

ARGOSY

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Buckboard Tracks

"I," said Irish O'Shea's Mexican captor, "am the best drinker in Mexico—and the best shooter. I weel show you—"

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"Wild Oats," etc.



CHAPTER I.

OVER THE BORDER.

OF course, there should have been a sign or a fence, or something to show Irish O'Shea that he was crossing the border into Mexico. Not that it would have made any material difference to

O'Shea, except, possibly, to have made him more cautious. But there was nothing to indicate that he had ridden out of Arizona; nothing but rocks and sage, with an occasional clump of mesquite, ocotillo and scattered Joshua palms.

Irish O'Shea was the young foreman of the Seven Cut cattle outfit, near

Ocotillo City, forty miles away; and Irish was looking for thirty head of young horses which had been spirited away from the Seven Cut. Irish was twenty-five years of age, dark as an Indian, with black hair and brown eyes. Black Irish, fighting Irish, was O'Shea, with a flashing, white-toothed smile, built like a middleweight fighter, and rated the best broncho rider in that part of the State.

Perhaps Irish O'Shea was a bit gaudy in his cowboy garb; but he looked well in silver and bright colors. He rode a black gelding, and his riding

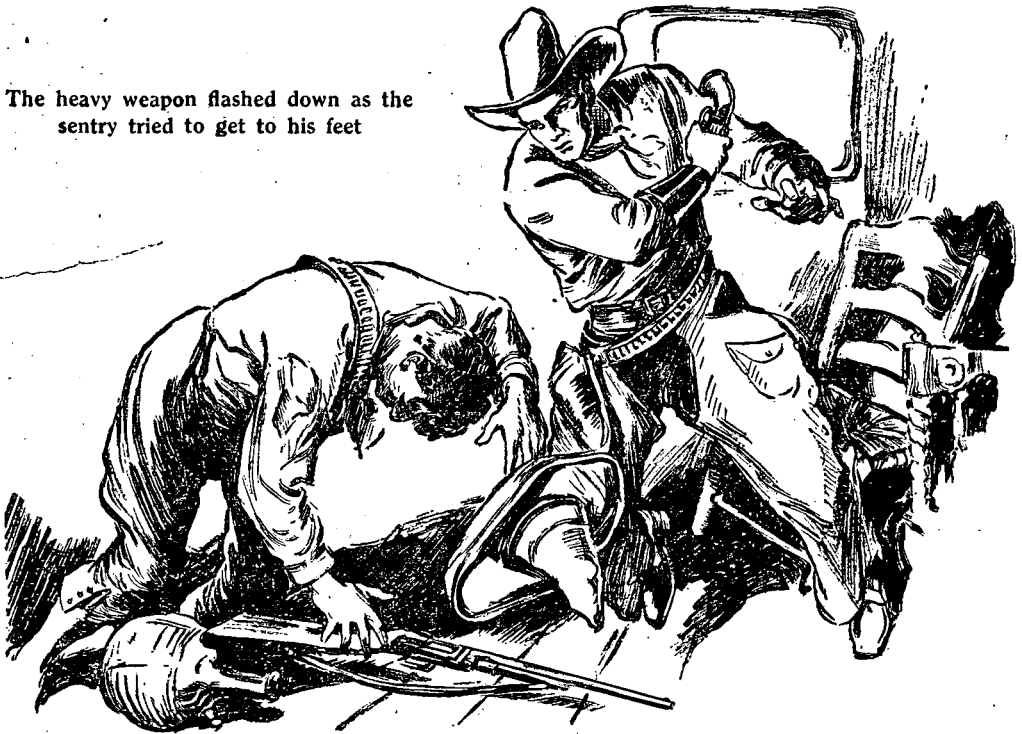
softly, when he suddenly found himself surrounded by mounted Mexicans. They appeared to be a company of *rurales*, mounted Mexican police, but Irish knew that no *rurales* were stationed in that part of the country. They were covering him with rifles before he realized what was being done.

"*Buenas dias, señor,*" grinned a short, fat Mexican, whose mustaches should have belonged to a Chinese mandarin. He spurred in closer and removed Irish's gun from its holster.

"*Gracias,*" he chuckled.

"Talk English, you bug-headed

The heavy weapon flashed down as the sentry tried to get to his feet



rig was of black leather, trimmed in carved silver. Irish had his bat-wing chaps cut a bit wider than regular, the conchas were of a distinctive design; and the five on each leg of his chaps represented two months' salary.

Irish was riding south, singing

chili," said Irish. "And tell these ignorant 'dobie-ites to ease off on them triggers. You've got my gun."

"You theenk thees ees fonny?" asked the spokesman.

"Well, I dunno," replied Irish, looking them over. "They're funny

enough, if that's what you mean. But why stick me up?"

"Steek you up? *Idiota!* You are een Mejico. Don' you know that Americano *vaquero* got no beezness in Mejico carrying a gon?"

"Oh, is this Mexico?"

"Si."

Irish eased himself in the saddle and looked back.

"Where's the line?" he asked.

"Too far back; you never find."

"Uh-huh." Irish turned and looked at his captors. "Well, I must say I've horned into the finest bunch of cut-throats I ever seen. What's yore name, feller?"

"Tito," replied the spokesman.

"Tito. You onnerstand? Tito."

"Go write it on a rock and then shoot yourself," advised Irish.

Another undersized Mexican, skinny as a lizard, spurred in close.

"Thees Tito ees my brodder," he said proudly. "I am brodder from heem, too."

"That makes it complicated," said Irish. "Both named Tito?"

"My name ees Poco. He ees my brodder and I am brodder from heem."

"Now, that makes it nice," said Irish seriously. "I'm glad yuh told me. How about givin' me back my gun?"

"No," replied Tito quickly. "Thees gon not come back to you. Now we take you see the general. Poco, you put rope on thees 'orse."

"Where is this general?" asked Irish.

"Santa Juana. Thees ees General Pedro Morales."

"Morales, eh? How does he rate a general's commission? The last time I seen him, he was beatin' it out of Nogales jist ahead of a bunch of Federal soldiers."

"Morales ees ver' good frand from thees Gov'nor."

"Oh, yeah. What kind of an army has he got at Santa Juana?"

"You see mos' of thees army now."

Irish wanted to laugh, but he realized he was in a bad position. He knew Morales as an unprincipled Mexican rogue; two hundred and fifty pounds of oily ignorance; an egotistical hulk, who gloried in plotting against the government. A political pull, probably through a division of graft, possibly through relationship, had reinstated him after his last ill-fated connection with a revolution, and he was at Santa Juana, commanding officer of these ragamuffin soldiers.

Irish was not ignorant of what Morales could do to him for being armed in Mexico. The penalty could be what Morales wished. Santa Juana was an isolated little village, a mile from the border, and on the American side was only a little revenue office and a store.

Irish had never been in Santa Juana, but he knew that its reputation was bad. The border officers cursed the place and swore it was a nest of smugglers. But they could do nothing.

THE cavalcade rode into Santa Juana, a huddle of adobe houses, most of them strung along the one street, none bigger than two stories, and most of them a dirty white. Wooden balconies jutted out over the street, which was deep in dust. There were no sidewalks in Santa Juana.

Few people noticed the American cowboy in the midst of the soldiers, as they traveled the length of the street, fogging the whole town with dust from the horses' hoofs.

They drew up in front of a two-story adobe, which boasted a rickety

porch, where a sentry waited for them. This man wore a dirty undershirt, an old pair of riding pants, unlaced at the bottoms, and no shoes. His Mauser looked businesslike, however. His challenge was a wide yawn, and he showed little interest in Irish.

Most of the army dismounted, pointing their rifles at Irish, who headed for the door, with Tito and Poco close behind. The room was large and poorly furnished. On a rickety bed lay General Morales, half-dressed, snoring loudly. On the floor beside the bed was a gallon demijohn, uncorked, around the neck of which buzzed a cloud of flies.

Tito dropped the butt of his rifle to the floor, and the thud caused the general's siesta to break off short. That is, it caused him to open one eye. The other one opened gradually. Then he yawned heavily, put both hands under himself, and after considerable effort managed to assume a sitting position.

Morales had not been on a diet since Irish had seen him last. Possibly he was twenty-five pounds heavier. Morales had a face like a full moon, on which grew whiskers in a haphazard manner. For instance, one side of his mustache was fairly regular, but the other side had all the appearance of having been left to the moths. His hair was not exactly his crowning glory; it was a greasy mat, with one lock sticking straight out to the front.

Another yawn made him fully awake; so he shut one eye and looked closely at Irish, who returned the scrutiny.

"Hyah, Pete," said Irish. "My Gawd, man, yo're gettin' fat!"

The general made guttural noises in his thick throat, shifted his position, which caused the bed to groan complainingly, brushed some of the flies

away from his supply of *tequila* and drew the demijohn up beside him on the bed. He looked at Tito, who explained in Spanish what had happened and why he brought a prisoner.

Irish could understand and speak Spanish well enough to get along, but he paid no attention to Tito's explanation. Morales took a deep drink, pulled the jug in close beside him and looked appraisingly at Irish O'Shea.

"W'at the hell you do down 'ere, anyway?" he asked.

"I didn't know I was across the border," replied Irish.

"No-o-o? You prob'ly lie to me, eh?"

"I didn't lie to yuh. Tell that bat-eared spig over there to give me back my gun, and I'll be pullin' out."

"So? You theenk you can breeng gon down 'ere? *Por Dios*, you are beeg damn fool. I am ron theese place—me, General Morales. Who you theenk you are, eh? Geeve me back my gon! Tak' off 'at! W'at the hell you theenk, eh? Now w'at the hell you do down 'ere?"

"Go lay an egg, you fat-headed *ladron*!" snapped Irish.

"You call me *ladron*?" choked Morales. "You say I am thief?"

"You never made an honest dollar in yore life."

MORALES, puffing exceedingly, his face scarlet, searched around among the tumbled blankets. Apparently he was searching for his gun, but was unable to find it. Finally he decided that the effort was too much, and looked at Irish O'Shea malevolently.

"You'll git mad some day and have a stroke," said Irish. "A feller as fat as you are hadn't ort to never git mad."

Morales sighed and ran a fat finger

into the mouth of his jug. He turned to Poco and ordered him to produce the gun he had taken from Irish. Poco gave it up reluctantly, because it was a good gun. Morales cocked it carefully, placed it on his lap and ordered Tito to take his army out of the place.

"But the prisoner, general," protested Tito.

"Are you giving me orders?" roared the general. "Take them away!"

Tito reformed his army and marched them out to the horses, which they led away. The barefooted sentry looked into the room, got a dirty look from the general, and resumed his shuffling on the porch.

"I'm ron thees place," declared the general. "You don't theenk so, eh?"

"Yeah, I reckon yuh do," admitted Irish. He knew that six-shooter was easy on the trigger.

"I am bigges' man een Santa Juana, eh?"

"Yeah, I reckon yuh are, general."

"I am bes' damn shot in thees Mejicano army."

"Well," replied Irish, "I've got to take yore word for that."

"You wan' dreenk liquor?"

"All right," agreed Irish.

"Go to hell; I dreenk my own liquor. Seet down and watch me dreenk."

"I'll bet yo're the best drinker in the Mexican army, too," said Irish.

"Sure," agreed Morales, as he wiped off his mustaches. He placed the jug beside him again and examined the cocked gun.

"Thees good gon," he said. "I keep for myself personally. You wan' see me shoot?"

"It all depends on what yuh shoot at," replied Irish.

"*Bueno.*"

Morales got to his feet and lurched over to the doorway, where he steadied

himself against the wall. Irish came in close to him, wondering what Morales would use for a target. A couple of half-starved curs were taking a siesta in the shade across the street, when the general fired a shot in their direction. The bullet smashed into the adobe wall of a small market twenty feet wide of the target, but the two dogs went away from there in a cloud of dust.

Morales laughed with drunken glee, and sent a bullet straight down the main street of the town. The sentry laughed heartily.

"You keel both from them," he said. "Keel both, one shot."

"Damn right," choked the fat general. "I am fine shot."

"Yo're a damn fool along with it," said Irish. "You'll kill somebody's kid down there, if yuh ain't careful."

"Huh!" Morales looked owlishly at Irish. "You theenk you can shoot?"

"Yeah, I can shoot—a little."

"*Bueno!* We shoot. But firs' I take dreenk."

Morales left Irish at the doorway, while he went back to the bed and drank deeply from his jug. The sentry came in close to Irish.

"No beat heem shoot," warned the sentry. "He get ver' mad."

"All right, pardner," replied Irish. Morales came back and sat down on the doorstep. Irish hunched down beside him. Across the street was a vacant lot, littered with tin cans, and as Morales lifted the gun to shoot at one of them, the army came back, attracted by the shooting. The general paid no attention to them. He fired at one of the cans, but his drunken aim was bad, and a hunk of adobe flew from the wall at the rear of the lot.

"Viva Morales!" applauded Tito, and the rest of the army cheered weak-

ly. Irish understood perfectly — the king was always the best.

Morales gave the gun to Irish, who took careful aim and almost missed the wall entirely.

"I reckon you beat me," admitted Irish.

"Sure," agreed Morales. "I am bes' damn shot in worl'. Look thees one."

That shot actually hit a tin can, but at least twenty feet away from the one he fired at.

"That shot was perfec'!" declared Morales. "Nobody can beat. You like try, greengo?"

"I can't beat that one, general."

"We 'ave dreenk now, eh?"

He started to get to his feet, and Tito essayed to help him, but he kicked Tito's feet from under him and Tito fell off the porch.

"Tak' damn army away from 'ere!" roared the general. "You theenk I'm need you for help? Go 'way—I'm don't like your face, *Vamose!*"

TITO led his soldiers away, while Morales, nearly apoplectic from the effort, managed to get to his feet. He staggered back to the bed, but clung to the revolver. The bed creaked and groaned, but somehow managed to hold together. Morales generously poured a drink into a tin cup for Irish, who abominated *tequila*. He managed to spill most of it on the floor, while Morales drank thirstily from the jug. The sentry watched from the front doorway.

Morales was not dangerous now. The effort of getting up from the steps and the potency of that last drink had been too much for him. He made a decided effort to keep his eyes open, grunted wearily and began snoring. Irish slumped back in his chair and considered the situation.

The sentry leaned against the doorway, watching Irish. Possibly he was afraid to come in and take the gun from Morales. The sun was down so low that the heavy shadows filled the street. As long as the sentry watched him there was no chance to recover that gun. Even with the gun, his chances of reaching the border were very slim indeed. He would have to kill the sentry, and go on foot out of Santa Juana. No, it did not look so good to Irish O'Shea. The room began to grow darker. There were candles on the table. Irish had plenty of patience. He felt sure that nothing would happen to him as long as Morales slept, because the general had not given any orders for his disposal.

It was dark in the room when Tito came. He spoke to the sentry, walked in and lighted two of the candles. He scowled at Irish, who seemed to be asleep in his chair. Tito was carrying a bowl of what smelled like food to Irish, who had not eaten since breakfast.

He walked over to a locked door, and the sentry came inside. Tito had one of the candles, and as he entered the other room Irish saw what seemed to be the lower half of a man, lying on the floor. It was only a flash in the candlelight, but it was his impression that the feet of the man were clad in cowboy boots.

Tito was gone about five minutes. He dropped the bar into place, but did not fasten the padlock.

"Why do you hurry?" asked the sentry in Spanish.

"A good game of draw poker," laughed Tito.

The sentry gave an exclamation of disgust at his hard luck in not being able to enter the game.

"The general is as drunk as a pig,

and I alone am here to guard the prisoner. Shall we bind him safely?"

Apparently Tito enjoyed the discomfiture of the sentry.

"We have no orders to bind him. It is your duty to guard both the prisoner and the charming general."

Laughing at his own wit, Tito went shuffling away, while the sentry glowered after him, muttering threats to get even with Tito. A few moments later the general shifted heavily to his right side, and the revolver fell to the floor, between Irish and the bed.

Without thinking of the danger, the sentry hurried over and stooped to pick up the gun. It was no time for Irish O'Shea to remember the ethics of rough and tumble fighting. He was out of that chair like a flash, and his well directed kick brought an explosive grunt from the sentry. The next moment Irish had his gun, and as the sentry tried to get to his feet, the heavy weapon flashed down, and he went out.

CHAPTER II.

THE SECOND CAPTIVE.

IRISH jumped back, loosened some cartridges from his belt and quickly filled the cylinder of the .45. Morales slept noisily. Irish picked up a candle, stepped over and unbarred the door. A young cowboy, bound and gagged, looked up at the candlelight. Irish had never seen him before and had no idea why he was a captive, but he quickly untied the bonds and took away the dirty gag.

The cowboy grunted with pain, tried to get up, but sank back. Irish helped him up, and he gritted his teeth from the anguish of returning circulation. After a few moments he was able to hobble along with Irish. They left the

candles burning. Irish picked up the sentry's rifle and gave it to the cowboy.

"It'll do as a crutch, anyway," said Irish.

"I pretty near need one, pardner," replied the cowboy painfully. "I've been tied up there two days. My name's Dusty Davis."

"Mine's Irish O'Shea. Dusty, I've been wonderin' if we better whip the army before we go."

"I'd like to do it. I wonder if we can find some horses."

"Do yuh know where the army might keep their rollin' stock?"

"Oh, sure; if yuh want to take that chance. They've got my bronc."

"Mine, too; and I'm not givin' up Diamond without a scrap. They've got my rig too. Lead on, will yuh?"

"C'mon."

It was quite dark, but Dusty knew Santa Juana. They plodded up a short street, crossed a vacant plot of ground and went through a scattered grove of pepper trees. Beyond this was the barracks, a long, low adobe. They could hear the voices of the soldiers.

"Playin' poker," said Irish. "I'll betcha they won't have no guards around the horses."

The stables consisted of a long shed and an open corral. There was a small storeroom, windowless and doorless, in which the Mexicans kept their saddles and bridles; and here the cowboys found both of their saddles. Diamond, Irish's black, came straight to him; but they had a little difficulty in finding Dusty's brown gelding.

Quickly they saddled and led their horses down to the deep shadows of the peppers.

"The hell of it is, we've got to ride down the main street," explained Dusty. "There's a deep arroyo on each side of the town. But we can

make it easy. They've got two policemen who know me and my horse; and they know damn well I was a prisoner. But we'll ride slow-like down the street, and they probably won't pay no attention. If they do—I'll—well, I've been hankerin' to lead up both of 'em."

"That's great," chuckled Irish. "Let's go."

They swung into their saddles, walked their horses down to the main street, where they turned to the right. Santa Juana was unlighted, except for the shop windows. No one seemed to be paying any attention to the two cowboys, and they were nearly to the east end of the street when a knot of people in front of a store attracted them.

A girl seemed to be trying to get away from two men, who were dressed like a pair of Morales's soldiers, and as they swung around in the light Irish could see that it was a white girl.

"Good Lord!" snapped Dusty. "It's Norma! Why, what—?"

He spurred his horse almost into them, swinging up the rifle. The crowd scattered. One of the men let loose of the girl, and as she whirled around she tore the sleeve of her dress, leaving it in the hands of the other man.

"Norma! Here!" yelled Dusty. She ran to him and he dropped the rifle to pull her up on the horse.

One of the men jerked out a revolver, but Irish's bullet thudded into his shoulder, whirling him around and dropping him to a praying position against the wall. The other man ran swiftly up the street, calling for help, and the audience scattered like quail.

Dusty slid behind his saddle, swung the girl ahead of him, whirled his horse around, and they went racing out of Santa Juana. In a moment they were out of the street, pounding along a dusty road.

"If the Mexicans try to stop us at the border, ride 'em down," panted Dusty. "Don't take a chance—you downed a policeman."

BUT there was only one Mexican at their little revenue office. He was on the steps, and they showered him with gravel. He was still blinking it out of his eyes as they thundered up to the little office of the customs collector.

There was only one man on the American side; a hard-bitten individual with a wide, thin-lipped mouth and tired eyes. He looked them over curiously, studied the girl for several moments and smiled.

"Mebbe you'll believe me next time, when I tell yuh that Santa Juana ain't no place for a girl," he said. "And where the hell have you been for the past two days, Dusty?"

"I've been restin', all tied up," replied Dusty. "I'd still be there if Irish O'Shea hadn't showed up. Irish, meet Jim Boyle."

They shook hands solemnly.

"And what happened to you, Mister O'Shea?" asked Boyle.

Irish explained in a few words. Boyle shook his head sadly.

"Santa Juana is gettin' too tough. Yuh didn't have to kill anybody, did yuh?"

"Unless medical treatment ain't handy, I might be guilty," admitted Irish. "I socked a soldier over the head with my six-gun and I crippled the shoulder of a policeman with a bullet. But he was drawin' on us. I hope everythin' will be all right."

"Oh, them little things don't amount to anythin'. I'll have to tell this to the boys of the patrol; they'll enjoy it. Yuh see, they ain't allowed to go over there, but they do love to hear of somebody

givin' them crooks a good curryin'. Santa Juana is a disgrace to Mexico."

"Morales is a pretty tough *hombre*; eh?" smiled Irish.

"Morales is only ignorant. He runs the army, such as it is. You should have met Li Wang and Pablo Ortez. They've got brains. Morales thinks he runs things, but he don't."

"Then Santa Juana ain't a one-man town, eh?"

"It ain't, O'Shea. Where are yuh goin' now?"

"We are going home," said the girl. "Mr. O'Shea is going with us. I've never met the gentleman yet, but I've heard his name."

"Excuse me, Norma," said Dusty quickly. "I'd like to have yuh meet Irish O'Shea. Irish, this here lady is Norma Austin."

Norma reached out her hand to Irish and they shook hands solemnly.

"We're on our way," said Dusty. "See yuh later, Boyle."

The officer grinned as they rode away. The girl was silent, and the two cowboys only exchanged a few words. In less than an hour they arrived at what seemed a sizeable cattle ranch.

"You are welcome to the Cross A, Mr. O'Shea," said the girl, and laughed throatily. "That rhymes, doesn't it? Dusty, you put up the horses, and both of you come up to the house; we've got to talk things over."

Dusty had nothing to say as they stabled their horses. He led the way up to the big ranch house, where they found the girl and four cowboys in the main room.

IT was the first time Irish had really seen Norma Austin. She was not exactly pretty, but Irish decided that she was mighty good to look at. Her eyes were big and dark, she had

wavy, dark brown hair, and a clear, olive-tinted skin. She had gone through that episode in Santa Juana without showing any decided fear.

Dusty introduced Irish to the four cowboys, Johnny Link, Doc Smalley, Ollie Reed and Omaha Tozier.

"Where the hell you been at, Dusty?" asked Johnny Link, a little man whose face was full of grin-wrinkles. "We thought mebbe somebody had dry-gulched yuh."

"They did, jist about," admitted Dusty. "I rode into Santa Juana and the army fell on my neck. I dunno why. I asked the general what it was all about and he almost stove in all my ribs. That big brute can shore kick."

"Well, great lovely dove!" exclaimed Doc Smalley. "What is it all about, anyway? Norma, what was you doin' down in Santa Juana all alone, and have yuh heard anythin' of yore dad?"

Norma shook her head.

"I was over in Oro Springs this afternoon and a little Mexican kid came up to me. He couldn't talk English at all. He asked me where he could find Señorita Austin. He said that dad had been hurt down in Santa Juana; that he was in the Oriental Cantina. I don't believe the boy was lying; he seemed so anxious about it all."

"But you didn't find him?"

"It was after dark when I got down there," said Norma. "I got off my horse in front of the Oriental Cantina, and those policemen grabbed me. I went with them for a ways because I thought they were taking me to dad. Then I got the drift of their remarks, and it sounded very much as though I was on my way to jail. That was when I tried to get away, and then I saw Dusty and Mr. O'Shea."

"I tell yuh what we've got to do,"

said Omaha. "We've got to jist go down there and mop up on that place. Here's six of us; and that's enough to do the job."

"We've got to find John Austin before we do anythin' else," said Dusty. "I want to pay Morales for that kick in the ribs, but that can wait until we find the boss."

"Afer what happened to-night," admitted Norma, "I'm really worried. Before this, we have always been safe in Santa Juana. I never thought anything about going down there alone. Li Wang and Pablo Ortiz have both been here."

"General Morales hasn't, because he doesn't dare come across the border. Uncle Sam hasn't forgotten that Morales did a bit of raiding at one time."

"Ortiz has taken enough money away from yore father," said Dusty. "He ain't got no cause to do yore dad any dirt."

Norma sighed wearily. "Poor dad; he will gamble."

"And lose," added Dusty.

"Yes, that is very true. Well, I suppose we may as well go to bed. Dusty, will you see that Mr. O'Shea is given a bed?"

"I'll see that he's given anythin' he wants," grinned Dusty. "If it hadn't been for him, I reckon things might have been pretty bad for both of us."

CHAPTER III.

DUSTY'S TALE.

THE Cross A ranch was one of the oldest places in that part of the State. Parts of the ranch house dated back to the original building used by Don Diego Ramirez, lord of thousands of acres, granted to him by the

King of Spain. The old adobe rambled like a poorly drawn letter U, the center of which was a sycamore-shaded patio, its ancient tiles deeply worn. In the center of the patio was an open well, curbed high with flat stones.

One end of the U was the bunk house and the grain room, and down a slight slope, shaded by a number of gnarled sycamores, were the corrals and stables. Many of the old hand-made tiles were still in place on the ranch house roof, and some of the windows were still guarded by wrought-iron grilles brought from Spain.

Irish and Dusty slept late the next morning, and Norma sat with them in the cool adobe dining room while Old Maria, the Indian cook, served their breakfast. She was a short, fat, stolid-faced squaw, but an excellent cook withal.

"Maria is the only mother I remember," said Norma. The old squaw smiled at her and nodded violently.

"Ol' Maria pretty damn good modder, eh?" she said, and went shuffling into the kitchen.

"She always says that," smiled Norma. "She may be Indian, but she's wonderful. Her people have always worked here—as far back as she has ever known. I suppose they were here when Don Diego Ramirez came, and he gave them a job."

The two cowboys finished their breakfast, and Norma went with them to the shady patio.

"What are yuh figurin' on doin', Irish?" asked Dusty.

"Well, Dusty, about the only thing for me to do is to go back home and mark thirty two-year-olds off to complete loss. I know very well I'm not goin' horse huntin' down in Mexico again. Once is plenty for me."

"I don't blame yuh," replied

Dusty. "I wish we didn't have to go down there again—but we've got to do it. Norma's father is down there somewhere, and we've got to find him. I didn't think so much about it until they decoyed Norma down there yesterday. I thought—well—"

"Go ahead, Dusty," said Norma. "You thought dad was down there gambling again."

"Well, it wasn't none of my business, Norma. If he wants to gamble, it ain't up to me to try and stop him."

"Let me git this all straight in my mind," said Irish. "Why would they harm Mr. Austin?"

"I haven't any idea," said Norma. "We don't know that they have."

Irish looked quizzically at Dusty for several moments.

"Dusty," he said, "why did they have you tied up and gagged?"

"I don't know any more about it than you do."

Irish scratched his nose thoughtfully.

"Didn't they tell yuh anythin'?"

Dusty sighed and shook his head.

"Not a thing, Irish."

"And why on earth would they try to capture Miss Austin?"

"For no known reason," replied Norma. "They never told me what it was all about. That Mexican boy said that dad was sick or hurt."

"I've tried to puzzle it out," said Dusty, "but it beats me. Unless it was somethin' about what happened here a few nights ago."

"What was that?" asked Irish.

DUSTY got up from his seat and leaned against the curbing of the old well, a serious glint in his blue eyes.

"We had a young gun-battle here in the patio—me and another feller," said Dusty slowly.

"A gun battle, eh? Sounds interestin'. Anybody hurt?"

"Yeah," said Dusty softly. "I killed him."

"I'm going in and help Marie with the beds," said Norma. They watched her enter the house, and Dusty came over to sit close to Irish.

"Didja know the feller?" asked Irish.

"I never seen him before in my life. Irish, he was nothin' but a poor type of Mexican. I'll tell yuh how it was. The boys was all over at Oro Springs, and so was John Austin. A horse fell with me that day, and I was kinda bunged up; so I stayed here that night.

"It was about—no, I'm goin' to tell you the truth about it. I wasn't lyin' about bein' bunged-up, but I didn't go to bed. I was settin' over there with Norma, talking about most everythin', I reckon. It was about half past ten when she went in the house. I sets there a while, and I'm about to go to bed, when I heard somebody come into the patio.

"It was pretty dark under the big tree that night. In fact, it was dark everywhere. But I was sure I seen two men. I know there was at least two men, but only one stepped out from under the tree. I don't believe either of 'em seen me, until I said, 'What do yuh want?'

"From the way they came sneakin' in, I knew they wasn't up to any good. They never said a word, and I started toward 'em. I says, 'What are yuh sneakin' around here for? Step out before I drill a hole in yuh.'

"I had just said that, when one of 'em shot at me. I seen the flash of the gun, and it was wide of the man I could see. I shot twice, as fast as I ever shot in my life—once at the flash and once at the man I could see. He

went down, and I could hear the other man running.

"Now, Irish, I'm goin' to tell yuh somethin' that I ain't told anybody. I got scared. Yeah, I did. Yuh see, the sheriff ain't exactly a friend of mine. And under the circumstances I might—well, they might not believe there was a second man.

"The feller I shot had a loaded Colt .45 in his holster, and a belt full of shells. I figured I better shoot his gun once, as sort of an alibi for that bullet that missed me. So I took his gun, snapped every shell in it, and not a damn one of 'em would go off.

"So I took out the shells, put in some of my own, fired one shot and left the gun on the ground beside him. My story and the evidence looked all right to the sheriff and coroner. None of 'em knew the Mexican. This poor greaser was given a gun loaded with dummy shells, because somebody was mebbe supposed to kill him. Oh, I'll be damned if I can figure it out. But if the Mex wasn't a lamb bein' led to slaughter, I don't know much."

"What did they do with the body?" asked Irish.

"Buried it at Oro Springs the next day. None of the Mexicans around there knew who he was. The coroner exonerated me right away. Of course, I never told any of 'em about the dummy shells; I've only told you, Irish. Now, what do you make of it?"

Irish shook his head as he rolled a cigarette. "Sounds complicated," he admitted. "Of course, I don't know anybody around here, so I can't even make a guess on what it might be about."

"Well, I dunno, Irish. If John Austin would come back, it—" Dusty stopped as two riders came into the patio.

"Our esteemed sheriff and his deputy," he said softly.

MIKE EAGAN, the sheriff, was a blocky sort of person, with a short-clipped gray mustache, narrow eyes and a wide, firm lipped mouth. "Telescope" Tolliver, his deputy, was a lanky, long-faced cowboy, one cheek bulging with chewing tobacco.

"Hello, Davis," said the sheriff crisply.

"Howdy, Mike," replied Dusty. "How are yuh, Telescope?"

"Wilder 'n a hawk," grinned Telescope.

Dusty introduced them to Irish O'Shea.

"I know wharat is that there Seven Cut spread," said Telescope. "It used to belong to old Bedrock Belton. I hived up there one night couple years ago."

"Where's John Austin?" asked the sheriff.

"I dunno," replied Dusty. "He's likely down in Santa Juana."

"He is, eh? You been down there lately, Dusty?"

"Yeah, I was down there yesterday."

"Uh huh." The sheriff shifted in his saddle. "I heard yuh was."

"Who was tellin' yuh?" asked Dusty calmly.

"Oh, I jist heard."

"Yeah," said Telescope. "Somebody said yuh raised hell down there."

"Yuh don't have to raise it down there," replied Dusty. "It's already raised."

"It's none of our business," decided the sheriff. "But here's somethin' that is our business, Dusty. Last night somebody dug up that Mexican yuh shot."

"Dug him up?"

"Plumb out of ground, and forgot to plant him again," said Telescope.

Dusty looked his amazement. "Say, that's a hell of a thing to do, Mike!"

"Maybe," suggested Irish, "they wanted to be sure he was dead."

"There's somethin' to that," admitted the sheriff. "They dug him up, smashed the box and took him out. But, damn 'em, they never buried him again."

"That's a dirty trick," grinned Dusty.

"What the hell's funny about it?" demanded the sheriff. "We had to nail up the box again and shovel all that dirt back into the grave."

"We, hell!" grunted Telescope. "I was the one what had to do it. All you done was set on a mound and watch me."

"Mike's careful," grinned Dusty. "He wouldn't even trust yuh with a corpse. It's a wonder to me he keeps yuh on the job at all."

"There's got to be some brains in the office," replied Telescope.

"That's right," agreed Dusty. "You might help O'Shea find a bunch of missin' two-year-old horses, marked on the right hip with the Seven Cut brand."

"Hell! He can't even read a brand!" snorted the sheriff.

"I'll betcha he could alter one," chuckled Dusty. Telescope's ears reddened.

"You've been readin' some old reward notices," said the sheriff.

"I reckon I better go home, before my past gits all unfolded," sighed the lanky deputy. "I can hear my family skillington beginnin' to rattle."

"Yore what?" asked Dusty.

"Skillington. What's left, after

yore insides are out and yore outside is off."

"You mean skeleton," said Dusty.

TELESCOPE nodded. "Yeah, I reckon I do. Was you jokin', or is O'Shea really lookin' for some lost Seven Cut horses?"

"It's no joke," said Irish. "We've lost thirty head — taken away in a bunch. I've been driftin' for a week, huntin' for sign."

"He drifted into Mexico," grinned Dusty. "Didn't know he was across the line, until some of Morales's soldiers picked him up."

"Uh-hu-u-uh!" grunted the sheriff. "What did they do to yuh?"

"Well," smiled Irish, "they kinda acted up a little and took me over to tell it to General Morales. We had a little *tequila*, done a little target shootin', and called it a day. He's a nice old feller."

"Yea-a-ah," drawled Telescope. "He'd make a great Sunday school teacher. A man of very fine morals. It's a dirty shame, but if he's ever caught on this side of the line, Uncle Sam would hang him so high he could look down on the moon."

"Well, he was nice to me," said Irish. "He didn't even keep my gun. I've got a silver trimmed ridin' rig and the best horse that ever went across the border, but he didn't even keep them."

"Tell the truth and shame the devil," said the sheriff. "We happen to know that you fellers shot yore way out of Santa Juana."

"Well, can you imagine that?" blurted Dusty. "How many was killed, Mike?"

"I didn't git no list of the dead, but the live ones are shore boilin' down there. I'd stay out of there, if I was you."

"Horses couldn't drag me back," declared Dusty. "I won't go where they talk behind my back. What else do yuh know, Mike?"

"I know they've doubled the Border Patrol. I talked with Jim Boyle and he said there was whispers of another revolution. Mebbe they've doubled the patrol to stop gun runnin'. A fat lot of good that'll do, with Pablo Ortez and his gang over there. There's one smart Mexican."

"I never met him," said Irish.

"He's shore a comical jigger," said Telescope. "Dresses swell, talks worse English than Morales, and makes yuh like him, whether yuh want to or not. Yuh know damn well he's as crooked as a corkscrew, but yuh like to talk with him."

"What business is he in?" asked Irish.

"Cattle business, gamblin', smug-glin'—and makin' love to every damn female he meets," said the sheriff. "Said he was a bull fighter in Mexico City, a captain in the Federal army; and anythin' else that he happens to think about at the time. I wouldn't believe him as far as I could throw this bronc by the tail. He owns a rancho about three miles from Santa Juana, runs quite a few cows, and harbors the finest bunch of outlaws on earth. There ain't an American workin' on his rancho that ain't got a price on his head. I'll betcha I've got reward notices to cover every man on his place."

"I wonder if them thirty head of Seven Cut horses are down on his place," said Irish.

"If they are, you better leave 'em there."

"I dunno," grinned Irish. "It might be fun to go down and take 'em away from him."

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"Daw-gone!" said Dusty softly. The sheriff snorted and picked up his reins. "I reckon we'll be on our way. Pleased to have met yuh, Mr. O'Shea. If yuh want to leave any message, I'll see that it reaches Ocotillo City safely."

"Thank yuh, Mr. Eagan," replied Irish, "but I've got the luck of the Irish, and I always deliver my messages in person."

CHAPTER IV.

AUSTIN'S RETURN.

IT was about an hour later when John Austin came home. Dusty and Irish were in the stable, and came out as he dismounted. Austin was a big man, his close-cropped hair nearly white, his face deeply lined. Dissipation had left its mark in the sagging face muscles, tightly drawn lips and haggard eyes. He did not speak to Dusty as the cowboy took charge of unsaddling the horse, nor did he appear to notice the presence of a strange cowboy.

"Is Norma at the house?" he asked Dusty.

"Yeah, she's up there," replied Dusty, and the big man went slowly toward the house.

"He's shore been on a bender, ain't he?" asked Dusty as he pulled off the saddle.

"Yeah," replied Irish, "it looks to me as though the snakes were just about to come out of hibernation for him. Is he always thataway?"

"He never was before, Irish. Hell, it ain't a bit like him. Why, he never ever seen you. I dunno." Dusty hung up the saddle and scratched his head. "Somethin' has done gone wrong with John Austin."

And Dusty's prophecy was absolutely right; something *had* happened to John Austin. He was sitting in a rocking chair in the main room of the ranch house, his head buried in his hands, while Norma leaned against a massive table, hands braced on the table behind her. There was no color in her face, but her eyes were fairly blazing with anger.

"So you gambled away everything," she said slowly. "Twenty thousand dollars! That means that the Cross-A rancho is lost to us. Oh, dad, why did you do this? It isn't fair."

Norma choked back her tears. John Austin lifted his head and looked at her dumbly.

"And you borrowed the money from a Chinaman," she said huskily. "A Chinaman will get this home—my home. When is Li Wang going to claim this place?"

"Lord only knows," replied her father miserably. "Oh, I've been a fool, Norma. I'm sick and so tired I can hardly sit up. It's a damnable nightmare. But the damage is done. I can curse the day I ever went to Santa Juana; but cursing won't alter the situation."

He got heavily to his feet and started toward his room. Norma ran to him and took his arm.

He looked at her, drew her tightly to him for a moment, choked over what he wanted to say, and went on to his room. Norma went out into the patio in time to see Dusty and Irish riding away. She sat down on a shady bench and tried to think what it would mean to her to lose the ranch. They would be broke and without a home. She knew there was very little money in the bank at Oro Springs. As she sat there in the shade of the giant sycamore, a man stepped softly into the patio, and

she lifted her head to see Pablo Ortiz smiling at her.

PABLO was immaculate in a semi-military riding outfit, white sombrero, polished boots.

"Thees ees great pleasure, *señorita*," he said. "Please do not get up. Señor Austeen ees at 'ome?"

"My father is sleeping," replied Norma.

"Sleeping on such a beautiful day? Weeth birds seenging and—oh, well, I sleep sometime myself, personally."

Pablo smiled widely and brushed an imaginary speck off the lapel of his coat. Norma was not at all afraid of Ortiz. No matter what he might be in Mexico, he had always been a gentleman on the American side of the border.

"Why did you wish to see my father?" she asked.

Pablo shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, notheeng from eempotence. I am jus' w'at you say, making leetle call. Ees that right theeng to say?"

"If it is the truth—yes."

Pablo drew a long face. "*Señorita*, I'm never tell lie to a lady."

Norma looked closely at him. "Then tell me, Pablo Ortiz, did you know my father borrowed twenty thousand dollars from Li Wang?"

"I'm 'ear that," he replied seriously. "I do not know for sure."

"Did you know he lost all that money?"

"Eet ees not for me to say, because I do not know for sure."

"How did he lose that much money?"

"*Quién sabe?* Poker, écarté, roulette."

"Who won it from him?"

Pablo shrugged his shoulders. "That ees 'ard to say. Eef you fall een a cac-

tus, can you say wheech steecker go mos' deeper?"

Norma nodded thoughtfully. There were plenty of gamblers to take the money.

"Did you hear what happened in Santa Juana last night?" she asked.

Pablo smiled slowly. "*Señorita*, there ees plenty people to talk of some-theeng. Who knows eef they tell it right? These things I did not see—I only hear of them."

"You heard that Irish O'Shea escaped from Morales, helped Dusty Davis to escape, and then the two of them took me away from two Santa Juana policemen?"

"Morales! Bah! Fat peeg! Army! I tak' one shotgun, declare war, and that army ron like hell. But, *señorita*, who ees thees man who get away from Morales—thees Americano *vaquero*?"

"Mr. O'Shea?"

"Sí."

"He is searching for thirty head of horses which were stolen from the Seven Cut outfit, up near Ocotillo City."

Pablo's mouth opened in a soundless "Oh!" and he nodded thoughtfully.

"And so he look for them in Mejico, eh?" he said.

"And Morales's men caught him," added Norma.

Pablo laughed softly.

"What was the name of that Mexican who was shot here?"

"The one they bury in Oro Sprengs? Hees name was Salas."

"You knew him, did you?"

"Not ver' good. He was cousin from General Morales."

"Then what in the world was he doing here?"

"Getting himself keeled, mos'ly," smiled Pablo. "Well, *señorita*, I mus' go now."

"I'll tell dad you called," said Norma.

"*Gracias, señorita*; you are ver' kind, ver' beautiful. In fac', you are so ver' beautiful that I could almos' lie to you—and believe it myself. *Adios*."

He stepped outside the patio, swung gracefully into his saddle and rode away.

CHAPTER V.

RUSTLERS.

O RO SPRINGS was a quaint little town, its architecture more Mexican than American. The sheriff's office was a little adobe hut, attached to a brick jail, almost in the center of town, opening out on a small, tree-shaded plaza. Irish, Dusty and Telescope sat, on a plaza bench, smoking cigarettes and talking things over. There were many rumors of a revolution to come soon, which gave food for conversation.

"It wouldn't surprise me a bit if them thirty horses was in Mexico," said Telescope. "And I'll tell yuh why. Santa Juana is never Federal. I mean, it is always a rebel town. If they could run thirty head of horses down there, they'd help the rebel cavalry a lot. But if they're down in that country, you can kiss 'em good-by."

"I never kissed a horse good-by in my life," replied Irish O'Shea.

"You'd be one awful fool to go down there again. I can show yuh pictures on reward notices of some of the men we know damn well are down there with Pablo Orteza—and they're a forked bunch."

"That's all right," nodded Irish, "but them horses are worth plenty money; mebbe a hundred dollars apiece. I ain't furnishin' free remounts

for no danged revolutionists. Me and Dusty can go down there and whip the present army."

"That army ain't nothin'," grinned Telescope. "They ain't got them horses."

"They shore wasn't well mounted when I seen 'em," laughed Irish. "I'll betcha the coyotes cry every time they see that bunch of broom-tails. Dusty, you've been down to the Orteza rancho, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah, I've been there," admitted Dusty.

"Does it lay in such a way that a couple of us could surprise 'em?"

"Sure, yuh could," said Telescope quickly. "They'd sure as hell be surprised at yore lack of brains in comin' down there. Well, here comes some of the brave Border Patrol, wearin' out horseshoes for our Uncle Sammie. That's Henderson and a couple new men. All yuh have to do is rumor a revolution, and help cometh to the border."

The three riders stopped at a store and dismounted, but Henderson, a lean-faced border officer, spied the three men in the shade and came over to them.

"Has war busted out yet, Henderson?" asked the deputy.

"Not yet, Telescope. Whew! That sun is mighty hot to-day. How are yuh, Dusty?"

"Pretty good, Henderson. Meet Irish O'Shea, from Ocotillo City."

They shook hands, and Henderson sat down to roll a smoke.

"Has Austin been sellin' beef to Mexico?" asked the officer.

"I never heard of him sellin' any," replied Dusty. "What do yuh mean?"

Henderson lighted his cigarette lazily and leaned back.

"I jist wondered," he replied. "I

seen the dust of a small herd across the line, headin' south. Picked 'em up with my glasses, and there was prob'ly forty head, with six, seven men herdin'."

"Where?" asked Dusty.

"Almost due south of the Cross A."

"Well, I'm a son-of-a-gun! Forty head? Meat for the army, eh? That's bad, boys."

"No use hurryin' away about it," said Telescope. "Forty head will keep 'em eatin' for a while, Dusty."

"That's over two thousand dollars' worth of beef!" snorted Dusty.

"I thought you'd like to know about it," said Henderson lazily.

"Yo're darn right I do! But it's too late to stop 'em now."

"Here comes an old friend of yours, Dusty," said Telescope.

IT was a portly Chinaman, wearing American clothes, sitting in an open buggy under the shade of a parasol, and driving a sway-backed, gray horse. He drove the animal up to the front of a Chinese restaurant, climbed ponderously out of the equipage and tied the tired animal with a rope strong enough to hold an elephant.

"Friend of mine!" snorted Dusty. "Li Wang."

"The King of Santa Juana," added Telescope.

"And the brains," said Henderson softly. "For a year we've watched Li Wang, and all we ever got was a headache. There's dope comin' in from Santa Juana, that's a cinch; mebber Chinamen. And Li Wang is at the bottom of it all."

"Does he live at Santa Juana?" asked Irish.

"He lives right here," replied Dusty.

"He owns that restaurant, but don't run it. Drives back and forth in that

funny buggy between here and Santa Juana."

"Yeah, and we've searched him dozens of times," sighed Henderson, "and the most we ever found on him was a package of Mexican cigarettes. If he's got anythin' dutiable to bring across, he pays on the nail. But we'll get him some day."

"Like hell," said Telescope. "You may get one of his shipments, but you'll never get Li Wang. And what a poker player he is!"

"Are the games pretty high?" asked Irish.

"Down in Santa Juana? Yo're damn right. Li Wang banks the poker game, and the sky is the limit."

"I'd like to play in his game some day," said Irish.

Telescope looked pityingly at Irish. "Barnum was right."

"Just the same," said Irish, "me and Dusty are goin' to p' on a little private revolution. They owe the Seven Cut for thirty head of horses, and they owe the Cross A for forty head of cows. That's a lot better cause for a revolution than they've ever had in Mexico."

"You fellers better keep out of there," advised Henderson. "That revolution is due to bust any old day—and I'm tellin' you that Santa Juana ain't no healthy place for an Americano when it busts. Of course, it's yore funeral."

"You ort to carry a basin of water with yuh," said Dusty.

"What for?" asked Henderson.

"So yuh can wash yore hands of all responsibility every time a damn fool cow waddie don't take yore advice."

"Oh, I ain't advisin' yuh. I wouldn't waste my time in advisin' a bug-headed cow-poke. Go on down

there, mix into things that don't concern yuh, and git lined up against a blank wall."

"I suppose them forty cows don't concern me, eh?"

"Are you so damn cow-patriotic that you'd give up yore life for a few of 'em?"

"That's all he knows," said Telescope. "If he was lucky, he'd be a hero in the eyes of a few Herefords and some cross-breeds. If they lined him up against a blank wall, he'd prob'ly die yellin', 'I'm only sorry that I ain't got more lives to give for my dogies.'"

"Is it really dangerous down there?" asked Irish innocently.

Henderson looked pityingly at Irish, sighed and turned away.

"Didn't yuh find that out when yuh was there?" asked Telescope.

"Well, it wasn't bad," drawled Irish. "All I done was kick the wind out of General Morales's sentry, shoot a policeman and ride out of town. Yuh can't call that dangerous."

Henderson looked up quickly.

"Oh, yo're the feller Boyle was tellin' about, are yuh?" he asked.

"The same one," grinned Dusty, and the border officer looked upon Irish O'Shea with more interest.

"Well, even at that, I wouldn't want to be in yore boots, if Morales got yuh again."

"I'm not walkin' into his arms again," laughed Irish. "The next time General Morales gets his hands on me, if he ever does, he'll be able to charge me with somethin' bigger than packin' a gun in his dog-gone country. I know him as well as you do. If the Mexican Federals ever capture him in a revolution, they'll hang him without a trial. And he don't dare cross into this country."

"That's right," nodded Henderson. "But why would the Federals ever want to capture Santa Juana? As a port of entry, it's a joke. The revenue wouldn't be worth anythin' to 'em. No railroads. Hell, there ain't even good wagon roads. But it's a great place to run guns, horses and meat for the revolutionists. Morales is no fool, even if he is drunk most of the time. If the Federals should come—he's a loyal Federal. If the rebels come, he furnishes 'em with guns, meat and horses. He plays both ends against the middle—he's the middle—and he can't lose."

Henderson got up and strolled back to his horse, where his two companions were mounting.

"He's a mighty efficient officer," said Telescope. "Never catches any smugglers, but he tries hard."

"I was jist thinkin' about that smugglin' stuff," said Irish. "What's to prevent smugglers from hidin' along the border, waitin' for a patrol to pass, and then comin' across to this side?"

"Pardner," drawled Telescope, "if you can find out *what could* prevent 'em from doin' that—Uncle Sam will pay yuh big money."

Dusty and Irish proceeded to ride out to the Cross A, where Norma told them of Ortiz's visit and what she had learned of the dead Mexican.

John Austin was still asleep at supertime, and after supper the two cowboys rode back to Oro Springs. Li Wang was still at his restaurant, the old horse nodding at the little hitch rack. They found Mike Eagan at his office, Telescope being out to supper.

"**W**E found out who that Mexican was, Mike," said Dusty.

"Yuh did, eh? So did I. Doc Rice took some papers off him that night and forgot to turn 'em over to

me. Doc is the most absent minded feller I ever knew. Now, you tell me who he was."

"His name was Salas, and he's a cousin of Morales," replied Dusty.

"A cousin of Morales, eh? I didn't know that part of it, but his name was Salas. Pete Salas. But he didn't belong in Mexico."

"He didn't?"

"No. His papers show that he lived in Douglas."

"What else do yuh know?" asked Irish.

"I talked to Jim Boyle at the border," replied the sheriff. "He saw Salas and talked with him that night. Salas came from Santa Juana. He didn't tell Boyle where he was goin'. But Boyle says he's pretty sure Salas didn't enter Mexico through Santa Juana."

"I don't reckon it makes much difference, anyway," said Dusty.

"No, I don't suppose it does," agreed the sheriff. "But I'd sure like to know why he went to the Cross A and took a shot at you when you asked him what he wanted."

"So would I," nodded Dusty.

"You didn't lie about that, didja, Dusty?"

"I hope to tell yuh, I didn't. I never seen the man in my life; and I'm not in the habit of lyin' to a sheriff."

"Well," said the sheriff dryly, "we've all got our own ideas of how many times a feller can lie, before it becomes a habit."

"He's chidin' yuh, Dusty," said Irish seriously.

"I know he is," wailed Dusty. "But what can I do? He's got the law and order all on his side; and all I've got is my honor."

"Yore what?"

"Oh, there's no use goin' into de-

tails," sighed Dusty. "I spoke of somethin' that you never had, nor prob'ly never heard about."

"Git out of here, you cow-ranch comedian!" exploded the sheriff.

"C'mon, Irish," sighed Dusty. "The sheriff's got a mad on, 'cause I didn't come right out and tell him that I snuck up on that Mexican and shot him down in cold blood. He's so mean minded that he scares me. I don't wish him any bad luck, but I hope all his children have warts. C'mon."

They went across the street and sat down in the Oro Saloon.

"Mike ordered us out of the office," said Dusty.

"Hell, that's nothin'!" grunted Telescope. "He fires me ever' few days. That's about the only chance he has to show his authority."

"But he's a pretty good sheriff, ain't he?" asked Irish.

"His record is as clean as a hound's tooth; he ain't done nothin' good and he ain't done nothin' bad. He fired me yesterday. Yuh see, he just got that set of false teeth for the top side of his mouth, and I told him he had a good alibi for keepin' his mouth shut, 'cause if he didn't, some one would steal 'em."

"But yuh didn't stay fired," said Dusty.

"No-o-o-o, he hired me back. But he'll prob'ly have the county dock me for the few hours I was off the job."

CHAPTER VI.

NIGHT ASSAULT.

JOHNNY LINK, Doc Smalley, Ollie Reed and Omaha Tozier came in. Omaha tried to jerk the chair from under Telescope, and before the scuffle was over they had upset several more chairs and a poker table.

The bartender swore bitterly over a torn place on the green covered table top, where a spur had ripped the cover.

"A feller ort to have cast-iron furniture around here," he said.

"Well, why don'tcha?" asked Omaha. "All this here delicate stuff! If yore furniture was as strong as yore whisky, yuh couldn't shoot holes in it."

"Omaha, do yuh remember the furniture in that saloon down at Whippoorwill?" asked Telescope.

"Do I? Man, man, that was furniture! Everythin' was iron. The pool table was all iron, with a silver top. It atch'ly was. I never seen such a place in my life. And jist as soon as yuh showed up the bartender started shovin' bottles down the bar to yuh. Never cost yuh a cent. Drink all yuh wanted."

"Champagne, too," added Telescope. "They was hospitable."

"I don't believe that's true," said the bartender.

"Well, we ort to know, hadn't we?" asked Omaha. "We was there."

"I still don't believe it."

"Why don'tcha believe it?"

"Because, if it was true, you'd both still be there."

"We'd still be there, but the whole town burned down, and they never built her up again."

"Well," said the bartender, "we ain't givin' away free drinks; and what do yuh know about that?"

"We know it," replied Omaha. "Why, it's the talk of the country. This place has got a reputation for bein' stingy. I'll buy a drink."

Omaha motioned for the bartender to have one with them.

"It's a total loss," warned Telescope.

"It's a experiment," said Omaha. "I know it 'll harden his arteries,

but I want to see if it'll soften his heart. Well, here's hopin' that the bartender gits human."

It cost a dollar to treat the crowd, and by the time seven had been spent, the bartender's heart had softened. Oro Springs whisky had more authority than a newly appointed policeman. Irish O'Shea tried one, and shifted his affections to some sorry looking cigars, which had been in stock all too long. When he blew on them the dust flew out through the dry wrappers.

"They ort to burn good," said Telescope.

"Too good," said Irish. "I'm scared of spontaneous combustion."

The bartender looked owlshly at Irish. "What didja say?"

Irish groaned and leaned on the bar.

"Tell him to go to hell," suggested Doc Smalley.

"It's my turn to buy," declared Omaha. "We'll go 'round the wheel once more and then go home."

"That makes shixteen drinks," said Johnny Link, counting on his fingers. "Eight more 'n we've had now. Where'd yuh git the extra bartender?"

"Shut one eye," advised Omaha. "That'll e-limi-nate the one on the left."

"What 'bout the one on the right shide?" asked Doc Smalley. "He's my ex'ra one, Omaha."

"You feller's 'r cheap," said Ollie Reed. "I can shее three of 'm."

"Well, sir," said Omaha loftily, "I'd like to work with a bunch of good two-fisted drinkers again, like we used to on the old 99, eh, Telescope?"

TELESCOPE sighed heavily. "They don't make 'em," he said.

"We're all that's left, Omaha. Wasn't that a ranch, though! It was the ranch."

"Big?" asked the bartender. "I've seen the 101, and that's—"

"Hundred and One!" snorted Omaha. "That—that farm! I was talkin' of a ranch, feller."

The sheriff walked in, eyed the crowd with evident disfavor, and sat down.

"That was a ranch," agreed Telescope. "The south line fence wasn't more'n three miles from Whippoorwill, and the main ranch house was right in the middle of the spread; but the place was so big that a feller went to town to git the mail on the very day that the Spanish American War started, and it was all over before he could git back."

"That sounds exaggerated," said Omaha, "but it wasn't. We had fifteen thousand cowpunchers as a reg'lar crew. 'Course at roundup time we had quite a bunch around there. Telescope, do yuh remember how the cooks used to howl at havin' hot cakes for breakfast every mornin'?"

"I shore do."

"How the hell could they cook that many?" asked the bartender. "No griddle is that big."

"It was a sight," admitted Omaha. "That there griddle was acres and acres big. They had sixty men on roller skates, whizzing around over that griddle with big pitchers of batter; and sixty more right behind 'em with scoop shovels."

"That wasn't what interested me so much," said Telescope. "I used to like to watch 'em grease that griddle. Every one of them fellers would strap a strip of bacon on each foot, and go skatin' over that hot iron. Man, they used to take some great spills! But they enjoyed it."

"Remember that big steer?" asked Omaha.

"That old mossy-horn? Shore do."

Was you there the day we measured his horns? Yeah, I thought yuh was. Sixty feet from tip to tip."

"My Gawd!" exclaimed the bartender. "That was a real longhorn."

"No, he wasn't," denied Telescope. "The longhorns was all gone at the time. This was a cross-breed; but he had fair horns."

"Remember what he weighed?" asked Omaha. "I'm kinda hazy as to whether it was seventeen or seventy tons."

"Forty-seven," said Telescope. "You was pretty close. How about another drink? C'mon, sheriff."

"You fellers are the finest pair of liars on earth," declared the sheriff as he came up to the bar.

"You ain't never seen that 99 outfit, have yuh?" asked Dusty.

"No, I never did."

"Then judge not, lest ye be judged."

DUSTY took a silver dollar between his fingers, made a few deft passes and the dollar disappeared. Then he reached out and seemed to pluck it from the sheriff's vest pocket.

"Pretty good," admitted the sheriff, as he poured out a drink. "I seen a feller up in Phoenix last summer, and he shore done some good tricks. He broke an egg in a hat and drawed out a chicken."

"Oh, that old trick," laughed Dusty. "It's simple."

"You can't do it."

"I'll betcha this dollar that I can. No, I can't either; I ain't got no chicken. Well, lemme see."

Dusty walked over and picked up a pool ball.

"It's easier with a chicken, but this will do. I'll betcha I can bust an egg in yore hat, right in plain view of all

of yuh, stir it up, and bring out this pool ball. I'll betcha a dollar it won't hurt yore hat."

"I'll jist take that bet," said the sheriff. "Git the egg."

The bartender gave Dusty an egg, and the sheriff handed Dusty his fairly new Stetson. Dusty asked them to all stand back several feet from the table, and after a lot of hocus-pocus he broke the egg into the hat, stirred it industriously with his fingers for several moments, wiped his fingers on his chaps and tossed the dollar beside the hat.

"You win," he said dismally. "It didn't work. Whose turn is it to buy the drink? This'n ought to be on the sheriff."

And there stood the disgusted sheriff, examining the interior of his nearly-new hat, which was gobby with egg. And judging from the odor, it wasn't exactly a fresh egg. He didn't buy the drink. Muttering some choice curses under his breath, he walked out of the place.

Telescope doubled up with mirth, hammering a fist on the bar.

"That joke cost yuh a whole dollar," said Omaha.

"That dollar's been plugged in three places," replied Dusty. "Yuh couldn't even pass it on a blind beggar. Now, I'll buy a drink."

Telescope and Omaha had been mixing whisky, brandy and gin with devastating effect on their nervous systems. This last drink, a full glass of brandy, caused Telescope to sway dangerously. Soon he was sitting on the barrail, trying to lead the gang in song, and a few moments later he was snoring industriously, his back against the bar.

"Gotta take 'm home," declared Johnny Link.

"Abs'lutely," agreed Ollie. "Gotta."

"Whazzat?" asked Doc Smalley.

"I'm all right."

"Nobody talkin' about you," said Dusty. "But as far as that's concerned, you'll never be able to drink enough to be all right, Doc. I'll tell yuh what let's do; let's take Telescope over to the office and present him to the sheriff. Omaha, will you make the speech?"

"Where's Omaha?" asked Doc.

"Him and the bartender are asleep on the floor behind the bar," grinned Irish. "Man, they went out like a couple of candles in a wind."

"Well, we'll pack Telescope over to the office, and then take Omaha home," decided Dusty. "Ollie, you and Doc and Johnny grab onto Telescope. Here—I'll help yuh. Irish, you pack his hat. Grab his legs, Ollie; easy, yo're pullin' off his boots."

IN some unaccountable way they managed to lift the lanky deputy off the floor, and went staggering toward the doorway. Ollie, Doc and Johnny were almost in Telescope's condition, and their sense of direction was absolutely nil.

"Gee! Gee!" yelled Dusty.

But Ollie and Doc didn't "gee" at all.

Crash! They butted into the wall, three feet from the doorway, and all sat down heavily, letting Telescope down with a resounding thump.

"If I find the man moved that door, I'll kill'm," declared Ollie seriously. "Shomebody jerked it away, Doc."

"Wait a minute," begged Dusty. "Let's slide him right outside."

They managed to drag the inert Telescope through the doorway and into the street. Irish sat down on the sidewalk and choked with mirth as the four cowboys tried to lift and carry

the deputy. Their efforts were not concerted, and each blamed the other.

Finally they got him off the ground, wending their erratic way across the street toward the sheriff's office. Irish followed, weak from laughing. There was no light in the office.

"Git that door open, Irish," panted Dusty. "If we ever let loose of him again, we'll never get him up. Left, Doc! Not right—left!"

Irish jumped ahead and flung the door open ahead of the men who were surging forward at a dog-trot. Ollie and Doc were cut down at the doorstep, but Dusty and Johnny shoved Telescope straight ahead and fell into the room with him; three dull thuds, and then silence.

Irish leaned against the front of the building and drew a deep breath, as he waited for conversation to start. It was Dusty's voice that broke the stillness.

"What happened to Telescope? His hair's all sticky. Will some of you dumb cow waddies light a lamp?"

"Whazzamatter?" asked Ollie. "Who's doin' alla yellin', I'd crave to know; that's what I'd crave."

"Allus cravin'," complained Johnny Link. "Have I got m' own leg over the back of m' neck? Nope, that ain't my boot. Ouch! Nope, it ain't mine. I've got more sense than to kick m'self in the face."

"Will somebody li-i-i-ight the la-a-a-amp?" wailed Dusty.

"Light it yourshelf, can'tcha?" asked Ollie weakly.

"Mus' be me," said Doc Smalley. "Yore voice shounds close."

"I'll light it," choked Irish. "Hold still, so I won't trip over all of yuh."

Irish made a guess as to the location of the lamp, stopped against the desk and scratched a match. He lighted the

small lamp and turned it on the assemblage. Telescope and the four cowboys were on the floor, and beside Dusty, lying flat on his face, his head a welter of gore, was Mike Eagan, the sheriff.

Dusty got quickly to his feet and helped Irish turn the sheriff over on his back. Eagan was still alive. Irish looked quickly around the little office. The safe, an old key-lock thing, was wide open. The drawers had been taken from the desk, their contents strewn on the floor.

"Stay here," panted Dusty. "I'll get Doctor Rice."

"You boys better git up," advised Irish. "It might look bad to the doctor."

"Whazzit all about?" asked Ollie. "Who hittum, Irish?"

"*Quién sabe?* See if yuh can't get Telescope over to the pump and soak his head good. He'll have to take charge now."

"'Ze dead?" asked Johnny.

"No, he's still alive."

TELESCOPE protested weakly against waking up, but they finally got him out of the office, and the four of them headed in the general direction of the livery stable watering trough. A few moments later Doctor Rice and Dusty reached the office. Dusty had explained how they had found the sheriff, and the doctor made a swift examination.

"We've got to get him down to my house," he said. "I can't do very much here."

The sheriff was no light man, but they carried him. The doctor's wife was also a nurse, and they were quickly at work. Eagan had been struck several times with a blunt instrument and had lost considerable blood.

"May be a fracture," said the doctor. "Can't tell a thing yet. He's strong. Nothing you two can do, except try and discover why he was assaulted."

They went back to the street and found Telescope at the office, soaking wet, but partly sober.

"If I hadn't been a good swimmer, them fools would have drowned me and themselves," declared Telescope. "I saved Ollie twice and Johnny once. They've gone over to try and wake up Omaha. Now, tell me about Mike."

Dusty told him all they knew about it. Telescope looked at the open safe and at the scattered papers, shaking his head blankly.

"I can't figure it out," he said wearily.

"I'm shore disappointed in yuh," declared Dusty. "Me and Irish was sure you could set right up and explain it all."

"I've got a theory," said Telescope.

"If that's a new brand of hiccups, you have."

"Let him tell it," advised Irish. "What is yore theory, Telescope?"

"Well," replied Telescope, "it looks to me as though somebody wanted to read Mike's mail."

"Aw, go stick yore head in the trough again!" snorted Dusty. "C'mon, Irish; let's go round up them drunks and go home. The first thing yuh know, we'll all be crazy like Telescope."

"Allus belittlin'," sighed Telescope. "I guess I better go down and see if Mike's dead yet. He's awful hard headed."

"Well, he may die, at that," said Dusty.

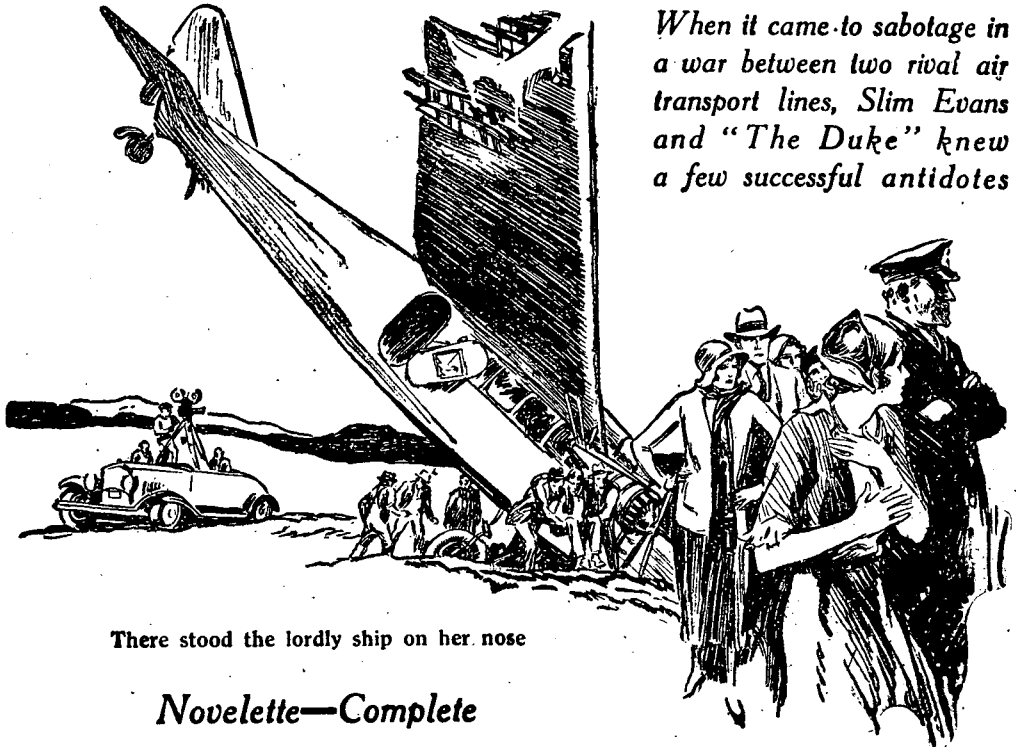
"Most everybody does, at one time or another," replied Telescope.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

Hot Airmen

By THOMSON BURTIS

Author of "Soldiers of the Storm," "X Marks the Lot," etc.



When it came to sabotage in a war between two rival air transport lines, Slim Evans and "The Duke" knew a few successful antidotes

There stood the lordly ship on her nose

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

PACIFIC PILOTS, INC.

THERE is no doubt that somewhere back in remote ages, when men grew hair for their vests, a strain of the wild cuckoo got mixed into the old English blood of the Evanses. This adulteration is undoubtedly responsible for the fact that practically every time a clock ticks I talk out of turn, and thereby get snarled up in some kind of trouble. When asked to do something, I always say yes. Trouble follows invariably. In the particular case to which I am referring, several friends of mine were

the boys on the uneasy seat. Then after I'd said "yes" to John Benton, and landed on the West Coast, I found a tack in my own seat.

As a result of the happenings of that crowded day, this particular first lieutenant in the Army Air Service no longer has restless moments when he wishes he was out in the world, fighting for his spot in the bread line. I have decided to stay curled up in the arms of my Uncle Samuel, peeking coily through his sheltering beard and watching the rest of the world go by.

Between breakfast and lunch of a certain misty morning, I saw a possible quarter of a million dollars, the repu-