"Hoss ranch," answered Mesquite, reaching for another tin plate. He laughed grimly. "That feller sounded a little like a Britisher, and he was kinda hostile. I asked him th' way to th' nearest town, an' he told me, an' here I am. Don't th' damn' fool know his own part of th' country?"

"Hoss ranch?" mused the straw boss, glancing swiftly around the circle of faces. "Britisher? Oh, shore, I've heard of him. Then you been ridin' steady from th' northeast, lookin' for th' nearest town?"

"Yeah, thanks to him," growled Mesquite, wiping the knife the cook had handed him. "Lucky I saw yore fire, I reckon."

The straw boss exchanged smiles with his outfit and then laughed outright.

"Mebby th' Britisher figgered Hackamore was big enough already an' didn't need one more citizen."

"Mebby," grunted Mesquite, scowling a little.

"Mebby he figgered you might like his hosses better'n he did," said a man beyond the fire and grinned at the chuckle which ran around the circle.

"Well," grugged Mesquite, grinning slightly, "I saw some of his that looked better than mine. He thinks a lot of 'em, because he's puttin' up a fence. That all, cook?" He looked into the pan, blew out his breath and moved slowly toward the fire. "But I'd even take a job with a fence builder till I got me a little stake. What kinda town is Hackamore?"

"Not nothin' to make it stick up higher than any other town in this part of th' country," answered the straw boss. "Just plain cow town without no fancy work."

"You got any word you want to send in?" asked Mesquite, seated cross-legged again.

"No, reckon not," answered the straw boss.

"If you drop into th' Hackamore Hotel bar," said a man near the wagon, "you might tell that long, lanky bartender that Dick Bartell said for him to go to hell."

"By which I savvy that th' bartender is a friend of yourn?" asked Mesquite.

"Which he shore is," said the man near the wagon.

"Keno. I'll shore tell him," replied Mesquite, tossing his cigarette butt into the dying fire. He yawned and recrossed his legs.

The straw boss got to his feet and moved slowly toward his blanket roll. It seemed to be a signal, and it was. Man after man followed his example, Mesquite not excluded. In a remarkably short time ten human cocoons lay with feet to the fire, and contented sighs told of welcomed rest near at hand.

The small fire flickered, but mostly it was just a dull red bed of coals. Deep breathing and an occasional snore told of blessed oblivion; but one mind struggled against sleep for a few minutes while it searched along a little thread of thought: "If you drop into th' Hackamore Hotel bar, you might tell that long, lanky bartender that Dick Bartell said for him to go to hell." Long, lanky bartender . . . Hackamore Hotel . . . Dick Bartell. And there the thread broke as Mesquite's breathing became as deep as that of any of the others.

The cook had his fire going when Mesquite opened his eyes. The little streamer of pale smoke climbed straight up and vanished. The cook was talking to himself and seemed to be enjoying the conversation. Mesquite closed his eyes, stirred, grunted and opened them to look into those of the cook, and around the eyes of both were little crinkles of good humor. Other sleepers awakened, and the cocoons slowly unrolled. Man after man felt for his boots and his gun belt and took his big hat from under his head. On the open range Stetsons take a lot of punishment and seem to thrive on it.

Blankets were being rolled up and tossed into the wagon. The wash basin was doing a sudden burst of business, and cigarette smoke mingled with the odors of the cooking food. A man strode over to a picketed night horse, mounted and rode out to the grazing cavy. By the time he had driven in the day's saddle stock the line was forming at the tailboard of the wagon. Breakfast was a silent affair: hungry men are not given to holding conversations before they have slicked their plates.

The straw boss puffed out his breath, put his eating utensils on the ground beside him and reached for tobacco and papers. He had reduced cigarette making to as unconscious a habit as buttoning a vest, and while he built this one he was looking at Mesquite.

"These parts yore stampin' ground?" he asked, making conversation.

"No," answered Mesquite, rolling a cigarette of his own. "Couple of years ago I started out to see th' world. Hooked onto a trail crew an' didn't have sense enough to go back home for th' winter. I've seen as much of th' world as I want, an' I'm driftin' South as I ride."

“Kinda figgered you come from th’ South,” said the straw boss, smiling a little. “Why don’t you fellers down there learn how to talk English?”

“Which same we could ask you boys,” countered Mesquite and laughed with the others.

“Then yo’re only lookin’ for jobs between rides?” asked the straw boss.

“Shucks, I dunno. If I got a good job I might stay with it, except for th’ damn’ winters. I ain’t shore. I reckon I’m just a tumbleweed; but I’m th’ kind that likes to eat.”

“What do you mean by a good job?” asked the cook carelessly.

“Somethin’ with more money tied up with it than a common puncher gets; say a foreman’s job on a good ranch, or even second boss.”

“You must figger yo’re a good hand with cattle,” smilingly said the wrangler.

“Shore, just like you boys,” laughed Mesquite.

The straw boss slowly stood up and glanced from the seated circle toward the waiting horses in the flimsy rope corral the wrangler had stretched around them. Then as the crew got to its feet and picked up their saddles he turned to Mesquite.

“Glad you dropped in, friend. Cook’ll see that you don’t starve before you get to town. We’ll mebbly be in town ourselves in a couple, three weeks. If yo’re there I’ll buy you a drink.”

“If I’m there as long as that,” chuckled Mesquite, “I’ll have money enough to buy you a drink.”

“How ’bout me?” asked the cook.

“Buy you a bottle!”

“Studhoss?” inquired the straw boss curiously.

“No. I couldn’t make no money at studhoss even if I had a stake,” answered Mesquite, looking the man full in the eye. “Somethin’ faster’n studhoss, an’ a damn’ sight more risky.” He turned on his heel and went over to his saddle. In a few moments he led the saddled animal to the wagon to get the food which the cook had ready for him. Mounting, he raised his hand in a parting salute and rode at a lope from the little camp, and he did not look back.

The straw boss had not moved, and now he was studiously regarding the back of the departing rider. The cook’s voice cut in upon his thoughts, and he turned toward the speaker.

“Mebby we coulda give *him* a job, at that,” said the cook meaningly.

“Mebby,” slowly agreed the straw boss. He thoughtfully rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Mebby,” he repeated and walked toward his horse.

TWO SCORE unpretentious frame houses and shacks; a main street two blocks long with rough frame buildings on each side of it connected to each other by a raised wooden sidewalk to keep the inhabitants from drowning in the mud of spring. Over the sidewalks, here and there, were board roofs thrusting out before a few of the stores. The height of the sidewalks during the dry seasons was about even with that of the bottom of wagon boxes. There were tie rails, litter and deep dust; ugly stables, patched corrals and rusty tin cans scattered at random where careless hands had tossed them. This was Hackamore, neither better nor worse than hundreds of other towns scattered over the face of the cow country. It was typical. To the rider who topped the last little rise and saw it for the first time it was just another town so far as its physical characteristics were concerned; but he hoped that it would lead him into high adventures. There it lay, and it did not spoil the landscape, because the latter was such that hardly anything could spoil it. There was one thing he knew about it even before he saw it: it lay well outside the jurisdiction of the sheriff of Twin River County, and all he could hope for was to pick up leads which might take the action, if there was any, over the state and county lines.

He rode slowly toward the main trail and followed it into town. He was supposed to be broke and in need of a job, and the last two days had given him plenty of time to think this out. The Hackamore Hotel raised its ugly second story above the surrounding roofs, and its faded sign bridged the wide sidewalk and the wooden awning above it. The rider swung to the ground, fastened the reins with his customary jerk knot to the tie rail and pushed slowly through the swinging doors, pausing for a moment when inside the room to let his eyes become accustomed to the dimmer light. This room was no different from numerous others he had seen, but he did notice that the footrail along the bar was brass instead of iron pipe. The man behind the counter, however, did not share in that quality of sameness: he was one of the tallest and thinnest men Mesquite ever had seen.

The bartender leaned sideways against the long counter and eyed the newcomer impersonally, one hand resting on the bar cloth. Except for these two the room was deserted.

Mesquite walked slowly forward and stopped at the other edge of the counter, lazily lifting one foot to rest on the brass rail. He pushed up his hat until it was loose on his head and smiled at his companion.

“An’ what’ll it be?” asked the tall thin man without any particular interest.

“Nothin’; nothin’ a-tall,” answered Mesquite and gently cleared his throat as if to hide his embarrassment. “I just stopped in to tell you that Dick Bartell said for you to go to hell.”

“Right thoughtful of Dick,” replied the bartender with a grin, “but mebby it’s just plain selfishness; mebby he figgers he’ll be wantin’ company down there.”

“Mebby, although I figger none of *us* will be needin’ company in hell,” replied Mesquite. “I understand it’s right crowded. But that wasn’t th’ only reason I dropped in. I want a job, an’ I want it bad. Don’t care what it is. You know anybody that needs a hand?”

The bartender was studying him and for a moment did not answer. Then he moved the cloth gently to and fro.

“Where’d you see Dick Bartell?” he slowly asked.

“Out at th’ wagon, two days west,” answered Mesquite, his eyes on those of the bartender. “Looked like they had more men than they needed. They told me where to find Hackamore, grubstaked me for th’ ride, an’ here I am.”

“Yeah,” said the bartender. “What kinda job you want?”

“Anythin’, but I’m handiest with hosses an’ cattle.”

“Uh-huh,” replied the bartender, slowly turning to reach behind him. He slid bottle and glass across the counter and waved a hand. “Have one on th’ house,” he invited.

“Thanks, but I don’t drink,” said Mesquite, smiling thinly.

The bartender’s wide-open eyes regarded his companion in surprise.

“Huh?” he muttered.

“I don’t drink hard liquor.”

“Umm,” said the bartender, his eyes squinting from speculation. “You don’t drink, an’ you wear two guns. You friendly with that outfit at th’ wagon?”

“No. Never saw ’em before I rode in at grub time.”

“I got a friend, an old man,” said the bartender thoughtfully. He paused a moment. “When you work for a man you look out for his interests? In other words yo’re *for* him?”

Mesquite studied the speaker for a moment and then slowly nodded his head. “Of course.”

The bartender polished the counter for a moment and suddenly looked up.

“You go down an’ see old man Hankins at his livery stable at th’ end of this cross street. He drinks enough for two an’ is frequent drunk. He oughta have a sober man workin’ for him if th’ man can keep his mouth shut. Tell him Long John sent you. See you later.”

Mesquite’s next stop was in front of Hankins’ Livery and Feed. He closed the door of the little office behind him and looked down upon the sprawled figure of the proprietor. The old man’s eyes were closed, and he did not move. Mesquite walked over to a chair and sat down, making as much noise as possible, and slowly the old man’s eyelids raised, and he fixed a watery, bleary stare on the visitor, although it was considerably out of focus.

“Aw right,” he muttered. “Pick yore own stall an’ take care of yoreself. Sick, awfu’ sick. Oh-o-o-o!”

“I’m lookin’ for a job,” said Mesquite. “Mebby I better come back later.”

“Oh-o-o-o! What say?”

“Lookin’ for a job. I’ll be back later.”

“Job. Job? Kin you figger?”

“Yeah.”

A sly look passed across the sodden face, and a look of faint intelligence came into the reddened eyes. The old man inched up a little straighter in the oft-repaired rocking chair and raised a hand to fumble on the desk top. After a moment’s search the fingers closed on a sheet of paper which was covered with figures. The old man slowly passed it to his companion and leered knowingly. “P-prove it.”

Because of the number of figures Mesquite knew it must be a problem in addition, and the several totals, each crossed out, made him smile. He picked up a pencil, wet the point and fell to. After a moment he handed the sheet to the proprietor.

The old man tried to focus on the figures, failed to get the range with both eyes simultaneously and let the sheet fall to the floor.

“D’ju do it? Is it right?”

“Yes. It’s right.”

“Uh. You know hosses?”

“All my life.”

“Oh-o-o-o—so sick. So sick. Yo’re hired. Don’t pester me—now. Too sick.”

Mesquite arose, got his horse and took care of it. Then he looked the place over. During his tour he found the little house out behind the main building, and he also investigated this. It consisted of a kitchen and two small bedrooms. One bed, from its condition, looked like it was the one the old man used. He made it up roughly and went back to the office. Old man Hankins had passed out again.

Mesquite picked him up and carried him into the little house, where he pulled off the boots, removed the big hat and laid the old man on the bed. The window had divided curtains, and Mesquite drew them together and fastened them with a blanket pin. Closing the door part way, he went back to the office and waited for customers. He needed no instructions in the matter of the proper charges. No customers came, but suppertime did. He reversed the sign in the window, which laconically proclaimed: GONE TO EAT, and went through the long building toward the little house in the rear.

The kitchen was a mess of accumulated dirt and untidiness, but he started the fire and got things ready for the meal before he tackled the confusion about him. While the supper was cooking he washed the stack of soiled dishes and tidied up generally. Occasionally he listened to the snores coming from the other room, but there was no change in their sound. All right, let the old fool sleep it off. Coming down to cases, that was about all that could be done. He had plenty to do without fooling with a man who was dead drunk.

Mesquite was hungry, and he cooked plenty of ham and potatoes, making a sizzling brown ham gravy for lubricant. He filled a plate with ham and potatoes and covered it with a cloth in case the old man should wake up before breakfast and be hungry. This was not a probability but only a possibility.

He washed and wiped the dishes, washed out two dirty pieces of cloth for further dishwashing and wiping and hung them over the stove on a piece of half-inch manila rope which served for clothesline. It made him laugh, for it seemed strong enough to hold up a horse. Giving one final listen to the steady blubbery snores coming from the old man's bedroom, he slipped out of the door and headed for the stable. When he returned he had his saddle, bridle, rifle and bed roll. The load was heavy and bulky and decidedly awkward, but he managed it and dumped it on the floor of the second bedroom. Turning down the lamp, he slipped from the building and headed back into the stable. Still there were no customers, but he waited awhile and then locked up and went up the street toward the Hackamore Hotel.

Long John, to Mesquite's surprise, was still on duty and ventured a cold smile as the puncher, now a horse nurse, walked in.

"You keep long hours," said Mesquite, leaning on the counter.

"Yeah. Ben wanted to go off somewhere an' asked me to run his trick," replied the bartender, idly sliding the damp cloth back and forth. "Old man hire you?"

"Shore, but he don't know it yet," chuckled Mesquite. "I added up a column of figgers for him, carried him in an' put him to bed, ate my supper an' then hung round waitin' for customers. None came, an' when I figgered it was time to close, I closed. Here I am. Much obliged."

"Th' old man is as short on figgerin' as he is long on liquor," said Long John. His smile suddenly disappeared, and he looked intently at the man across the bar. "Hankins is a friend of mine. He's a friend of Dick Bartell's; but I'm a better friend of *his* than Bartell is. Play square with him, look after him, an' you won't make no mistake."

"I aim to do all that if he don't fire me when he comes out of it in th' mornin'," replied Mesquite with a grin.

"He won't fire you. If he does, come up an' see me. Have a cigar?"

"Gracias. I still smoke. When I get my first week's pay I'll buy you one." Mesquite smiled ruefully and shrugged his shoulders. "That's how bad I needed a job."

"Huh," grunted Long John. "You want a couple dollars till payday?"

"Thanks again. Not bein' a drinkin' man, I won't need 'em," answered Mesquite and turned from the bar. He was tired, and the full meal he had eaten was making him sleepier than usual. "I figger I'll turn in. See you tomorrow."

Mesquite had just reached the door of the office when there came the sudden pounding of hoofs, and a bunched group of riders turned the corner from Main Street and whirled down the side street to the stable. Mesquite saw a group of led horses in the middle of the bunch, and then the horsemen stopped in front of the stable and dismounted as one man, and all but the man holding the lead ropes of the led horses stepped quickly to the big door and tried to open it. One of them, catching sight of Mesquite in the dark recess of the office door, took a step forward and spoke angrily.

"Hurry up, you old fool, get this door open!"

Mesquite passed through the office and unfastened the stable door, and as the hasp dropped, the door slid back with a bang, and the horses surged in, the door closing swiftly behind them.

"Why didn't you watch for us? You knew we was comin' in?" demanded a voice from the darkness above the sounds of moving horses.

"I didn't know about it," replied Mesquite. "Th' old man's dead drunk." He took two swift steps sideways as he spoke, and his hand dropped to his gun.

"— — — —!" swore one of the group.

"Who th' hell are *you*?" snapped another.

"Ask Dick Bartell," replied Mesquite, again shifting, and this time the gun was out and in his hand.

"Light th' lamp in th' office! We'll take a look at you!"

"Don't light no lamp in th' office!" said another rider. "Ain't you got no sense? Get th' lanterns an' light one in a stall."

"Damn' old fool!" snapped the first speaker. "I got a mind to shoot his head off!" He took a step in the darkness. "Here, you! Where are you?"

"Right here," came the answer, and it sounded icy. This time Mesquite stepped quickly to the left. If this hombre should shoot by sound his first shot would be a miss, and the flare of the gun would be all that Mesquite would need.

"Then stay there for a minute," growled the other. "We'll take a walk up th' street. I want to get a look at you."

"All right," answered Mesquite. "You better do it quick if you want me to rub down them hosses an' feed 'em. I ain't figgerin' to stay up all night."

"Hell you ain't! You'll do what yo're told!" The speaker paused and listened to something being whispered to him and grunted his acquiescence. "All right, Jim, that's a good idear. Don't light them lanterns yet." He turned around in the darkness and again spoke to Mesquite. "Hey, you, out th' back door an' into th' house, an' don't make no funny motions."

Mesquite was as anxious to get a look at the riders as they were to get a look at him, and he thrilled with the thought that perhaps he had been lucky in getting his job. As the thought passed through his mind he was walking heavily and noisily toward the rear door, two men close at his heels, and he was quite certain that both had guns on him.

The two men crowded after him into the kitchen, and one of them stepped to the table and turned up the lamp without once losing sight of the new stableman.

"Who are you, an' what you doin' here?" demanded the leader, his low-held gun unswerving.

"They call me Mesquite," came the slow reply, "an' I just got th' job of stable hand. I don't aim to make no trouble. Th' old man is dead drunk, in

there in his bed. Mister, if I knowed you was comin' in I'd had th' door open. I need this job, an' I want to keep it. Th' door will be open next time."

The man who had turned up the lamp went into Hankins' bedroom and came out again, and he nodded angrily.

"Drunk as three fools," he growled and then looked at Mesquite. "I figger you better quit this job an' clear out. When did th' old man hire you?"

"Late this afternoon," answered Mesquite. "He was so drunk I figger he didn't know hardly what he was doin'. Dick Bartell sent in a message with me for a feller here in town, an' *he* sent me down here to try for a steady job. I got th' job, an' I need it. I'll do as I'm told, mister."

"What was th' message, an' who was it to?" demanded the leader.

"I ain't got no business to tell you that. I keep a close mouth. You'll have to ask Bartell."

"Huh!" muttered the leader. He took a little time to follow out a thought, and he had lost a little of his scowl when he asked his next question. "Where you from, Mesquite?"

"Up from th' South with a trail herd a couple years back," answered Mesquite, careful to make his answer correspond with the one he had given out at the wagon. "I didn't have sense enough to ride back ag'in. I hung around, ridin' for one outfit after another till jobs got scarce. I need this one if I figger to eat. I'll have th' door open any time you say." He glanced at the window facing the stable. "Don't you reckon I better go out an' look after yore hosses? They was pretty warm an' oughta cool off under a blanket."

"They're bein' took care of," replied the leader, glancing at his companion, who moved his head toward the door. "All right. Turn in an' stay there. I don't want to see you before tomorrow, an' I shore will see you then."

Mesquite watched them pass through the door and then caught sight of a boot and the lower end of a trouser leg as it swung into the pale spot of light made by the window on the ground outside. The watcher stopped and waited. Mesquite did not glance that way again but slowly unbuckled his gun belts and hung them over a chair. Then he sat down and pulled off his boots and gave every indication that he was following instructions and was headed for bed. And that was exactly what he was doing and where he was going. He would like to feel over the horses to verify his suspicions that they had been hard ridden and well lathered; but at this time curiosity was something which he must not show. He had been told to turn in. That seemed to be the thing to do, and he proceeded to do it.

MESQUITE AWAKENED with the sun, moved his eyes swiftly from side to side, thought for a moment and then moved his head. It was no dream. He drew in a deep breath and slowly sat up. He was hungry, and it did not take him long to dress, go into the kitchen and start the fire. As he moved about he heard a stirring in the other bedroom, and he smiled grimly in anticipation of what might happen in the next few minutes. Old man Hankins was due for a surprise, and there was no way of telling how he would take it.

The bacon sputtered in the pan, and the potatoes sputtered in harmony. The mixed aroma now began to include that of coffee, and the total was intriguing. He heard a soft thump, and then after a moment slow, heavy steps approached the kitchen. The frowzy head of the old man appeared in the doorway, and the dull eyes rested on the busy cook. Their dullness faded, and the apathetic expression on the seamed face quickly changed.

“Well,” said the old man with a snort. “Where th’ hell did *you* come from? Who are you? What you doin’ in my kitchen, in my house?”

Mesquite, busily turning potatoes, flashed a quick glance at his companion and boss. “Mornin’,” he said. “You look a lot better than when I carried you in last night an’ put you to bed. Have grub ready in a shake. There’s a full bucket of water on th’ wash bench. I’ll be ready when you are.”

“Who are you? What’n hell you doin’ here?” demanded the old man.

“My name’s Mesquite. I’m th’ man you hired yesterday,” he answered, now busy with the bacon. “You better get th’ biscuits out of th’ oven before they burn up. Long John sent me down, so I reckon it’s his fault.”

“Long John, huh?” replied the old man, still staring at the busy cook and caring little whether the biscuits burned or not. He watched the cook’s quick move toward the oven. The biscuits were a golden brown. “Oh, you said Long John?”

“Yeah,” replied Mesquite, putting the hot food on the table and then pouring the coffee. “Well, there it is. You feel like eatin’?”

“Yeah, allus do. You a friend of Long John?” asked the liveryman, and his voice seemed to hold a note of hopefulness. Mesquite sensed it but did not show that he did.

“No. Never saw him till yesterday. Dick Bartell sent me in to Long John with a message. I was lookin’ for a job too.”

“Dick Bartell,” muttered the old man, and the note of hopefulness was absent. Mesquite glanced curiously at him as he passed the bacon and then the potatoes. “Uh-huh,” grunted Hankins. He was frowning. “Figgered they’d mebby work around to runnin’ my business entire, whether I like it or not. So I hired you, did I?”

“Yeah, an’ I hope you keep me,” answered Mesquite. “I’d like to work for you. I want you to savvy that: I’d like to work for *you*.”

They chewed in silence, neither looking at the other. The old man reached for his second biscuit, smeared oleomargarine on it and dragged a piece of bacon across it. The food, he decided, tasted better when someone else cooked it, especially the coffee.

“You carried me in an’ put me to bed, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“You pulled off my boots, loosened my collar an’ then pinned them curtains together to keep out th’ sun?”

“Yes. Here, gimme yore cup.”

The old man complied, but now his gaze did not avoid his companion’s eyes. He was reading his new stable hand as best he could, taking in the regular features, the shallow blueness of the eyes, the cleft chin. He finished the biscuit and washed it down with the second cup of coffee. Something suddenly took his notice. Clean cloths hung on the line above the stove; the accumulated mess of soiled dishes was not to be seen. He glanced up at the two shelves on the wall and found the dishes, neatly stacked. He leaned back in his chair and sighed with contentment, which might have been due to repletion.

“Where’d you learn to cook like this an’ red up?” he asked.

Mesquite smiled, and his cold eyes warmed a little.

“Used to help my maw when I was a kid.”

“Did, huh?” grunted the old man. He brushed the stubble on his chin, gently nodding at some thought passing through his mind. “You a friend of Dick Bartell’s?”

“Never saw him before I rode up to th’ wagon,” answered Mesquite. “I was hungry an’ broke. They fed me an’ grubstaked me so I wouldn’t go hungry on my way to town. Bartell asked me to take a message in to Long John. I asked Long John where I could get a job. He sent me here, an’ you hired me. I’d like to stay.”

“Huh. Did you know anybody a-tall at th’ wagon?” asked the liveryman.

"No," answered Mesquite, and a quick thought prompted the rest of his reply. "I asked for a job, but they wasn't hirin'," he added and watched his companion's head nod quickly.

"Glad of that," said the old man, and his smile made more wrinkles on his old face. "If they'd been ready to hire you I don't reckon I'd wanta."

Mesquite smiled again.

"That woulda been kind of hard luck for me, I reckon."

"Yes, it would," replied the old man slowly and perhaps meaningly. "It mebbly woulda been right hard luck. Well, I hired you, an' it sticks. You'll mebbly see things that'll make you wonder. Nobody can stop you wonderin', but you jest mind yore own business, don't ask no questions an' do yore work. It ain't nobody else's business if I need a hand. Is it a trade?"

"All th' way," answered Mesquite, rolling a cigarette.

The old man was looking at his companion's waist, and he saw the wear caused by gun belts and holsters, and he let his gaze wander about the room; but the guns were not in sight.

"You better dress like you been used to," said Hankins as he reached for the dishpan. He partly filled it with water and placed it on the stove.

"Better let me red up," offered Mesquite.

"Two can work faster'n one," replied the old man. "Anyhow, yo're hired to work in th' stable, an' you ain't *nobody's* nigger less'n you want to be." He frowned suddenly as if he regretted what he had said and the thought which prompted it, and reached up to take a cloth off the line.

When they entered the stable the old man went straight toward the office, unlocked its front door and handed the keys to his new hand. Mesquite unlocked the big door, pushed it back and returned the keys. Then he went about his new work, curious to have a look at the horses ridden in the night before. To his surprise their backs were still wet, and thin, drying streaks of lather told of hard riding. They must have been ridden again after he had turned in and brought back shortly before he awakened. None of them bore the Long Diamond or any brand which meant anything to him.

He went to work on them with gunny sack and brush, alert for treacherous hoofs and teeth, and then watered and fed them, and while they ate he cleaned out the stalls. The job done, he walked around the stable, looking it over. Of course the horses had been ridden after he had last seen them: the led animals were not here and therefore must have been taken away.

There was plenty of work to be done as a penalty for the old man's laziness, but it was not pressing and could be done a bit at a time. He walked

toward the big door, picking up a chair on his way, and was soon leaning comfortably back against the outer wall, waiting for customers.

At this hour the sun was not too hot, but he pulled the brim of his big hat down to shut out the slanting rays. He had just rolled his second cigarette of the day when he heard the office door squeak and looked up to see the old man standing in the opening, looking down at him and clutching a piece of paper in his hand.

"You add up these figgers?" asked the boss, a grin on his old face.

"Yeah," drawled Mesquite. "That's why you hired me, I reckon."

"My Gawd!" muttered the liveryman, scratching his head vigorously. "I just don't remember nothin' that happened. I must have been as stiff as a plank."

"No, you wasn't," replied Mesquite with a faint smile. "You was as limp as a piece of soft buckskin." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "There's quite a lot of reddin' up to be done inside. I'll do it a little at a time so I won't run out of work."

The old man nodded absently, his eyes on the sheet of paper.

"You git it th' first time?" he asked a little suspiciously.

Mesquite looked up at the paper and nodded.

"Yeah, but mebbly not as quick as you did," he answered with a grin.

"Ha, ha, ha! By Godfrey! Looks like I got three, four totals," chuckled Hankins. "Come on uptown. Damn' if I don't buy you a drink!"

"I just had breakfast," answered Mesquite, tossing the cigarette butt out into the street. "Besides, I don't like liquor: it makes me sick."

"Meanin' you don't drink?" demanded the old man incredulously.

"Reckon that's it," answered Mesquite, and out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement up the street. A group of men had turned the corner and were striding purposefully toward the stable. The blue in his eyes became frosty. "Reckon you better wait for that drink. Here comes company, an' I figger it's trouble."

The old man jerked his head around, grunted something and looked down at Mesquite.

"Mebby you better start reddin' up th' stable," he said, a frown on his face, "but you don't have to do no real work."

"I figger they're comin' to ask you to fire me," said Mesquite. "You aim to do that?"

The old man stiffened, squared his shoulders and spat violently into the street.

“Not by a damn’ sight!” he snapped and went back into the office, where he threw a gun belt around him, caught the tongue as it whipped out in front and slipped it through the buckle.

Mesquite leaned forward in the chair until its front legs touched the ground and slowly stood up, facing the oncoming group and the door of the office.

The five men had slowed their pace, and now one of them moved a step in the lead, and when they stopped their leader was about one stride from the new stable hand.

“Anybody wearin’ two guns shore hadn’t oughta work in no stable, waitin’ on hosses,” he said, coldly looking Mesquite in the eye. “That means you ain’t got no job no more.”

“Th’ man that fires me is th’ man that hired me,” replied Mesquite calmly.

“That so?” sneered the leader. “You know who I am?”

“No. Who are you?”

“I’m Dutch Bill, an’ folks that I talk to do like I say. Get yore traps an’ clear out. Savvy?”

“That’s right peculiar,” replied Mesquite, a frosty smile on his lean hard face. “I never heard of folks that amounted to anythin’ take any orders from a windbag.”

Dutch Bill’s hand moved downward at the same instant that Mesquite’s fist moved outward. Dutch Bill’s head snapped back, and the rest of him naturally had to follow it. His impact disturbed the equilibrium of the two men immediately behind him, and before the other two could catch up with events they were staring at a gun muzzle.

“If you’ve come after yore hosses, go get ’em; if you haven’t, then clear out an’ carry Dutch Bill with you,” said Mesquite. “I never saw none of you before last night, an’ I got nothin’ ag’in you; but when trouble comes my way I try to handle it. He went for his gun, an’ I’m no damn’ fool; but I ain’t leavin’ this job to hunt up another.” He stepped slowly backward until the big door was in front of him. “Call yore play.”

Four men were watching him closely, and flinty smiles broke across their faces. After all, Dutch Bill had gone for his gun, and he was accustomed to ride his companions with such a high hand that they had no love for him.

“We came for our hosses,” said one of them and glanced swiftly back at the recumbent form of his leader to assure himself that Dutch Bill’s ears were not functioning. “What a smash! Well, he’s big enough an’ ornery

enough to fight his own battles. Suppose we pass around th' peace pipe an' ride on our way?"

"That's th' most sensible play," replied Mesquite, lowering his gun. "Right now you better get 'em yoreselves an' pay th' boss before you go. I'm too busy right now to give you a hand."

"Yo're a good kid, feller," said another of the four. "Which makes me feel sorry for you. Might be a darn' good idear if you did hunt another job, an' a long way from Hackamore."

"Thanks, but I'm stubborn," said the new stable hand and slowly sheathed his weapon as the old man, minus gun belt and gun, appeared in the office door.

"Wish you boys would quit yore rowdyin'!" snapped Hankins. "Go get yore hosses an' clear out. I'll put it in th' book. An' take Dutch Bill with you before he gets hisself shot." He glared at Mesquite. "I hired you to work an' not to fight my customers. Get into th' office here an' add up them figgers!"

Mesquite frowned, hesitated and then slowly obeyed the orders, the old man squeezing against the door frame to let him enter. The four customers stood Dutch Bill on his feet, and two of them steadied him while their companions disappeared in the stable. When they came out, leading five saddled horses, their leader had recovered his senses and was struggling with his arguing and pacifying friends. They finally had their way with him, and soon all were riding up the street.

The old man watched them until they had turned the corner, and then he swung about and smiled at his new hired man, who was searching for something.

"Lose somethin'?" asked Hankins with a chuckle.

"No," answered Mesquite. "I'm lookin' for those figgers."

"There ain't none. That just seemed to be th' best way to end th' argument. If you'd stayed out there in plain sight when Dutch Bill come to there mighta been gunplay." He was slowly shaking his head, his mirth gone. "We don't want none of that."

"Don't we?" calmly asked the stable hand.

"No, we don't!" answered the old man, his expression now one of worry.

"It mighta been better for me, though, if there'd been some while I was *lookin'*," replied Mesquite. "I've met his kind before."

The old man shifted his gaze and looked very uncomfortable.

"Reckon mebbey you have," he said. His eyes wandered back again to those of his hired man. "Yo're a young 'un; I'm old. Trouble don't mean so

much to you as it does to me. A-aw, hell. Come to figger it, I reckon you'd better not tote two guns: they make a man stand out a lot. Ain't one enough?"

"Reckon so," answered Mesquite, looking idly at a much-thumbed account book. He picked it up and clawed a pencil from a box of odds and ends. "Tell me their names an' how much to put down; then it won't be forgot."

"I'll take care of th' accounts," said the old man, holding out his hand with a quickness which was almost spasmodic. He put the book behind him on the desk and then looked at the door leading into the stable. "You might start in reddin' up out there."

"What's Dutch Bill's name?" asked Mesquite, his gaze now locked with that of his boss.

"Dutch Bill, of course. What you reckon it is?" snapped the old man. His gaze wavered but came back again.

"Figgered there might be more of it—his real name," answered Mesquite, slowly turning toward the stable door. "There generally is," he added.

"Yeah, there is if you know it; but 'Dutch Bill' is all I ever heard," replied the liveryman. "Wait a minute. I like you, young man. I may be gettin' into trouble over it, but I do, just th' same. There ain't no reason for th' stable bein' red up, not a mite of reason. What's in th' corners an' ain't in th' way don't bother nobody. It ain't never bothered me, an' it hadn't oughta bother you. You take care of th' hosses, I'll take care of th' office, an' we'll let th' stable take care of itself. I didn't hire you to be no damn' nigger. You get rid of one of them gun belts, do yore reg'lar chores an' look after th' office when I ain't in it. Hell!" he exploded as a thought came into his mind. "What wages did we agree on when I hired you?"

Mesquite hooked his thumbs in the gun belts, leaned back against the door casing and smiled.

"We didn't get that far," he answered and laughed. "You came to, handed me some figgers to add, hired me an' passed out ag'in."

"H'm!" said the old man, greatly relieved. "H'm." He cleared his throat, slyly glanced at his hired man and then vigorously scratched the back of his head. "What you say to a dollar a day an' found for yoreself an' hoss?"

Mesquite reflected that the track layers on the railroads, working hard, got no more than that. He smiled again.

"You figger I'm worth that?" he asked.

The old man studied him for a moment. "Yes, an' mebbly more; but that's as much as I can pay."

"It's enough," said Mesquite.

"All right. There's an old coat I wear when I'm doin' dirty work," said Hankins. "Wear it when you work, if it fits you. It'll save your shirt."

"All right," replied Mesquite. "You said you liked me. All right to that too. I like you. We'll let it ride that way, but if th' time comes when you can't pay me a dollar a day then I'll work for my keep. Now you better go an' get that drink, but it might be a good thing if you don't get too many of 'em. I'll shuck a gun belt and get right back."

"Damn' yore impudence!" snapped the old man. "Th' liquor I drink ain't none of yore business! I won't have no young whippersnapper tell me how — —" His voice ceased abruptly as he realized that he was talking to himself. He scratched his head again, looked down to see what it was he had picked up and stiffened slightly. He glanced hurriedly around the little room and then walked swiftly to a pile of illustrated weeklies on a shelf in the rear. Slipping the account book in the pile, he wheeled, strode through the door and along the street to the Hackamore Hotel.

Long John, once again doing his own trick, glanced up as the shadow of this early morning customer fell through the doorway; but he knew who it was by the sound of the steps, and the knowledge did not seem to particularly please him.

"Mornin', John."

"Mornin', Joe. Startin' in a little early, ain't you?" asked the bartender, sliding bottle and glass toward his customer. "Nice day."

"Yeah, fine day," replied the customer, ignoring the unpleasant remark and grabbing bottle and glass. He filled the glass and tossed off the drink. "Hah! That puts life into a man. An' I need a few jolts *this* mornin'." The old man shoved his hat back upon his head and rested an elbow on the bar. "Well, any news?"

The bartender regarded his companion curiously.

"It all depends what you call news," he replied, idly moving his cloth back and forth before him. "Seein' you had to come up here to ask for news, mebbly it don't amount to anythin'; but *I'd* call it news an' none too good."

Hankins grinned.

"If it ain't no secret suppose you tell me about it."

"Well," said Long John, looking his companion in the eye, "Dutch Bill an' his friends just left. Dutch had a swollen jaw, an' th' disposition of a

rattlesnake. It appears he wasn't lookin' when he was hit. You'll mebby lose a stable hand."

"Wasn't lookin', huh?" snapped the old man. "Then he didn't say that he was watchin' that youngster like a cat an' goin' for his gun?"

Long John raised his eyebrows.

"You don't say!"

"You jest heard me say it! I was there an' saw th' hull of it."

"Well," sighed Long John, shaking his head. "That only makes it worse. Dutch Bill will feel that he'll have to save his face. I'm more afraid than ever that yo're goin' to lose yore stable hand."

"I mebby will, John," agreed the old man, sighing deeply as he laid the proper atmosphere for pouring the second drink. "He's a good lad too. Carried me in, put me to bed, took off my shoes, pinned th' curtains tight shut, red up th' kitchen an' had breakfast all ready when I turned out in th' mornin'. Then he faced down Dutch Bill an' his crew, knocked Bill into week before last when Bill went for his gun, an' then up an' made friends with th' rest of 'em. I mebby will lose him, John: no one man can stand up before Dutch Bill an' his hellions very long. Friend of yours, is he?"

Mesquite was no friend of Long John's, but after the old man's recital Long John decided that some friendships started on the spur of the moment. He carefully considered what he had just heard, was glad that the old man had someone to look after him and decided to tell a white lie.

"Yeah, he is. All th' way from th' Jack," he replied. "I sent him down to you. He needed a job, an' you needed a good man to help you around th' stable. It just seemed to fit together." He glanced at the bottle, at the empty glass and at his customer.

The old man removed his elbow from the bar, stood up straight and glared at the man behind the counter.

"One drink is all I need today, so far," he declared. His face flushed. "Not that no man on earth can tell me how much liquor I'm to drink; but I had a good breakfast, saw Dutch Bill swap ends in th' air an' him an' his crew eat humble pie. As I said just now, no man on earth can give me orders about drinkin': so I'll have just one more, a couple cigars—an' when I drink this un it's to hell with Dutch Bill!"

"Yeah," replied the bartender sarcastically. "When you drink this one an' a couple more someplace else you keep yore fool mouth shut about Dutch Bill! Ain't you got no sense a-tall?"

"Mebby I ain't, because I'm gettin' damn' tired of th' way my stable is bein' used," replied the old man with a courage which spoke well for the

potency of Long John's liquor. "Why, only last night they drove in— —" He stopped, clapped his hand over his mouth and looked swiftly around the room.

The bartender reached out, scooped up the bottle and placed it behind him on the back bar. He slid two cigars across the counter.

"This is once you drink like you been told to," he said flatly. "Th' more you drink, th' more you talk. You've talked too much already. Take them cigars, on th' house, an' go back where you belong. I saw my friend was wearin' two guns, an' I liked th' way they set on him an' th' way he moved. Like a damn' bobcat. That's mebbly why I sent him to you. There's talk goin' on around this town. Go back to th' stable an' keep yore fool mouth shut! An' if you can find any way to keep yore stable from bein' used nights you *do* it!"

"But they'd shoot me quick as a wink!" retorted the old man. "An' I know too much!"

"I said *if* you can do it," snapped Long John. "Mebby now that you got that Mesquite workin' for you some way will show up."

Hankins flashed a longing glance at the bottle so far out of his reach, shook his head slowly and sadly and turned and walked out, and his gait was not as quick as it had been.

HOPALONG CASSIDY rode into Twin River, stopped before the livery stable of his friend Rick Bradley and moved lazily into the building. Sounds of whistling came from the rear, and he kept on going and saw the proprietor turn around from hanging up some harness.

“Mornin’, Hoppy,” said Rick with a smile.

“Mornin’, Rick,” replied Hopalong. “I just dropped in to see if there was any letters here for me.”

“There ain’t any yet. How’s Buck an’ all th’ rest of ’em out at th’ ranch?”

“They’re all right,” answered Hopalong. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and seemed to be studying something. He exchanged a few more words with his friend, turned on his heel and went back the way he had come. He was getting too fussy, he decided. The kid hadn’t had time enough to learn anything worth writing about.

He mounted, rode up the street a short distance and again swung from the saddle, this time in front of his office. Last night’s mail was on the desk, and he began pawing it over without much interest. He picked up the first envelope, tore it open and glanced at the brief letter, but he took time to look at the faces of the two portraits on the “wanted” posters. They awakened no memories, and he put them to one side, to be tacked on the wall later. The second letter took little time to read and went into the wastebasket. The last was addressed to him personally, and any lack of interest he might have had evaporated before he had read the first line. By the time the last work had passed before his eyes he was smiling a little. So Whit had got himself naturalized, the boys were calling him Hank, he was doing well (or had been before the rustling had started), and he liked Mesquite very much.

He put the letter in a pocket and stood quietly thinking until the distant, vibrant sound of a whistle broke in upon him and roused him to the doing of one of his regular morning chores. He had two trains to meet every day, and this was the day’s first. It was the westbound, due in a few minutes. He walked quickly out to his horse, mounted and rode toward the station. As he reached the station platform the train was slowing down, and the litter, swirling in the air, was beginning to settle, while the smoke and dust made a temporary fog.

Hopalong took his place near the baggage car, where he could see the full length of the train, and in his mind’s eye were the two new “wanted” pictures. Half-a-dozen passengers stepped down to the platform, and he was

just about to turn away when he saw one more appear, and as his gaze settled upon this person his eyes grew cold. The damned old horse thief was back again!

The passenger looked quickly and furtively around and was about to scurry past the end of the station when he glanced a little farther to the left and seemed to shrink. How well he knew that cold face! And the quick gesture he saw could not be disobeyed. If he had dared he would have run, but he did not dare. While he paused for an instant he saw the cold-faced man walk toward the end of the freight office and then out of sight behind it. It would do him no good to try to get away, and it might do him quite a lot of harm. This was one of the moments he had dreaded. He shook his head slowly and shuffled toward the freight office, and as he turned the far corner of the building he stopped for an instant, looking down on the hat and the broad shoulders of the man who was lazily seated on the edge of the platform, watching his slowly swinging feet. Then the passenger took the few remaining steps and stopped even with the shoulders. He stood so for a cruel and silent several moments, and then the seated man spoke.

“Set down, Shanghai,” invited the sheriff pleasantly. “Yo’re allus in such a stew. Set down an’ smoke a cigarette.” The speaker turned from the waist, leaning back to look up at the other. He held out cigarette papers and a sack of tobacco. “Set down an’ smoke.”

Shanghai’s expression of fear lessened a little as he yielded to a faintly budding hope. Maybe this was just cat-and-mouse, but he had to do as he was told. He slowly and rather laboriously lowered himself to the platform and then, finally settled to his satisfaction, took the tobacco and papers again held out to him. He placed the lip of the bag to his teeth, opened it and then tilted some of its contents into the curved paper; but his trembling hands made a sorry mess of it, and he was not at all helped by the knowledge that his companion’s eyes were on him.

Hopalong reached out, took the sack and paper and deftly rolled a smoke. He bent over, grinned into the old man’s face and then shoved the cigarette between Shanghai’s lips. Striking a match, he touched it to the curled paper tip.

“Just like a sucklin’ babe,” he said, grinning. “You ain’t got no reason to be leary of me unless you got somethin’ in yore mind to make you so. They treat you all right back there?”

Shanghai seemed to shrink in his poorly fitting but new and shoddy clothes. His sentence had not been as heavy as it might well have been, and he had earned time off for good behavior. The good behavior had not been due to any change of heart, any inner goodness, but was rather the result of

the man's shrewd thinking. He was behind stone walls and steel bars. The more trouble he made, the more he would earn for himself. Good behavior was just plain common sense. Now he was face to face with the man he always had believed to be implacable, the man who had been most instrumental in his conviction. He glanced sideways into the blue eyes of the peace officer, caught a glint of humor which seemed, fleetingly, to be a little warm; and the little bud of hope grew a trifle.

"They treated me all right," confessed the old man. "I didn't give 'em no trouble, don't want to give nobody no trouble. I'm jest a pore old man, an' I'm kinda lost."

Again his glance swept over the officer's face, and he thought that the glint of humor had grown. The sheriff was implacable, yes; but Shanghai had never heard that he was cruel or unjust.

"Kinda lost, huh?" asked Hopalong with keen relish, his mind running back through the past when Shanghai was known as an old fox, an unintentional compliment to the fox. There had not been a trail, a path, a piece of ground, a trick of woodcraft that he had not known and made very good use of. For twenty-odd years he had escaped arrest, not to mention conviction; and he had made his living all of those years by theft. And now he felt kind of lost!

"Yes," admitted the old man out of one side of his mouth. He was not as old as he pretended. "Yes, kinda lost. I got to find somethin' to do so I won't starve. I'd ruther it was somethin' honest, Sheriff. I'm too old to go back there ag'in an' ever hope to come out alive." He shook his head sorrowfully. "They shouldn't-a sent me back here where everybody knows me. I'm afear'd nobody'll hire me."

"Mebby not, 'though you've paid th' debt an' are supposed to be all square," replied the sheriff, knowing how utterly empty his words really were. "As you say, you've got to earn a livin' or starve. An' if you earn it like you used to you shore will go back ag'in; an' then, like you say, you'll mebby never come out alive. You got any money?"

"I got th' five dollars they gave me, along with this suit of clothes," answered Shanghai, wriggling uncomfortably.

"That ain't very much in th' face of a drunk long delayed," said Hopalong, smiling faintly. He rammed a huge fist into a pocket and brought it out again. Something yellow peeked out from between his fingers as he reached out and took hold of the old man's hand.

"There," he said. "Ten more oughta help quite a lot. After th' long layoff it won't cost you as much to get drunk as it did in th' old days. After you

sober up come out to th' ranch. When you get there ask for me an' insist on seein' me. I stay there nights. I'd rather give you a job under my nose an' Buck's than go bustin' all over th' country tryin' to catch you ag'in. There was one thing I never questioned about you: I allus knew you had plenty of brains. Only trouble was, you used 'em th' wrong way. You've still got th' brains, I reckon, an' from what you just said I figger that you might come to use 'em enough to see that you can't lick th' law setup in these parts." He placed a gentle hand on the old man's shoulder. "Go on with yore bender, sober up an' see me at th' ranch some night soon." He chuckled. "You savvy?"

"Shore. I savvy," answered the old man, knowing that he really only understood part of it; but the ten dollars was real, and it also seemed that this old-time enemy was not holding too hard a grudge; but his nature had been formed by the years which lay behind him, and seldom in his sinful life had Shanghai trusted any man.

The idea of a good drunk revolved in his mind. Back there where he had just come from the edge of his thirst had become blunted, and he had gone without liquor for so long a time that now he was practically starting anew; and on the train back to Twin River as the miles monotonously followed each other he had argued with himself about the spending of the precious five dollars. It would not last him long if he started sliding it across the bars. Now he had three times as much and at least the promise of a job. He straightened up slightly and tried to square his shoulders.

"You ain't a-foolin' an old man, are you?" he asked.

"Not in no way a-tall," answered Hopalong, gently shaking his head. "Yo're supposed to be all square. Far's I'm concerned, you are. I'm just figgerin' to give you a chance. After that it'll be up to you."

"It's a long way out to th' ranch, an' I'm purty soft for walkin'," said Shanghai. "I don't reckon nobody'll lend me a hoss, seein' how many I've stole, an' I don't want to—to steal one. He, he, he! That'd put me right back in my old stride, wouldn't it?"

"I'll drop around to the livery barn an' see Rick Bradley," said the sheriff. "When you get ready to go out to th' ranch he'll let you have a hoss."

"You be at th' ranch tonight?" asked Shanghai.

Hopalong laughed with keen enjoyment and again rested a hand on the old man's shoulder.

"Shore I will," he replied, still laughing, "but I ain't lookin' for no miracles or expectin' you to grow any wings. You get that bender all over

with an' go out to th' ranch when yo're flat busted an' cold sober. An' I wouldn't do too much talkin' if I was you, specially about how smart you used to be. Folks around here don't have to be reminded about how you stole their critters."

"Talkin' never put me up no tree!" retorted Shanghai with the first indication of spirit he had shown so far. "If some others I used to know had kept their fool traps shut it mighta saved all of us a lot of trouble."

"I know that," laughed Hopalong. "That's mebbly another reason why I'm givin' you a job. I allus did like a tight mouth."

"Any of my old friends in town or anywhere near?" asked Shanghai somewhat anxiously, trying to remember whom among them he had double-crossed and would have to watch.

"Not one of 'em," answered the sheriff. "You warn't very lucky at th' end, but yore friends warn't even as lucky as you. All right, go get those drinks. I'll expect you when I see you, so we'll leave th' time open. Good luck, old-timer."

Shanghai sat as if frozen to the platform, watching the sheriff stride away. The same trim, bowed legs; the same broad, sloping shoulders, swinging easily above the lean waist; the same swing of the body, the short choppy walk of a horseman and the two plain guns low down and tied.

The old man let go a gusty sigh. If he were only twenty years younger—yes, even ten years would do. Age was robbing him of the right to choose his course. Still his old choice had been wrong in the final showdown, as proved by the stone walls and the steel bars. It was now just plain common sense to choose the other road and to be with the law instead of against it. There was one bit of country, outside this county and across the state line, which he might try if he were younger, the section where he had spent the earlier years of his life and which he knew as well as he did his name. It was just no good; he'd try the safe way, for a while at least. Perhaps after he got his feet firmly under him and got his bearings and had saved up a little stake out of his wages—well, that would come later.

He looked past the sheriff along the littered, dusty street. Saloon, eating house, saloon, general store, post office, saloon, pool hall which had not been there before, livery stable, saloon. In one of those saloons, come night, there would be a few riders who would take a gamble now and then. Huh! there would be time for that later on.

He slipped a hand into his pocket to feel the money nestling there and let his roving gaze drift back to one building down the street. Yes sir, if he were

only ten years younger he might give the sheriff's office something to worry about.

He stirred, slid off the edge of the platform and shuffled out onto the bare and dusty square. As he neared the first of the buildings he saw the sheriff swing into Rick Bradley's livery stable, and a cunning gleam came into his eyes as a tricky thought popped into his mind. But he shook his head regretfully—none of the old crowd was left, and he had no real choice. He fixed his hungry gaze on the building he had singled out and shuffled slowly toward it.

THIS WAS ONE OF THE DAYS when the sheriff's office had nothing to do, and about midmorning Hopalong became tired of the office and the boring inactivity. There was no reason for him to stay in town. He went to the back door and stuck his head out of it, calling to his deputy who was fussing around the small corral.

"Mike!" he called. "I'm leavin' her to you, I'm goin' out to th' ranch."

He whirled on one heel, clipped across the sounding board floor of the little office, went out to his horse and had one foot off the ground and in the stirrup when he paused in that position, his eyes and his thoughts on the man who was just coming out of the lunchroom down the street. The restless horse made him hop about on one leg, but he did not know that he was doing it. It was Shanghai, and the old man appeared to be unbelievably sober. This miracle impacted so forcibly on the sheriff's mind that he put the raised foot back on the ground and quit his hopping.

Shanghai glanced both ways out of the corner of his eyes, caught sight of the sheriff and forthwith shuffled toward that surprised person. He wiped his lips with the back of a hand and smeared egg yellow out on his cheek. He had yearned for ham and eggs for months and months and months, and now he was as full of that delectable combination as his capacity would allow. As a matter of fact he had begun to suspect that he was just a little mite too full of it. He knew that the sheriff was openly and frankly studying him as he shuffled along, but now, full to the limit with ham and eggs, the old man walked straight into that stare with a confidence strange to him.

"I been waitin' a long time for a feed like that," he confessed as he slowed before the still studious peace officer. "I figger that mebbly I'm on my way to a bellyache, but I just don't care."

"Eggs," mused the sheriff, his gaze on the dirty cheek. "That means ham too. W-e-l-l, th' eggs won't hurt you, an' you've already gambled with th' ham, which never has hurt me. Where you goin' now?"

"I was figgerin' to go get that hoss an' ride out to th' Double Y," answered Shanghai with a faint grin. "An' I will, too, less'n you've changed yore mind."

"Reckon you can hold up yore end at a brandin' fire?" asked Hopalong.

The old man stiffened slightly and then nodded.

"I don't know how many I can grab an' flop," he answered dubiously. "I might do better, for a while, tendin' th' irons; but I'll stay with it till I mebbly

drop. That's right hard work, an' I ain't as tough as I uster be, but I'll try it."

Hopalong laughed gently, still in a more or less dazed frame of mind because the old man was full of ham and eggs instead of frontier liquor. Perhaps the old reprobate was really going to amount to something.

"All right," he said, swinging into the saddle. "Get that hoss, an' let's make tracks." He swung the animal around and rode at a walk toward the livery stable, the old man shuffling along near a stirrup.

After a short wait he saw Shanghai riding toward him in the dim light of the stable, mounted on a Double Y horse and sitting a Double Y saddle as if he really belonged there. And he sat the saddle with an ease and grace which belied the long time he had not even seen one. The sheriff grinned at the sight and wondered how long the old man could stand saddle punishment after so long a layoff. And he suspected that the same thought was in the old man's mind. The once powerful thigh muscles must now be pitifully weak.

They left town stirrup to stirrup and at a much slower pace than Hopalong had been wont to leave it. The ride ahead of them was a long one, too long to be comfortable for a man who had not sat a saddle in a number of years. And so they rode, leg to leg, each silent and buried in thought and each thinking of the other and of what might lay ahead. An hour passed, and then Shanghai, surreptitiously trying to find a more comfortable position on the saddle without success, glanced sideways at his companion and spoke.

"I'm afeared I won't be much account at no brandin' fire for th' first few days," he said and tried to square his shoulders, "but it won't take me long, I reckon, to get toughened to it." He chuckled. "How you know I won't steal yore cattle?"

"That's somethin' I got to gamble on," answered the sheriff with a laugh. "An' as to you gettin' toughened up at a brandin' fire, I've kinda changed my mind. We've got some wild ones in th' big hoss pasture, an' we're short of busted hosses. We'll bring in some of 'em an' put 'em in th' breakin' corral an' let you try yore hand at tamin' 'em."

Shanghai stared straight ahead with unseeing eyes. There had been a time when he could break range horses with any man, but that time was so long, long ago. The great thigh muscles were great no longer, as he was very acutely aware at this moment. It was almost like a death sentence, but he squared his shoulders again.

"Shore," he agreed and tried to make the word sound hearty and enthusiastic. Perhaps he would be driven to meet some of the boys in that saloon back there in Twin River; but if he did, and got caught, they would never take him alive.

Hopalong laughed outright and loudly and clapped his heavy hand on the bony shoulder which sagged under the pressure.

“Just wanted to see how yore spirit is, old-timer,” he said and laughed again. “Th’ only time you’ll get near that breakin’ pen is when you set on th’ top rail an’ watch somebody else take th’ dynamite out of ’em. Likewise yo’re not goin’ to mess up th’ smooth work at no brandin’ fire. We been keepin’ a healthy, tough, first-class cowhand at th’ ranch to wrangle in th’ saddle stock for me an’ Buck. One of them fires is shore needin’ him. I’m figgerin’ on you to take his place. Are you any damn’ good at all at wranglin’ in a few head of hosses?”

“Sheriff,” said the old man earnestly, “there just ain’t no better hoss wrangler ever lived than I be.”

“Huh! You know, old-timer, I kinda believe you.”

“Yes sir, Cassidy,” said the other, his shoulders truly squared now and his soul more or less at peace, “that’s where I shine.” He squirmed slightly in the saddle and was sorry that his bones were not better upholstered, and his thighs were so sore it was all he could do to hold back the tears.

The sheriff caught the movement, fell sorry for the old man and drew rein abruptly. His companion quickly followed suit and looked around in surprise.

“Allus like to breathe my hoss about here,” explained Hopalong gravely.

Shanghai’s expression was tinged with suspicion. As he painfully shifted again in the saddle he looked his companion squarely in the eye.

“Th’ breed musta fell off while I was away,” he said and grinned. “Hell, no hoss that’s worth a damn has to be breathed so soon. They ain’t even worked up a sweat.”

“I allus like to be kind to dumb animals,” replied Hopalong, trying to keep his face straight.

Shanghai turned the remark over in his mind, and slowly his pale face grew red.

“You meanin’ I’m a dumb animal?” he demanded with more spirit than he had shown for years. There could be no other explanation for this absurd breather.

“Keep yore hat on,” replied the sheriff kindly. “I know how long it’s been since you set a hoss, an’ you ain’t got no meat a-tall on yore bones, an’ no saddle muscles. We ain’t in no hurry. You feel like swingin’ down an’ stretchin’ yore legs?”

The old man was silent while one might count ten, and conflicting thoughts were fighting it out in his mind. Then he sat up straight, his heart warming the little bud of hope.

“Hell, no!” he exclaimed. “You comin’ along with me, Hoppy?” And his dust suddenly swirled high around the man he left behind.

Hopalong sent his mount forward at a lope, and the smile on his face was something worth seeing. It was not long before he caught up with the old man and, having caught up, suited his pace to that of his companion. Shanghai finally slowed and his companion with him, and after a few moments they were again riding at a more comfortable speed, stirrup to stirrup.

“How come they called you Shanghai?” curiously asked the sheriff after a while.

“On account of a song I used to sing . . . You know, them ham an’ aigs ain’t botherin’ me a mite.”

Another interval of silence, and then:

“You figger swappin’ saddles will make it easier for you?” asked the sheriff.

“Dunno,” answered Shanghai. “This un won’t be so bad after I get used to it.” He appeared to be thinking. “What happened to that Mesquite feller that ketched me?”

“Oh, quite a lot of things; but he ain’t here no more,” answered the sheriff. “Why?”

“Smart young cub, he was,” growled the old man. “But he never ketched me all by hisself. No stranger to that country could know it well enough to find out where I was holed up. Hoppy, it was you who told him where to go an’ where to look. But I’ll say this for him: when it came to trackin’ an’ readin’ sign he was shore hell on wheels. Just like a damn’ Injun, he was.”

“He was Injun trained—mountain Utes down in th’ Southwest,” replied Hopalong. “Not him personal, but his father. His father taught him. As to me tellin’ him about where to look—well, mebby. Your boys ambushed me,” he said after a moment’s pause. “You come nigh on killin’ me. I had a damn’ narrer squeak. Mesquite was a friend of mine, but I didn’t know just how good a friend he was till then. He swore he’d get you all—every damn’ one. He did it. You ever have a friend like that?”

“— — — —, no! I never had no friend that I didn’t have to watch every move he made, outguess every thought he had! You mean to tell me that young hellion went out after us an’ got us, one by one, just because he was a friend of yours? There warn’t no reward out for us?”

“Yes to yore first question,” answered Hopalong. “No to yore second.”

Shanghai had felt more or less lost all along, but now, metaphorically speaking, he threw up his hand. This was almost past belief. He had been on the front end of that chase, and he knew how hard and how dangerous it had been.

“Hoppy,” he said thoughtfully and sorrowfully, “if I could ever have a friend like that there ain’t a damn’ thing on earth I wouldn’t do for him. I can’t believe it. It just don’t make sense!”

“It makes a lot of sense,” replied Hopalong quietly. “An’ Mesquite is only one of my friends. Only one of more’n a dozen,” he said with quiet pride.

“I knowed you had friends,” admitted Shanghai, “but I didn’t have th’ sense to know what it meant—what it meant to me. Fine chance *we* had to lick a combination like that.”

“You just couldn’t lick it in th’ long run,” replied the sheriff. “You had to have luck with you all th’ way, all th’ time, an’ not make even one mistake.” He turned and looked quizzically at the old man. “An’ that still goes.”

“Yeah,” grunted Shanghai thoughtfully. “An’ th’ luck didn’t run with us all th’ time, an’ we did make a mistake or two.” The horses kept on going, and the friendly wind kept the dust behind them. After a moment Shanghai turned his head. “I been bitter ag’in that damn’ cub,” he admitted, “bitter for years. But I’m beginnin’ to see him in a different light. We was on one side, an’ he was on th’ other, an’ we both did our damndest. I’d shore like to have a friend like him, to have friends like you have.”

“Mebby you will someday,” replied the sheriff, “but you’ll have to earn ’em, you’ll have to deserve ’em.”

They passed a turn in the trail, and ahead of them lay the slope which led down to the buildings of the Double Y, small dots in the distance.

Shanghai had not replied to his companion’s last words, but he was thinking as hard as he ever had thought in years. He had backed the wrong plays all his life; but a man who had good sense could change, perhaps, if he wanted to. This sheriff and his unbelievable friends were implacable only to those who ran against the law. And look at the friends he had! Any man who had friends like those must be square and kind and true. He saw the buildings come steadily closer, and he wondered if he could stick it out; but stick it out he did. They were heading straight for the bunkhouse, but suddenly Hopalong’s horse crowded over to the left, and they both turned slightly and then stopped before a small frame house.

“Just a minute, Shanghai,” said the sheriff, dismounting before the door of the little dwelling. He went into the building but soon came out again, waving a careless hand behind him. “My shack,” he explained as he swung back into the saddle.

A few moments later they drew up before the bunkhouse door, and somehow, in some way, Shanghai managed to get his leg over the saddle and to get down and stand erect beside the horse.

A curious puncher loafed to the door and leaned lazily against the casing. He nodded to Hopalong and then looked curiously at the old man.

“Bill,” said the sheriff, waving a hand, “meet Shanghai, an old-timer in these parts. He’ll wrangle in our saddle hosses from now on. You head for Lanky in th’ mornin’. He’ll likely need another roper or cutter.”

He pushed past the puncher, motioning for Shanghai to follow.

“There’s two bunks that ain’t bein’ used,” he said, indicating them. “Take yore pick an’ make yoreself at home. I’ll see you later.” He started to turn away but checked himself. “When you ain’t wranglin’ you can give cook a hand.” Then he turned again and left the building.

Shanghai watched the sheriff stride to the door and through it, exchanged grins with the puncher and then looked at the two bunks. The farthest from the door would be, everything else being equal, the quietest. This was the one he chose. As an indication of possession he made it up and turned back the blanket, his hands moving deftly from long habit, and awakened a grudging admiration in the watching Bill.

“There,” said the new hand on the Double Y. “Now s’pose you show me th’ ropes an’ tell me what I should oughta know. I specially want to know about th’ hosses rid by Buck an’ Hoppy. I can see where I’m goin’ to be too busy for a spell to wash many damn’ dishes. Can’t cook handle a little outfit like this all by hisself?”

“He shore can, Shanghai,” answered Bill, leading the way toward the door, “an’ he can handle you, too, mebby.” He had no suspicion that he was talking to an ex-cattle thief, for he was comparatively new to the country.

“Huh!” snorted the new wrangler. “Mebby he can! Is that th’ blacksmith shop? Yep, I see it is. I’ll take a try at blacksmithin’ to get my hand in ag’in.” He glanced ahead at the smaller corral and slowed his peculiar steps. “Mighty nice hosses, them are. This outfit allus had good uns. *Oh!*”

“What’s matter?” asked Bill curiously.

Shanghai drew a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

“Little cramp, I reckon,” he explained and hated to think how sore he would be in the morning, but in the morning he was going to ride, no matter

how sore he was, and he was going to keep on riding until he rode the soreness out. He had jumped from the penitentiary right smack into a good outfit, a good and easy job with a man who was treating him far better than he had any right to expect, and he was not such a fool as to risk losing any part of it.

He well knew the tight friendship and close loyalty which bound together the members of this outfit; he knew it to his sorrow, and, knowing it, he also knew that it had not been just the law which had laid him low, but the almost unbelievable friendship existing between these men. When Hopalong had been ambushed it had been like stirring up a nest of hornets, and the angry stinging had not stopped until every man concerned in that affair had either been killed or captured.

From now on he was going to be on his best behavior, for that would pay him best; but he sighed as he thought of how he would miss the old excitement, the old matching of wits. Oh well, at least he would win food, lodging, smoking tobacco, wages and companionship—and all for wrangling in a few horses and for helping the cook. The last thought made him frown a little, but he brightened instantly and shuffled on. The cook might provide him with opportunity for using his wits to avoid work in the kitchen.

Late in the afternoon the cook stuck his head out of the galley door and shouted lustily for his new helper, but he shouted in vain, because the new helper had persuaded Bill to show him where the riding stock grazed, on the plea that it would save him time when it became his job to wrangle them. He timed it so nicely that he could just hear the cook's summons sounding over the ridge behind him; and while he was sore and stiff from the morning's ride he preferred riding and suffering to peeling potatoes and performing the cook's more unpleasant tasks; and he felt that he might be a great deal stiffer in the morning without this limbering up.

Supper over, there was no way in which Shanghai could escape the kitchen work, but he made the best of it and pretended to like it, only he was very clumsy and forgetful. The work done, he and the cook joined Bill in the bunk room, and Shanghai refused to make a third hand at cards. He was stiff and sore, he said, from riding, and thought it would do him good to wander around the corrals and try to work some of it out of him. Neither the cook nor Bill had any yearning for his company and were already picking up their cards and hardly noticed when he left.

Shanghai shuffled around for a while and had started back toward the bunkhouse when the lights in the ranch house engaged his attention. One of his old traits came to life quickly: spying and snooping were ingrained in

him. It was an art with him and had saved his skin on more than one occasion in the old days. He wondered how good he was after such a lapse of time and also what was being said about him, and so he started toward the ranch house.

Buck and Rose and Hopalong were sitting on the front porch, talking idly, when Rose remembered that she had some mending which had to be done and left the two men to themselves. Neither had any reason to suspect that an ex-horse thief was stretched out on the ground under the far end of the porch, listening to every word that was said.

"I was glad to read that letter from Whit," said Buck, "an' to learn that Mesquite was there an' that Whit took a likin' to him. I figger th' kid got a tough job on his hands. You don't even know there's any rustlin' goin' on. But don't you think it's funny that you ain't got no letter from him?"

"No, I don't think it's funny," answered Hopalong. "As I told you before, even if there is deviltry goin' on up there he ain't hardly had time to find out anythin'. An' we do know that there's hoss stealin' goin' on up north, up around Whit. We got nothin' to do with that unless it moves down into our jurisdiction."

"You figger he's got to Hackamore yet?" asked Buck.

"Don't know. He may be playin' th' Hackamore end, or he may be out scoutin' around on th' range. Be time enough for the letter when it gets here."

"Eh, suppose no letter gets here?" asked Buck slowly.

"Then I clean my guns an' go into that country to find out why it didn't."

"You won't go alone," said Buck. "Mesquite shouldn't-a gone up there alone. It's too big a play for one man."

"It was th' safest play he could make," replied Hopalong shortly. "How many times have I got to tell you that if anybody went with him they would likely be seen by somebody that knowed 'em an' couple up th' kid with this part of th' country an' th' sheriff's office?"

"Huh!" grunted Buck and changed his line of attack. "An' you went an' hired Shanghai without askin' me anythin' about it! I got a good mind to fire him th' first thing in th' mornin'. You know what he is!"

"I know what he was," retorted Hopalong warmly. "An' he won't be fired in th' mornin' nor any other time unless he does somethin' to deserve it. You want to drive him back to his old tricks? He's served his time, an' he's squared up. He's supposed to have a new chance. I'm givin' it to him because I know that nobody else will. He's got to eat, ain't he? You let me an' him work this out by ourselves. If he's changed he's got a job here as

long as he wants it—until he dies. He's got brains aplenty, an' that's somethin' any ranch can use. He's got guts too. I know what he went through durin' th' last part of th' ride this mornin'; an' just before supper he went ridin' ag'in, to have Bill show him th' lay of th' ranch."

"He'll never be a loyal hand, an' we'll never be able to depend on him," growled Buck, shaking his head in the darkness.

"Mebby not," admitted Hopalong, "but we won't *know* that till we find it out for certain, will we? Nobody ever accused th' old man of not havin' brains, an' if he still has 'em an' uses 'em he'll know that his best bet will be to change his ways—specially at his age. Tell you one thing: if he does make a loyal hand he'll be deadly poison to any wide-loopers pickin' up an occasional stray cow from th' fringes of th' ranch. He knows all th' tricks of that game."

"Huh!" growled Buck. He suddenly stirred, and his chair scraped as he stood up. "You talk like you've just had a nice big feed of locoweed. This ain't th' first time I've figgered that you was crazy. I don't know what gets into you. But I can tell you one thing: when you do go loco yo're crazier'n hell!"

"Wouldn't be surprised," retorted Hopalong. "Somethin' like that is shore bound to happen to a man who's been associatin' with you all these years. If you was just about twice as smart as you are, you might make a good prairie dog!"

"Is that so?" barked Buck. "It's gettin' chilly out here, an' I'm goin' in. Shanghai workin' for th' Double Y! Th' slickest cattle thief these parts ever saw, workin' for th' Double Y an' th' *sheriff*! Great Gawd A'mighty!"

"I ain't findin' it so chilly," chuckled Hopalong, "but I'll foller you into th' house, give you twelve men to my eleven an' lick you good."

"You must figger yo're a right smart checker player," snorted Buck, pushing open the door.

"Seems to me that you oughta be figgerin' that way, too, by this time," retorted Hopalong, stepping across the doorsill.

Rose looked up from her mending and sighed gently. The room had been so quiet and peaceful, but now — —

"I do wish you two could play checkers without wrangling all the time," she said.

Buck laughed, rested his big hand gently on her head for a moment and glanced at the grinning Hopalong out of the corner of his eye.

"I reckon that's one of th' reasons why we like to play so much," he said and then frowned at his friend and partner. "Well, get out th' board, why

don't you? You reckon you need my help to lift it?"

"If I needed any help I wouldn't ask you for it," growled the sheriff, scaling his big hat onto a chair across the room.

Outside the house there was silent movement at the far end of the porch where a little darker spot on the ground seemed to ooze along the side wall foundations. After a few moments it was lost in the outer darkness.

The Shanghai who was snooping now was not the old Shanghai, snooping evilly, but a wise and canny Shanghai, striving to fit himself into the new conditions, to safeguard an honest livelihood, to earn himself security in his older years and perhaps to gain himself some real friends as he passed down the lower reaches of the hill of life. Snooping now to acquaint himself with the new and mysterious present, to become as well oriented now as he had been in those dangerous days long past; snooping to learn exactly what Buck and Hopalong thought of him. Buck's attitude did not surprise him, for it was the natural one. He would have been surprised if Buck had thought differently, just as he had been surprised by Hopalong's words and actions. And even now he was surprised by what Hopalong had just said. Now it seemed that the sheriff's earlier attitude toward him was a true one, that the sheriff would let him start from taw and decide his own fate for himself. The old man glowed with gratitude.

UP IN HACKAMORE Mesquite was beginning to doubt the wisdom of being held prisoner by his job and was beginning to give serious thought to quitting it so that he could move around the town and the surrounding country in search of necessary information. He was turning the matter over in his mind and wondering how to gracefully get around the play he had made about being broke when his boss called him. He left the work he was doing and went into the office, leaving his broom against the door casing.

"I've got to go up th' street for a while," said Hankins. "Keep yore eye on th' office."

"All right," replied Mesquite. "Give my regards to Long John."

The old man's face flushed, and he glared at his assistant.

"I will!" he snapped. "If I see him!" He strode toward the door and then stopped and turned. "I told you I don't want you to work so hard. There ain't no sense to it. No use cleanin' out them last two stalls on this side: they're handy to put things in, an' we got more stalls than we need without botherin' with them. Let 'em stay like they are. I won't be gone long."

Mesquite nodded and dropped onto the desk chair. His gaze moved idly about the little room, came to a stop on the dusty pile of illustrated weeklies on the shelf, and he lazily reached up to get one. A number of odds and ends were on the top of the pile, and rather than move this stuff, he pulled at one of the papers which stuck out a little from the pile. As it came out the account book followed it and fell to the floor. That was a strange place for the account book, and it could hardly have gotten in there by accident. The old man must have placed it there intentionally, and he had not been drunk since that first night. There could be only one explanation for that: the old man had tried to hide it.

Mesquite leaned over, picked the book from the floor and fell to turning its pages slowly. When he reached the last page he closed the book and was about to put it back into the pile of weeklies when he suddenly realized that on no page had he found the account of Dutch Bill. It was there, of course, under some other name—but the old man had told him that Dutch Bill had no other name so far as he knew.

He leaned back in the chair, his eyes on the book; and after a few moments he put it back where he had found it, opened the weekly and looked at one of its pages with unseeing eyes. What were the names of Dutch Bill's companions of that night?

He felt a little guilty about poking into the old man's business, but it might be something which would stand for a little poking and prying. Dutch Bill was a bully, but he would hardly carry his bullying so far as to try to escape paying his stable bills. Something was very wrong about this layout. He closed the weekly and looked at it speculatively, and then a new thought popped into his mind: if the old man returned and saw him with the paper he might suspect that he had been found out, and that would hardly do. Mesquite stood up, lifted the top paper from the pile without spilling the odds and ends on it, and in another moment there was no sign that the pile had been disturbed.

By now he had the stable in pretty good shape, all except those last two stalls, and he had intended to start on them as his next job. There was no reason to tidy them except for the sake of tidiness, and that was hardly a necessary virtue in a livery stable. There had to be some place, as the old man had said, to store things and get them out of the way. As it was, most of his work had been done for the sake of keeping occupied.

He rubbed a hand over his chin and discovered that he needed a shave, but there would be time for that after supper or after the stable was closed for the night. He got up from the chair and loafed to the door.

Across the street was the harness maker's shop, and the harness maker himself was leaning in the doorway, idly looking at Hankins' establishment. Mesquite nodded to him and then looked up the street. A sudden gust of wind sent the dust soaring and started it spinning. The little dust devil sucked in small bits of litter and carried it aloft. After a heavy rain this street would be a quagmire. On the other side of the street, up on the far corner of the intersection, was the Hackamore Hotel, and his idle gaze settled on it. A man moved into sight, crossing diagonally toward the hotel, and pushed in between its swinging double doors. If he wasn't Dutch Bill, then he was Bill's double. Then he closed his eyes quickly and scowled as a gust of wind enveloped him in a thick cloud of dust.

"She shore is hell when th' wind blows," called out the harness maker amicably. "An' she blows aplenty this time of th' year."

Mesquite sneezed and nodded, his gaze on the swinging doors, his thoughts on what might be going on behind them. Was it a meeting which had been arranged between Hankins and Dutch Bill?

"Yeah," he replied, glancing at the harness maker, "an' a puddle of mud when it rains."

"Which it don't do at this time of th' year," replied the harness maker, craning his neck to see what it was that his companion had been staring at;

“that is, not often, but when it does rain, it pours.”

Again Mesquite nodded, shifted his gaze from the Hackamore Hotel and looked across at the harness maker. He wondered if that person could see into Hankins’ office well enough to make out the stack of weeklies on the shelf, and he took a careful sight. From where he was now standing the harness maker could, perhaps, see the weeklies; but he could not see them from his bench.

“Well,” said Mesquite with a smile, “just because you can loaf ain’t no reason for me to. I got my pay to earn.”

The harness maker laughed knowingly, and it sounded a little unpleasant.

“You have, have you?” he retorted, spitting violently into the dust. “Well, I reckon you get plenty of pay, an’ you get it easy.”

Mesquite curiously and thoughtfully regarded the stiff back of the disappearing old man, a little surprised by his vehemence and abrupt action. Oh well, he had met these grumpy old fellows before. The chances were that the old man would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it. Then he became thoughtful. The old man was located so that he could see about everything which went on about the stable. Hum!

Again Mesquite looked up the street at the Hackamore Hotel, and he wondered if Hankins was in there with Dutch Bill. Perhaps the old man had not gone to the hotel at all. Well, suppose he had, and suppose he was: what of it? What of it—unless they had met by appointment. If the appointment had any particular significance they would not have chosen Long John’s bar for it. So he got good pay, and he made it easy, did he? And Dutch Bill was not paying for the stabling and feeding of his horse.

Up in the Hackamore Hotel three men occupied the corners of a triangle, and no others were present. Two points of the triangle were Dutch Bill and old man Hankins, and they were having an argument and were handicapped by the fact that they could not speak plainly. In Dutch Bill’s mind was the fact that he wanted no stranger working in the livery stable. If Hankins had to have help then it would be provided for him.

“An’ *I* say for you to fire him,” repeated Dutch Bill flatly and with no friendliness. He could not give his real reason because of Long John’s presence, and yet he should have an understandable reason to justify such a highhanded demand.

“An’ *I* ain’t goin’ to do it,” retorted the liveryman for the second time, his glass of liquor untouched on the bar beside him.

“You heard what I said,” replied Dutch Bill, an ugly glint in his eyes. “You fire him an’ do it pronto if you want my trade. An’ if you lose my trade you’ll lose more.”

“I tell you I won’t do it!” snapped the old man.

“You won’t, huh?” asked Dutch Bill and moved forward, his hand slowly rising.

“A-huh!” coughed the bartender, his unfriendly eyes on the moving puncher, and one of his hands was out of sight below the bar.

Dutch Bill stopped and looked questioningly at the interrupter.

“You cuttin’ in?” he asked unpleasantly.

“This is th’ Hackamore Hotel,” said Long John casually. “It ain’t Dalton’s saloon, an’ it ain’t no honkytonk. If yo’re figgerin’ to start a brawl do it outside.”

“That so?” sneered Dutch Bill.

“I got a job to hold down,” explained Long John, his hand still under the counter. “You shouldn’t make me lose it. Have a drink an’ behave yoreself.”

Dutch Bill studied the speaker for a moment, thoughtfully considered old man Hankins and then slowly moved up to the bar. Long John had made the affair as impersonal as he could, and Dutch had no reason to save his face.

“All right,” he growled somewhat reluctantly. “I ain’t got nothin’ ag’in th’ old man nor you, neither; but no man that’s knocked me down can take care of my hoss or do any business with me. You’ll fire him, Hankins, an’ you’ll do it quick if you want my trade.”

“You act like you was runnin’ my business for me,” retorted the old man, hating himself because there was so much truth in his words. He reached for the liquor, raised the glass in a quick salute and gulped its contents. At a sound in the street the bartender glanced out the front window, and in that instant the old man jerked his head significantly and nodded toward the door. “Well,” he continued as Long John turned his face toward him, “I’ll think it over, Bill. Now I’m goin’ down th’ street.”

“Go with you,” grunted Dutch Bill. “That’s where I was headin’ when I saw you come in here. Come on, an’ we can continue th’ argument.”

Long John watched the swinging doors close behind them, then suddenly jerked something from under the bar, slipped it under his coat and hastened to the front door. For a moment he watched the pair, moving along in apparent amity. There were no loud words, no gestures. He sighed with

relief and went back to his place, and when he rested his arms on the counter both of his hands were empty.

“Where you headin’?” asked Dutch Bill as he and his companion were passing a wide, open lot.

“Any place where we can talk,” answered the old man, stopping and looking about him. “An’ this looks like th’ place right here, where there ain’t no ears to listen.”

“I’m goin’ down to Dalton’s,” said Dutch Bill suggestively.

“I ain’t,” replied the old man.

“All right, then, this’ll do,” growled Bill. “I’ll speak my piece first because *I* got somethin’ to say. We’re goin’ to bring in a bunch tonight, an’ you got to fire that Mesquite feller outa there before we come in. That’s flat!”

“You bringin’ in a bunch beside them that you’ll be ridin’?” demanded Hankins, his frown growing.

“Yes! Said so, didn’t I?”

“Th’ hull idear is loco,” retorted the old man. “Yo’re takin’ big chances, keepin’ on doin’ that.”

“Th’ idear is smart, because nobody would be lookin’ for a bold play like that,” replied Dutch Bill. “We got to drive ’em too far over open range in daylight. Th’ play is all right. It’s all right till we get ready to shift, if we do. We’re makin’ a play in that direction, too, but it’s a play that’s got to wait on somebody else. We’ll be in tonight.”

“All right,” acceded Hankins grudgingly. “Then you’ll be right late. After midnight. That old he-goat acrost th’ street will be in bed. Mesquite will be asleep in th’ house an’ won’t know nothin’ about it. I’ll throw off th’ inside hasp an’ use th’ lock, which means th’ key will be where it usually is.”

“That Mesquite hombre won’t be asleep in th’ house!” growled Dutch Bill. “He’ll be sleepin’ some place else, worryin’ about gettin’ a new job.”

“I just told you where he’ll be!” snapped Hankins. “I ain’t goin’ to fire that lad, not till I has to. An’ I’ll be th’ judge of that. I’ve took a likin’ to him, an’ he likes me. Sweep up th’ hair like you allus do, an’ nobody will be knowin’ anythin’ about it.”

Dutch Bill was staring at his companion through narrowed lids.

“I’m beginnin’ to figger you need a lesson,” he said. “You ain’t forgot who’s runnin’ this game, have you?”

“No, I ain’t,” retorted the old man. “Somethin’ may happen to me of course. If it does I’ll lay you a bet that th’ same thing will happen to

somebody else. Mesquite will be right where I said he will be. All you got to do is sweep up them hairs an' throw 'em outside."

"Yeah?" growled Dutch Bill ironically. "What about th' fresh broom marks on that littered floor?"

"There won't be any because th' floor won't be littered," replied Hankins. "He keeps th' place swept neat as a pin. Sweeps it near every day. I told him it was foolish to do it, but now I know it ain't. You let me try my way first. I ain't goin' to fire that lad till I has to."

"Huh!" sneered Dutch Bill, but he knew that the old man was adamant. "Yore way will work out all right till th' first time it don't. All right, you old fool. She goes as you say; but th' first time it don't work we'll stop his mouth an' stop it permanent." He stepped forward as his companion started to move on. "Better not part here. You step into Tom's an' buy somethin' you don't want, an' I'll keep on goin' to Dalton's. Do as you said about th' stable door."

Hankins nodded and a few moments later stepped into the general store, while his companion kept on going toward his favorite saloon.

The proprietor of the store stepped back hastily from the grimy window and leaned over a keg of nails. At the sound of steps he looked up, and a smile slipped across his face.

"Hello, Joe, you old hellion!" he said.

"Hello, Tom, you old half-breed. You got any lead rivets?"

"Lead rivets? Hell, no. Ain't never heard of 'em!" exclaimed the storekeeper.

"Nobody out in this part of th' country ever has anythin' a man wants," growled Hankins and turned on his heel to go out again.

"Wait a minute!" cried Tom. "What fool idear you got in yore head now? I got copper rivets an' soft iron rivets. Hell, man, they oughta be all right. I never even heard of lead rivets! They just wouldn't hold nothin'!"

"That's just why I want 'em!" snapped the liveryman, scowling fiercely, and the door slammed resoundingly after him.

The storekeeper's face expressed great puzzlement, and he scratched his head in vain.

"Ketch me buyin' somethin' I don't want," muttered Hankins, stumping down the street.

MESQUITE GOT UP out of the chair as his boss entered the office.

“Well,” he said smilingly, “see anybody you knew?”

“Yep,” answered the old man, his seamed face trying to smile. “Saw Long John, Dutch Bill, merchant Tom and put away two drinks which fit me right snug. Any customers?”

“Not so far,” answered Mesquite, frowning a little. “Dutch Bill still want you to fire me?”

“Naw,” chuckled the old man. “He’s got all over that idear. Anyhow, you couldn’t blame him hardly. You knocked him down, didn’t you? You reckon folks like to be knocked down?”

“Reckon not,” answered Mesquite in a low voice, remembering that Dutch Bill’s demand for his being fired had come before the knockdown. He was trying to read the old face in front of him. “How come, then, that he changed his mind?”

“Because I changed it for him,” answered Hankins, chuckling. “He ain’t such a bad feller when you know him well. But it’s a right good idear to let him alone if he don’t like you: an’ he don’t like you a hell of a lot.”

“That goes both ways,” growled Mesquite.

“You got yore work done?” demanded the old man.

“No. It’s where I left it when you called me into th’ office,” answered Mesquite. “Got a little sweepin’ to do.”

“Well, I’m back ag’in,” said the liveryman, moving around the desk toward the chair behind it. As he passed the inner door he saw the broom where his assistant had left it and waved a careless hand toward it. “All right, start in where you left off, ’though I reckon it’s good enough as it is.”

The rest of the day was like other days. A few customers left their horses and came for them later on. Suppertime came and found two hungry men ready to eat. The evening was uneventful, and closing time came at last. Mesquite closed the big doors and paused to glance into the office, where his boss sat behind the desk and read an old paper under the soft mellow light of a kerosene lamp. The old man did not seem to have a worry in the world.

“I’ve closed th’ big door,” reported the stable hand. “Anythin’ else you want me to do?”

Hankins lowered the paper, rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Turn in if you want. I reckon I won’t be far behind you.” He raised the paper again and searched for the place. Finding it, he grunted his satisfaction and went on reading. An hour later he blew out the lamp, stepped to the office door and looked idly up and down the street. The harness maker’s shop and the rest of the street were in quiet and darkness. He stepped to the street and was gone for a few moments. When he returned he closed and locked the office door, threw off the hasp on the big stable door and then made his way slowly and cautiously through the pitch-dark stable toward the faint rectangle of light at the far end. This door he closed and locked behind him, and a moment later the little house swallowed him.

In the morning, breakfast over and the dishes washed and stacked on the table, Mesquite left the little house and made his way to the stable. His boss was already in the office. As he passed the first box stall he reached his hand in for the broom. It was not where he had placed it. Surprised, he stuck his head in through the doorway and looked. The broom was not there. He looked to the other side, and there was the broom, leaning against the front wall of the stall.

He must be going loco. He carefully ran back in his mind, picturing himself and the broom when he had placed it in the stall the evening before. There was no question about it: it was not where he had left it. At least twice a day he put the broom away and always the same way. He had a trick of performing physical acts in the simplest manner, and in putting the broom away there was no variance. He had been going toward the rear of the building on his way to the little house to start supper. He was right handed, and a right-handed man in such a situation would naturally place the broom on the left-hand side of the opening. It was easier to do it that way because it required less movements and could be done almost without stopping.

Here it was, however, on the other side, which would have made a right-handed man step into the doorway and turn around. He would also have to shift it to his other hand to do the job without further movements. Of course if he had been coming from the other direction, from the rear of the building toward the front—but he had not done this.

There was no particular importance in the shifting of a broom, but it was a puzzle to play with, to follow out, something to think about which appealed to a man skilled in reading sign; and the more he thought about it, the more certain he was that the broom had been shifted, and perhaps used, by a left-handed man or by a right-handed man coming from the rear of the stable. This man had used the broom and had put it back where he had found it, as he supposed. He chuckled to himself: perhaps the old man had used it. Then the chuckles died. Hankins was right handed. It was even money that

someone had been in the stable last night and had used that broom. Who? Why? The stable had been locked, and he believed that he would have heard the old man if he had gotten up in the night and left the house. He left the broom where it stood and walked on toward the front of the building, stopping in the office door.

“You seen th’ broom this mornin’?” he asked a little fretfully.

“Broom?” repeated the old man and paused while his mind ran over the possibilities in this innocent question, and in his mind the possibilities suddenly developed. Damn it all, even a broom was dangerous! Even a damn’ broom had to be explained away. He turned a bland and smiling face to his stable hand. “Shore. Why?” For an instant his eyes became secretive.

“I was wonderin’ if I was gettin’ forgetful,” explained Mesquite with a faint grin. “It wasn’t where I thought I put it, that’s all.”

“Now where did I put it?” growled the liveryman, scratching his head. “Damn’ if I remember. Some stall, mebby. I was goin’ to use it, saw it wasn’t needed before I got ten feet an’ put it in some stall, I think. What of it? I put it somewhere!”

“All right,” replied Mesquite with a smile. That ten feet would have put it in another stall, but the broom was not in another stall. “I’ll find it if you didn’t eat it.”

“Well, I mighta et it, for all I know, I’m gettin’ so damn’ absent minded; but I figger I didn’t.”

Mesquite turned from the door, still childishly occupied in the great mystery of who moved the broom; and then the light, streaming in through the big rear doorway, picked out some scattered hairs on the rough board floor and tried to make halos out of them. They reflected the light, looked twice as thick and fairly shone.

Mesquite grunted. A floor as rough as that simply could not be swept clean. But it was strange he had not noticed them before, because there were so many of them. Just the way the light shone on them perhaps. He bent down to have a closer look at them, although for a moment he could not tell why, unless it was just due to his training. And then he knew.

When he used the broom he always started at the front door and swept toward the rear. These hairs had been caught by splinters which pointed in the wrong direction. They had been swept toward the front of the stable instead of in the other direction. Now he was into this puzzle in earnest, intrigued by its unraveling. When his Ute-trained father had taught him sign reading he had done a good job.

Behind him in the office the old man sighed wearily, his face lined with trouble. He was not exulting his triumph in explaining away a clue to last night's activities but was regretting it; regretting the need to trick a man whom he had vaguely hoped would get him, somehow, out of the mess he was in; to lie to and trick a man who was friendly to him. He would go out and have a drink or two; things might look better after that.

He got to his feet, moved to the door and stuck his head out into the stable. Mesquite, on his knees, was picking horsehairs from the grip of the splinters and looking closely at them, so preoccupied that he did not hear his employer's light steps. Hankins jerked his head back and moved silently to his chair. Then he noisily pushed the chair back and spoke loudly.

"Mesquite!" he called and again walked to the side door. When he stuck his head out this time he saw the stableman sweeping diligently.

"Found it, huh?" asked Hankins, nodding at the broom.

"Found it," repeated Mesquite, "right where you put it." And he carelessly waved a hand at the wrong stall.

"Yeah," said the old man with a grin. "I remember now. I started toward th' back yard an' put th' broom in that stall. I'm goin' out for a little while," he added and turned back into the office. He did not know that his hired hand was standing like a statue, thinking instead of sweeping; did not know that he had talked too much, that he had made the common mistake of volunteering information.

Hankins walked slowly up the street, and the Hackamore Hotel invited him, but he shook his head. Why had he ever let himself get into this fix? Why hadn't he said no in the beginning and risked that they would not carry out their threats? There were other stables in town. After all, he was an old man, with the best of his life behind him, and he did not have, at best, many more years to live; but the less there were remaining to him, the more precious they somehow seemed to be. He was just an old fool.

He glanced again at the Hackamore. Long John would be standing behind the bar: Long John, who always begrudged him his third glass of liquor for fear it would loosen his tongue and who now was beginning to begrudge him his second. To hell with Long John. He knew where he would go and where they would be glad for him to drink all he wanted, and go there he did.

He had his two drinks and then a third. They put life into him and made him feel much better. He could talk to this bartender without being criticized, and it made him feel more comfortable. The minutes slipped past, and then in the mirror he saw Dutch Bill come in the back room and head

for the bar. He did not like Dutch very much, but the three drinks had mellowed him, and perhaps Dutch was better than he had thought. Anyhow, a man should not drink alone. He raised a hand in salutation and then waved it toward a table as he turned his head toward the bartender.

“Gimme a bottle an’ a couple of glasses,” he said. “It’s more comfortable to drink sittin’ down.”

Dutch Bill chose a table in a far corner and took the chair which was in the corner. The whole room with its doors and windows was in the field of his vision. He nodded as Hankins placed bottle and glasses on the table and dropped rather heavily onto a chair.

“Don’t reckon I can take th’ time for no real session,” said Dutch Bill. “I got a long ride to make whether I want to or not, an’ I got to start purty soon; but I’ll have a few with you.” He reached out, picked up the glass the old man had filled, raised it in salute and downed its contents. He was a gulper rather than a taster. He cleared his throat and smiled. “Does a man good, don’t it?”

Hankins chuckled his agreement and poured again and this time spilled some of it. Dutch Bill began to fidget, remembering the ride he had ahead of him and that time was passing. He suddenly stood up, lifted the bottle and filled the old man’s glass again.

“I got to go,” he said. “You change yore mind about firin’ that Mesquite hombre?” He did not wait for an answer but turned and strode out of the door toward the corral.

Hankins sat up suddenly and laughed. He was recalling the episode of the broom and admiring his own quick wit. It was too good to be kept a secret. He staggered to the door and reached the corral as Dutch Bill was mounting, and at his shout and upraised hand the rider checked the already moving horse and listened to what the man on foot was saying about the misplaced broom and about Mesquite kneeling on the stable floor picking horsehairs from the splinters and how intent he had been while he studied them. And then the old man leaned against the corral and laughed until tears formed in his eyes.

Dutch Bill laughed, too, but only with his mouth. As he looked down at the maudlin old man his hand crept toward the holster but stopped. He had a play in mind, and if it went through he would have no more use for the liveryman. Be time enough then. He swung the horse around toward the stable and changed his mind; he had to make his ride, and the sooner he started, the sooner he would be back. A few hours would make no difference: there would be no more horsehairs plucked from the splinters of

the stable floor. The horse leaped forward, and the sound of its hammering hoofs slowly died out west of town.

Hankins pushed against the corral and then stumbled and lurched back to the saloon, and the next thing he knew—and he was not quite certain of that—was that he was sitting on the single step before his office door, trying to remember who it was had brought him home.

MESQUITE, Broom in hand, stood for a moment digesting his employer's words. He did not hear the old man leave the office, did not know that he had gone. From the consideration of the misplaced broom and what it told him, his mind ran back to the account book, to the horsehairs, and now he knew they had not been there the day before. He ran back to that first morning in the little house, when Hankins awoke to find that he had hired a stableman; to the varying expressions on the old man's face; to his words.

Who, besides himself and Hankins, would use the broom, especially at night? Who would have occasion to, to need to? How had the new hairs come to be on the floor? Why had Hankins lied? Why had the old man's face shown sudden hope that first morning? There was something here which evaded him. What it was he did not know, but he felt certain that it existed. Being so carefully hidden, so evasive, it must be something which would not stand public knowledge, something furtive and outside the law. In this part of the country it could scarcely be anything but rustling.

He placed the broom against a stall and walked to the front of the building, his eyes searching every inch of the floor. He glanced into the office and saw that it was empty and then stopped in the big doorway to lean lazily against the casing and look speculatively up the street. His thoughts ran on and on, toying with the facts he had, playing with suspicions, explanations, trying to fit together these fragmentary parts of the puzzle. Broom, hairs, lies, evasions, the account book.

Perhaps he was not wasting time, restricted by his job from making excursions afield. Perhaps he was near the hub of these mysteries or at least on one of the spokes. It looked like cattle thieves were using this stable for a rendezvous, and if that were so he was just about where he wanted to be. He slowly shifted his gaze from the Hackamore Hotel and looked across the street at the harness maker's shop. Its proprietor was at his bench, barely to be seen through the grimy window. During daylight the old man saw almost everything which went on about the stable; perhaps he did not sleep well nights! Mesquite pushed away from the casing and slowly sauntered across the dusty street.

The harness maker looked up from his work, grunted a dubious greeting and looked down again, the thin bristle ends of the two threads deftly meeting and passing each other in the hole in the leather. He jerked his hands apart and reached for the awl. As he did so he glanced up again.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, using the awl and laying it down again to pick up the two bristles.

“Nothin’ right now,” answered Mesquite, seating himself on a chair without a back. “I got a little lonesome, saw you over here an’ just dropped in.”

The workman grasped the projecting ends of the bristles, pulled them through and clear, gripped the threads firmly and again jerked his hands apart. He shifted the trace in a vise, took a new grip and reached for two new threads.

“Saw you leanin’ ag’in th’ door,” said the harness maker, picking up the awl.

“Yes,” said Mesquite, smiling. “That’s a good job yo’re doin’.”

“Try to make ’em all good,” grunted the leatherworker without looking up. “Good work means customers; customers mean more work. It goes in a circle, like a dog chasin’ his tail.” The new threads now in play, he cut off the ends of the other pair. “I never had th’ knack of gettin’ my livin’ without workin’ for it—workin’ hard for it.”

Mesquite thought that he detected a slight emphasis on the last few words but gave no sign of it.

“Well, most folks earn their livin’ that way,” he said with a laugh.

“Huh!” sneered the harness maker, reaching for the awl. He pushed it through rather viciously. “I was thinkin’ of work an’ not risk.”

“Yeah?” politely inquired the visitor, feeling that the conversation was heading in the direction he wished; but he was wrong, for his host turned the talk, or what there was of it, into harmless channels and kept it there. After a little of this futile conversation Mesquite arose, stretched and walked slowly toward the door. “So long,” he said. “I better be gettin’ back.”

“Yeah,” replied the harness maker without looking up. “So long.”

Mesquite walked thoughtfully across the street and into the stable and went on toward the rear. He stopped and looked down at the suspicious hairs and then squatted and carefully plucked them from the grip of the splinters until there were none left, and he did the same thing at several other places on the floor. He laughed suddenly and threw the handful of hair into a stall. Dumb. Just plain dumb. Trying to find a hard and complicated answer to a puzzle so easy that it almost shouted at him. Of course! All the little pieces fitted nicely together now, but now it was just one part of a bigger puzzle, a puzzle of where and how.

He picked up the broom and began to sweep again, just going through the motions, until he was interrupted by two horsemen who left him their

mounts and walked up the street. Time rolled past and brought the lunch hour near, and as Mesquite was about to start for the kitchen he heard heavy, irregular steps on the street, a few words and then lighter and regular steps rapidly dying out. He hesitated, yielded to curiosity and went to the big door and looked out. Old man Hankins was half sitting, half lying on the stoop. At a sound from across the street Mesquite glanced that way and saw the harness maker standing in his door, slowly shaking his head.

Mesquite sighed, jammed his fists on his hips and looked down on the wreck. Then he took hold of his boss, threw him across a shoulder and carried him through the stable and into the house. There he plumped the old man into a chair, straightened him up and stepped back. The rough handling shook Hankins back to a momentary interest in things about him.

"Drunk ag'in, you old fool," he mumbled.

"Yeah. You oughta be proud of yoreself," growled Mesquite.

"Huh?" muttered the wreck, opening his eyes and trying to focus them on the speaker. "Huh? What say?"

Suddenly Mesquite smiled.

"Stealin' my broom, scatterin' hosshair where I just swept," he accused, leveling a rigid forefinger at the old man. "You oughta be ashamed of yoreself to fool me like that."

"He, he, he!" laughed the old man, almost contorted by mirth. "Did fool you, huh? He, he, he! Fooled you! *I* didn't touch th' damn broom, but I know who did. *I* didn't drop no hosshair." And he rocked to and fro in senseless laughter and would have fallen from the chair if his hired hand had not grabbed him and propped him up again.

"Reckon yo're smart, don't you?" said Mesquite with simulated anger as he stepped back. "Reckon it's smart to fool me, don't you? I bet you don't even know their names! *Now* how smart are you?"

"Huh!" grunted Hankins, slobbering. He bent his head uncertainly and rubbed his wet chin with the back of a grimy hand. Then his eyes closed, and he started to fold up, falling forward slowly.

Again Mesquite grabbed him and straightened him back in the chair. After waiting a few moments with his hands on the old man's shoulders he shook his head, picked him up and carried him into the bedroom, where he undressed him, put him into bed and again pinned the curtains shut.

Stepping into the kitchen, Mesquite closed the door behind him, the action purely one of habit. His mind was occupied in searching for the answers to the new puzzle. Suddenly he snapped out of his preoccupation and walked over to the opposite wall, where he took down his second gun

belt. Swinging it around him, he buckled it and then began to prepare his noon meal. There was a grim smile of satisfaction on his face, for now he did not believe that it was at all necessary for him to quit his job and to ride around the country. Once he knew what there was to be known about Dutch Bill he would come mighty close to knowing what he had been sent up here to find out.

The meal over, he went out to the office, found a soiled piece of cheap paper and a grimy envelope and wrote a letter addressed to Rick Bradley at Twin River, Montana. There was not much to tell, but there was something, and he felt that Hopalong should know where he was and what he was doing. When it was finished he sealed it and put it in his pocket. After dark would be time enough to mail it. As a matter of fact it would not be time to mail it before dark, and the darker and the later, the better. He was doing too well to take unnecessary chances.

The afternoon passed uneventfully. He took care of the horses brought in, saddled those that were taken out, examined the account book with more care and killed the rest of the time as best he could. When suppertime rolled around he took a look at his prostrate boss and cooked a meal for one.

The evening passed as uneventfully as the afternoon, and at long last came closing time. Anyone wanting his horse after the stable was locked was supposed to go around to the little house, hammer on the door and make his wants known; but that would not happen tonight because there were no customers' horses in the stable, just the two belonging to Hankins and himself.

Mesquite locked up, slipped the keys into a pocket and wandered up the street. The building housing the post office was closed, but the slot cut into the front door was all he needed. Across the street and to his left was a lighted saloon. Above its window, halfway up to the top of the false front and barely readable in the dim, reflected light, was a faded legend: DALTON'S. The name meant nothing to him then, and he walked back the way he had come without giving it a second glance until he stood on the corner opposite the Hackamore Hotel. Nodding his head gently, he stepped across the street and pushed through the swinging doors.

Long John was mopping spilled liquor from the bar and glanced up as the doors swung shut behind the newcomer. A dozen or more men were in the big room. A poker game was going on in a far corner in a fog of smoke, and it must have been more friendly than deadly, judging from the banter and laughter. Several men were leaning back in their chairs against the wall and carrying on a desultory conversation. Mesquite glanced back to the poker game and decided that the present dealer had never done any hard

work with his hands. Either a gambler or a traveling man, he guessed. Mesquite photographed the whole scene with one slow look, and he knew that he never had seen one of the men before. He had not paused in his slow advance, and a few more steps brought him to the edge of the bar, where he nodded to the tall man behind it. Long John had plunged the bar cloth into a pail of water and was now wringing it out.

“Have a cigar with me,” invited Mesquite, resting his forearms on the counter. Since he now had a job, and perhaps a payday, he did not have to pretend that he was dead broke.

Long John looked at him for a moment, nodded, pushed out a box of cigars, put it on the back bar again, tossed the coin in a box and struck a match. While it burned green and fizzled and stank he held it out in front of him, but when the color of the flame changed he reached out and held it to Mesquite’s cigar.

“Old man turned in?” he asked, lighting his own cigar.

“Yeah,” grunted Mesquite. He sighed wearily. “He turned in about midmornin’, th’ old fool.”

The bartender frowned slightly and raised his eyebrows.

“Ag’in, huh?” he asked.

“Yeah, ag’in,” growled Mesquite. “Somebody brought him home an’ dumped him on th’ doorstep. He musta met friends.”

The bartender nodded slowly in agreement, but the frown had grown.

“Don’t know that I’d go so far as to call ’em friends,” he said. “You toted him in, undressed, put him to bed an’ pinned shut th’ curtains, I reckon?” He smiled.

Mesquite nodded and looked slowly around the room again. The smoke had grown thicker over the poker table, and someone was reaching for a bottle. Then he turned his head slowly and looked squarely into the bartender’s eyes.

“Yo’re a friend of Hankins, I figger,” he said in a low voice.

“That’s right,” grunted Long John.

“You hear lots of things, standin’ here behind th’ bar, but you don’t say nothin’,” stated Mesquite, smiling coldly.

“That’s a right important part of th’ job,” replied Long John, also smiling.

“An’ that goes for everybody on this side of th’ counter, huh?” asked Mesquite, still looking searchingly into Long John’s eyes.

“Everybody,” grunted the bartender.

"That's good enough for me," said Mesquite. "Then of course you wouldn't know how it is that certain hombres keep their hosses in our stable an' don't pay one damn' red cent for it?"

"Why no," drawled Long John, his gaze unwavering, his expression unchanged. "Seein' that I don't know, I'm dead shore that I wouldn't ask nobody no questions about it. Dead shore. An' if I did ask 'em I'm also dead shore I wouldn't ask 'em in Dalton's saloon. It's a tough dump."

"Never heard of it," replied Mesquite. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and it reminded him that he had forgotten to shave. "If you wanted to see Dutch Bill someday about where would you look?"

"I figger I'll never want to see him in a hurry," replied Long John, "but if I did I'd look in some tough saloon. There's usually three or four of his friends with him."

"You bein' a friend of Hankins an' him now bein' dead drunk, you figger there's anythin' you oughta tell me?" asked Mesquite, again trying to read his companion's eyes.

"Only that I wouldn't go huntin' Dutch Bill," answered Long John. "Nice night, though a mite cool for this time of th' year."

"I don't believe that I'd go huntin' for him, myself," replied Mesquite, smiling thinly, "seein' that I don't care whether I see him or not. He changed his mind about havin' me fired outa my job. Oh well, reckon I'll wander around town an' look it over. Ain't had a chance to since I got here. Oh, by th' way, you wouldn't be knowin' what saloon it is where th' old man gets so damn' much liquor poured into him, would you?"

Long John gently shook his head.

"No, I wouldn't be knowin' that," he answered.

"All right," grunted Mesquite, turning from the bar. "Good night. I'll mebbey see you ag'in soon."

"Good night," replied Long John. He was moving a fresh cloth slowly back and forth on the bar, his face studiously devoid of expression, but his eyes were very bright. He watched his companion push slowly from the bar and walk slowly toward the door, and his eyes dropped to the gently swinging butts of the two low-hung guns. He had spent his whole life (and it had been a hard one) on the frontier, and he thought that he knew a capable, deadly gunman when he saw one. He let loose of the bar cloth, leaned gently against the edge of the back bar and thoughtfully regarded the polished surface in front of him; and something which he seemed to see there made him smile.

MESQUITE WALKED diagonally across the street intersection and paused for a moment as he looked at the faint yellow light coming from Dalton's saloon; but he shook his head, turned abruptly and went on toward the stable. He passed around this and entered the kitchen. The lamp was burning as he had left it; but beside the lamp was something which had not been there before. It was a whisky bottle, half full of liquor.

Mesquite swore under his breath and walked over to the door of the old man's bedroom, his shadow surging before him. At first the semidarkness of the room let him see nothing, but gradually the lower drawer of a chest of drawers, picked out faintly by the light from the other room, could be seen. It was on the floor, its contents scattered around it. He nodded understandingly. That was where the bottle had come from. He turned his head, scowled at the indistinct figure sprawled on the tumbled bed and swung on his heel to leave. The shape on the bed stirred, muttered something and became foggily awake.

"Who're you?" it demanded in a voice thick and uncertain.

"Only Mesquite. I see you figger to keep up this drunk!"

"'F I wanna. I'm taperin' off, but it's none of yore business. None of yore—none of yore business. No sir."

"That so?" inquired Mesquite sharply. "As long as I have to play nurse to you in yore drunken sprees I'll make it my business when th' time comes. Who started you off this time?"

"Nobody. We started together, though I did have a couple before he did. It was just drink for drink. Me an' Dutch Bill. What you care, huh?" The old man began to laugh and slobbered generously. "Thought you was smart, huh? Well, I was smarter. He, he, he! I know that I was smarter. Dutch Bill knows I was smarter. We near laughed our heads off."

Mesquite stiffened slightly and tried to study the speaker's face in the poor light. This inconsequential conversation was moving out of that classification, and he pressed it.

"Oh, so you had to crow about it, huh?" he demanded irritably. "You had to tell him an' everybody else, I reckon, how you fooled me about th' broom an' th' hairs." He laughed, and when he spoke again his voice expressed admiration. "Yes, you was smarter than me. What did Dutch Bill an' th' boys think about it?"

“He, he, he! There warn’t no boys. Just Dutch Bill an’ me, out by ourselves at th’ corral. He liked to a died laughin’, specially about you pickin’ up hosshairs off th’ floor. Yo’re fussier than any damn’ woman I ever heard of. Can’t you sweep ’em up good enough with a broom?”

Mesquite did not answer but turned his back to the bedroom door and glanced swiftly at the windows and the kitchen door. A man was often in the greatest danger when he fancied himself secure. Three quick steps took him to the table, and he blew out the lamp. He slipped off his boots, and then, waiting until his eyes were accustomed to the darkness, he went swiftly and silently from window to window, trying the catches. He shot the bolt on the door and jammed a chair under the knob. He did not care when they came so long as he was awake and ready for them. Anyone who forced that door or the windows would make noise enough to wake him up.

The muttering in the old man’s bedroom had ceased, but his stertorous breathing sounded unnaturally loud to a man listening for slight sounds. Mesquite slipped into the room and tried the window, finding it locked. Then, moving silently, the better to hear, he went into his own room, tried that window and began to undress. Placing one gun where a second pillow might have been and the other on the floor where a falling hand would find it instantly, he lay down, drew the covers over him and in a few moments was asleep.

The sun was slanting in around the edges of the curtain when Mesquite awakened, and in a few moments he was dressed and in the kitchen, both gun belts around him. A glance into the other bedroom showed him Hankins sprawled on his back, snoring and blubbering. His tapering-off dose had hit him like a mallet.

Breakfast out of the way, Mesquite cleared up the dishes, yanked the chair from under the doorknob and stepped out into the littered little yard, one hand resting on a gun. He unlocked the double doors of the stable, pushed them back and did the same with the big single door in front. The only person in sight was the harness maker, carrying in a bucket of water from his well.

Up the street a horse and rider turned the corner and came at a walk toward the stable. The man was riding carelessly, nonchalantly. Mesquite and the harness maker saw him at the same time, and the latter carefully placed his bucket on the ground while the former stepped out of the door and into the street, free from the building. He stopped and balanced himself on the balls of his feet, forewarned, forearmed.

The horse stopped just short of the office, and Dutch Bill casually and lazily swung down from the saddle, the thumb of his right hand hooking

over the edge of his sagging gun belt. He paid no attention to the curious harness maker, who stood with mouth agape—no more attention than he would have given a stone—but kept on taking his slow steps, his eyes fixed steadily on those of the stable hand. He knew by now that he had lost the advantage of surprise and so struck straight at the heart of the matter.

“I told you to pack up and get out,” he said in a low voice as he stopped. “You shoulda done it. It won’t be fists this time.” And his hand moved swiftly; but Mesquite knew the purpose of this visit, knew what Dutch Bill had come to do, and his own hand flashed down and up as he leaped aside. The two shots sounded as one, but Dutch Bill had not jumped aside, and he paid for that oversight by slowly folding forward and crashing to the ground.

Mesquite slid the smoking gun into its sheath, took his eyes from the prostrate man and looked intently at the stunned and gaping harness maker.

“Th’ town’s full of his friends. I haven’t even one,” he said slowly and meaningly. “I’m claimin’ self-defense. Did you see it all?”

The harness maker nodded, gulped and spoke, still staring with almost unbelieving eyes at what lay on the ground.

“Yes, all of it. He moved first. I saw him. It’s lucky for you that you jumped. He was th’ best pistol man in town. Now I reckon yo’re th’ best; an’ better’n Bill. Don’t you fear, young feller; there ain’t no written law in this town, an’ nowhere there ain’t no law ag’in a man protectin’ his own life. I seen th’ hull thing. Here they come a’ready,” he said, turning to look up the street at the sound of many heavy steps. He rubbed a hand across his forehead and looked down at the ground again.

A scattered dozen men were running toward the tragedy, and the harness maker picked up his bucket and placed it inside his door. Then he walked across the street and stopped near the figure stretched out upon the ground. He jammed his hands against his narrow hips and waited.

“Who is it?”

“Who done it?”

“That’s Dutch Bill!”

“It was Dutch Bill,” said the harness maker. “He went for his gun, was beat to th’ shot, an’ now he ain’t Dutch Bill no more.”

“You say he went for his gun first an’ this feller shot him, beat him to it?” demanded a bewhiskered teamster in strong doubt. “Why, Bill was th’ handiest man with a gun in these parts!”

“He thought he was, Sim; an’ so did th’ rest of us,” answered the harness maker. “But he warn’t by a split second. I saw th’ hull thing from start to finish. This feller had to shoot or be killed, an’ he had a narrer squeak at that.

If he hadn't jumped sideways they'd both be dead." He shook his head in wonderment. "It was as even as that."

"What did Dutch Bill have ag'in you?" demanded one of the slowly growing crowd, looking at Mesquite.

"He tried to pull a gun on me once before, an' I knocked him down an' cold," answered the stable hand quietly. "Then he tried to make Hankins fire me. So he came down to fire me hisself, I reckon, an' fire me permanent. He ain't th' kind that would forgive a man who knocked him out. Well, I've still got my job, an' I'm keepin' it. If any of you was his friends you might tote him off somewhere."

"What's th' shootin' about?" asked an unsteady, irritable voice from the stable door, the speaker trying to peer through the close-packed circle around the body.

Mesquite did not turn but stood facing the crowd. He knew the voice and was about to answer when the harness maker took the job off his hands.

"Dutch Bill went for his gun, an' yore man killed him," he said.

Before Hankins could get his thoughts together he found himself face to face with the teamster, who seemed to have taken full charge of the affair, and uncomprehendingly noticed that Mesquite was slowly backing off at such an angle that he could keep the officious teamster in his angle of vision.

"Did Dutch Bill ask you to fire this feller?" demanded the teamster.

"Yes, he did," slowly answered the liveryman. "Kept pesterin' an' pesterin' me about it. Long John can tell you th' same."

"Did this feller knock Dutch Bill down when Bill went for his gun?" persisted the teamster.

"Yes. Dutch Bill took a dislike to him an' told him to clear out. They had some words. Dutch Bill wasn't used to bein' talked back to, an' it didn't set well on him. He reached for his gun, an' Mesquite knocked him down an' cold."

"All right," growled the inquisitor and slowly turned to join the crowd. Then he stopped in his tracks as a crisp voice spoke to him.

"You've had a lot to say," said Mesquite, his face cold, his voice icy. "Too much, mebby. If yo're a friend of Dutch Bill's mebby you'd like to take it up where he left off?"

"Yo're a cocky rooster, ain't you?" asked the teamster, little prickles running up and down his back. "I warn't no particular friend of Bill's. I just wanted to know that it was an even break."

"An' now you figger it was?"

"Ain't no doubt about it," growled the teamster and faced the crowd. "You boys figger that way too?" he asked and nodded at the affirmations.

Two men threw Bill across the saddle of his horse and led the animal up the street. They disappeared around the corner as the following crowd split up and dispersed, eager to tell the news to all and sundry.

Hankins sat down on the step before the office door, elbow on knee, chin in hand. He was slowly shaking his head.

"Well," said Mesquite, smiling down at the old man. "Am I fired?"

"What for?" snapped the harness maker indignantly. He suddenly shoved out his hand. "I been figgerin' you wrong, young feller. If Hankins fires you I'll give you a job till you can find another, though I ain't got a thing for you to do!"

Mesquite gripped the strong gnarled fingers and laughed gently.

"Thanks, old-timer; but if you ain't got nothin' for me to do, then I couldn't take th' job, could I?" He clapped a hand on the bent old shoulder and then looked down at his boss. "Well, am I fired?"

"You know damn' well you ain't," growled the liveryman, "but you oughta be! An' you oughta clear outa town for yore own health. Dutch Bill's real friends ain't here now, but they will be!"

"You reckon so?" laughed Mesquite. "I figger he never had a *real* friend in all his ornery life. Them kind don't."

"I got a rifle an' a clear view of th' stable," said the harness maker in sudden pugnacity. "Young feller, my name's Frank." He grinned rather shamefacedly. "Funny I never saw you knock Dutch Bill down."

Mesquite chuckled and stuck a thumb into the old man's ribs.

"I'd say it was a downright miracle!" he said.

"Mebby," admitted the harness maker, "but don't forget that I got a rifle."

"Seems like that rifle might come in handy sometime," admitted Mesquite, "but you'll mebby be a damn' sight better off if you don't use it. I'll drop in an' see you when I got more time." He turned to his boss. "You had yore breakfast?" he demanded.

Hankins slowly shook his head.

"Didn't have no appetite," he answered, "an' after what's just happened I ain't got even as much as I had." He scratched his head slowly and thoughtfully. "Reckon I was as drunk as a fool; but that shootin' got me outa bed right quick."

"I reckon you was, an' I reckon it did," replied Mesquite, a wide grin on his face. "Come on now. I'll get breakfast for you, an' shore as hell you'll eat it. You'll feel better after you've got some grub inside you."

Hankins sighed and kept on scratching.

"Mebby, mebby; but I dunno."

The harness maker was frowning at the old man, his face expressing strong disgust. "You ain't got no more sense than a prairie dog," he snapped and, turning on his heel, strode purposively toward his shop.

Mesquite led the way into the kitchen and got busy at the stove, the old man sinking onto a chair and watching the proceedings with troubled eyes.

"There's a lot of trouble comin' to you, young feller," he finally said. "Dutch Bill's friends won't let her lay like she is."

"Well, that won't be nothin' new to me," said the busy cook. "Seein' that Bill was a better man than his friends an' I shot him on an even break, I figger th' friends will be easy." He glanced at his companion and smiled reassuringly. "You see, I'll be right here, an' they'll know just where to find me," he hazarded, wondering if he was making the suggestion along sensible lines. "It might be better for me if I wasn't here all th' time."

"What you mean?" asked Hankins rather sharply.

"Well," slowly answered the cook, "if I could wander uptown once in a while when you are on th' job in th' office—well, a man often picks up a word here an' a word there. An' sometimes you can add 'em up to somethin' worth knowin'. I don't know if you get my drift."

"Don't matter much whether I do or not," replied Hankins, again scratching his head. "There ain't no reason for you to stay here like a hoss hitched to a rail. I ran this shebang by myself afore you come, an' I can take care of my share of it any time you want to stretch yore laigs an' see th' sights." He glanced at his companion's crossed gun belts and nodded thoughtfully. "From now on wear 'em both wherever you go. Wear 'em both from th' time you get up in th' mornin' till you go to bed at night—an' then have 'em right handy to yore bed." He looked at the squizzling frying pan and sniffed. "Hah! Damn' if that don't smell right good. Mebby I can eat some of it."

Mesquite smiled and turned the sizzling bacon, watching it closely because the old man liked it crisp, and therefore there was danger of burning it.

"When five men drive in a few head of animals, drive 'em right into a town when th' town's asleep, just to hair brand 'em," he said in a

conversational voice, "then them animals are more likely to be hosses than they are to be cows. That right?"

Hankins' Adam's apple did a handstand and a backward flip. He gulped, stared and blinked.

"Wh-what you mean?" he asked almost in a whisper. "What you mean?"

"Why," explained the cook, watching the bacon even more closely, "I mean that hosses are worth a lot more'n cows, an' improved hosses are worth more'n range bred. You take three, four, five cows an' divide their value between five men, an' th' job an' th' risk ain't hardly worth takin'. Anyhow, they wouldn't be drove into town. Mebby they wouldn't even be hair branded. They'd just have a hot iron run into 'em an' be pushed somewhere off on th' range where they wouldn't likely be found till th' new marks would be all healed up. So I'm figgerin' they was hosses an' right good hosses. Them fellers couldn't wait for brands to heal. Th' animals was too valuable to risk somebody stumblin' on 'em, an' so they had to drive them off somewhere, an' part of that trip had to be made in daylight. That seems to mean they had to be drove quite a distance. It all sounds reasonable, don't it?"

"What you mean? Who are you?" asked Hankins in a thin and frightened voice. He was staring at his companion as though he were hypnotized.

"I'm yore hired man," answered Mesquite calmly. "An' I reckon you need me more now than you ever did. How come you ever let yoreself get mixed up in a mess like this? You ain't no hoss thief."

Hankins was still staring, fear on his face, in his eyes and in his soul.

"What you mean?" he whispered, his dry throat bothering him.

"Don't ask me that fool question all th' time," retorted Mesquite, reaching for the ambitious coffeepot. The coffee was swelling to the boil. "I mean just what I said. You've got yoreself into a mess an' a damn' dangerous one. How'd you get into it in th' first place?"

"I got into it with Dutch Bill's gun in my belly," muttered the old man. "I didn't have guts enough to say no then an' there." He cleared his throat by an effort. "That's how I got into it, but now I'm aimin' to say that no!"

"Yo're to keep right on playin' th' cards like you have been playin' 'em," ordered Mesquite. "Don't act no different. That trouble between Dutch Bill an' me was just a personal brawl an' didn't have nothin' to do with you or anybody else. Anyhow, that's our play if we can make it stick."

"But who *are* you?" demanded the old man anxiously.

"I'm yore hired hand, figgerin' how to get you outa th' mess yo're in," answered Mesquite. "You gave me a job when I needed one, an' you treated

me right. Here,” he said, dumping the crisp bacon onto a plate. “Draw up yore chair an’ get that into you. You’ll feel a lot better after you’ve et.” He reached for the coffeepot and filled a cup. “Get right into it an’ clean yore plate.”

The old man slowly obeyed. He finished a biscuit and a few slices of bacon and then dropped his hands to the table.

“I figger you’ll be a sight better off if you get outa town an’ go on yore way,” he said, sighing.

“An’ you’ll be a sight better off if you eat th’ rest of th’ bacon an’ more of them biscuits,” replied Mesquite. “Get ’em into you. If I leave town, then I’ll have to quit my job. I’ve found out that jobs are scarce an’ that a man has got to eat. I’m figgerin’ on stayin’ here.”

“You ain’t gettin’ money enough,” said the old man, reaching for a biscuit. “Yore job has growed a lot in th’ last couple hours.”

“I’m gettin’ enough,” replied Mesquite. “An’ if my job has growed it’s my own fault for stickin’ my nose in where it didn’t belong. Where do they get them hosses?”

Hankins’ hand jerked, and he slowly shook his head.

“Don’t know. They never told me.”

“You see th’ brands before they was changed?”

“No,” lied the old man. “They never made no light while I was around.”

“Where do they drive ’em to?” persisted Mesquite.

“Don’t know that neither,” muttered the old man.

“You just don’t know nothin’, do you?” growled the stable hand.

“Not nothin’ about their business,” answered Hankins.

“Then you don’t know what kinda hosses they are?”

“No. You know that they bring ’em in at night, an’ I’ve just told you that I’ve never seen ’em well enough for that.”

“They rustlin’ cows too?” persisted Mesquite.

“Mebby; I dunno,” answered Hankins. “But of course they don’t never bring no cows in here.”

“Thanks for th’ information,” grunted Mesquite sarcastically. “Who you figger will take Dutch Bill’s place?”

“What place? What you mean?”

Mesquite looked at his companion in disgust. “Quit askin’ fool questions. Who you figger it’ll be?”

“Don’t know,” answered the old man. “Ain’t got no idear.”

Mesquite's mind ran back to the chuck wagon and Dick Bartell and the straw boss of that little outfit.

"Where's Dick Bartell fit into this?" he asked.

"Reckon he's just one of th' boys," answered Hankins. "What you askin' all these fool questions for?"

"Seein' I just shot Dutch Bill, I figger it might be a good thing for me to learn all I can. Who's th' straw boss of that outfit that Dick is with?"

"Dan Lucey, I reckon. Why?"

"I just told you why," answered Mesquite, sliding the soiled dishes into a big pan. He poured boiling water over them and then pushed a cake of soap around in it. "Somebody oughta be out in th' office while I'm busy."

The old man sighed, pushed his chair back and slowly stood up.

"All right," he said and moved toward his other gun belt and gun hanging on a peg. They were both covered with dust.

"Let it alone," ordered Mesquite crisply. "If you wear a gun they can shoot an' claim you went for it. You act just like you been actin' right along. An' keep yore mouth tight shut like you keep it with me. Next time you feel like gettin' drunk you do it up in th' Hackamore Hotel where Long John can keep an eye on you; an' you *tell* Long John to *keep* his eye on you, an' not let you talk too much. You savvy?"

"Hell of a chance I got gettin' drunk with Long John lookin' on!" snapped Hankins with a show of spirit.

Mesquite smiled gratefully; the old man's spirit wasn't broken but just bent.

"Didn't I tell you that a meal would put some gumption into you?" he asked and laughed. Then he sobered. "If that's so, you stay right here an' get drunk. I don't want you very far from me when you go on yore next bender. . . . Somebody oughta be out in th' office."

"Don't you start givin' me no orders, young fella-my-lad!" snapped the liveryman as he started toward the door. Then he stopped and turned. "You was sayin' you'd like to go uptown once in a while. Well, when you get all red up in here, why don't you? Get acquainted with th' boys: but I don't reckon you'll find much in Dalton's saloon to amuse you. Be a good place to stay away from after what's happened."

"All right, I'll mebbly go out an' take a look around," replied Mesquite, "if I don't change my mind. There ain't *nobody* out in th' office."

"Go to hell!"

BACK ON THE DOUBLE Y things were going on about the same as ever except for the roundup activities, and these were far from the ranch houses.

Shanghai made it a point to awaken before the cook and to slip out of his bunk and go to the horse corral without disturbing the boss of the galley. His instructions had been that his job was primarily that of wrangler; his helping in the galley was secondary, and he saw to it that wrangling in the riding stock consumed so much time that the cook had small aid and comfort from him so far as the preparation of breakfast was concerned. His timing was perfect. When he had saddled his horse and ridden forth to perform his daily job he never drove in with the saddle stock until breakfast was being put on the table; and by the time he had gotten through at the little corral and put up the bars he usually was just in time to eat his breakfast before it had gotten too cold.

After breakfast, however, it was a different matter, and his uncomfortable shoulder blades told him that the cook was keeping an eye on him. At first he pleaded the necessity of going right over to Hopalong's little house and putting it to rights, but the cook eloquently proved that since Hopalong would not be using his house until late in the afternoon it could wait until after the breakfast dishes had been taken care of, stove wood carried in and the water buckets filled and placed on their bench. Shanghai hated these tasks, but he performed them because he could do nothing else.

His next job, self-imposed, was to keep watch over the little house, and when Hopalong had ridden off on his way to Twin River the old man shuffled across the ranch yard to tear Hopalong's bed apart for a thorough airing and to sweep and put things to rights. For years he had been trained in the proper making of beds, in redding up, and he made Hopalong's bed like it never had been made before—well aired, without a wrinkle, the top covers securely anchored at the foot; and when he had finished his work he left the house in as perfect order as any housewife could have done.

On the wall, hanging from a great spike driven into it, were two soiled, battered gun belts and holsters, and in the latter snugly nestled two single-action Colts taken, perhaps, from prisoners. On this morning the old man dragged a thumbnail across the leather and shook his head; it was dry and showed a tendency to crack between his thumb and forefinger. The guns were standard range weapons, both 45s.

He slipped out of the house and sidled toward the harness shop. In it he found the bottle of neat's-foot oil he knew would be there, and, returning to Hopalong's quarters, he used oil and elbow grease and the heat of his hand on the old dry leather and put back into it some of the life it had lost. One of the belts had dried beyond hope and would not hold against the pull of the buckle tongue, but the other was in much better shape and would still give good service.

He took out the guns, after he had replaced them, to test the grip of the holsters, and cleaned them, examining the grooves and lands of the barrels for wear and pitting. In one of them the lands had ceased to exist for two or three inches back from the muzzle, and this one was shoved back into the poorer holster without receiving further care. The other, however, was in fair shape and would do a good job if the range was not too long. He worked on diligently, and when he placed it in the better holster he knew that, in time, it would be his gun. But he was too canny to take liberties before he had been accepted as a real member of the outfit. In the meantime he knew where there was a serviceable hand gun if the occasion should call for its use.

He had already explored the contents of the chest of drawers in which Hopalong kept his wearing apparel, and in a far corner of one of these drawers he had found several boxes of 45 cartridges, a tarnished sheriff's badge with a dent in it and a letter signed by Hopalong which for some reason he had not mailed. He had left these things where he found them and in another drawer came upon a roll of bills which Hopalong kept for emergencies. He looked at the roll for perhaps a minute, shook his head and closed the drawer without touching the money.

And so the days passed, Shanghai wrangling in the saddle stock, taking care of Hopalong's little house, trying to outwit the cook and straining his ears after dark whenever listening promised the greatest yield. And then suddenly, having obtained sufficient knowledge by his snooping, he made up his mind.

While Hopalong was eating supper with Rose and Buck the old man slipped into the little house, took cartridges, the tarnished, dented badge and the letter from the drawer, and the better gun belt with its gun from the spike in the wall. He found a piece of blank paper and a pencil and, hurriedly scribbling a note, folded it and put it in his pocket. As he scrambled toward the bunkhouse, going behind Hopalong's house to lay his plunder against the rear wall, he heard the cook's bellowing call to supper. As he passed the horse corral he looked hungrily at the bay horse in the enclosure—one of Hopalong's—and chuckled to himself.

That night he again listened at the ranch-house porch and then went to the bunkhouse. When he knew that the cook was soundly sleeping he slipped into his clothes, took his boots in his hand and stole toward the door. A few minutes later sounds of a walking horse came from the corral and died out in the west. As Buck had truly said, he was the slickest cattle thief this part of the country had ever known, and now he was going back to his old trade, a past master picking up his tools again; but this time he was not going for the money to be found in stealing. He was going for an entirely different, even if purely selfish, reason. And he was on his way.

Hopalong awakened, stretched and pushed back the covers. He stretched again, yawned, sat up and dropped his legs over the side of the bed. As he pushed out a foot to hook a sock toward him he caught sight of a folded piece of paper on the floor just beyond the crack of the door. He looked at it thoughtfully and then, banishing sleep from his mind, quickly stood up and walked over to it, picked it up and read it hurriedly despite the clumsy letters. He read it again, folded it and stood quietly for some moments, his forehead wrinkled by thought. Then he read it once more, moved slowly toward his clothing and slowly dressed himself.

DEAR HOPPY: *I ain't stole the hoss. I borried it and will bring it back when I come. I got a job to do whats got to be did. Its a honest job and a job I got to do. I'm playin squar. I'll be back with the hoss.*

SHANGHAI.

The dressing took time because Hopalong paused for moments while he thought the matter out and found that it could not be thought out. Finally, dressed at last, he walked over to the top drawer of the little chest, pulled it out and smiled a little at the sight of the roll of bills; and he felt a little ashamed of himself, which perhaps accounts for the fact that he did not disturb the roll to count it. Then he noticed that only one gun belt and gun hung from the big spike in the wall. Scratching his head thoughtfully, he stepped from the building and looked toward the bunkhouse and horse corral. Smoke was coming from the bunkhouse kitchen, although he sensed that rather than saw it, for his thoughts were now on the little corral. In that corral were two stall-fed animals, his roan and his bay. He was curious to learn which one the missing man had taken, and he was not long in doubt: the bay was not to be seen.

He led out the roan, saddled it and was soon riding off to wrangle in the few head of saddle stock. On his return he drove them into the corral, put up the bars, mounted again and rode on to the ranch house.

Buck was standing in the kitchen door, watching him curiously.

"How come yo're doin' th' wranglin'?" he asked. "Where's Shanghai?"

"He's off doin' a job that's got to be done," answered Hopalong, swinging down from the saddle and stepping onto the porch. "It's a job that only he could do. I don't mind wranglin' in a few hosses, even if you do."

"Why did you send *him*? What hoss did he take?" persisted Buck, who at times could be most annoying.

"He took my bay of course," answered Hopalong calmly and evenly. "He was th' best man for th' job. You wouldn't want me to pull a good man from one of th' fires, would you?"

"Pull a man from th' fires? You got deppeties to do th' sheriff's jobs, ain't you?" demanded Buck with a show of spirit. "An' what th' hell kinda job is *he* th' best man for?"

"If I was as dumb as you *I* wouldn't be able to play checkers neither," said Hopalong and walked past his friend and partner and into the house, hoping that Rose would not give him that patient, forgiving look because he was late for breakfast.

SHANGHAI TOOK ADVANTAGE of the late-rising moon and pushed on until sunrise, rolling the miles behind him to a rather surprising total; and he was riding as truly as a homing pigeon could have flown. He knew that country up there, knew it well. He had lived the earlier years of his horse and cattle stealing among those low mountains and their snug, verdant valleys and had been especially interested in hidden trails and hide-out ranges. He knew Hackamore, too, if his memory was not faulty; but there would be a great change in faces after the years he had remained away.

Right now his objective was old man Boggs's cabin in Sunrise Valley. If Boggs had died or moved out there would be other valleys and cabins. He began to search his memory for other names, other faces, other cabins, and to picture in his mind's eye many winding, narrow trails following the easiest ways over the little mountain ranges. In the beginning these were game trails, then Indian trails and then the trails of the trappers. Water and grazing were certain along them. But the trails which were of particular interest to him were a certain few which followed the harder ways and shunned skylines wherever possible.

When the sun burst up over the horizon Shanghai was in the lower part of the rough territory which Hopalong had twice scouted on his wild-goose expeditions. The old man sought a sheltered ravine, picketed the horse where the feed was plentiful and rolled up for a few hours sleep. Then he was riding on again and kept on riding for the rest of the day, and after a pause for supper and to rest the horse, on into the night. And then he knew that he was not only out of Twin River County, but out of the state as well. Another day or two of riding found him topping another of the low mountain ranges to the west of Hackamore, and he drew rein to peer down into the valley below. There was the cabin, but no smoke climbed up from its chimney, no water bucket stood on the wash bench near the door, no basin hung from its nail in the wall; but there were horses and cattle placidly grazing over the length and breadth of the grazing land. A little creek meandered along its shallow bed down the middle of this sloping pastureland.

Not trusting to the evidences of vacancy offered by the house, he hid the horse behind a thick growth of aspens and slipped on foot along the top of the low mountain and just below its crest. After an hour or more of this cautious scouting he found himself down in the valley and well hidden by the thick brush.

Directly in front of him and not far off several cows were grazing, and suddenly they lifted their heads and looked steadily in his direction. He chuckled. The brands were new to him, both now and before their alteration. The additional marks were still a little raw and prominent. Storing them both in his memory, he slipped back the way he had come and after a while was riding on again. He went around this valley at its head and again rode up a mountain slope, following a little-used trail. At this second crest he again dismounted and went forward on foot.

This valley was larger than the other, and it, too, had a cabin. It also had a small corral and several snubbing posts. Peculiarly colored spots, circular in form, on the ground near the posts suggested branding fires. Cattle and horses were spread out over the floor of the valley, busily grazing.

Shanghai again made his cautious way down the mountainside and again worked up close enough to some of the grazing horses to read the brands. One of these made him rub his chin. It was a double X with a short horizontal line running through the middle of the letters. His keen eyes made out the original marks, and he knew that they were two Y's lying on their sides, right and left handed. He had seen none of these in the other valley, although they might have been there on animals too far away to be read.

"Hum!" he muttered thoughtfully. "That coulda been a divided diamond or a—a two Y, lazied. By Gawd, it's another kind of double Y! Hah! *That's* th' brand of that feller Whit Booth that Hoppy an' Buck was talkin' about! I remember that Englisher an' his damn' cattle dip! Looks like I'm goin' to have quite a few friends afore I get through an' done." He grinned cheerfully and scratched his head energetically. "Beans an' bacon for th' rest of my days. I fooled 'em once, an' I can do it ag'in. Now if I can just find some of th' old-timers that know me: Billy Bradshaw, Dan Lucey, George Engels—any of th' top-hand cattle rustlers. He, he, he, he!"

With treachery in his heart he slipped back into the denser shelter of the brush and went cautiously along the lower benches of the mountain, working deviously toward the cabin at the upper end of the valley. No smoke was coming out of its chimney, but after a while he saw a tin wash basin lying on a rough bench near the door, and this he took as a sign that the cabin was occupied. This was Boggs's cabin, and the occupant might be Boggs.

When he finally stopped and snuggled down in a thicket, flat on the earth, he could see well enough between the stems of the brush. He had always had patience, the patience of an Indian or a wary animal, and he cared little about the passing of the minutes. He was in no hurry. His wait was soon rewarded, for there were vague movements in the darker interior

of the building, movements going to and fro beyond the open door; and then the movements centered toward the door and became the figure of a man; and then the man himself stepped into the opening and glanced about the valley. It was Boggs. Shanghai released his breath gently but did not stir. Boggs might not like all this cautious scouting of himself by an old friend.

Boggs stepped back into the house, soon reappeared with a wooden bucket and strode toward a little fenced-in spring a score of paces from the door. That spring had been the determining factor in the location of the cabin. He filled the bucket, replaced a small rail and slowly went back to the house, whistling softly. Then the shadowy interior swallowed him.

Shanghai wriggled backward, pausing every now and then to glance behind him to locate dried twigs and branches. Not a stem moved, not a leaf jiggled. He was getting to be an old man, but he was spry and nimble enough now that there was no reason to pretend otherwise. His progress up that mountainside did him credit. Even if Boggs had been watching, it is doubtful if he would have caught a movement. Reaching his horse, Shanghai mounted, pushed carelessly up over the crest and rode slowly and innocently down the winding trail; and now if Boggs had been watching he would have seen plenty of movement, but every move a natural one. But Boggs was starting a fire, preparatory to cooking himself a meal.

The man in the house, reaching for the frying pan, did not quite touch it as the sounds of a walking horse reached his consciousness. Instead he let the frying pan alone and moved swiftly toward the door, where a rifle stood on the right and close to his hand. He watched the horseman ride down the lower reaches of the trail, but the distance was as yet too far for anything like a definite identification. But he did know that the stranger was no member of the gang, and his right hand reached out and grasped the rifle barrel. This stranger had seen too much, following that trail; and strangers who saw too much had a way of disappearing in these mountains and of never being seen again.

Shanghai, noting the smoke now coming out of the chimney, sighed happily and let out a notch of his tightly drawn belt in a keen anticipation. The food he had been able to take from the bunkhouse kitchen had not been as much as he had wished. The trail lost its steepness and leveled off into a very gentle slope. He reached and crossed the little brook, glanced at the fenced-in spring and stopped the horse half-a-dozen paces from the open cabin door. He was grinning at the man in the door, and he laughed gently as he swung from the saddle.

Boggs's puzzled expression had cleared before the visitor had reached the brook, and he took his hand from the rifle barrel. The puzzled expression

had changed to one of surprise. It was! Sure as shooting, it was! The sly old fox was returning to his earlier hunting grounds. It was Shanghai. It had been all of ten years since he had seen the old reprobate, and the man had changed a lot, but Boggs knew him; and he knew him to be the cleverest cattle thief he had ever seen. Why was he coming back at this particular time, when everything was running as smooth as bacon grease? He had had no hand in building up this organization. Oh well, there would be time enough to think that over before the old man left, if he ever did leave.

Shanghai was stripping saddle and gear from the splendid bay. He rubbed its back thoroughly with the saddle blanket, slapped it affectionately and watched it trot off, roll several times and then go about the serious and pleasant business of hunting bunch grass. He carried the gear toward the house, dropped it on the ground against the wall, carefully hung the saddle blanket on two pegs in the wall and then sidled toward the open door. His grin threatened the safety of his ears, and as he stopped before the door he impulsively thrust out his hand.

“Damn’ glad to see you ag’in, Boggs,” he said. “I was wonderin’ if you’d still be here after all these years. How are you?” He shook his host’s hand and then passed his own over the stubble on his chin. “Damn’ if this ain’t fine! Well, you look a mite older, but yo’re lookin’ right good. Yes sir. I’m damn’ glad to see you ag’in. An’ I shore am hungry. Th’ last of my grub is gone.”

“Come on in,” said the man in the door, stepping slowly aside. “I’m glad to see you, Shanghai. Yo’re just in time to eat. Where you been all these years? I ain’t seen you for I don’t know how long. Come in, come in!”

Shanghai swiftly thought that his companion might know where he had been and virtuously answered truthfully.

“I been in th’ pen, damn’ ’em!” he snapped angrily. “But now I’m out ag’in. An’ I got a big score to square. It’s been growin’ steady.”

Boggs made no reply but busied himself with the frying pans. He was not too busy to do a lot of thinking. Bacon squizzled in one of the pans; cold cooked beans were getting hot in the other. He harried the beans with a steel knife, pushing them around, turning them so they would not burn and thinking all the time. While he was busy at the stove his visitor wiped two greasy plates with a soiled rag which served as towel and set the table for two. Boggs was just as shiftless and no-account as ever: he still washed his dishes in cold water, and they were greasy messes.

The meal was a silent one, both men being genuinely hungry, both a little wary about starting the conversation; each suspicious of the other; and

Boggs a little worried. Shanghai did not know the thoughts in his companion's mind, or he would have been more worried than Boggs; but if he was worried he did not show it, which was an ace in the hole which Boggs did not have. After the meal, however, pipes were loaded and lighted, and it became time to fence a little.

"So they got you at last, huh?" asked Boggs tentatively, hoping to keep the talk on a personal basis.

"Yes, they did!" snapped Shanghai, and there was venom in his voice. "They got me, but they didn't have sense enough to keep me! They turned me loose when my time was up. They turned me loose with a new suit of clothes, five lousy dollars an' a damn' railroad ticket. An' where in hell you reckon that ticket read to?"

Boggs scratched his head and gravely considered the question, although he knew the answer.

"Back to th' place where they tried you?" he said with a rising inflection.

"Yes!" snorted Shanghai. "Yes, by Gawd! An' where was that?" he demanded in a voice which bespoke indignation.

"Don't know," replied Boggs. "Where was it?"

"Twin River!" snapped the old man. "*Twin River!*" he repeated shrilly. "Th' one damn' place I never wanted to see ag'in! *Twin River*, with that Cassidy coyote, Buck Peters an' all th' rest of that damn' crew! Fine chance I'd have in Twin River. *Fine* chance! That's where I went, but I didn't stay there. I got me a hoss, ridin' gear, a gun, a belt an' some grub, an' here I am, an' I ain't stoppin'. I ain't stoppin'. Th' further away I get from Twin River an' them Double Y hellions, th' better I'll like it. But lemme tell you somethin', Boggs: they shore as hell made a mistake when they turned me loose—when they turned me loose with th' score I got to square. An' they'll find it out someday."

"Where you aimin' to go?" asked Boggs carelessly. His eyelids were nearly closed.

"Don't know," answered the old man. "Don't know 'cept it'll be outa Twin River County an' outa th' damn' state."

Boggs smoked placidly, enjoying the talk so far, but suddenly he remembered the brand on Shanghai's bay horse. He sat up a little straighter and asked a question.

"If they only gave you five dollars how'd you get that fine hoss, th' ridin' gear, th' gun an' th' grub?"

"He, he, he, he!" chortled the old man, rubbing his hands with glee. "How'd I ever get a hoss an' gear when I needed 'em? An' I got th' gun an'

th' grub th' same way. An' I got th' five dollars they gave me. An' if they're lookin' for th' hoss they're shore lookin' in th' wrong direction. First chance I get, when I can hole up an' not need th' hoss till th' new marks look right, I'll shore make a nice big W outa that brand. Trust me for bein' out in th' clear. I ain't goin' back to their damn' pen. No sir, not never. I only made one mistake in years an' years, an' that damn' Cassidy caught me doin' it. I won't make it ag'in." He shook his head savagely in emphasis. "No sir, not ag'in. Th' old fox is a better fox than he ever was before. He, he, he, he!"

Boggs was listening to the old man and apparently intently, but his mind was not entirely engaged with what Shanghai was saying. He heard all he needed to, but all the time he was following a line of thought all his own. He knew that Shanghai had always been an old fox—everybody knew it—but the question he was considering now was whether the old fox was as good as he once was. If he were, then there might be a place waiting for him, a place well suited to his peculiarities.

"It shore looks like yo're right anxious to get outa Twin River County an' th' state," said Boggs with a smile. "You've not only crossed another county this side of Twin River, but th' state line as well; it's near forty miles behind you. I reckon you can rest up a bit if you want." He played with a greasy, soiled table knife for a moment. "That five dollars won't last you long. You've got to earn a livin'. What you figgerin' to do?"

Shanghai carefully tipped the coffeepot over his cup to get the last few drops without unduly disturbing the settlings, sighed regretfully at the amount of coffee obtained and slowly raised his eyes as he answered.

"Don't know what I'll do," he confessed. "But I'm too old a dog to larn new tricks. I can promise you this, Boggs: I won't start earnin' my livin' close enough to yore cattle to worry you. He, he, he, he!"

"All right," said Boggs with sudden decision. "You turn around an' keep right on ridin'. Head for Hackamore. Go to Dalton's saloon an' ask for Dutch Bill. Tell him I sent you an' that you want a job. He's heard about you, heard plenty. Stay here tonight an' go on in th' mornin'. There's irons in th' fire, an' they're all hot."

Shanghai glanced at the sugar bowl, decided against sweetness despite a number of years without sugar and drained the cup. He rubbed the back of a grimy hand across his lips and leaned back in the chair. He had the feeling of being home again, and for an instant doubted the wisdom of his plans; but a lifelong job, with safety, food and comfort banished the doubt.

"I'll do that," he said. "I allus liked hot irons in th' fire. I'll ride to Hackamore . . ."

The tempo of galloping hoofs was faintly beating on his eardrums, and Shanghai left the sentence unfinished to aid in listening. Boggs also was silent and listening and was watching his companion suspiciously. Was someone following the tracks of the stolen bay? A casual rider usually loped, but a man in a hurry galloped. This rider was galloping as if the devil were after him. The beats grew louder suddenly. Boggs nodded as the sudden increase in the sound told him of the flinty place in the trail. He stood up so quickly that his chair fell over behind him, but neither he nor Shanghai heard its crash. The hammering hoofs, iron shod, were now thundering along the curving section of trail which ended at the cabin. Boggs whirled and ran to the door, his right hand outstretched to rest on the convenient rifle. Shanghai slipped to a window, a hand resting on his holstered gun.

"It's Nick with some kinda news," said Boggs, his hand falling from the rifle barrel.

Shanghai read relief in the words and action and let his own right hand drop limply toward his knee.

"Then it must be damn' good or damn' bad," he said and moved toward his companion and the door.

"Ten to one it's bad!" snapped Boggs.

"That's a sucker bet in this game, an' I been weaned from sucker bets for forty, fifty years," chuckled Shanghai. With Mesquite playing a hand up in Hackamore it was almost certainly bad.

The rider swung into sight, flashed past a little clump of aspens and then came on over the open pasture. He checked the horse and slid twenty feet past the door.

"Dutch Bill's been shot an' killed!" he shouted as he leaped from the saddle and dropped the reins over the head of the heaving, lathered horse. He walked stiffly back toward the cabin door. "We're meetin' at Dan Lucey's wagon tomorrow night to vote on a man to take Bill's place."

"Hadrn't I better scatter my cows an' hosses up in th' little valleys on th' mountain?" anxiously asked Boggs. "Th' new brand marks ain't all healed yet."

"Hell, no," answered the courier, pushing back his hat and rubbing the mark of the band on his forehead. "Th' killin' was a personal matter. Bill was a heller with a hand gun, but he shore met up with a better man." He caught sight of Shanghai back in the cabin, and his gun was out and up like a flash. "Who's that?" he demanded.

Boggs swiftly raised a hand.

“A friend of mine! We’ll mebbby need him now,” he said hurriedly. “Put up yore gun; he’s all right. You never heard of Shanghai?”

The courier slowly lowered the gun and rather reluctantly holstered it. He was nodding, his eyes on the man in the house.

“Shore I’ve heard of him.”

“Who killed Dutch Bill?” asked Boggs somewhat anxiously.

“A young feller, a stable hand of old man Hankins,” answered the courier. “Name’s Mesquite. Wonder who’ll be elected to take Bill’s place? You got any liquor? I’m damn’ near done.”

Shanghai stepped back and slowly ran a hand over the bristles on his face to hide the grin. Mesquite, huh? And a personal matter. Damned if that wasn’t a good one. There existed no question now about his determination to keep to his original plans. Damned if that Double Y breed didn’t always run true to form.

ABOUT A WEEK LATER old man Hankins was leaning back in his office chair, staring through the open door into the street and seeing nothing, the depth of his thinking making him oblivious to all else. And then suddenly he was roughly jerked back to attention by a figure popping into sight and stopping in the door. It was George Hicks, Dutch Bill's old lieutenant. The old man straightened a little and looked inquiringly at the visitor.

Hicks stepped swiftly across the office and stuck his head out of the side door, searching the stable with his eyes. Mesquite was not in sight, and he pulled back into the little room and jerked his head toward the house in the rear.

"Yore hired man around? Back in th' house?" he asked.

"Yeah, back in th' house, redden' up," answered Hankins. "He won't be out here for a little while."

"All right," replied Hicks. "I just dropped in to tell you to be right here at twelve o'clock tonight. We got another small bunch of hosses to work on. If you think anythin' of yore hired hand see that he stays where he is right now an' don't do no spyin' an' snoopin'. Him shootin' Dutch Bill ain't made him no friend of ourn. If he sticks his head out into sight he'll likely get shot. You savvy?"

"Yeah, I savvy," answered the liveryman, slowly nodding his head. "I'll see to it that he ain't outa his bed. I don't want no harm to come to him. Won't it be better if both him an' me stay in th' house, abed? Then there won't be no chance of him hearin' me movin' about. I can leave th' keys where I usually do."

"Not tonight," answered Hicks. "We'll have a new hand with us, an' we want you to see him so you'll know him ag'in in case he has to come by hisself."

"Somebody that took Dutch Bill's job?" inquired Hankins curiously.

"No. Dan Lucey is runnin' things now. This new feller is an old-timer, slippery as a catfish and wise as a fox. Knows this hull country better'n all of us put together. We been talkin' of changin' our main hide-out range. Too many folks ridin' back an' forth. Too plain a trail now. An' some of them ranchers over west of us ain't actin' like they used to. We figger they're smellin' somethin'. If they are then it's us they smell. This new hand has got th' job of pickin' us a new hide-out range. From what Lucey says, he's all right. Dan an' him has been old friends for years, an' Dan knows him well.

So you be right on hand, settin' here in th' dark. An' don't forget what I told you about that Mesquite coyote: if he sticks his nose into this he'll get hisself shot."

Hankins nodded and moved slowly to the door after his departing visitor and watched the man mount and ride off. Across the street there was a pale, indistinct oval behind the window of the harness maker's shop, but before Hankins' gaze swept the window the pale oval had disappeared. He did not see the harness maker, an imaginative soul, check on the cartridges in the magazine of his rifle and affectionately pat the weapon as he stood it against the wall near his workbench. The harness maker was fighting gory and heroic battles in his mind.

The liveryman turned slowly and moved from the sunny, open door back to his office chair, and when it again took his weight he seemed to have shrunk a little. And there he sat, huddled down in the chair, his unseeing eyes again looking through the open door out on the street; and he did not move until brisk, hard-hitting heels sounded in the stable and came rapidly nearer, and the hired man picked up a broom and came on to begin his daily sweeping at the big front door. Then the old man stirred a little, frowned as he at last had to consider a question squarely, and with a gentle sigh he arose, pushed back the chair and slowly moved to the side door of the office.

Mesquite was sweeping gently, to keep down as much dust as he could, and he heard the creak of the chair, the slow steps, and looked up as his employer's head pushed into sight.

"Howdy," said the stable hand, smiling.

"Howdy," grunted Hankins, his scowl persisting.

Mesquite went on with his sweeping, whistling softly in time with the movements of the broom. Then he sensed that something was wrong, that something was sour. He checked the movement of the broom, stood erect and turned to face the office door.

"Little touch of bellyache?" he asked, grinning widely.

"None of yore business," retorted Hankins, his scowl growing. "You listen to me. I'm givin' you orders now. Before midnight comes you be abed, an' you won't hear nothin'. Understand?"

"More hair brandin'?" impudently asked the stable hand with a grin.

"None of yore business," growled the liveryman. "You'll be in bed an' asleep. An' you won't hear nothin'. Savvy that?"

Mesquite raised the broom, saluted with it and let it fall to the floor.

"Orders is orders," he said. "Now that I'm out here an' on th' job why don't you go up to th' Hackamore Hotel an' buy Long John a drink? An' tell

him that he's th' only bartender in town who's to let you have more than two drinks at one session."

Hankins swore under his breath, said something about hoping he never would see Long John as long as either of them lived but moved toward the street door even as he growled. Mesquite smiled and started the broom moving again, and he had been sweeping for perhaps three minutes when he sensed that someone was behind him. His guns came out like a flash of light as he leaped sideways and turned in the air. And as his feet touched the ground he saw the grim, smiling face of the harness maker.

"Well, well," laughed Mesquite. "You better make some noise next time. Come in."

"I am in," replied the harness maker, his eyes on the pair of grim weapons still pointing at the center of his belly.

"So you are," admitted Mesquite. He holstered the guns and reached for the fallen broom. "What's on yore mind so early in th' mornin'?"

"About th' same that's on yourn, I reckon," answered the harness maker.

"Meanin'?" asked Mesquite curiously.

"Meanin' that George Hicks just dropped in on Hankins an' paid him a short visit, that's what I mean."

"Well, if George dropped in on Hankins he shore paid him a visit, an' if he didn't stay very long then it was a short one," replied Mesquite. "What about it?"

"Thought mebbby you'd like to know," answered the harness maker.

"Hankins musta thought th' same thing, because he just told me about it," replied the stable hand, grinning again. "Who's George Hicks?"

"He was second to Dutch Bill!" snapped the harness maker.

"Then, Dutch Bill now bein' dead, that makes George first," laughed the stable hand. "In other words, Bill bein' dead, that makes his friend George First. Is that what yo're tryin' to tell me?"

"You go to hell!" snapped the harness maker, and he turned on his heel and stalked out to the street.

Mesquite watched the old man enter his shop and slam the door behind him, and he stood quietly for a moment, lost in thought. Then he resumed his sweeping but not his whistling. He had learned about all he could as a stable hand, which was that cattle stealing and horse stealing were going on. It did not make any difference whether he was in bed tonight or not so far as he was concerned; he had learned all there was to be learned in the stable. As a matter of fact, under the circumstances, remaining in the house was a

wise thing to do, since it would not tend to arouse suspicions any more than they were.

It was his job, however, to find out who were doing the stealing and where they were doing it, and this he could not do while he stayed here. He had to be free to ride when and where he pleased, to be his own boss. Hopalong would be waiting for some really definite information. He would have to tell Hankins in the morning that he was quitting the job. He gripped the broom tightly and again started to sweep, and now his whistling was louder than ever. Youth craves action.

Hankins returned well in time for the noonday meal, and he was cold sober. He knew that he would have to stay cold sober until after midnight, and the thought increased his thirst. Mesquite was sitting on an old chair, propped back against the front of the building, and the fact that his stable hand was not wearing the old coat he wore at his work told Hankins that the work was done for the day.

“Well,” said Mesquite, smiling as he looked up. “You ready to eat?”

“Reckon so,” grunted the old man as he kept on going. He was halfway through the stable when he heard the chair legs drop to the planks of the sidewalk and hard heels clipping after him. He was tired and in low spirits, and the danger, even if remote, which threatened his stable hand did not help him any. Sooner or later the young cub would get curious, out of hand. . . .

“Well, what’ll it be this noon?” asked Mesquite, closing the kitchen door behind him and heading for the wash bench. He scaled his hat across the room. “We got potatoes an’ ham, an’ we got ham an’ potatoes. An’ we got enough biscuits to see us through.”

“Don’t care what it is,” growled Hankins, beginning to set the table. This consisted in shoving two plates from the center to the edges and sliding knives, forks and spoons after them. Then he sank down onto a chair and looked at his boot toes.

Mesquite, the fire going well, began to get busy with the ham and potatoes. When the frying pan was hot he dropped in the slices of meat and stood looking at them, knife in hand.

“We’re near outa grub,” he said. “Next time you go uptown better bring some home with you.”

Hankins grunted something and continued to stare at his boots.

“You still want me to go to bed an’ stay there tonight?” Mesquite asked.

“Hell, yes!” snapped Hankins, looking up quickly and sitting erect.

“All right,” replied Mesquite, watching the ham.

“What fool idear you got in yore head?” demanded the old man with spirit, closely studying the calm face over the stove.

“Nothin’,” grunted Mesquite, turning one slice of the meat. In a moment he turned the other. The sliced boiled potatoes had only to be made hot and browned a little: they already were cooked. He glanced at the coffeepot and found it well behaved.

“Then what made you ask me that?” demanded Hankins.

“I was just kinda wonderin’ if it wasn’t gettin’ about time to clean house, that’s all,” answered Mesquite, smiling grimly.

Hankins was staring at the speaker, wondering if he understood what the words meant.

“Clean house?” he asked. “You ain’t goin’ to start tearin’ everythin’ up in here, are you?” There was alarm in his voice.

“I shoulda said stable,” corrected the cook. “How long you goin’ to let this go on?”

“That’s my business,” retorted Hankins shortly.

“Seein’ that I’m workin’ for you an’ will likely get tarred with th’ same stick, or mebbby hanged from th’ same limb,” retorted Mesquite, “I’m figgerin’ to make it some of my business.” He quickly lifted the ham from the frying pan, placed it on a hot plate on the rear of the stove and dumped the potatoes into the sizzling grease. “When’s it goin’ to stop?”

“Don’t know,” growled Hankins, again studying the toes of his boots.

Mesquite stirred the potatoes and with his free hand grabbed the swelling coffeepot and pushed it to the back of the stove.

“Pour th’ coffee,” he said. “These potatoes will be ready in a minute.”

They ate wordlessly and somewhat hurriedly. When they pushed back from the table Mesquite waved a hand toward the stable and then began scraping the dishes and sliding them into the boiling dishwater rattling its pan on the stove lid. He did not glance around as the old man slowly passed through the door on his way to the office. Curiously Hankins was thinking that the house might look better for a good tearing up and cleaning, while Mesquite was thinking that the kitchen was much cleaner now than when he had first seen it and wondering how long it would be clean after he had left.

Midnight. Hankins sat out in his dark office, listening for hoofbeats to come down the street. He had filled and trimmed three lanterns, and they rested near him on the floor, ready to be lighted. He was thinking about his helper’s remarks about cleaning up the stable and the work which would be

done in the stable tonight; but he was not worrying about any trouble tonight. He had Mesquite's definite word that he would not show himself and that he would stay in the house.

Suddenly the old man became a little tense. Intermittently the sound of hoofbeats came to his ears, and they grew steadily louder, and after a few minutes he knew that they had turned into his street from the open plain. He arose and slipped into the stable, threw off the heavy hasp of the big door and put his shoulder to the edge. In another moment the door rolled back, and an indistinct, moving mass surged through the opening, and then the big door rolled shut behind it. Men were dismounting, their high heels hitting sharply. One of them stepped toward the faint opening which located the office door.

"Where's yore stable hand?"

"In th' house abed," answered Hankins, shuffling forward. "Wait till I get th' lanterns." In a few moments he was out in the main stable again, three lighted and turned-down wicks throwing faint but enormous shadows to dance on the walls. "Here," he said, holding one of them out. "Take one."

George Hicks complied and moved down the long dim room. He hung the lanterns on pegs in the stall posts and took a hand in securing one of the unsaddled horses to the heavy uprights which supported the roof. Then he took one of the lanterns from a peg and held it close to the shoulder of the trussed animal. After a moment's scrutiny he nodded, gave the lantern to a companion and went carefully to work on the brand. The clipped hair fell to the floor.

"Won't have to do this fool thing much longer," said a squeaky voice from the shadows. "I ain't figgerin' to locate th' new hide-out range on th' wrong side of town. No sense comin' to town a-tall. No need for this damn' hair brandin' if th' layout is figgered right. Dan Lucey made two plays last summer that was right, but Dutch Bill wouldn't go through with it. Well, Bill ain't here no more." The speaker moved, and his elbow brushed against an old coat hanging on the wall beside him. He started nervously at the ghostly movement and glanced down.

"Mesquite's work coat," said Hankins reassuringly. "You must be th' new hand I heard about."

"He is," said Hicks, pausing in his careful clipping. "Meet Shanghai. Shanghai, this is Hankins. Take a good look at each other." He put out a hand and moved his helper's arm until the rays of the lantern fell strongly on the faces of the two old men. Both faces were heavily lined, none too clean, with generous stubbles of bristles.

“Glad to meet you, Hankins,” said Shanghai, holding out a hand.

“Same here,” said Hankins, meeting the grimy paw and shaking it.

Hicks turned back to the horse, the upheld lantern swinging after him, and went to work again. Hankins moved a little closer to the workman, interestedly watching the steady, clever but superficial changing of the brand. This man Hicks was a genius.

His companions were all watching his clever clipping, their faces toward the lantern, their backs to the outer darkness. They did not see Shanghai carelessly pick up the coat from the floor and would not have thought anything of it if they had seen it. The old thief was thinking how easily one of his problems had been solved by an old coat as he carelessly brushed it with one hand, a gesture of habit. Then he turned and hung it on the peg from where it had fallen, but in that brief moment his hands had swiftly transferred something from a pocket of his own to one in the coat. Mesquite would be very much surprised in the morning.

The hair branding went on until the last horse had been taken care of. The horses were bunched again, and the booted riders swung into their saddles.

“Don’t forget to sweep up them hairs an’ do it before you go into th’ house,” said Hicks, and then he turned and faced the big front door. “All right, douse th’ lights an’ roll her back.”

The sudden darkness seemed doubly dark, and then a faint slit appeared in the front of the building. It swiftly grew until the entire doorway was a square of dim light. There came a sudden clatter, a surging of a compact black mass, and as the hoofbeats rolled off down the street the big door rolled shut again.

Hankins felt around in the dark, put the hasp back in place and relighted one of the lanterns, burning his hand slightly in the effort. He carried the other two back to the far stowage stall, set them in a corner and did not bother to cover them. Then he got the broom and carelessly scattered the clipped hairs, grinning a little as he did so. And he grinned a little more when he deliberately put Mesquite’s broom in a stall on the wrong side of the aisle. He went to the rear door, put out the lantern and placed it on the floor to one side, and not long thereafter he was getting ready for bed.

MESQUITE AWAKENED, went through the regular morning routine and soon followed his employer into the stable. He walked over to get his work coat, put it on and then turned to look curiously at the floor where he had found the telltale hairs. He grinned as he saw the new ones and how they had been scattered instead of being swept up. Whoever had bothered to disturb them even that much must have known the uselessness of hiding them. That told him the task had been left for Hankins to do. Then he jammed his hands into the side pockets of his coat and found that one of them was not as empty as it had been the day before. A look of surprise flashed across his face.

He pulled out the articles and looked at them curiously and was still further surprised to find a deputy sheriff's badge, a piece of paper with Hopalong's signature on it and a folded, grimy note written on a piece of wrapping paper.

He read the note with controlled excitement and then read it again with no excitement but this time with a vast suspicion. Then he studied the signature on the little piece of writing paper and put it into a trouser pocket. Examining the badge more closely, he turned it over as though he might find another surprise there, and the surprise was plain to be seen, only it was on the edge. He shoved the note and the badge into the same trouser pocket and slowly went over and reached his hand in a box stall to get his broom. It was not there, but for a moment he did not notice this, and if he had it would have meant nothing of any importance. He already knew who had used it.

His mind was occupied with suspicions, conjectures and outraged disbelief. Yet there was Hopalong's signature, although it was signed to no message; but this might be due to a regard for caution. As for the badge, he knew that particular one because he himself had worn it and was responsible for the dent. There was no question about that dent; he recognized it.

Shanghai! That old fox of a horse and cattle thief who had been responsible for the unsuccessful ambushing of Hopalong! He had been the last of his gang when Mesquite had finally tracked him down and brought him in to face judge and jury. The old fox had gone to prison. How long ago was that? Huh! Yes, it was entirely possible that with time off for good behavior the old man's term had expired. Hopalong's signature bothered him. In itself, it was almost as incriminating if found on Shanghai as it would be if a few lines were written above it—a few lines in Hopalong's writing, vouching for the old fox.

All right, he would watch and wait and listen. From now on he never would be without his pair of guns and everlastingly alert. Shanghai had him located, and he was about where the old fox would want him to be if the old thief was working with the gang and not with Hopalong: away from his friends and an easy mark for a potshooter. He stepped into a stall and again read the note in the light of the small window. All right, he would do some writing himself. He would get off a letter to Hopalong that very night and send Shanghai's along with it. In the meantime, since the old man had been in the stable last night and Hankins had opened the door for him and his companions, it would be well to have a few words with his boss.

Then he thought of the broom and reached for it again. It was not there. He stuck his head in the door and looked around the stall. There was no broom. This time there was no need to puzzle over it. He looked in four stalls before he found it and then, deciding that he did not want it right away, leaned it against a stall front and walked toward the office. He stuck his head and shoulders in the door and laughed.

"What you want?" asked Hankins, looking up quickly. He seemed to have lost his air of worry.

"I found some more hosshairs," said Mesquite, grinning, "scattered all over th' place. You are right careless in reddin' up." The grin disappeared in favor of a frown. "Ag'in I'm askin' you, how much longer is th' stable goin' to be used by these damn' hair branders?"

"Not much longer," almost whispered the old man, his face lighting. "Not much longer now, Mesquite. That's straight."

"Yeah?" asked Mesquite ironically. "You finally pullin' out of th' lousy game?"

"No," answered the liveryman, his smile worth seeing. "No. They've got some new plans an' some new brains. God knows they need both. They had th' brains right along, but while Dutch Bill was runnin' things they wasn't much use. Dutch was a man to take orders an' not give 'em, only he wouldn't admit it. But th' brains are workin' now, an' they ain't entirely Dan Lucey's. An old friend of Dan's has come back to this part of the country, an' I'm right sorry he waited so long. Their whole play is shiftin', Mesquite, an' I'll be left behind. You hear that? I'll be left behind, an' *out* of it."

"You will, huh? Well, that's right good news," replied Mesquite, knowing that Shanghai's note so far had told the truth, unless the old fox was staging one of his clever plays. Suddenly a thought popped into his mind, and he looked closely at the liveryman, trying to conceal his

eagerness. "You say th' play is shiftin' away from Hackamore an' their old ranges. Which way is it shiftin'?"

"East. Over east. Hackamore is out of it entire," answered Hankins. "They've got brains doin' their thinkin' for 'em now. Mesquite, this'll add ten years to my life. Here I been worryin' an' frettin' an' stewin', not knowin' what was goin' to happen to me. Long John told me that folks here in town were beginnin' to talk—it musta been about me or he wouldn't-a told me. An' now they're shiftin' their play away from me, an' I'll be gettin' outa th' whole damn' mess. It seems too good to be true."

"Yes," grunted Mesquite thoughtfully. "It does seem too good—an' it is too good to be true as far as you are concerned." Another thought was running in his mind: they were leaving their old hide-out ranges and moving *east*! By God!

"Can't you see what it means?" eagerly asked the old man. "What you mean by sayin' it's too good for me?" And then he suddenly caught his breath.

He found himself looking into a pair of eyes belonging to a man who was accustomed to giving orders instead of taking them, and the eyes were frosty, and there was something in their shallow blue opaqueness which made the old man gasp and sent little prickles playing along his spine.

"What's th' matter?" he whispered. "What you mean?"

"Th' matter is, I see what it means to you," answered Mesquite. "It means that if they're pullin' out of this part of th' country an' leavin' Hackamore out of their plays they shore won't leave nobody in this town who knows too much. Somebody in th' gang is goin' to think of that an' see that it's looked after. This damn' fool play actin' is all over. From now on I'm givin' *you* orders, an' yo're takin' 'em whether you like 'em or not. We both know too much, but you know a lot more'n I do. An' I can take care of myself when I know that somethin' may be headin' my way, an' you can take that for gospel."

He was silent for a moment, his thoughts racing on, and the old man was too amazed to say a word. Yes, by all that was holy, it was working! Hopalong had not made a riding fool out of himself the third time, and it was working, and working like the old red-headed son of a gun suspected it might!

Since Dutch Bill's death the gang had had a new leader. Perhaps Dan Lucey, too, could see the folly and the utter nonsense and the danger of running a few head of horses into town for the purpose of hair branding them. Perhaps things were getting a little too tight, a little too dangerous on

their old hide-out range. And now Lucey had been joined by an old cattle-stealing fox to help him think. And Hopalong! He had not made a fool of himself the third time, and now they were going to shift over east! That would lead to new angles which would better be thought out later. Right now there was a more pressing matter to be decided, and it was already decided.

"Hankins," he said crisply and with authority in his voice, "you know that I'll do my damndest to keep you from bein' killed. An' I can do it up to a certain point. I don't want you killed because I like you a whole lot." He chuckled grimly. "An' it's very likely that I'll want you for a witness if things work out right. You'll make a hell of a witness if yo're dead."

"Me *dead*?" exclaimed the old man, his mouth gaping. "What you mean, Mesquite?"

"Just what I said—dead," answered Mesquite. "I can protect you here on th' premises ag'in pistol shootin', indoors or out; but I can't protect you ag'in a hidden rifleman shootin' from a distance. An' when they find out that th' nut is too tough to be cracked with pistols they shore as hell will choose a longer range. It ain't very far from th' house to th' stable, but it's far enough for a good shot."

"I—I——" began the liveryman.

"You listen to me," ordered Mesquite sternly. "You listen because *I'm* givin' *you* orders, an' I'll see they're carried out even if I have to hog-tie you! I'll mebbby be too busy lookin' out for myself without bein' bothered to look after you any more than's necessary. You savvy?"

"Why—why . . ." muttered Hankins and became silent. He was lost in these shifts and changes, bewildered, not knowing what to do, what to say, what to think; and he was glad to have someone think for him, someone he felt he could trust. All at once he realized that he was, indeed, an old man.

"You go back in th' house with me," ordered Mesquite kindly. He sensed the old man's state of mind and felt sorry for him. "An' when you get in there you stay there. You hear me? You stay there. An' you lock th' windows an' doors, an' then you keep away from both. Don't get where anybody can see you from th' outside. An' at night before you light th' lamp, if I ain't there to do it, every curtain must be drawn an' drawn tight, an' don't stand in front of th' windows when you do it; stand at one side. Draw 'em so there won't be a crack that'll let an eye see into th' rooms. I'll be spendin' my time nearer th' rear of th' stable, an' for th' next few days I ain't carin' much whether any customers come or not. You understand everythin' I've said?"

Hankins slowly nodded and rubbed a groping hand across his face.

"All right," said Mesquite, smiling at the old man. "Now we come to somethin' else. Do you know where Whit Booth's hoss ranch is? Th' Long Diamond, up north of town?"

"Whit Booth's hoss ranch?" muttered the old man, still a little bewildered, still lost.

"Ain't there just one out-an'-out hoss ranch in this part of th' country?" demanded Mesquite, blessing Whit for that life-saving innocent remark.

"Oh yes!" answered Hankins, brightening a little. "Shore, it's up th' north trail, near forty miles. Shore, th' Britisher's!"

"Good," said Mesquite, smiling again. He was turning something over in his mind. After all there was no reason to wait a few days in this matter. It was something which could be done right away and gotten rid of. "That takes some of th' load off my mind. Now you write out a bill of sale, in my name, for this stable, th' house an' th' land; lock, stock and barrel. Then go into th' house an' do as I said. You got an extry key for th' door?"

"Bill of sale!" snapped Hankins indignantly and somewhat fearfully. "Nobody's gettin' a bill of sale for this property!"

"Yo're wrong about that, because I'm gettin' one," retorted Mesquite. "I'm tryin' to save yore life an' my own. You date yore bill of sale for today. I'll give you mine in return for it an' date mine a week later. That'll protect you ag'in me. I'm tellin' you that I don't want yore property; you reckon I'll let myself be hog-tied to this damn' town? Don't you see that my bill of sale will protect you ag'in me, as I just said?"

"Ag'in you?" asked the old man, his seamed face working curiously. "Damn' her up an' damn' her down! I don't need no protection ag'in *you*!"

"You won't need none while I'm alive," replied Mesquite, smiling a little. "But I may not live. You'll take back my bill of sale to make sure. Now then. Let's go an' do our writin', an' then into th' house with you after we swap papers. An' when you get in th' house throw yore cleanest clothin' into a gunny sack an' get ready to make a long ride. Yo're goin' up to Whit Booth's hoss ranch to stay awhile, an' yo're startin' tonight after dark. After you get two, three miles away you'll be safe enough because this bunch of thieves do their ridin' west an' south of town. An' I got to write you a letter to Whit. You got an extry key to th' kitchen door?"

"Yes, I have," answered the old man, now more bewildered than ever. "You reckon I got to go away up there? That I got to hide out?"

"Yes," answered Mesquite patiently. "Hell may pop around these diggin's. An' there's somethin' else you've got to do. I mustn't forget it. You got to take a letter up to Whit Booth for him to mail for me. I don't want to

mail any more from this damn' town. Tell him he must not send it by hossback messenger even if he wants to; it must go by mail. I don't want any of his punchers to be seen ridin' anywhere near th' country east of here, an' that's th' way they'd ride if they went. By Gawd! Th' sucker didn't bite th' third time!"

"What sucker?" asked the old man curiously. "Who's a sucker? Me?"

"Sapsucker!" laughed Mesquite. "You ever see one?"

"Yeah, back in Indiana," answered Hankins, scratching his head vigorously. He sighed. "Well, let's write them damn' fool bills of sale. I reckon I got to go up to that hoss ranch whether I want to or not. Hell of a note when a man of my years is told what to do by a young whippersnapper. Hell of a note."

"Ain't it?" asked Mesquite, grinning. "Well, don't worry too much about it. You ain't th' only one. There'll be others told what to do when th' time comes, an' it'll be a whole lot worse than takin' a hossback ride up to see a nice feller like Whit. A whole *lot* worse!"

Mesquite was not sure how good the bills of sale would be without being witnessed, but seeing that they would not get into any court and would, if need arose, be shown to men as ignorant as himself, that made no difference. They made out the transfers, swapped papers and then, Mesquite's toes almost on the old man's heels and with naked guns in his hands, they walked to the house and into it; and in a few moments every window was a blank.

"If you figger that yo're gettin' into any trouble fire a shot," said Mesquite.

"If I has to fire a shot I won't be needin' you," retorted the old man with plenty of spirit.

Mesquite laughed agreement to the statement, took the extra key, stepped out and locked the door behind him and then walked to the stable and into it on the balls of his feet. Nothing happened. Nothing like that ever did happen, except suddenly and all at once. Quite often once was enough.

Another thought popped into his mind: Hankins' horse. It had not been out of its stall since he got his new job and perhaps for quite some time before that. Neither had his own, for that matter. The old man's horse did not appear to be very devilish, but it might throw him and hurt him seriously; his old bones had a quality of brittleness which they had lacked in his earlier years. All right, as soon as it was dark he would saddle the animal, take it down into the little sloping valley back of the house and take some of the gumption out of it. He did not doubt but what it was in fit condition to take the old man as far as Whit's, for it was not likely that its rider would push it

very hard, out of consideration for himself. There was a spade bit, too, back in one of the catchall stalls; and while he hated spade bits as he hated snakes, that was what the horse would have in its mouth when the old man rode it north. And he must remember to tell the old man that it was a spade and not his regular bit.

THE OLD MAN'S HORSE did not put up much of an argument, and it was not long before Mesquite rode it back to the stable and tied it inside the building and turned to go to work on his own. After some difficulty he saddled it and then led it from the stable and off some distance before he mounted. He had a mild fight on his hands for a few minutes and was agreeably surprised. Tying his own mount alongside the old man's, he scouted around the premises for a few minutes and then slipped back to the house and called Hankins. Shortly thereafter they rode side by side around the house and struck off across the open plain, to circle west to the trail after the town had been left well behind them.

They struck the north trail about three miles from Hackamore, and Mesquite kept his companion company for half an hour more. His instructions were simple: to keep riding north all night at a pace which suited him best and to keep on going until he was safe at the Long Diamond; if he learned of the approach of another rider in time, to turn off the trail at a safe distance and wait for him to go past; and when he got to Whit's to stay close to the ranch proper.

Mesquite returned and scouted the stable and house on foot before riding in. He had locked the stable before he left. The horse put up, he went to the house, let himself in and then locked the door and turned up the lamp.

He did not know how long it would take for his letter to get to Hopalong, but he thought that two days would be more than enough. That would depend on train schedules and the location of the railroad junctions. If it reached a junction too late to catch a train going in the right direction it might have to lay over a day or at least a good part of one. If it went west it would have to catch the eastbound for Twin River, which was the evening train if his memory served him well. If it went east, then it had to catch the westbound, a morning train. It might require two days to get to Rick Bradley. The same would hold true for the return, with the added uncertainty of the mail stage between Hackamore and the railroad. Then inside of four days he would expect an answer, and he was allowing for Whit having to send his letter to the nearest post office.

Mesquite knew nothing of local geography or junction points in this part of the country. Old man Hankins and the letter reached Whit's ranch before breakfast on Monday. But Whit knew something about timetables and junctions. When Hankins gave him the letter and explained about it Whit

looked at the clock, ran to the kitchen door and shouted. Two men popped out of the bunkhouse, two more peered over the corral wall.

“Saddle Jerusalem!” yelled Whit, waving the letter, and then called to his lightest rider. “Slim! Take this letter to town and get it on the eleven-eight! Can you do it?”

“I can if she ain’t ahead of time, an’ there ain’t no fear of that!” answered Slim and started to move.

Slim was right. He put it on the eleven-eight, and he had four minutes to spare.

On the eleven-eight it went westward to Wells Junction, where it lay for twenty minutes before Number Six, eastbound toward Twin River, roared down from the north, hammered over the crossing points and picked it up. In less than ten minutes after that it was on the last leg of its journey.

In Twin River Hopalong looked at his watch, found it was nearly time for Number Six to come tearing in for a disdained stop; but it had to stop for water anyway. He decided to meet it himself instead of asking his deputy to do it. That would give him the opportunity to take the mail, if any, out to the ranch today; and that would square him with the women. They seldom got letters, but that made no difference to them. And that was not the whole question: he could not help but feel a little disturbed by Mesquite’s continued silence.

He mounted and rode to the station and timed it nicely as usual. He was at the side of the baggage car, looking along the train as the wheels ceased turning. Number Six did not waste any time at Twin River, and in three minutes she was pulling out of it.

At the post office Hopalong bumped into Rick Bradley and gossiped with him until the mail was sorted and distributed. Hopalong and the Double Y drew blanks, but Rick won two letters and a post card and threw the post card into the wastepaper basket. The two men rode from the building side by side, Hopalong silent while his companion looked at his mail.

“One for you, Hoppy,” mumbled Rick without turning his head. “You want it now?”

“No! In th’ stable. What was you sayin’ about Cyclone cattle?”

“They sold a small herd of beef,” answered Rick, pulling up at the corner of the street. “You in a hurry to get out to th’ ranch?”

“Reckon not,” answered Hopalong. “Why?”

“Come over to th’ stable an’ I’ll pour you one outa th’ sacred bottle,” invited Rick with a smile.

"One of them will set right good just now," laughed Hopalong.

They rode along with all the time in the world, nodding to friends on the high wooden sidewalks. Inside the stable Rick stepped inside a stall and out again. When he came out his companion was leaning against the partition, and in his pocket was something which had not been there a moment before. Hopalong had no reason to suspect that he was being watched, but he took no chances. A minute later they were in the office, and Rick stepped across the room to unlock a closet and get the bottle. When he turned around with it in his hand he was a little surprised by the look on his friend's face. Hopalong was scanning a piece of wrapping paper.

"Bad news?" asked the liveryman.

"Don't know, but I shore aim to find out!" answered Hopalong. "Who's th' best liveryman over in Wild Run?" he asked, naming the second town up the line.

"Old Bill Farrell," answered Rick, putting two glasses on the desk.

"He know you?"

"Shore! We're old friends," answered Rick, pouring. "Say when."

"When," said Hopalong. He picked up the glass and looked at its amber contents. "It's too late to get a wire to him tonight, I reckon," he said. "Number Six is th' last train through tonight, an' th' station over there will be closed by now. Makes no difference anyhow. Rick, I'm sendin' Farrell a telegram in th' mornin' with yore name signed to it. It'll say that Sam Jones, an' old friend of yours, will rent th' best hoss Farrell can get, for one day, one week or until he brings it back. Th' wire will be to give him time to get th' best hoss he can. Then you give me a letter to him, vouchin' for me. I may need all th' money that's in th' safe, an' th' letter will save me th' bother of huntin' up enough extra money for a deposit on th' hoss."

"Bad as that, huh?" said Rick.

"Not bad a-tall, *yet*," answered Hopalong.

"Well, here's luck, in case you need it," said Rick, raising his glass.

"Luck's allus needed," growled Hopalong and raised his own. He placed the glass on the desk. "Well, me for th' hotel. I got a letter to write to Buck, an' I wish you'd send it out to him by somebody in th' mornin'. I'll put up my hoss and sack my saddle an' gear. It'll be that much less to do in th' mornin'. Have th' letter ready for me when I come around a little before train time."

"It'll be waitin' for you, Hoppy," said Rick, "an' I'll see that Buck gets yore letter. How about a little game tonight, seein' yo're stayin' in town?"

“Fine!” said Hopalong. “Round up some of th’ boys an’ bring ’em over. See you then. So long.” He stopped suddenly and turned. “Wait a minute! I take chances for myself, but I don’t risk my friends if I can help it. Have my saddle sacked for me an’ have a man take it on that train like it was his own. If he can slip off ag’in without bein’ seen, let him. If he can’t he’ll have two train rides an’ a day’s vacation with pay an’ expenses. I’m just goin’ up th’ line on business, an’ I don’t expect to do no ridin’ on a hoss. I’m only buyin’ my ticket to th’ next town, an’ from there on I’ll pay th’ conductor. You see, Rick, they may have a spotter here in town by this time. Well, bring a gang over to th’ hotel for a trimmin’.”

MESQUITE AWAKENED, cooked his breakfast and then, with disguised caution, stepped out of the house, locked the door behind him, crossed the little yard, let himself into the stable and closed and locked the big rear doors after him. He rolled the front door open and then stepped back and placed his chair against a box stall about halfway down the building. He was ready for business or trouble, as the case might be, and while he waited for either or both he let his mind run over the events of the day before.

This was Monday, and by now Hankins should be at Whit's ranch, and by noon the letter should be pretty close to a post office. He tried to follow the letter's journey but gave it up as involving too much pure guesswork. All right, he was free from the responsibility of looking out for the old man, free to play the cards as they chanced to fall.

About midmorning the harness maker stepped into his doorway and looked curiously at the stable office. He peered into the dim interior of the stable, shading his eyes with a hand to aid his vision. He thought he could see someone sitting on a chair halfway down the building. Yes, that was right; but he could not see who it was. He hesitated for a moment and then rather reluctantly turned and disappeared into his shop.

Lunchtime came around, but Mesquite hated to leave. That would mean that he would have to close and lock the big door of the stable, which might look suspicious to someone. If he left and did not lock it the box stalls might provide very excellent ambushes. He did not know that Dutch Bill had not passed on the disturbing news which old man Hankins had drunkenly told him at the little corral behind Dalton's saloon; that Dutch, intending to take care of the matter himself, had not thought it necessary to pass the news along. Had he known this he would have been saved a deal of trouble. As it was, he had to make a choice. Oh well, it would not be the first time that he had missed a noonday meal.

Midafternoon. The harness maker again stepped into his open door, stared into the dim interior of the stable and suddenly made up his mind. He crossed the street and passed through the big doorway.

"Oh, it's you, huh?" he asked, looking around curiously.

"Nobody else," replied Mesquite pleasantly, looking up.

"I ain't seen Hankins around today," said the harness maker. "He ain't sick?"

Mesquite found a more comfortable position on the chair and grinned.

"No," he answered and laughed. "He ain't sick. I'll give you one guess. What *you* think is ailin' him?"

"Damn' old fool!" said the harness maker. "Liquor'll be th' death of him! Why don't you stop him?"

"That's a little job I'm willin' to turn over to you," said Mesquite.

"It can't be did!" snapped the harness maker with conviction.

"That's why I don't stop him," replied Mesquite and laughed again. "Besides, there's another angle to work from."

"What you mean?"

Mesquite was about to answer when the sounds of a walking horse got his attention, and he forthwith forgot about Hankins and the liquor problem. The sounds grew louder and nearer, and he stood up lazily and lazily regarded the big front door. The shadow of a horse's head pushed out into sight on the hot and shimmering street, and then horse and rider partly filled the doorway, and the horse stopped with half of him inside the stable. The glare outside was such that Mesquite could not see the features of the rider, but the silhouette suggested an old man. The rider swung from the saddle and dropped the reins over the horse's head.

"Give him good feed of corn an' rub him down," said the horseman somewhat nervously. His throat was a little dry, and it bothered him.

Mesquite did not stiffen because he did not allow himself to do such things when they might constitute a mistake. Right now he was on balance, physically and mentally. It had been eight or ten years since he had heard that voice, but he had heard it under conditions which had impressed it upon his memory. Besides, he knew that the old man was in this part of the country. Had he come alone? And in a situation like this he had the damned harness maker on his hands!

"All right," he said, moving slowly, the light shifting and playing on the handles of his low-worn guns as they slowly followed the movements of his thighs and shifted forward and back. They were walnut but oiled, and polished by handling.

"I'll be back after I feed myself," said the horseman. His voice had suddenly lost what measure of assurance it had had. He was once again face to face with one of the coldest, deadliest men he had ever known, and he was not at all sure that his note had been believed. To make matters worse, he had ridden in on a horse which easily might be considered stolen. He suddenly turned on a heel and walked slowly out of the door and out of sight.

“Well,” said the harness maker, still looking at the big front door and puzzling himself about the identity of this stranger. “If you need any help with Hankins, call on me.”

“Thanks,” said Mesquite dryly. He watched the slow progress of the harness maker through the door and across the street. The damned old coot! He’d never offered any help before! He shook his head slowly and moved warily toward the horse, his hands dangling limply near the holsters, and he kept so closely to the horse that he crowded it. Nothing happened. He led the animal into the stable to take care of it. And then he froze.

Its brand was the Double Y! This was suspicious. No man working for Hopalong would ride into the company of cattle thieves on a horse wearing that brand. So Shanghai had reformed, huh? So had the devil, then, and all men were turning honest. He was almost sorry that he had bothered Hopalong with that letter and had bothered himself to write it. But still it was something which Hopalong should know. Because, knowing it, he would automatically know that the game was not going to be a simple one. No cattle-stealing game with Shanghai sitting in would be simple.

While he thought, he was rubbing down the horse, and he began to laugh gently. One of the Double Y’s prized animals, stolen and miles from home, being rubbed down by a friend of Hopalong Cassidy! Ha-ha-ha-ha! But while he rubbed and laughed he did not lose sight of the big front door. And the moment came when he again saw a shadow pushing out on the baked dirt of the street.

He stepped out of the stall and took one quick pace away from it to give his elbows plenty of room; and he let his swinging hands brush gently against the satiny walnut handles as he faced the big door and the street and took slow, short steps toward both. He should let Shanghai come to him, but pride overrode this caution, even if the old man had friends placed with nice strategy and forethought. If the friends were there they would likely learn what two-hand shooting really was.

Shanghai stepped through the big doorway and stopped suddenly as if he had been pulled back with invisible reins. The attitude of the man he was looking at was disturbing to such a one as he. He cleared his throat and swallowed with some effort.

“I see you know me,” he said, trying to smile. “Where’s Hankins?”

“Drunk in his bed,” grunted Mesquite, his eyes slitted.

“That’s good,” said Shanghai nervously. “I’m bringin’ you some news that he shouldn’t hear.”

“He won’t hear it,” replied Mesquite.

"I'm movin' every stolen head to th' east'ard," said Shanghai. "Every head an' every man. Onto a hide-out range I've picked for 'em. When th' time's right I'll let you know. I oughta be able to tell you more Wednesday night, between eleven an' twelve. Right now every head an' every man is outside Twin River jurisdiction. By Wednesday night they may be in it. I dunno yet. I'll see you Wednesday night anyhow. Keep Hankins drunk. What you say?"

"Shore, why not?" asked Mesquite, icy glints in his eyes. "An' I don't have to keep Hankins drunk; that's somethin' he does for hisself. But you come alone, Shanghai, or you'll mebbly find yoreself wrapped up in powder smoke. An' you tap on th' glass of th' first window on th' east side of th' house. Three, two, three. Like this."

Shanghai watched the finger tapping against walnut, watched it and listened to it. He nodded and suddenly swore under his breath as he heard slow but heavy footsteps crossing the street. The harness maker was getting lonely again or eager to lend a hand.

"Yes sir," said Mesquite, leading the horse from the stall. "At twelve o'clock, sir. Well, he's all full of corn an' hay an' ready to go. Good luck, mister."

"Good luck," repeated Shanghai and watched the finish of the quick, expert saddling. The harness maker was just rounding to, to come through the door as Shanghai mounted, and the former leaped aside with unexpected agility as a bay thunderbolt set the board floor aquiver and shot out into the street, its rider bending low in the saddle and on the far side to escape being struck by the top of the doorway, a full five feet above his head.

"Great Gawd A'mighty!" shouted the harness maker angrily.

"Yo're right," admitted Mesquite and sat down upon his chair.

"He oughta be arrested!"

"An' yo're right ag'in," admitted Mesquite, laughing gently, "an' it shoul'da happened twenty years ago or more; but it didn't." Then he again thought of how he had had a stolen Double Y horse in his hands and had let the thief ride away on it. Suddenly he became serious. Shanghai must have known that he would recognize the brand and perhaps the horse, and yet he boldly rode it into Hackamore and into this stable. Why that almost seemed like —

"Hankins any better?" solicitously asked the harness maker. "Anythin' I can do?"

Mesquite slowly arose, placed two gentle but firm hands on the harness maker's arms and slowly but surely moved him toward the door.

“Nobody can help him but hisself,” he said, “an’ he won’t do that. Come back tomorrow when he’ll mebbly be all right. So long.”

“Er—so long,” replied the harness maker and reluctantly made his stiff-backed way to his harness shop, where he angrily plumped himself down on his workbench with a savage determination to miss nothing which went on across the street. And it may be that his savagery increased because nothing happened.

Evening came, and it was time to eat. Mesquite forsook the chair, rolled the big front door shut, fastened it with the hasp and then made his way to the rear. Locking the back door after him, he crossed the little yard with every sense alert, let himself into the house and locked its door behind him. Ham and eggs and biscuit made him feel better, and it was not long after he had redded up that he was in his bed and sound asleep.

Tuesday was uneventful, and the monotonous hours dragged by without a visit from the huffed harness maker. The morning brought three customers who did not at all suspect how ready a pair of guns were to leap into close-range, quick-fire action against them. The afternoon brought half a dozen customers, and this sudden boom in business increased the alertness, if possible, of the lowly stable hand. So far, however, no one had taken a shot at him or even tried to. When evening came he took a handful of the weekly papers from the office and carried them into the house with him. All the day’s customers had returned for their horses and ridden off, and it would not be necessary to consider them.

For supper he had beans and bacon and more biscuits and made up and cooked a batch of the latter for the morrow. The beans had been cooking all day, and they tasted good, plastered with mustard, to a man who had eaten no midday meal. He had been in the house only long enough, from time to time, to keep the fire going for the beans. Again he redded up and then, dragging a chair close to the table, reached for a weekly, read until he was sleepy and went to bed.

He awakened with a start and felt for a gun.

Hopalong Cassidy rode all day on a horse that would make any man proud to own it. Farrell must have picked the best he could find in Wild Run. The rider was faced with one of the longest unbroken rides he had made in years. He was horseman enough to spare his mount on upward slopes and yet cover the miles, and he did not want to get to Hackamore until an hour when most of its inhabitants would be indoors or asleep, and it would suit

him better if it was raining like the devil when he got there. But there were no indications that nature was on his side.

At noon he stopped for a longer interval, rested the horse and while it fed on bunch grass, ate his lunch sitting cross-legged on the ground. The same thing happened at suppertime, and the horse looked fit to go on all night. If he did not have such good animals in the roan and the bay (the latter temporarily missing), he would be tempted to dicker for this horse when he got back to Wild Run.

Just about midnight Hopalong entered the town of Hackamore, and he knew where the saloons were because all other lights were out. In his letter Mesquite had said across from a harness shop. The first harness shop he came to had no stable opposite it, although one shouldered it. The next stable lacked a harness shop across from it. The main street, which was simply the widening of the trail, yielded him nothing, and he turned and went back to the one cross street and, of course, followed it in the wrong direction. It had neither stable nor harness shop. He turned again and rode back the way he had come, crossed the main street and kept on going. There was another livery stable, and it must be the last in town. Its sign, if it had any, was hidden by the darkness, but across from it was a harness shop. The horse kept right on walking and did not stop until the last building was two hundred yards or more behind, and then it turned to the left and stopped when some distance beyond the street. Its rider dismounted and felt a little thrill of pleasure go through him: this was something like old times.

Mesquite sat up in bed, steel and walnut in his hand. Again the sound came: tick, tick, tick, tick. The damned old thief! This was Tuesday night and not Wednesday; and he had told him three, two, three—not four. Tick, tick, tick, tick. A bit of stone gently tapping against the window, the window in the old man's room. He had told Shanghai which window was his. Tick, tick, tick, tick. Why four all the time? Hah! He thought that he knew the answer to that: exact repetition was more likely to gain attention, to break in through the barrier of sleep.

He slipped out of bed, both guns now in his hands, and went softly into Hankins' room. Tick, tick, tick, tick. It was quite a bit louder now that he was closer to it. All right, damn them. If it was trouble they were looking for they had come to the right house to find it. He moved silently over against the wall, close to the window, and tapped on the frame and not on the glass. The curtain hid the glass, and if he moved it that would have him spotted for a clean hit in the dark. For a moment the silence was unbroken, and then he heard a low voice.

"Kid, it's Hoppy. I've got to hide my hoss. It's down th' trail a bit. Have th' stable door open when I get back—th' rear door. You hearin' me?"

"Yes," answered Mesquite, tingling with pleasure. He knew that voice as well as he knew his own and liked it better. "It'll be open. I don't know if there's any danger, but don't get careless."

"Keno," said a laughing voice outside.

After a minute or two Mesquite opened the kitchen door and then heard a low, quiet voice in the darkness. It seemed to come from the ground, and it did.

"All right, kid. When you open it, stay inside."

Mesquite tingled again. If there was ever a workman he had just heard his voice. Nothing overlooked, nothing neglected. He rolled the door back very slowly, and it hardly made a sound. He heard no sound from the darkness either. He was about to announce that he was safely in the stable but checked the words and kept his fool mouth shut. It would be just like telling a schoolmarm that twice two is four. How in hell had he made it so quickly? A little warm surge of pride went through him: this was the man who had trained him, who had thought him good enough to train.

He heard it, the sounds of a walking horse; and then, click, click, click, click, with the same intervals and like a gun barrel tapping gently against a belt buckle. He knew that belt buckle, the only belt buckle he had ever seen that had been sanded and hammered and painted a dead black. Why give some coyote in a poor light, Hopalong had said, a bright and shining mark in the middle of your belly? He stepped aside to let them enter, Hoppy and the horse, and then he reached out a hand and touched his friend.

"Gimme th' reins," he said and suddenly had them as his friend stepped back to give him and the horse more room in which to maneuver.

"It ain't no Double Y hoss," said Hopalong softly as he slipped to the edge of the door. "It's brand is WF. Don't care who sees it, now, or when."

Mesquite smiled. He wouldn't care who saw the saddle either. There were hundreds of others just like it, and it had no distinguishing mark; that is, not one that you would notice on your own hook. With money enough to buy the fanciest saddle that Cheyenne ever turned out Hopalong chose the plainest he could find and cared only for comfort and honesty.

The horse stabled and the gear piled against the wall of the box stall, Mesquite walked toward the open door.

"All right, kid," said the low voice, this time from outside the stable. "Lead th' way."

Mesquite crossed that short distance between stable and house with a careless assurance he might have lacked if a squadron of cavalry had been there to protect him. When he reached the door he stopped and turned on the sill.

“All right, start comin’,” he murmured and in a moment stepped back and to one side to give his friend more room. Then he pushed the door gently shut and struck a match, and in its sizzling greenish light he saw his companion glance swiftly at the windows and nod his head in silent approbation. Then Hopalong smiled as the match flame changed its color.

“How are you, kid?”

“Right snug an’ ready to talk all night,” replied Mesquite, touching the match to the lamp wick and carefully putting back the chimney.

“That’s good,” said Hopalong wearily. “We’ll talk in th’ mornin’. I sat up last night till near mornin’, playin’ cards, like a fool; an’ I’ve had a long an’ busy day. Which room is mine?”

MESQUITE SAT UP, pivoted, dropped his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his clothes; and then, thoroughly awake, he remembered what had occurred the night before and listened for sounds in the other room. There were none. Dressing hurriedly, he went into the kitchen, started the fire and then looked into Hankins' bedroom and grinned at what he saw.

Hopalong, seated on the edge of the bed, was stretching out a foot toward a sock and trying to hook it to him. He looked up and laughed softly. It was good to see the kid again, good to be with him. He was going to enjoy himself if he had half a chance. He chuckled as a thought came to him: it was the old line-up of Mesquite and him against Shanghai and his kind. Not exactly the same, perhaps, but—well, perhaps it was. He'd know more about that a little later. Anyhow, he was here, and Mesquite was here, and that was enough for the moment.

"Mornin', kid," he said in a low voice. "When we talk we want to do it low. I ain't supposed to be here, an' I've taken some trouble not to let anybody know I am here."

"Mornin', Hoppy," said Mesquite, following the advice, although he did not need it. "I'm shore glad to see you. You hungry?"

"Hungrier than the devil," answered Hopalong and got the sock started toward him. "So you had to send Hankins up to Whit's, huh? Well, we know he got there all right, because yore letter was mailed. You figger it's as bad as that?"

"I figgered that it might get that bad, an' I wasn't takin' no chances with th' old man," answered Mesquite. "I wasn't expectin' you or word from you for another day or two. How come you got here so damn' quick?"

"Mebby I thought it might get bad too," grunted Hopalong, standing up and taking his trousers from a chair. "Mebby you can save me some time an' trouble by givin' me a line on Shanghai. I come up here to twist his tail. I don't like nobody to do any dealin' for me unless I tell 'em to. Likewise th' bay is goin' back with me if I can find it."

"I had my hands on it yesterday," chuckled Mesquite. "As to Shanghai, he'll be here tonight. I wouldn't be surprised if you found that you ain't in no hurry to take home th' bay. An' then you didn't give him that paper with yore name on it, an' that badge? I didn't put much stock in yore signature because there warn't nothin' writ above it. As a matter of fact I kinda suspected that somethin' was writ above it an' had been cut off."

“Did I give it to him?” said Hopalong. “It’d be too much like handin’ out a blank check, an’ I never do that. So I’ll give you one guess, an’ you’ve already guessed it. How you fixed for money?”

“Got as much as I had when I started an’ a little more,” chuckled Mesquite. Then he sobered and went back to the thoughts in his mind. “An’ his bay hoss had a giveaway brand, which was another thing that bothered me: you’d never send him or anybody else up here, right now, on a Double Y hoss; an’ yet he was ridin’ it open, like he had a right to.”

“Well,” chuckled Hopalong, “he didn’t steal it. He just borried it. I’ve already said that I’m here to take it home with me if I can find it an’ don’t have good reason to change my mind.” He had now gotten to the point of putting on his shirt, and he did it. As his head emerged he said: “All I knowed was that he’d just gone off som’ers. He left me a note too. Gettin’ to be a writin’ fool.” He laughed. “You reckon I’d send a man up here that I wasn’t dead shore of? To mebbby get you into all kinds of trouble? Hell, kid, I wouldn’t even ’a’ sent my deppety; nobody but Red, Lanky or Skinny.”

“What th’ devil made him come up here?” demanded Mesquite with pardonable curiosity. “He hadn’t oughta have no love for me!”

“He’s makin’ a fancy play, I reckon, to copper-rivet an easy job for hisself an’ plenty to eat for th’ rest of his life,” said Hopalong, “a play he didn’t have to make because th’ job was his as long as he behaved hisself. I’m hungry; let’s get breakfast goin’. Tell you all about it while we eat.”

They got breakfast going, they ate all of it, and the matter was more fully explained and talked over. When they pushed back from the table Mesquite asked a question.

“What you figger to do now?”

“Stay holed up for a while, right here in this house,” answered Hopalong. “Holed up as tight as a badger in his hole. Shanghai may be tellin’ you th’ truth, or he may be lyin’, but whichever it is it’ll be th’ best from his angle. There’s somethin’ we don’t want to forget: all his thievin’ life he’s never thought of nobody but hisself, never trusted nobody but hisself. An’ right now, if he’s playin’ square with us, whatever it is he’s plannin’ to do, he’s doin’ it for hisself first. I figger to stay in that room tonight an’ listen to him talk. When he gets all through talkin’ an’ leaves I may have a purty good idear if he’s lyin’ to you or not. An’ then I’ll know what to do. An’ now hadn’t you oughta go out to th’ stable like you allus do?”

“We won’t do no talkin’ here in th’ house,” replied Mesquite. “He won’t want Hankins to hear what he’s goin’ to say, an’ he don’t know that Hankins

ain't here. If I have him come in th' house he'll wonder about that. No. He'll tap on my window, an' then we'll do our talkin' in th' stable with a lantern lighted but turned down so I can watch his face."

"Shucks, kid," said Hopalong with a laugh, "if he's comin' in to shoot you he can do that right handy when you step through th' door. He'll know right where to look for you, but you won't know where to look for him out there in th' dark."

Mesquite chuckled and shook his head.

"An' you trained me," he said reproachfully. "Well, I had two thoughts in my mind when I told him that. One was that he might be figgerin' to get revenge on me for trackin' him down an' arrestin' him, an' figgered that would be a safe play for him, that he could get me in th' dark before I knew what it was all about. Th' other was that he might not come alone. If he was scared to do th' job hisself all he had to do was to tell that gang who I was an' why I was up here. They'd be glad enough to take th' job off his hands."

Hopalong nodded and smiled grimly.

"Go on, kid. Yo're usin' yore head. Go on."

"Well," continued Mesquite, also smiling, "when I told him to tap on th' window, an' he did it, that would put him in one special place. I'd have him located. He'd be at that window, tappin' to me inside, lettin' me know that he was there. But I won't be inside. Long before it's time for him to show up I'll be outside, doin' some scoutin' in the dark. An' while he's tappin' an' strainin' his ears for my answer I'll know whether he's alone or not; an' I'll be movin' up on him outa th' dark. I'll be in my socks, an' my gun will be on him. You see, I trust th' old thief, an' I'm dead shore that he's reformed. Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Yeah, I see that you do; just like I do," laughed Hopalong. "You got a head on you, kid, but I knowed that long ago. All right. When you start out on yore scoutin' I'll get into th' stable, in th' box stall. That will work out best. You know where th' lantern's goin' to be an' where you'll be doin' yore powwowin' an' you'll have to place me accordin'. An' it mustn't be where I can see him. I know that old devil. If I can see him th' chances are that he'll see me. An' that won't do. All I want is to hear him talk."

He laughed contentedly.

"I don't know where we're goin', kid, but I'm dead shore that we're goin' som'ers an' we're goin' there together. An' that shore beats hangin' around Twin River meetin' two trains a day."

"Yo're right, Hoppy," replied Mesquite, his eyes shining. "Before I forget it. You got any special questions you want me to ask him? Somethin'

that may help you check up on him?”

“Good kid! Yes. I’ll be thinkin’ ’em out durin’ th’ day. I’ll be wantin’ to know just about how much he’s lyin’.” He grinned. “But hadn’t you oughta be out in th’ stable, waitin’ for business?”

“Hate to leave these dirty dishes,” replied Mesquite, frowning.

“They won’t be dirty when you see ’em ag’in,” said Hopalong. He caught the look of protest on his friend’s face and chuckled. “Hell, I ain’t no guest. An’ it’s goin’ to be a long day, an’ I’ll be glad to have somethin’ to do.”

“This is gettin’ to be like old times, Hoppy,” said Mesquite, his eyes shining again. “You don’t know how glad I am to see you.”

“Yes, I do; but I figger yo’re late on yore job, kid, with all this talkin’, an’ th’ customers an’ mebbby that harness maker across th’ street won’t know about our pleasure of bein’ together ag’in. They’ll mebbby be thinkin’, an’ you never want to start folks thinkin’ if you can help it. Clear outa here, you Siwash!”

This morning was like other mornings. A few customers brought in their horses and left them. Later on they returned for them and rode off. Shortly before noon Mesquite remembered that the food supply was running low again. He closed the big door and walked up the street, alert as a cat without appearing to be, and bought what he needed at the general store. He was not molested. On his return he went around the stable and into the little house, dumped the provisions on the table and locked the door behind him as a precaution that no one would walk in and discover Hopalong before he could get out of sight. As he turned from the door Hopalong stepped out of the bedroom and put more fuel on the fire.

“I been thinkin’, kid,” he said. “Suppose some one of th’ gang comes in an’ wants to see Hankins. What then?”

“If it’s anybody else Hankins is dead drunk an’ in his bed,” answered Mesquite, smiling. “If it’s one of th’ gang then I tell him that Hankins suddenly got near scared to death about somethin’ an’ cleared out. He wouldn’t say what it was, but he did say he warn’t comin’ back, an’ he sold me th’ whole outfit for a dollar an’ just rode away. That was a couple of nights ago. I ain’t seen him since.”

“Suppose they don’t believe it?” persisted Hopalong.

Mesquite took the bill of sale from a pocket, handed it over to his companion and watched him read it. He took it back when it was held out to him.

"I don't know how good it is without bein' witnessed, but that don't really matter," Hopalong commented. "You thought it was good. But suppose they don't believe that?"

"Then we argue about it," said Mesquite. "Then I'll get mad for bein' regarded a liar, call 'em a — — — an' we'll mebby shoot it out."

"You mebby will," said Hopalong and smiled. "That grub will smell better when it's cookin', an' I shore can eat my share of it. I'll pay for my keep by doin' th' dishes."

The afternoon passed as quietly as the morning. Customers came and went, and the harness maker solicitously asked about Hankins, found that the old man had uncovered a cached bottle and was drunk again, and turned to go back to his shop.

"If he don't stop his fool drinkin' it'll mebby stop him," he said. "Why don't you take him in hand?"

"Mebby I will some of these days," answered Mesquite. "Or some of th' bartenders in this town. That may be th' best way out."

"Young man," said the harness maker eagerly, "this town needs a marshal, an' I got a damn' good idear to call a meetin'. Would you take th' job?"

"I might if I was figgerin' to stay here," answered Mesquite with a laugh. "I'm stayin' only till I get me a stake. I'm a tumbleweed."

"You think it over," said the harness maker as he turned to leave. "I warn't foolin'."

"Neither was I," replied Mesquite and watched the old man walk away.

Supper over, Mesquite pushed back from the table and started toward the door.

"It won't be much longer now, Hoppy," he said with a smile.

"No," replied Hopalong, and then he looked curiously at his friend. He had had plenty of time to think about things, to run back and look at them. "There's one thing been puzzlin' me, among others," he said thoughtfully. "Dutch Bill came to th' stable that day to kill you deliberate an' stop yore mouth. How come nobody bothered you after you shot him? How come nobody else tried to stop yore mouth? At a distance, say, with a rifle? Why only Dutch Bill?"

Mesquite thought for a moment, and then old man Hankins' drunken words came back to him. Strange that he had not thought this out before. It might have saved him a lot of foolish motions.

"I remember now," he said, "that Hankins told Dutch Bill at th' corral behind Dalton's saloon. There was nobody there but them two." He paused a moment to follow this thought through. "Dutch Bill had a long hard ride to make, an' he mebbly figgered to shoot me as soon as he got back. Mebbly he didn't have time or a good chance to tell anybody else. It musta been somethin' like that, because if anybody else in that gang knew what I did there in th' stable they'd have had to make a play for me. Or mebbly he wanted to do it hisself to boost his reputation an' warn th' rest of th' gang."

Hopalong nodded and glanced at the boiling dishwater.

"Yore last two thoughts was th' best," he said and smiled. "That was yore good luck, kid. All right, get out there in th' stable an' don't keep me from my dishwashin'."

Mesquite chuckled, turned on his heel and obeyed. He kept the stable open until the regular hour and then, locking up, went into the house and locked the kitchen door behind him. He turned up the lamp after Hopalong was back in the bedroom again, and sat and read for a while. Then, putting out the light, he slipped through the door and faded into the darkness. After scouting for a few moments he returned, went to the stable and unlocked and opened the rear doors wide enough for a man to slip through.

"All right, kid," said a low voice from the darkness close by, and the speaker slipped into the building.

"Fourth stall from this end," muttered Mesquite, "on th' right hand side facin' forward. There's a chair in it. See you later."

He stepped outside, closed and locked the door and again became lost in the darkness, lying down a short distance from the house and flat on the ground.

Hopalong groped along the stalls on the right hand side and counted off four of them. He stepped through the door and felt about him. The chair was there, and he seated himself on it and moved this way and that. The chair did not squeak. Then he got up and moved about the stall and found that it, too, was silent. Following one wall, he found the chair again, moved it a little farther from the partitions so his holstered guns would not strike them if he changed position, and then sat down to wait.

One thing made him frown: if Mesquite should run into sudden trouble outside he would not be able to help him, for the doors were locked. Oh well, a man had to take his risks and do the best he could; and he smiled a little as he thought that Mesquite's best was mighty good. Everything else being equal, he'd rather be standing in Mesquite's boots than the other fellow's.

TO YOU AND TO ME time would have seemed to have stopped; but to the man in the stall and to his friend outside on the ground, mentally disciplined and blessed with patience, the passing minutes held their wonted pace and followed one another at their appointed intervals.

The night was dark, with heavy clouds filling the sky. Insects fiddled or buzzed or chirped according to their natures. And then a two-legged fox slipped along the east wall of the stable, enfolded in its protecting dark, and scurried across the small and silent yard. Reaching the corner of the house, he felt his way silently along it, each cautious forward foot feeling for twigs before it pressed against the earth, and stopped just short of the window. For moments he stood still and listened, and then, raising a hand and stretching it out before him at the full length of his arm, he gently tapped a fingernail against the glass. Three, two, three. Then a pause. Three, two, three. And then silence. Time flowed on in the darkness, and again he raised his hand. Three, two, three. And then suddenly he stiffened, and a panicky fear tore at his throat and his stomach. A hard, small object, was suddenly pressing against his side.

“Don’t move!” said a low mutter at his ear. “You alone?”

“Gawd, yes!” breathed Shanghai and closed his eyes for an instant. He felt his belt tug against his middle, and he knew that he had lost his gun. Damn’ the breed, they were too thorough!

“In th’ stable,” muttered Mesquite. “Th’ old man is drunk ag’in, but not as drunk as he was at supptime. Th’ stable’s th’ place. He can’t hear us out there. Turn around an’ get goin’. I’ll be right behind you, treadin’ at yore heels. If you whistle or shout, clear yore throat or cough you’ll go to hell in a cloud of powder smoke. Get goin’.”

Shanghai obeyed and made no more noise than a stalking cat. The big doors unlocked, one of them opened a trifle, and the yard was suddenly empty. They closed again, and the sharp click of a lock told that they were securely fastened.

Mesquite felt for the end wall, found it and leaned over. When his match was lighted he was facing his companion, a naked gun gleaming in his hand. The green light sizzled, and the green fumes stank.

“No light!” whispered Shanghai.

Mesquite calmly lit the lantern and placed it on the floor between them. He stepped away from the wall, a full pace or more out into the stable, but

swiftly checked his companion's move to follow.

"Th' lights' safe enough," he said reassuringly. "When I listen to a man talk I like to see his face. Sit down ag'in th' wall," he said, and as Shanghai slowly obeyed Mesquite squatted and then sat down and crossed his legs.

Shanghai settled himself comfortably, his greasy face now closer to the light. Before him stretched the dark emptiness of the long stable, and the only sounds he heard were the occasional movements of resting horses. The scent of ammonia was strong in his nostrils, and there lay the fainter but characteristic smell of harness. Before him, face to the light and back to the darkness, sat the man who once had tracked him down.

"Well?" asked Mesquite pleasantly enough.

"Dan Lucey an' me are old friends," said Shanghai in a whisper.

"Don't whisper!" said Mesquite sharply. "Some of th' letters carry a surprisin' distance when you whisper. Talk low, as low as I am. All right: you an' Dan Lucey are old friends. Go on."

"All right," said Shanghai, his seamed, dirty old face almost hideous in the up-slanting rays of the lantern. "He made a play last year; two of 'em. He worked it so that Hoppy made two wild-goose rides through th' wild country up in th' northwest corner of Twin River County. They was good plays an' cunningly made, an' Dutch Bill knew they was; but Bill was jealous of Dan an' scared th' boys might make Dan boss. He said th' plays was loco an' fought ag'in follerin' 'em up. Well," he chuckled, "Dutch is dead. You know that because you shot him, an' when you did that you gave good help to th' rest of th' boys. Dan is boss now, an' me an' him decided that them two plays wasn't goin' to be wasted, that th' follow-up play was goin' to be made. He, he, he!"

Mesquite said nothing. He just sat still and looked and waited and listened for faint sounds outside.

"This year," continued the old man, grinning evilly, "Dan sent out th' same roundabout call for help. Twice fooled an' too smart to be fooled ag'in: that was Hoppy's answer. He didn't make another ride. At soon as Dan was sure of that—an' he's had a man in Twin River watchin' Hoppy so he could be sure—why he got itchy to make his play. Then I showed up. He knowed that I knowed that country over there better'n any man in th' gang, an' he gave me th' job of scoutin' it an' pickin' out a new hide-out range. He, he, he! I didn't have to do no scoutin'. I knowed just where it was goin' to be. I made camp up in th' mountains an' waited for a while an' then went back again. I knowed where it was. An' where do you reckon it is?"

"I don't know that country well enough to even make a guess," answered Mesquite. "Where is it?"

"Box Canyon!" chortled the old man, and he laughed again. "Box Canyon! Two miles inside the Twin River County line, an' th' best nat'ral trap for animals or men that you ever saw. There's only one way in or out: where th' creek comes out at th' south end. An' inside that canyon there ain't no cover for a fightin' man, just a smooth, grassy valley floor. Dan wants us to build two, three cabins right away; but cabins mean cover for shootin' men, an' I'm holdin' out ag'in 'em. He, he, he! I say there's time enough for them before snow flies an' that we oughta go to brandin'. There ain't no timber in th' canyon. When they get ready to build their cabins they got to go outside to cut their logs. An' if you can get word to Hoppy, an' he can get up there with a posse inside a week, there won't be a damn' thing for them fellers to fight from except bare, open pasture!"

"That's very interestin'," said Mesquite, tempted to reach out and take this traitor's skinny neck in his two strong hands. "But I can't figger yore play or why yo're makin' it. Did Hoppy send you up here?"

"No," chuckled Shanghai. "He don't know I'm here. He does know I'm off som'ers because I left him a note before I went. I'm figgerin' to surprise him."

"Why?" asked Mesquite.

"Because I want to show him that I'm a loyal member of th' Double Y. Because I want to keep my job an' mebbby make some real friends. I'm an old man, Mesquite, an' old man."

"How do I know yo're tellin' me th' truth?" demanded Mesquite coldly. "You haven't forgotten that I'm th' man who tracked you down an' took you in to Twin River. I'm th' man that really sent you to prison. Why should I believe that yo're up here to help me?"

"I ain't up here to help you," retorted Shanghai. "Only that yo're a friend of Hoppy's. I'm up here to help him. An' mebbby to help Whit Booth. We got some of his hosses, an' they're damn' good uns. I want to stay a member of th' Double Y outfit, to keep my job an' mebbby earn me some real friends. If I had a grudge ag'in you I only had to tell th' boys that Mesquite Jenkins, friend of Hopalong Cassidy, was a hired hand in Hankins' stable an' snoopin' into their business. They'd got you as shore as hell. An' after Dutch Bill was killed some of his friends was talkin' of pickin' you off with a buffalo gun; but I talked it out of 'em. I don't hold you no grudge, Mesquite. You was just doin' yore damndest, like I was doin' mine. With Hoppy's help you happened to be th' winner."

"How did Hankins get mixed up in this mess?" asked Mesquite after a moment's silence.

"He got mixed up in it because Dutch Bill said he'd kill th' old man if he didn't let th' boys use his stable. An' you don't want to make no mistake about Hankins; he won't live very long now. He knows too much."

"I'm not makin' no mistake about Hankins," growled Mesquite. "That's why I'm wearin' two guns. If they elect somebody to come in an' get th' old man don't you let 'em elect you, because that man will be dead as soon as he makes his play, if not before." He rubbed his chin for a moment. "Just what's th' situation right now? Where's th' gang? Where's them hosses an' cows?"

"Just this side of Box Canyon," replied the old man, chuckling. "By tomorrow night every man an' every head will be in it. Send word to Hoppy for him to collect his posse an' start. They'll be all penned up for him like a lot of hawgs in a sty an' just as helpless if he does his job th' way I know he can. Surprise is th' whole thing. If he can get through th' entrance before they know he's there they can't do a thing."

"How come yo're in town tonight?" asked Mesquite. "They know yo're here?"

"He, he, he! Shore they do," answered Shanghai. "They sent me in with four pack animals to get supplies. There ain't no stores near Box Canyon."

"You say you got some of Whit's hosses," said Mesquite. "How many? What brand are they in now?"

"They got near a hundred head of 'em," answered Shanghai. "They was in th' Long Diamond, but now they're hair branded into a Double X with a long bar through th' middle. They'll be burnin' them new marks in when they get more time, though they'll be so red and new an' swelled that it won't mean nothin'. They mustn't get more time; they mustn't build them cabins to shoot from. You got to get word to Hoppy an' damn' quick."

"I'll get th' word to him as soon as th' mail will take it," said Mesquite. "Anythin' more you want to say?"

"Nobody really suspects you," said Shanghai, "but Hankins will get shot just as soon as they have time to get around to it. You say he's drunk an' in bed?"

"Yes," lied Mesquite evenly, thinking that it was almost an honor to lie to a man like this.

"Well," said Shanghai, slowly getting to his feet, "when he sobers up an' wants to get drunk ag'in don't let him go to Dalton's. You bring it to him in bottles an' let him get drunk in his own house. An' that's th' place for him to

stay. Don't let him leave th' house, not even to come out here. They *got* to close his mouth. You want to ask me anythin' more?"

"How'd you get Hoppy's signature an' that badge?"

"I took 'em outa his little house. His name was signed to a letter he never sent."

"Did you know that badge was th' one I was wearin' when I got you?" asked Mesquite with a cold smile.

"No, by Gawd!" exclaimed Shanghai in surprise. "Was it?"

"Yes, it was," answered Mesquite and laughed softly. "I knowed it by th' dent. All right," he said, getting up. "I'll blow out th' lantern, let you out, lock th' door an' go to th' house. I'll leave yore gun on th' top step. After I get in th' house an' close th' door you can come an' get it. I'll get word to Hoppy. See you back home on th' Double Y. Are you ready?"

"Blow her out an' unlock th' door," answered Shanghai. "I'm ready."

Mesquite unlocked the door, blew out the lantern and then followed his companion out into the dark night. As he closed the door he clicked the lock, but it clicked just an instant before the door was quite shut, which meant that Hopalong could leave the stable whenever it suited him.

Mesquite waited in the house for perhaps ten minutes and then slipped out and moved quietly toward the stable. The door was as he had left it, and as he put his hand on it to roll it back a little he softly sang a line from "Whisky Bill."

"All right, kid," said the darkness of the stable.

Mesquite slipped through the opening and pulled the door shut behind him.

"I was waitin' for you in th' house," he said.

"Wasn't no use for me to go in th' house," said Hopalong quietly. "I been thinkin' an' I'll saddle up an' be ridin' home in a couple of minutes. Trouble is I'm really two different men in one skin. Th' first is Hopalong Cassidy; th' second, th' sheriff of Twin River County. An' th' sheriff took an oath. Th' first would tell you to come on home with me an' let Shanghai go to hell; th' second has got to hold his nose tight shut to keep out th' smell, an' go through with his job. After all, it makes no difference to th' sheriff's office how cattle thieves an' stolen animals get into its jurisdiction; if they're there we've got to look after 'em. An' by th' time I get back home they'll be there, an' they'll have Whit's hosses with 'em."

He paused for a moment and then continued:

“You stay here an’ act like you have been actin’ till you get word from me. When you get that you’ll likely write up to Hankins an’ tell him to come back here an’ run his business without fear. Then you climb on yore saddle an’ head for Twin River. When you write to Hankins send word to Whit to send some of his riders down to th’ Double Y to drive home a herd of his hosses that we’ll be holdin’ for him. If he gets ’em there two weeks from today it’ll be time enough.”

“Then you figger Shanghai’s playin’ along with you an’ tellin’ th’ truth?” asked Mesquite.

“I suspected that he was when he mentioned Box Canyon. It’s a perfect trap. It can’t be got out of or defended from th’ inside ag’in a surprise attack. I’ll be sendin’ a couple of our boys up there to scout it out. If them fellers an’ them animals are in that canyon I’ll shore know what to do. Meanwhile you set tight an’ keep yore eyes skinned. An’ watch out for Shanghai: if he’ll sell out an old-time friend he’ll shore as hell sell out an old-time enemy—if it should pay him better. An’ we don’t know which play he’ll finally decide on, which he’ll finally think will pay him best, because it’s purty hard for you an’ me to think like him.”

Mesquite grimaced in the dark and then chuckled.

“I shore hope so,” he answered and chuckled again. “I thought you came up to take th’ bay home with you?”

“It’s too far from here, an’ he’d never make it,” replied Hopalong, laughing softly. “Besides, he likes company. Reckon I’ll bring him down with Whit’s hosses. Well, kid, I’ve shore enjoyed our little visit. Keep dealin’ ’em like you have been till you get my letter. I’ll just address it to Hankins’ Livery an’ Feed, an’ it’ll be in a Bradley’s Livery an’ Feed envelope. Beats hell how these liverymen like to write to each other! After that you’ll know what th’ hands are an’ you can do what you want. Now we got to find that Farrell hoss an’ get th’ gear onto him in th’ dark, which is no job to an old hand.”

The Farrell horse submitted well enough. Mesquite unfastened the rear doors and disappeared for a few minutes. When he returned he stopped just outside the door.

“All right, Hoppy.”

As Hopalong passed through the door at a walk he reached down, gripped the shoulder of his friend and was almost instantly lost to sight, though the sounds of his walking horse seemed to linger a long time in Mesquite’s ears.

Reaching Wild Run, Hopalong turned the horse over to Farrell, paid his bill and resacked his saddle.

“Wonder if you’ll have somebody put th’ saddle in th’ baggage car of Number Six this afternoon,” he said to the liveryman.

“Shore will, Mr—er—Jones,” answered Farrell with a faint smile.

“Tell Murphy that its owner will come in an’ claim it after th’ train starts.”

“Be glad to. How was Rick when you left him?” asked the liveryman.

“Sore as a pinched boil,” chuckled Hopalong. “Rick an’ me was in a poker game th’ night before I left. He likes two pairs an’ inside straights. He found th’ goin’ right tough.”

“He allus did have them failin’s,” laughed Farrell. “Well, Mr—er—Jones, any time you want another hoss you don’t have to bother Rick for no letter. I’ve been through Twin River two, three times on th’ train. Don’t you ever miss one?”

“Not many,” admitted Hopalong and laughed. “Come on over, an’ I’ll buy you some lunch an’ a drink.”

“I had my lunch at noon,” replied Farrell with a smile, “an’ a drink not ten minutes ago. Thanks just th’ same.”

In due time Number Six rolled out of Wild Run, and Murphy had leisurely closed the baggage-car door. He heard the end door open, looked around and then grinned as he saw who his visitor was.

“That’s my saddle, Mike,” said Hopalong, pointing. “You figger you can toss it into a little patch of brush or weeds just this side of th’ station when she’s slowed down enough not to bust it?”

“An’ on th’ far side of th’ track,” said Murphy, grinning.

“Takes th’ Irish to see through th’ hole in a doughnut,” said Hopalong, slapping the man’s shoulder. “You’ve named th’ side.”

“Sure an’ I know th’ very place,” chuckled Murphy. “Th’ roadbed pitches down to a mud puddle. Look for it there.”

“You show me a mud puddle this time of th’ year anywhere near th’ track in Twin River an’ I’ll buy you a drink when we get there.”

“Oh, it’s Twin River you mean!” exclaimed Murphy and threw back his head and laughed. “You’ve saved it bein’ pitched off at Sheridan.”

“Just for that you don’t get th’ drink!” retorted Hopalong with a grin.

“A hell of a drink it would be on a three-minute stop an’ th’ first saloon a good two minutes away.”

BEFORE THE TRAIN stopped moving Hopalong swung down from the steps of the smoking car, which was nearest the baggage coach and, stepping back to be out of the way of any other descending passengers, looked down the length of the train as usual. This time he saw no one get off because he was the only passenger to honor Twin River with his presence.

The train jerked, and as it began to roll a certain Irish baggagemaster reached down from the open door of his car and forcibly jammed the sheriff's big hat down over that official person's ears. When Hopalong had pried it up far enough to make use of his eyes he saw a fan-shaped hand hooked by its thumb to the end of the baggagemaster's nose, and then dust, cinders and track litter blotted the man from his sight.

"Damn that Mick!" muttered the sheriff with a grin and got the hat up where it belonged. He whirled round and strode off to the sheriff's office and caught his deputy going home early before that guilty person had quite finished locking the door.

"George," he said in a cold, level voice, "go to th' post office, get th' evenin' mail an' bring it here to th' office before you go home."

George grinned shamefacedly, grunted something and went out to his horse. When he jerked loose the knot he used a deal more strength than was necessary.

Hopalong chuckled and walked down to Bradley's Livery and Feed, where he waited for his good friend Rick to return from the post office. Rick duly returned, raised his eyebrows at sight of his friend and dropped comfortably into a chair. Hopalong glanced out of the window, saw George dismounting before the sheriff's office and grinned.

"It wasn't so bad, huh?" asked Rick in a congratulatory voice.

"Aces up," chuckled Hopalong, trying to forget the smell, and he laughed outright as his companion flushed at this cruel mention of his beloved two pairs. "Mike Murphy tossed my sacked saddle from Number Six just before we reached th' station. It's on th' far side of th' track. Ask Eddie to locate it just before dark an' not bring it here until after it gets dark. Tell him there's a dollar in it. He'll put it on th' peg my other one is on."

"I'll see he does it, Hoppy," said Rick. "How was Farrell?"

"Fair itchin' to get you in a poker game," chuckled the sheriff. "He wouldn't sell me that hoss you was tellin' me about." He shook his head. "Who told you it was for sale?"

Rick was silent for a moment, looking curiously at his companion, and then he nodded understandingly and glanced at the window out of the corner of his eye.

"I musta misunderstood him," he replied. "Sorry I made you go to all that trouble."

Hopalong leaned back and laughed contentedly.

"That's th' answer if anybody should start nudgin' you with questions about me," he said. "A man as smart as you oughta play a much better game of poker."

Rick grinned self-consciously. "What you say we prospect th' sacred bottle?" he asked.

"Sounds like pay dirt to me," chuckled Hopalong. He watched his friend unlock the closet, produce bottle and glasses and then perform the mystic motion known as tilting. "*When!*" said Hopalong.

"What's th' matter?" asked Rick, quickly lifting the neck of the bottle. "You hadn't oughta be scared of this."

"I drink for taste an' not for shock these days," replied the sheriff. "An' there's more taste in half a glass th' way I handle it than there is in a tumbler th' way you put it down. Here's to yore great-great-gran'parents."

"An' to youn'," replied Rick and placed his empty glass on the desk. "You boys kinda played ring-aroun'-th'-rosy with me th' other night," he said, and his eyes lighted. "You stayin' in town tonight?"

"You better go home an' deal yoreself some solitaire," jibed the sheriff. "It's a better game for trustin' souls. I'm goin' right out to th' ranch as soon as I can saddle th' roan." He slowly turned the glass in his fingers and watched it for a moment. Then he finished the drink and stood up. "I'll be on my way."

The lamps were lighted in the buildings when Hopalong stopped at the corral and swung down from the saddle. He took care of the horse and then discovered that Buck had robbed a branding crew for a wrangler. That person moved into sight, saw who the newcomer was and that there was nothing for him to do even if he wanted to, grinned and went back into the bunkhouse.

Hopalong strode toward the ranch house and saw the door open. He groaned. Buck now stood in the opening and completely filled it, what with body, knees and elbows.

"Where you been?" asked Buck bluntly.

"I see you had to take a man from th' fires to rustle in a hoss for you that you won't use," said Hopalong.

"Where you been?" repeated Buck.

"Been off listenin' to Shanghai," cheerfully answered Hopalong as he stopped on the porch. "If I want to take a man from th' fires there's hell to pay."

"Shanghai!" exclaimed Buck.

"Yeah," said Hopalong. "An' he was dead right: th' job he went off to do just couldn't have been done by *anybody* but him. What I just told you is a secret of th' sheriff's office. You can send that man back to his wagon first thing in th' mornin'."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Buck.

"That ain't news to me," retorted Hopalong.

"You get th' bay?"

"An' leave Shanghai afoot?"

"Hell with Shanghai! You keep an eye on him, or you'll lose yore pants," said Buck. "How you know you'll ever see that bay ag'in?"

"I know because I'm figgerin' on bringin' it down from Box Canyon."

"Box Canyon?" said Buck loudly. "What you mean? There ain't nothin' up there!"

"Yo're mebbey right at that," said Hopalong thoughtfully.

"How's Mesquite?" asked Buck.

"He's a hired hand in a livery stable an' layin' up a fortune. Anythin' left over from supper?"

"An' so you listened to Shanghai," sneered Buck. "Did you even see th' bay?"

"No, but I heard about it."

"Hell," said Buck, enjoying himself. "You coulda stayed home an' heard about it. I coulda done that for you."

"That so?" asked Hopalong.

"Shore. You'll never see it ag'in. I'll lay you two to one you don't."

"I been waitin' a long time to burn yore hide," retorted Hopalong, digging down into a pocket for the money he had forgotten to put back in the safe. "I got two hundred right here that says to yore four hundred that it's a bet. Now lemme see you crawl!"

"I wouldn't bet ag'in you to save my life!" snapped Buck with indignation. "All I been doin' for near forty years is payin' bets to you! Not

to save my life!”

“’Tain’t yore life, Buck,” laughed the sheriff easily. “There’s too much Scotch in you.”

“That so?” snorted Buck, bridling. “Then it’s a bet!”

Hopalong chuckled at how easy it was.

“Keno. Any grub left over from supper?”

“No, Hoppy,” said a gentle, calm voice from the living room, “but you an’ Buck come in and sit down. I’ll have something for you right away.”

“Where you been, an’ what have you been doin’?” asked Buck, hungry for details. He led the way through the kitchen and into the living room.

“I’ve been up to Hackamore, an’ I’ve moved a passel of cattle thieves an’ a hundred head of Whit’s hosses, not to mention quite a lot of cattle, over into my own legal jurisdiction. An’ I’m going to hurt yore feelin’s right soon, Buck. How’s th’ roundup comin’?”

“Comin’ right along,” answered Buck. “That’s why I took that wrangler from his wagon, that you’ve been bellyachin’ about. But what you mean, movin’ cattle thieves over into yore own jurisdiction? I should think you’d want to keep ’em out of it!”

“Well, nobody else wanted ’em,” replied Hopalong with a grin. “An’ I knowed that Whit would like to get his hosses back.”

“Hum!” said Buck thoughtfully, and then he turned a frowning face to his companion. “You said you was goin’ to hurt my feelin’s. You been doin’ that for nigh onto forty years. How you goin’ to do it this time?”

“By takin’ Lanky an’ Skinny from th’ brandin’ fires.”

“Like hell you are!”

“Th’ roundup comin’ along so good as you just said, we can take a man or two from th’ wagons,” retorted Hopalong.

“Hell! Th’ man I took ain’t Lanky or Skinny!”

“I’d be downright surprised if he was,” said Hopalong. “I’m swearin’ ’em in tomorrow mornin’. You wouldn’t try to interfere with deppeties in th’ legal performance of their duties, would you?”

“How long ago was it you put on long pants?” asked Buck with heat.

“Quite some years after you quit cuttin’ yore teeth on yore thumb,” retorted Hopalong.

“Why, you damned, bow-laigged, red-headed — —”

“Supper’s ready, Hoppy,” said the gentle voice from the kitchen. “You don’t mind if it’s a cold one?”

"Keep right on talkin', Buck," said Hopalong, arising and slapping his partner on the shoulder. "I'll be back after a while."

He kept his word, and when he returned he drew a chair up close to Buck and talked for several minutes. And then he ceased talking and leaned back.

"Great land of cows!" said Buck, and then he stiffened, and his face grew dark. "Shanghai can't work for th' Double Y!"

"He's workin' for it now," retorted Hopalong, "an' he'll keep his job! I gave him my word. But, Buck, I don't believe he'll be able to stick it out."

The following morning Hopalong rode into Twin River, and as he entered the town he saw John Rixey coming out of the general store. John mounted and swung around, saw the sheriff and raised his hand in salute.

"Mornin', Hoppy."

"Mornin', John," said the sheriff, kneeling his horse over toward his friend. "Rick Bradley was sayin' he wanted to see you right bad, *but not right now*," he finished on a low mutter.

"I don't owe Rick nothin'," laughed John. "How's th' roundup comin'?"

"Right smart. It'll be over purty soon," answered Hopalong and drew up before Bradley's Livery and Feed. "So long."

"Tell Rick I'll be in after while," said John. "So long."

Hopalong rode into the stable and, dismounting, walked toward the rear. Eddie was washing and oiling harness. He took the dollar and grinned.

"Where's Rick?" asked Hopalong carelessly as he walked over to examine his saddle. No harm had been done to it.

"He stepped out for a minute, but he'll be back purty—there he is, now."

The sheriff turned and walked back toward the street, meeting the liveryman not far from the big door. He stepped close to him and talked in a low voice, preparing him for John Rixey's visit and for other things, Rick nodding from time to time. Hopalong laughed heartily over an imaginary joke, swung up into the saddle and rode from the building with Rick's laughter following him. Shanghai had said there was a spotter in Twin River. All right, let him spot and be damned.

Last night's mail had netted one letter, which he read and tossed into the wastepaper basket. George came in from the corral in the rear and plumped himself into a chair near the desk.

"We got a job to do," said his boss, speaking softly. "An' we're bein' watched."

“Just what I was goin’ to speak about,” said George. “There’s a stranger in town that’s been keepin’ tabs on you. Want me to go get him?”

“What for? He ain’t done nothin’ for us to pick him up. Let him watch an’ you just act nat’ral. You stay right here in town an’ do what you allus do. I won’t be in for th’ next few days—goin’ to get my hand in at one of our brandin’ fires. I ain’t worked with a roundup crew for two years, an’ I’m fair itchin’ to join th’ boys. What’s the stranger look like?”

“I ain’t worked with a crew neither,” said George. “Wish I could go along with you. Why, he’s— — By Gawd! *There* he is, goin’ in th’ general store!”

“So’m I!” snapped Hopalong and left hurriedly after a quick glance through the window. He had never seen the man before.

He entered the store calmly and in no haste. The stranger was looking at socks as the sheriff stopped before the patent medicine counter.

“Mornin’, Hoppy,” said the proprietor, showing more socks. “These are fifty cents a pair.” He looked at the sheriff. “How are you?”

“I’m all right, but Buck ain’t so well,” Hopalong said, going around the counter and taking a bottle from the shelf behind it. “He eats like a hoss an’ don’t do no work. Put down in th’ book one bottle of castor oil. I’ll see you after th’ roundup is over.”

“You goin’ out to work with th’ boys?” asked the storekeeper.

“I am till Buck gets righted around,” answered Hopalong and walked toward the door.

“It’s about time you earned an honest dollar,” said the storekeeper with a chuckle.

“Ain’t it?” laughed Hopalong and left the building.

When he got back to the ranch he stopped long enough to give Rose the bottle of castor oil to add to her collection of medicines and to talk earnestly to Buck for a few minutes. Then he climbed back into the saddle and kept on going.

Lanky was glad to see him but would not have said so for a ten-dollar piece. The wagon was on the north side of the little valley and close to a spring. Dust showed where the boys were working the gather. The cook grinned a welcome and poked a thumb toward the coffeepot.

“Been savin’ that for myself,” he said. “You want it?”

“Yes,” replied Hopalong, reaching for a tin cup. He drank and then turned to Lanky, who had ridden into the wagon to get a fresh horse and by now had shifted his saddle. The horse he chose was fresh in more ways than

one, but Lanky climbed aboard and wilted it a little and started to ride back to the boys on the circle.

“Wait a minute, an’ I’ll go with you,” said Hopalong.

“I ain’t got all day,” replied Lanky.

“You got all week if I say so!” retorted Hopalong.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah!”

It sounded like an auspicious beginning, but they rode off stirrup to stirrup without any blows, and after a few moments Hopalong turned his head and grinned.

“Buck still workin’ hard, runnin’ this roundup?” asked Lanky.

“Yeah, he’s wore out two pencils,” chuckled his companion.

“You mean Rose has,” said Lanky. “What you doin’ out here?”

Hopalong told him to some length, and long before he got through Lanky was smiling.

“I’ll take Skinny,” said the wagon boss. “We got this job so near cleaned up that we can do without two full crews an’ let th’ other wagons spread out a little to take care of what we leave for ’em. But ain’t you gettin’ a mite careless associatin’ with that damn’ double-dealin’, treacherous skunk?”

And so it happened that Lanky and Skinny, with about all the grub they could hang on their horses, rode northwestwardly on the following day. Before noon John Rixey rode in from town, and with him came six more riders. John was proud of the time they had made but said nothing about the condition of their horses. The next morning two roundup camps were deserted, their wagons rolling ranchward, one being driven by the cook who belonged to it, the other by a puncher who had been hurt going down a rope. The other cook was riding with a bunch of rowdies, as he frankly stated, and had personal charge of four pack horses loaded to the scuppers with grub and tools of his trade. What he most terribly wanted to do was to go to the ranch, draw down his pay and pay installments on some saloon in Twin River without getting a deed to show for it.

“Reg’lar hand-painted, embroidered posse, this is,” he said with heavy sarcasm. “Fancy as hell.” He rode on for a few moments, buried under a mess of bitter thoughts. “Lot of — — — — helpless invalids. Have to have a range cook to stuff their bellies. Hell!”

“What half-wit ever told you that you was a range cook?” asked Red with a chip on his shoulder.

The cook had such good eyesight that he could see the chip, invisible though it was. He knew so much about Red that he shut his mouth and took it out on the pack animals.

MILES TO THE NORTHWEST of these two rolling wagons a large group of horsemen stopped late in the afternoon, unloaded the pack animals and prepared to make camp. Morning found them going on again, and again they stopped late in the afternoon and went into camp, but in this camp an air of expectancy became noticeable.

Cook was well along in his duties when a rider topped a rise north of camp and loped down the gentle slope.

"Here comes Skinny," said someone, and they all turned to watch him.

Skinny stopped and swung from the saddle. He was looking at the sheriff, and now he nodded.

"They're in there, Hoppy," he said. "Eight men besides Shanghai, about a hundred head of good hosses and two, three hundred cows." He was looking around the interested group as he talked, and now he laughed. "Hell, why'd you bring an' army? Th' old Bar 20 gang used to be enough to handle a thing like this."

Hopalong flushed a little.

"I brought enough not only to take th' rustlers down to Twin River, but also to drive back them animals!" he retorted.

"Drive 'em back?" asked Skinny in a rising voice. "Hell, let 'em stay there. Let their owners come up an' do the drivin' themselves."

"There ain't ten men in this country can find Box Canyon or ever even heard of it!" rejoined Hopalong. "Where's yore brains?"

"Not where yore's are!" snapped Skinny. "Mine are right close to my hat!"

"Damn' if you ain't right!" retorted the sheriff. "Many's th' time I've seen you sleep with that Stetson under yore hips! Where's Lanky?"

"Waitin' this side of th' canyon," answered Skinny with a grin.

"Come an' get it!" bawled the cook.

Eager for excitement, there was not a laggard when it came time for the human cocoons to unroll in the morning. Man after man awakened, got out of his blankets, rolled them hurriedly and placed them beside his saddle. They hastened off to lead in their picketed horses and saddled them on the edge of the camp. By the time they had their blanket rolls in place the cook was bellowing out his summons for breakfast, although not a man was more than thirty yards from him.

The cavalcade loped from camp with Hopalong and Skinny in the lead, the latter acting as guide.

“You say you thought you heard wood choppers just before you left, Lanky?” asked Hopalong.

“Yes. Lanky was goin’ to scout around an’ locate ’em if he could do it without takin’ too many chances of bein’ seen.”

“He can do it,” replied Hopalong.

“Slick as grease on rawhide,” agreed Skinny.

“Th’ best time to go in that canyon would be when they wake up in th’ mornin’,” mused Hopalong. “It’s too late for that now, an’ if we wait for tomorrow it’ll cost us another day. We’ll go in at noon, when they’ll be sittin’ around th’ fire an’ stuffin’ their faces. That means we got three hours to kill. Skinny, you take six men with you an’ find Lanky. Tell him to get th’ wood choppers if they’re cuttin’ today. Get ’em without firin’ a shot, an’ I mean that. Tell him that we’re goin’ in that canyon at noon. There’s only eight, all told, in th’ gang; but damn it, they may be all outside, choppin’ logs.”

He thought for a moment.

“Take half of th’ boys with you. An’ get them log cutters as soon as you can. An’ when you get ’em, keep th’ choppin’ goin’. Th’ sound of axes can be heard a long ways, an’ we don’t want that sound to stop. Put as many of th’ boys choppin’ as them fellers are. Leave one man to watch th’ prisoners while th’ others chop. If they give him trouble he ain’t to use his gun: a club oughta be enough if he’s onto his job. Then you take th’ rest of th’ boys up close to th’ canyon entrance. If you get there first wait for us. If we get there first you’ll either find us or a guide. Get there before noon. I want to show ’em plenty of force so they won’t get reckless.”

He looked back at the following riders and swung around again.

“Take th’ boys that was with you at yore wagon an’ three of th’ deppeties from town. Better start now, Skinny.”

Skinny and his contingent pushed into the lead, the rest slowing a little. They had plenty of time. The rough miles rolled behind them. Minute followed minute, and the tension slowly grew. The sun climbed higher. Then a horseman appeared ahead and waved his hat. The cavalcade stopped as one man when it reached him.

“We got th’ wood choppers,” said Skinny, grinning. “Three of ’em, which is all they was. It’s sweaty work, choppin’ trees. They all had their gun belts off an’ felt as safe as babies in their cribs.” His grin grew widely.

"If you want to see some rough-an'-tumble wood choppin', you come with me."

Low laughter answered him, and Hopalong smiled.

"All right," said the sheriff. "That leaves six, an' one of them don't count. Come on, at a walk, single file."

They rode on for an hour, and then Hopalong raised his hand, checked his horse and dismounted, the others following suit. Lanky and his crew were waiting for them and joined them. The enlarged party followed Hopalong among the boulders outside the canyon entrance and then, once fairly in the entrance, spread out slowly and cautiously at his signal.

Careful minutes followed, and then Hopalong raised his hand again and pushed on cautiously as the others stopped. He crawled the last fifty yards and then looked out from behind the boulder.

Six men sat around a little fire, exchanging banter and relishing their food. Hopalong inched back behind the boulder and waved his arm. The slow and cautious line again advanced and again stopped, each man behind his chosen cover, each man needing only to take a step or two forward or sideways to be within full view of the men at the fire when they turned their heads. Then Hopalong stepped out from behind his boulder, both guns in his hands. As he did so the rest of the line followed suit.

"Up with 'em!" he called. "We're three to one, an' we got you cold."

The six started and glanced around, and the hands of five were stealing toward their thighs; but the hands stopped and went slowly up. It was just plain suicide to make more serious use of them. They were helpless.

Hopalong and four men stepped forward and stopped near the fire.

"Get their guns," said the sheriff, and his companions obeyed the order.

"Cuff 'em," he said and turned suddenly at a muttered oath. John Rixey was reaching for Shanghai's hands as the old man backed away.

"Don't let him put them damn' things onto me!" cried the old man. "Don't you let him, Hoppy! Ain't he got no sense?"

Hopalong waved John back, and as he looked around again he saw Dan Lucey's face. Shanghai, he thought, had made a mistake; but under the circumstances it would do him no harm. He promptly forgot about it and singled out the crew which was to drive back the horses and the cattle, told them to take their own time and that he would send the cook and two of the pack horses to meet them. The rustlers had some supplies to help them out, and when he got back to the ranch he would send them more.

For more comfortable riding the prisoners' hands were cuffed in front of them, and in a few minutes Hopalong and his crew were riding from the canyon, the prisoners ahead of them. They picked up the wood choppers and laughed at them. From time to time the riding order shifted.

Shanghai rode up to Hopalong's side and found that the sheriff's part of the conversation consisted of "Yes" and "No" and "I reckon" and some grunts. After a few moments the old thief dropped back to talk to Red. Red left out the "I reckon" and the grunts. Shanghai let a few minutes of this go past and dropped back to talk to Skinny. All that Skinny said were the grunts. And then the old man thought he would try Lanky and rode up the line toward that silent, alert person.

For a mile or so Skinny had ridden at Dan Lucey's side but suddenly wanted to speak to the sheriff. Motioning for John Rixey to take his place, he pushed up to the head of the line.

"Well, I suppose we're in for it," said Lucey quietly.

"'Fraid so," replied John. "You never shoulda come into this county. That's where you made yore mistake."

"No," drawled Lucey carelessly as he watched Shanghai push past him toward Lanky. "That wasn't where we made our mistake——" He swung swiftly from the waist, and his manacled hands seemed to fairly leap to Rixey's holster. There was a flash, a roar, and then John grabbed the smoking gun and tore it from Lucey's unresisting grip.

Shanghai pitched from the saddle, and the bay horse stopped.

Lanky's heels struck the ground, and he bent quickly over. Then he slowly stood up.

"Never knew what hit him," he said.

Hopalong reined in his horse and looked down. Instinct made him take off his hat.

"I reckon he's lucky," he said thoughtfully, thinking that a man who had betrayed a friend could never have held his job, never have stuck it out in an outfit where loyalty was a fetish.

Low murmurs of assent arose.

"You *think* so, huh?" said Skinny. "By Gawd, I *know* so!"

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.

[The end of *Hopalong Cassidy Takes Cards*, by Clarence E. Mulford.]