

# King Colt

By LUKE SHORT

COSMOS was a tough county. Cosmos Town was tougher. Cattlemen were harried by rustlers, murders were committed and forgotten to make way for more murders. The law under slack, easy-going Sheriff Baily Blue and his young, big-

boned, too-amiable deputy, Johnny Hendry, was a mockery.

Picket-Stake Hendry, the old-time prospector who'd reared Johnny as his own son, worried about it some. Worried about Johnny—wondered if the stuff was really in the lad. But Johnny had his own point of view about it.

"You never went to the law in your life," he told Picket-Stake a hundred times. "No *man* does. As long as women and kids is safe, let the man who can fight the most and shoot the best win."

And Picket-Stake would snap back, "Force is only for them that know when not to use it."

That always made Johnny grin. "That's me," he'd say. "That's what I been tryin' to tell you. Crowd a peaceful man and you got a killin' slated." And Picket-Stake never had an answer for that.

JOHNNY HENDRY did feel crowded, though, the day that Pick's body was brought in, the head blown off by a double-barreled shotgun. There was some gold on Johnny's burros, but the location papers couldn't be found—and so the motive for the bush-whacking was plain enough. You couldn't recognize old Pick's face at all.

The reason for that was that it wasn't old Pick's face. Old Pick wasn't the man who was dead—but one of the two dry-gulchers who had trailed him across the desert. Eager to protect the rich strike he had just made, Pick had played a fox's game—and when his two trailers separated, Pick had shot first.

But Pick stayed dead because he wanted to see what Johnny Hendry would do. If Johnny wasn't what old Pick hoped he was, the gold he'd found after a lifetime of prospecting could go hang. That was the way he felt.

AND Pick's hunch turns out to be right. Johnny Hendry is jolted out of his easy-going ways. So much so that



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he announces to Sheriff Blue that he is going to run for sheriff himself, come election, on a law and order ticket. Blue isn't very much bothered—nobody running on a strict down-with-crime platform has a chance in Cosmos. But Johnny thinks he has.

Chief among his supporters is the girl called Nora, to whom Johnny is used to running when anything bothers him. She always gives him sound advice which he usually disregards, and she's said a firm "No" to his six proposals. Nora has the same doubts about Johnny that have bothered Picket-Stake. But this time, she's behind him a hundred percent.

Major Fitz, the manager of the big Bar 33 ranch, agrees to help Johnny every way he can, and Johnny's chances look brighter. He can count on the ranchers who've been rustled to the verge of bankruptcy, on the Mexicans—if Blue doesn't get 'em hooched up—on the management of the Esmerella and other mining companies of the district, and upon the townspeople who are pretty tired of the saloon cowboys and easy gunmen who hang around Cosmos.

Johnny visits the respectable ranchers and they agree to send to him, individually, a list of the members of the community they'd like to see run out of town. This much accomplished, Johnny begins casting around for likely deputies. Nora suggests Fred McLain, but Johnny objects. "He's honest. He's also dumb. How long do you think he'd stack up against a handy gunman?" Nora's frown deepens as Johnny goes on. "I've got to have hard cases for deputies. They've got to be tough—and hard to kill."

**T**OUGEST and hardest man to kill that Johnny can think of is burly, squat, redheaded Turk Hebron, petty cattle thief and rustler. Turk, Johnny thinks, should be tired of his penny-ante thievery, and ready for the opportunity to call the past the past.

Turk is leery at first. "If I'm elected," Johnny says, "all I aim to do is to move the badmen out of town. If they don't want to go, they got to prove they're men enough to stay. I'll expect my deputy to be honest and willin' to risk his neck if he needs to. You like a fight, Turk. How about it?"

Turk thinks it might be worth trying. But there is just one more thing. Johnny takes Turk out into the alley. "I've had a notion that if it came to a showdown, Turk, you think you could take care of me pretty easy. Try it. I'm open to conviction."

The fight is something for both of them to remember. And Johnny comes out with just enough edge to win his hard-case deputy's respect.

"Now," Johnny draws, "all I got to do is get elected."

## CHAPTER V

### STRAWS IN THE WIND

**I**F Johnny did not set up drinks for the whole county in each of the dozen saloons for a week, he did other things designed to offset Bailly Blue's whisky-buying. On the quiet, he managed to see every merchant in town and point out the advantages of a Law and Order term. To them, he promised a deputy who would act as marshal. Then he went to the mine owners and operators, and to them he promised he would stop hold-ups, or anyway cut them down to the place where insurance rates on the bullion shipments were not prohibitive. It was a busy week, but in the midst of it, he took the time to go down to Hugo Miller's assay office and talk with him.

Hugo was a quiet man, a graduate engineer, middle-aged, not given to talking much about his past. But Pick had found him thoroughly honest, and he had often spent evenings in the back of Miller's work shop talking over ores and minerals and mines, and Johnny sometimes listened. He too liked this pale, sensitive-faced man who forever had a pipe in his mouth, and who minded his own business,

Miller was working at his scales; at Johnny's entrance, he quit and

pulled up two chairs. After a few minutes of small talk, in which Miller bitterly lamented Pick's death, Johnny said, "Did Pick have any samples with you, Hugo?"

"About ten."

"Anything good show up?"

"They weren't worthless," Hugo said carefully. "Pick knows too much about the game to lug rock down to me that isn't good. But on the other hand, they were run of the mill samples for him. They all assayed about the same."

"No one better than the others?" Johnny asked hopefully.

"We'll see," Hugo said, rising. He got his reports and glanced over them briefly. "Here's one that's better than the others. Not much, though."

Johnny's heart sank. He had hoped Hugo could show him a rich assay, something that would indicate Pick had struck it and had been murdered by claim-jumpers, but there was nothing here pointing to it.

"Know where any of these claims were located?" he asked glumly, and then he went on to explain. Surely, Pick had been murdered for his gold—it was certain that he had found gold, for some of it was found on his burros. In view of this, it was almost certain that he had the location papers on him when he was murdered. "Maybe he found this gold at a place he'd been workin' a long time. I thought maybe he'd told you of a place that looked good."

Hugo shook his head. "He never told me."

Johnny sighed. "That's out, I reckon."

"Maybe not," Hugo said quietly. "He's brought me a lot of ore to assay, Johnny. Most of it lately has been a peculiar kind of ore—what a geologist

would call volcanic breccia, and my guess is that it's in a long dike, or fault. Every one of his last thirty samples has been of this ore. Maybe he struck gold in this volcanic breccia dike."

"That's a lot of help," Johnny said drily. "What do I do? Hunt the Calicos for volcanic breccia?"

"There isn't much of it," Hugo said.

"I know. But it may be only a mile long. It'd take years to find it."

"Let someone else do it for you," Hugo said calmly. Johnny was about to protest, when he closed his mouth and looked hard at Hugo. "What do you mean by that?"

Hugo took his pipe from his mouth and pointed it at Johnny. "Each one of these samples Pick has brought in is higher grade stuff than the one before it. That argues that Pick was following this breccia dike to its head, doesn't it? He was getting closer and closer to a really good thing. All right, if the man who killed him did it because Pick had something, the chances are he'll bring in this ore to be assayed. It'll have this volcanic breccia in it. And I'd know the looks of that anywhere, because in ten years of assaying for this town and the Calicos, it's the first I've run across."

Johnny turned this over in his mind. "Then if a jasper brings in some samples with volcanic breccia, you'll know it come from Pick's workings?"

"More than likely it will. Prospectors don't usually work near each other unless they've already found good color and staked claims."

"That'd be it," Johnny murmured. "It wouldn't be a sure thing, but it might be." He rose. "You'll let me know then, Hugo, if anyone brings in samples that jibe with Pick's?"

"Gladly."

JOHNNY left then. Here was something to work on; slim enough, it appeared, but nevertheless something. It would take patience and a lot of it. He stopped in at the sheriff's office and found Billy Blue loading his pockets with half dollars. He grinned up at Johnny and said, "That's my ammunition. Fifty cents a drink. You ought to take a tip from an old campaigner, son."

Johnny shook his head. "Got the mail yet?"

"Uh-uh. I'm on my way."

"Don't bother. I'll pick it up,"

Johnny said. He turned down toward Bledsoe's Miners' Emporium, where the post office was. A section in the front of the store had been partitioned off to make the post office. This partition consisted of a rack of pigeon holes, opened at both ends. The mail had been brought in on the stage only a few minutes before, and Bledsoe, the fat postmaster, who always waited to rack up the local mail with that brought in on the stage, was busy behind the partition. Most of the waiting crowd had already received its mail and was reading it.

Johnny looked in his pigeon hole and saw that it was vacant and stuck his head through the wicket. "Nothin' for me, Bledsoe?"

"A lot," Bledsoe said, and reached up to haul it out. He withdrew his pudgy hand, looking surprised. "Why, you had a whole boxful not ten seconds ago, Johnny," he said slowly.

Johnny wheeled to confront the crowd. Miners, punchers, men and women were standing in small clusters in the front of the store, most of them reading, some conversing. They had not heard Bledsoe's conversation with Johnny, for they were paying no attention to him—all except one dirty and

unshaven puncher. Johnny's gaze whipped past him, and the man turned down-store. As he wheeled, Johnny saw a sheaf of envelopes peeping out of his pocket.

Johnny started toward him, and then stopped. It would look mighty foolish to go up and accost the puncher and ask to see the letters. If that story got around, Baily Blue would turn it into a laugh, and no one knew better than Johnny how easy it is to laugh a man out of office. But still, he wasn't sure, and he loafed back through the store keeping a good distance between the puncher and himself.

The puncher stopped down the counter and asked the clerk for a box of shells, then turned and glanced obliquely at Johnny, who was pretending to examine a gun lying on the counter.

When he looked up again, the puncher was walking rapidly toward the rear of the store. Johnny, his suspicions thoroughly aroused now, took after him.

Outside, the puncher turned up the alley and out of sight and Johnny ran to the back door, yanked it open and raced out into the alley. Ahead of him, the puncher was running as fast as he could. Johnny lit out after him, drawing his gun. He shot once into the air and yelled, "Better pull up, fella."

FOR answer, the puncher stopped abruptly, whirled with gun in hand and started to shoot. Johnny cut off to his right for the shelter of a shed, and he emptied his gun in swift *rat-a-plan*. He saw the puncher go down, and he stopped, then loaded his gun and walked carefully toward him. He hadn't expected this, and he cursed himself for losing his head. What if the man had only been trying to get out of the way of what he thought was an officious

lawman? One look at him, and Johnny saw he was dead. One of the slugs had caught him in the neck, and he lay on his back, head twisted awry. And Johnny remembered that it was himself who had shot first.

Men started to collect in the alley. Swiftly, Johnny kneeled down and rolled the man over and pulled the letters out of his levi pocket. A glance at them brought a wave of relief over him, for they were his.

To the first few men around him—hard-case loafers at Prince's Keno parlor—Johnny held out the letters. "Stole them," he drawled calmly. "When will these tin horns learn they can't hooraw everybody in this town?"

He could see the dislike in the eyes of these men. One of them said, "You couldn't've asked him for 'em, I don't suppose?"

"If you see a man ridin' off on your horse, you don't ask him to get off, do you?" Johnny drawled.

"It ain't the same thing," the man countered.

Another said, "This a sample of that Law and Order you're talkin' about?"

Johnny picked out the speaker and walked over to him. "It is. Don't you like it?"

"Not much."

"This is a wide country, friend," he said gently, ominously. "If you don't like it, there's lots of roads out of here."

"I'll stick," the speaker sneered. "We ain't worried much about your gettin' in. Even if you do, we ain't exactly frettin'."

Johnny said, "Saturday night, I may start to worry you." He indicated the dead puncher. "Any of you know him?"

None of them did. They had seen him, they said, but they didn't think he worked here or was known except to maybe a few barkeeps.

"Just a harmless pilgrim," Johnny drawled drily. "Like so many rannies I could name around here. In a couple of weeks, maybe these pilgrims will decide it's a little safer to ride on through Cosmos." And with that he left them to hunt up a teamster who would deliver the corpse to the coroner.

When that was finished, he went down to the hotel. In his pocket were the letters—and they were the ones he had been expecting today from the ten ranchers he had consulted. In them would be the names of all the undesirables the honest ranchers wanted run out of the county. Obviously, somebody knew what these letters contained, and wanted to destroy them.

Nora wasn't at the Cosmos house, but Johnny went into the deserted dining room, shut the door behind him and pulled up a chair, spreading his letters on the table.

He opened all eight of them, for two of the ranchers were not represented. The lists were all printed, giving no clue to their writers.

With a stub of pencil and a sheet of paper, Johnny tabulated the names, and when he was finished, he sat back in his chair, amazement in his face.

"So Major Fitz heads the list!" he murmured. "Well, I'll be whupped! I'll be double, triple hog-whupped!"

It didn't make sense, yet there was the evidence. Six of the eight ranchers put Major Fitz' name at the head of their lists. Johnny pulled out a sack of tobacco and thoughtfully rolled a smoke. He'd got more than he bargained for here, but what did it mean? Originally, he had wanted to give these men a chance to express their honest beliefs without having to present inadequate proof and explanations. But Major Fitz? In cow country, no company outfit is ever loved, but to accuse



the manager of the Bar 33 of rustling beef was another matter. Of course they would seize this opportunity of telling it, for they wouldn't dare say so in public. And it couldn't be one man's grudge; too many had hit on Fitz' name.

He heard the door open and he swept the lists into one pile as Nora stepped into the room. She looked at him accusingly as she walked over to him, peeling off her coat.

"Hiding something?"

Johnny only grinned, and then, on that chance that two heads might be better than one, he decided to tell her. "Remember that scheme I told you about—having the honest ranchers send in the names of the bad hombres?" Nora nodded. "Guess who's the most unwanted jasper in this county."

"Johnny Hendry," Nora said, and then became serious. "Who?"

"Major Fitz."

Nora's face fell. "Let's see." When she'd looked over the lists, she put them down and said flatly, "Honest ranchers, nothing! Who all did you go to, Johnny? The bums and cattle thieves?"

"Ten men you like."

"But I like Major Fitz!"

"So do I. What do you make of it?"

Nora said hotly, "I just think it goes to show that some men will do mean and underhanded things if they don't have to sign their names to them!"

Thoughtfully, Johnny struck a match and touched off the lists and shoved them in the fireplace. "Mebbeso," he said slowly, but he couldn't help thinking about that puncher who had attempted to steal the letters. Had he been sent by Major Fitz, who might have guessed that his name would lead the list of undesirables? Johnny didn't know. "But whatever it is," he told Nora, "it's a secret between us."

## CHAPTER VI

### GOLD SHIPMENT

HANK BRENDER was clear out beyond the fourth corral when the Bar 33 triangle clanged for breakfast, so that he was the last man to the cookshack. As he entered, he felt, without being able to pin it down, that a subtle change came over his fellow punchers. The talk didn't stop, the usual number started to ride him about not being hungry, but he had the uncomfortable impression that the subject of conversation had been suddenly switched, and that the camaraderie was forced. This wasn't the first time he had noticed it, and it made him feel an outsider.

Sitting down, he noticed a stranger at the table, and like all these strangers lately—men who rode the grub line and could not be refused a meal—this one was shifty-eyed, furtive and silent. Nobody knew him, or said they didn't, but Hank had the feeling that they did. Somehow, things were different lately. Hands never stayed here long any more, and there wasn't that old loyalty to the Bar 33 that used to make it a pleasant and secure place to work.

As Hank sat down, Major Fitz rapped his tin cup with his knife, and the table fell silent.

"No work today, boys," the Major announced. "As you all know, this is election day. As soon as you've finished the work around the place, you can ride into town. Blake, at the bank, will pay you at two, not a minute before. If you haven't all voted before that time, you'd better not let me find it out." He paused, and glared around the table at his men. "And if you don't get down there—all of you—before you see a pay check or any whisky, and

vote for Johnny Hendry, you needn't bother to come back here. Understand that?"

They did. The talk turned to the election, and although there was a long ticket of offices, nobody discussed anything but the election of the sheriff. Hank listened closely, but he could not hear one dissenter from the Major's opinion. Johnny Hendry was liked here, it seemed.

After breakfast, as Hank stood outside the cookshack rolling a toothpick in his mouth, Major Fitz and Carmody, the foreman, came up.

"Hank, I've got a favor to ask of you," Major Fitz said bluntly.

When Hank inclined his head, the Major said, "I picked you because you're the steadiest hand here and probably won't feel this is such a burden. The rest of the men are anxious to get to town and vote and start drinking. It won't matter to you if you're an hour or so late, will it?"

Hank said no.

"Well, Art Bodan rode past that north pasture last night on his way home and he said there was a hundred foot of fence down. He rode around and made sure the horses were pushed up to the far end, but he couldn't fix it because he didn't have any tools. Would you mind ridin' out today and stringin' that wire back?"

"Not a bit," Hank said obligingly. He was a little surprised at the politeness of the Major's request, since he usually didn't ask a man to do a thing; he simply ordered him.

Carmody, the foreman, said, "Better get goin' now, Hank. The boys can clear up the work here in short order."

Hank went over to the bunkhouse to get a pair of heavy gloves. No one else was in the place. Prompted by something he could not immediately de-

fine, Hank tucked a pair of glasses in his hip pocket and went out to saddle up. When he had his wire wrapped in gunny sack and slung over the saddle horn, and the hammer and some staples, he mounted and rode south up the ridge. Once over it, he turned sharply and headed for some trees that saddled the ridge. Dismounting, he worked his way up the hump and bellied down in some brush, training his glasses back on the ranch house not a half mile away.

Out in the yard, the whole crew was gathered listening to Major Fitz. Something stirred Hank's anger at the sight. It was as if Major Fitz didn't want him to be in on this parley. And suddenly, Hank knew that he had been sent on this errand so that the Major would be rid of him. Passionately, Hank wanted to hear what was being said by Major Fitz down there. The hard-case stranger stood at the Major's right, listening. Then the gathering broke up and Major Fitz joined the stranger and they both walked toward the trim white house.

Hank drew back into the brush and squatted on his haunches, rolling and lighting a smoke. He was an even-tempered sort, but for the first time in his life, he felt sulky. He cuffed the battered Stetson back off his forehead and thoughtfully pulled the lock of gray-shot hair that licked down on his forehead. He'd worked under Major Fitz longer than any man down there—twice as long as Carmody had worked for him. And now they thought they had to send him away so they could talk among themselves. But why? Funny things were going on down there and had been for a year—secret things that a man could only guess at.

HE smoked his cigarette down until it burned his fingers and then he dropped it and stepped on it, his homely

face set in a stubborn cast. That fence up there could go straight to hell as far as he was concerned. He was going to get at the bottom of this.

Back in the brush, he trained his glasses on the house and kept them there. Presently, the stranger came out alone, went to the corral, snaked out his horse and saddled up and rode north, toward town.

Hank didn't waste a minute. Back to his pony, he cached the wire and tools and swung down along the ridge west until it petered out.

Riding an arroyo bottom, he swung north, keeping out of sight until finally he was a mile or so away from the house, and then he cut back to the road. The tracks of the stranger's horse showed plainly in the dust of the road. He followed them at a leisurely pace. Just before the road topped the ridge south of town, the tracks turned off to the left. This time, Hank used more caution. The tracking was difficult in this broken and rocky terrain, but he saw that the man was keeping to this side of the ridge until he was below the town. Hank dismounted then and went ahead, carefully scanning the broken country ahead of him.

Rounding a jut of rock, he saw the man's horse ground-haltered by a screening piñon. He drew back, circled wide and crawled up on a small, flat-topped butte. There, on the lip of the ridge under a piñon, the man was bellied down watching something below. Hank shifted his position until he also could look into the canyon.

Below them, in the bottom of the canyon below the town, lay the stamp mill. Hank watched it for a few moments, his face puzzled.

Suddenly, he saw a flash of reflected sun; and then he understood that someone was signaling to the stranger.

TIP ROGERS, superintendent of the Esmerella mine, was at work a little early on election day, so as to be at the shaft mouth when the night shift came off duty. The men of this shift he called into the big freighting shed and told them to wait a minute. The day shift of miners was just collecting at the shaft mouth, and he told these men to come into the freighting shed too. Once they were all collected, Tip mounted a piling and look them over. He was a young high-shouldered man with crisp, curly brown hair, dressed in breeches and lace boots and with an engaging serious face that was more sober than usual today. These men were his seniors, most of them, and he did not like the task set him, but he cleared his throat and raised his hand.

"What I've got to say is mighty short," he told them. "If Bailly Blue is elected sheriff of this county again, the Esmerella will have to shut down. I don't have to tell you that means you'll lose your jobs."

"How come that, Tip?" one of the miners asked.

"Because the insurance companies are asking such high rates to insure our bullion shipments that we can't make any money. And if we can't insure the stuff, we'll be cleaned out in a couple of months. And if we're cleaned out you won't have any employer to work for any more—no pay checks. That's simple enough, isn't it?"

The miners looked at each other. A voice carried over their murmur. "First time I ever knowed a outfit to make its workers vote the way it said."

Tip nodded. "We don't like it either, Bill, but that's how things stand. Unless there's a Law and Order sheriff put in here, we can't operate. We're not tellin' you how you have to vote. We're just saying that if you want to keep your



jobs, you'll have to help put Johnny Hendry in office."

"You think he'll clean it up?"

Tip's jaw muscles corded a little. "You really want to know what I think? I don't think he will. I don't think he can. But he's the only hope we've got. Get behind him and give him a try." Then he told them that the day shift would get two hours above ground at noon to vote, and dismissed them.

Inside the Esmerella office, he passed the door of the manager, Sammon's, office and went into his own neat cubby hole. He drew some papers from his desk, put them in his pocket and went outside to a saddled horse waiting at the tie rail.

His ride into town was slow and thoughtful. The streets of Cosmos were in an uproar, and there was much drinking already at this early hour. Tip looked at the scene contemptuously, and picked his way down the thronged street to the Cosmos hotel.

**I**N the dining room, Nora was serving the late breakfasters, and among them was Johnny Hendry. Tip scowled, but Nora smiled and waved him over to where she stood talking with Johnny.

"Sit down, Tip," Johnny invited, and Tip did, ordering his breakfast. He and Johnny regarded each other with a wary neutrality, for when Johnny wasn't with Nora, Tip usually was. But Tip knew that hard-faced, grinning Johnny had the inside track with her and he resented it with all the heat his good manners allowed him to show—which wasn't much.

"You don't seem worried about the election," Tip observed as Johnny went on with his breakfast.

"I'll win it. Why shouldn't I?" Johnny countered arrogantly.

"What if you do? Do you think you'll be able to clean up the place?"

Johnny looked at him swiftly. "I do. You don't, do you?"

"No."

"Want to bet?"

"Sure," Tip said, smiling crookedly. "What?"

Johnny laid down his fork and stared at Tip with speculative interest. "What is it you think I can't handle?"

"You won't calm down these hard-cases, let alone drive 'em out. You won't solve the rustling or the robberies or the murders any more than you did under Blue."

"You think I can expect trouble soon, then?" Johnny murmured innocently.

"Right away," Tip said flatly.

Nora came back now with Tip's breakfast and sat down at the third chair. Johnny said to her, "Tip thinks I can expect trouble right away after I'm elected." He looked at Tip grinning. "How soon?"

"If you're elected, you'll get it tonight, or tomorrow."

Johnny grinned broadly now. "And you're willin' to bet I can't handle it? Furthermore, you're willin' to bet I can't solve all this stuff that Blue don't pay any attention to?"

"That's right."

Johnny leaned back and drawled, "Nora tells me as soon as you heard about this election dance Monday night, you asked her to go."

"I did," Tip admitted, and looked down at Nora. "You're going with me, aren't you?"

"You asked me first," Nora said.

Johnny cut in. "Are you willin' to bet the chance to take Nora to the dance that I can't handle any trouble that comes up between now and Monday?"

"Sure," Tip said flatly. "But I already had the date. That's what I'm putting up. What are you putting up?"

"My resignation," Johnny murmured, eying Tip steadily.

Tip leaned forward in his chair and said, "You're crazy, Hendry. Even I wouldn't expect you to put that up for a stake."

"It's up," Johnny murmured, and rose, looking down at Nora. "I'll leave you love birds to yourselves," he said, grinning. "Me, I'm goin' out and elect myself. I'll see you Monday night, honey," he said to Nora, and laughed at Tip's glare of anger.

Tip regarded Johnny's receding back with a wry expression. "Some day, somebody's going to work that cocky puncher over," he growled.

Nora giggled. "It'll take a good man."

"But look!" Tip protested. "His stepfather was killed only a few days ago. You'd think he'd be a little more considerate of his memory, quiet down a little, and stop his swaggering. Instead, you wouldn't ever know he'd had any hard luck. You'd—"

"Stop that!" Nora said sharply. "Johnny loved Pick! But does he have to go around moaning in public to prove he's sorrowing?" Nora's eyes were dancing with anger. "Everything he thinks or does now is planned to help in getting Pick's killer. Don't criticize something you don't know anything about, Tip Rogers!"

Tip smiled a little. "All right, I'm wrong. But don't scratch my eyes out."

Nora flushed a little and her eyes lost their anger. She even smiled forgivingly. "All right, Tip, but don't ever try to knock Johnny to me. He's all right."

"I suppose he is," Tip agreed wryly. "I might even like him if he didn't like you so much."

WHEN Tip was finished eating, he went out to his horse again, mounted and rode west out of town toward the stamp mill. Approaching it, he could hear the earth-shaking thunder of the stamps as they crushed the ore in the reduction process. The mill itself was a series of red-painted, corrugated tin-roofed sheds tipping up the slope of the canyon side. The offices were down in the valley bottom at the very end of the building. A dozen ore freighters waited their turn at the scales and hoppers and the place buzzed with activity. Tip saw a bent old prospector drive his buckboard onto the weighing platform. He had a half dozen sacks of ore in the back of his buckboard. Tip smiled a little as he regarded the man. Then he stepped into the building and was shown into the manager's office.

Kinder, an officious, sandy-haired little man, greeted him, and they shook hands. Kinder had been watching out the window, and now he returned to it.

"His outfit is pretty clever, isn't it?" he said to Tip.

"Is he the one?" Tip asked, laughing. "I thought he was an old desert rat."

"Here he comes now," Kinder said.

In a few moments, the prospector was ushered into Kinder's office, and Kinder shook his hand and indicated Tip. "Reese, this is Tip Rogers, the Esmerella super." To Tip he said, "Believe it or not, this is Reese, your insurance man. He doesn't look like an insurance man, but he is—in more ways than one."

They shook hands. Reese, under his week's growth of stubble, was a tough, wiry man of middle age. His soiled and tattered clothes seemed more incon-

gruous when he spoke to Tip in cultivated English.

"The bars are under the sacks in the back of my buckboard," he announced to Kinder. "Your man contrived to unload my sacks of ore and put the bars in without even seeing it." He laughed softly. "Well, do you think we'll get away with it this time?"

"I hope so," Tip said fervently. "One more hold-up and you people will quit insuring us for good."

"That's right," Reese said crisply. "If this fails, the only alternative is a good sized army to guard the shipments. And that, I'm afraid, is a little too expensive all around."

Kinder laid out some papers in front of Reese. "Here's the weight. Four pigs at twelve thousand dollars value each. That's forty-eight thousand. Here's the ounces and weights, checked and rechecked."

"I'll take your word for it," Reese said. He in turn drew papers from his pocket, as did Tip. When everything was signed, Tip retained the insurance papers.

Again Reese shook hands all around. "Wish me luck."

"I do," Tip said solemnly. "It's a rotten shame that this is the only way gold can be got out of the country. Maybe a new sheriff will help, but I doubt it."

"We'll see," Reese said.

Outside, Reese went over to his buckboard, and waved to the checker, who stood by the scales.

"Good luck, dad," the checker called, and he watched while Reese turned the buckboard around and took the road west away from the mill.

Then the checker turned to his assistant. "Take this over, Frank. I want a drink."

He walked over to the huge watering

trough away from the buildings. A pipe funneled water into it, and the checker leaned over to drink from its mouth. But at the same time, he drew a small mirror from his shirt, and while he was pretending to drink, he held it out in the sun and turned it toward the opposite rim of the canyon. He could see its reflection on the cliff side. Finally, he focused it at the base of a gnarled lone piñon on the canyon rim. Then, by dragging his hand across the mirror, he conveyed a simple code in dots and dashes. It only took a half minute. When he was finished, he drank and returned to his work, whistling.

## CHAPTER VII

### ELECTION NIGHT

WHEN the stranger withdrew from the rim, Hank stayed where he was. He saw the man get his horse and ride west, past the very butte on which Hank was lying. For a long moment, Hank regarded the vanishing horseman with puzzlement. None of this made sense—or very little of it—but Hank was a stubborn man.

He got his horse and started to follow. In an hour's riding, he was off the ridge and down in the shallow canyon. Presently, the tracks crossed the dusty road, and Hank pulled up to investigate. Here, the stranger had paused to also look at tracks—buckboard tracks—but instead of clinging to the road, he crossed it, heading northwest. Now, Hank could see that the man had put his horse into a steady trot. Hank followed suit. The country was so broken and up-ended here with shale hills and clay dunes that the going was slow and tortuous. It was also dangerous, for if it once occurred to the stranger that he was being followed, it would be simple

to pull off behind a dune and wait for his pursuer. But that was a chance Hank was willing to take.

Trying to figure out the rider's destination, Hank recalled the country as best he could. He remembered the road continued west for a few miles, then turned at right angles north to skirt the edge of this dune country and the desert. In other words, the rider must be taking a shortcut.

As he approached the edge of the dunes, Hank went on with a little more caution, his hand riding close to his gun. And then, rounding one of the dunes, Hank saw the man's horse ahead of him. Shuttling his gaze to the peak of the tallest dune, Hank saw the stranger bellied down, facing the far side. Even as he watched, the stranger raised a rifle to his shoulder and sighted it. For one full second, Hank was locked in indecision, and then his hand swept down toward his gun. The stranger's rifle crashed sharp and loud in that stillness, and on the heel of it, Hank's six-gun roared. The stranger made a move to rise, to push himself erect, then fell down on his face, slacked over on his back and continued to rolled down the side of the dune until he lay stretched in the powdery clay at the bottom.

Hank regarded him with sober distaste, then urged his horse forward. He did not stop at the man's body but circled the dune until he could see beyond. There, the road snaked along paralleling the dunes only a hundred feet away. Up the road, a buckboard was traveling at a smart clip, and Hank could see the shapeless form of a body on the seat.

Spurring his horse, Hank overtook the buckboard and pulled alongside the off-horse. Leaning out, he got a short grip on the reins near the bit and pulled the team to a stop. Dismounting, he

walked back to the buckboard and examined the man lying face down on the seat. He was shot through the chest, and must have died immediately. To Hank, he looked like an old desert rat, dirty and unshaven and tattered.

"But he can't be," Hank mused. "Why'd this jasper want to kill an old hard-shell desert man?"

The gunny sacks on the floor of the buckboard beneath the seat caught Hank's attention, and he clawed down among them, hoping for something to give a clue to the killing. And there, just beneath the sacks, Hank discovered the bars of bullion. He whistled in exclamation, admiring their rich sheen, and then turned back to the dead man. In his pockets, Hank found the insurance papers, and immediately he understood. It was Esmerella gold, and the insurance company had tried to sneak it safely out of the country. Some hardcase at the stamp mill had given this bushwhacker the tip-off, and he had followed the agent to kill and rob him of the bullion.

Hank rolled a smoke and considered all this. Whether he wanted to deny it or not, he couldn't escape the fact that this bushwhacker had been in conference with Major Fitz only five hours ago, and that he had come from the Bar 33 straight to this killing. Was Fitz behind it? Hank couldn't believe it. He thought he knew Fitz well enough to feel sure that he would never be a party to a cold-blooded killing, but on the other hand, Hank remembered that conference he had witnessed through the glasses only this morning.

And suddenly, Hank thought of Johnny Hendry. By nightfall, he might be the new sheriff. Why not take the matter to him? For Hank knew without having to be told that his days with the Bar 33 were over.

IT was nearly dark when Hank pulled in the alley behind the sheriff's office with his strange burden of forty-eight thousand dollars in gold and two dead men. His entrance was practically unnoticed, for he chose the side streets. Besides, the town was too busy with election hilarity to pay any attention to him. He slipped the bars into a gunny sack, and hoisted them on his shoulder. The sheriff's office was locked and dark and he could not leave the bullion here in the alley.

On the street, he picked his way through the milling crowds looking for Johnny, stopping to rest occasionally. He found Johnny seated on the porch of the Cosmos House in one of the deep chairs in a dark corner. Just as Hank dumped his load beside Johnny, there was a fanfare of shots and chorus of yells upstreet. That would be another demonstration for Blue.

Johnny said, "What's that? The Bar 33 votes?"

"Take a look," Hank advised.

Johnny dragged out a bar and looked at it, noting the Esmerella stamp, and then shifted his somber questioning glance to Hank, who told him what had happened. But Hank neglected to mention that the murderer had stayed the night at the Bar 33.

When he was finished, Johnny said shrewdly, "How'd you come across him, Hank?"

"I was ridin' in from the spread, and he was ahead of me," Hank said carefully. "He kept lookin' around. Finally, I didn't see him on the road. Then I noticed where his tracks turned off. I pulled off the road myself farther on, and hid and pretty soon he come along. I was curious, is all."

"You liar," Johnny murmured calmly, smiling a little. "Where did you really pick him up?"

Hank grinned sheepishly, and then the grin died. "At the Bar 33." He told Johnny the true story, and Johnny did not comment immediately. Hank took a chair beside him, and they sat there in silence, rolling smokes. When the match flared, Hank could see Johnny's face and it was stamped with a somber scowl.

"What do you make of it, Hank?" Johnny asked quietly.

"I dunno. I ain't even tryin' to make anything out of it. All I know is what I told you. Did Fitz want to get me out of the way so he could talk to that hard-case?"

"It looks like it."

"It does. It looks enough like it that I'm quittin' the Bar 33. I don't like the feel of it."

Johnny considered a long moment. What Hank had told him was more than significant in the face of those six notes naming Fitz as an undesirable, and the bushwhacker who tried to get him the other day. But proof! Nothing was any good without proof. Besides, Johnny wanted to be fair. Setting aside his own real affection for Major Fitz, he wanted to make sure of his facts before doing anything—providing the election put him in a position to do anything. None of it made sense—or rather it did make sense, but the wrong kind.

While he was sitting in silence, the hotel door opened and Tip Rogers came out. Johnny called to him and Tip walked over. Johnny pointed to the bars. "Those yours?"

It was so dark Tip could not immediately make out what he was pointing at, but he stopped and examined them. Then he took one bar over to the light and checked the stamping. Back beside Johnny, he said quietly, "Yes. Where did they come from?"



"Your agent was killed," Johnny murmured. "Hank Brender here killed the man who did it."

For a moment, Tip said nothing, and then he turned his attention to Hank, asking for details, and Hank told him. When he was finished, Tip thanked him, and then was silent a moment.

"Well, Johnny," he said finally. "It rests with you whether or not the Esmerella shuts down. If you clean out this riffraff, we can operate. If you don't, we're closing."

"I've done all right so far," Johnny murmured.

"You?" Tip asked, surprise in his voice. "What did you do?"

"It was my deputy who got your gold back for you."

Tip peered at Hank, whose face was as surprised as his own. Luckily, the dark hid Hank's expression. "Deputy? Is he your deputy?"

"He is. Unofficially, right now. Officially, when I get elected."

Tip said resentfully, "I suppose you're going to claim that you're entitled to take Nora to the dance, now?"

"Not at all," Johnny murmured. "I'll earn that on my own hook."

Tip grunted and said, "Will you watch this gold until I can get hold of Turnbull to open the bank for me?"

Johnny said he would, and Tip left. When he was gone, Johnny looked over at Hank. "How about it, Hank? Would you like the job?"

"I couldn't handle it, Johnny," Hank said gravely. "I don't know anything about the business."

"So much the better. The only thing you need is honesty. You've got that." He told Hank about hiring Turk Hebron, and the circumstances which prompted him in his choice, and Hank agreed with him. "What I want now is a deputy to police this town in place

of a marshal. It'll take a tough man and a scrapper, and a man that this wolf pack of hard-cases will respect." He grinned. "I don't want to give you a swelled head, Hank, but you fit that bill pretty good. You've quit your job. Furthermore, it'll make it easier for you to quit Fitz, since I'll be offerin' you twice what he's payin'. What about it?"

Hank, after a moment's thought, said dubiously, "All right." Johnny felt pleased now; he had acquired his deputies. All he needed now was the election, and that was out of his hands.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ULTIMATUM

COSMOS, naturally, did not go to bed election night. At ten o'clock the ballots were brought in from Lynn's Ford, the only other settlement in the county which could be dignified by the name of a town. There was shooting and shouting as the election officers retired to the courthouse to count them; because, except for one far corner of the county, Doane's Trading Post, which at best would only muster a dozen or so votes, the election would be decided when the votes now in were counted.

Johnny and Hank picked up Turk Hebron at the Palace, and the three of them stood out on the sidewalk watching the crowd. It had collected now in front of the courthouse, an ordinary store building next to the sheriff's office. It had once been a saloon, but now its interior was partitioned off to allow for a half dozen offices in the front part of the building and the courtroom behind. The street was blocked now with the milling throng, half of whom were drunk.

Turk, observing it with a wry expression on his hard face, grinned crookedly. "If we get in, gents, we've got our work cut out." At Prince's Keno parlor, they took a corner table and ordered drinks. Turk heard Hank's story of the attempted holdup of the Esmerelda gold and he only grinned with pleasant anticipation at what this signified.

Hank had scarcely finished his story when, suddenly, the noise in the street started to fade.

Johnny said quickly, "They're announcin' the vote."

Out on the sidewalk across from the courthouse, they leaned against a store building. Bledsoe, one of the commissioners, was on the steps, his pudgy hands raised high in the air for silence. Slowly, the talk died down, until there was utter quiet along the street.

"The results of the election for sheriff are as follows," Bledsoe belled. "Baily Blue—three hundred and seventy-three votes." A mighty shout rose from the crowd, and Bledsoe waved his arms again to quiet it. Johnny looked bleakly at Turk, but said nothing. When Bledsoe had silence again, he said, "For sheriff, Johnny Hendry—four hundred and one votes."

For a moment, there was a stunned silence, and then a scattering of applause which was dimmed by a disgusted muttering. Again Bledsoe raised his hand. "If Johnny Hendry is in the crowd, will he come forward?"

Johnny said to Turk and Hank, "Come along," and elbowed his way through the crowd to Bledsoe's side. A few people called congratulations on the way, but Johnny did not fool himself that he was popular on this night. If he was not openly hissed and booed, it was only because the hard-

cases would need a little time to brood on the injustice done them.

Bledsoe, a stout, bald merchant, head commissioner, led the three of them back into the courtroom, where several men in shirtsleeves sat idling at a table littered with ballots. Four of them rose, took Johnny aside, and swore him into office. Once that was finished, Johnny came back to the table. Hank and Turk were sitting unobtrusively in chairs against the wall.

"Well, Hendry," Bledsoe said, his round face beaming. "We did it for you. Are you going to pay us back by cleaning up the town and county?"

Johnny was irritated a little at Bledsoe's assumption that it was the merchants who had elected him, but he only nodded gravely. "That's what I promised."

"Then we've all got in mind a couple of good men for your deputies. The statute provides for two of them, one to police the town in case of necessity. We've got your men for you."

Johnny looked along at Bledsoe, his face expressionless, and finally said, "I've got my deputies."

Bledsoe seemed disappointed and a little suspicious. "Who?"

"The two you see sittin' right over there," Johnny said. "Turk Hebron and Hank Brender, Hank to be the marshal."

It was Turk's turn now to look uncomfortable as every man in the room looked over at him. Finally, Bledsoe said to Turk, "Would you mind leaving the room, Hebron?"

"He would," Johnny cut in flatly. "What you've got to say about him, you can say to his face—and to mine."

Bledsoe looked at his colleagues with obvious discomfort, and at a nod from two or three of them, he sat on the table and faced Johnny.

"ALL right, boy," he said seriously, "I will say it to your face. You've been elected by us on a law and order platform. Three minutes after you've taken the oath of office, you announce that you've appointed an outlaw and an unknown puncher for your deputies. Does that look like you're keeping your word?"

"Who did you men have in mind for deputies?" Johnny countered.

"Frank Salem and Les McMahon are two men you couldn't beat. Honest, incorruptible and industrious."

"True enough," Johnny drawled, walking over to Bledsoe and facing him, hands on hips. "But if I recollect right, Bledsoe, Frank Salem is a man who's never worn a gun, or has he?"

"No. So much the better."

"And Mac is studyin' law while he's counter-jumpin' at your store. That right?"

"That's right. Nevertheless, they are both honest men."

"True," Johnny murmured. "Supposin' there was a quarrel over at Prince's Keno Parlor—you know, the usual kind, with somebody goin' for a gun, somebody else shootin' out the lights, and the rest of them takin' sides and wreckin' the place. What would Mac do in a case like that?"

"Stop them" Bledsoe said.

"How?"

"By being there—by demanding law and order and threatening the lot of them with arrest."

"We've got a four-cell jail," Johnny said drily. "I saw one of those hard-cases toss Mac clear over the doors of the Palace one night because he didn't like Mac's white shirt." Johnny leaned both fists on the table and looked around at the commissioners. "Wake up, you men. A man has got to be a gun-fighter to lay down the law in this

man's town and county. He's got to be a little handier with his fists, and a sight quicker with his guns, than anybody else in sight if he wants to live long. I appreciate that honesty is somethin' my deputies have got to have. But I also know they've got to be tough enough to cram that honesty down the throats of these men that are makin' this county impossible to live in." He straightened up. "Turk Hebron and Hank Brender stay. And if you'll give me a pencil and a piece of paper, I'll show you why."

In silence, one of the commissioners handed him paper and pencil. Johnny printed in big letters across the paper:

BY MIDNIGHT TOMORROW,  
EVERY MAN THAT CAN'T SHOW  
ME HE HAS GOT A FULL-TIME  
JOB WITH A RESPECTABLE EM-  
PLOYER HAD BETTER BE  
CLEARED OUT OF COSMOS AND  
THE COUNTY.

(SIGNED)

JOHNNY HENDRY, SHERIFF.

He shoved the paper at Bledsoe and said, "How far would Frank or Mac get enforcin' that?"

Bledsoe read the paper and handed it to the other commissioners. Each, in his own way, expressed disapproval. "You'll never make it stick, Hendry," Bledsoe said flatly, "You've got more sense than to stir up a hornet's nest." Paused, he regarded Johnny with outright suspicion. "In fact, I think it's a bluff."

Johnny ripped the paper out of his hand and strode down the hall. Outside, the crowd was still collected in the street. Johnny ignored them, turning to the bulletin board. He hung the paper over a nail, and then turned to face the crowd. "You want me to read it to you?" he asked, and they could

tell by the timbre of his voice that he was angry.

"Sure," somebody called.

Johnny said, "It just says that every one of you hard-cases who can't show you've got a job with a genuine employer had better clear out of here before midnight tomorrow night."

He listened for any protest. There were a few quiet laughs, considerable muttering, but no open defiance. He was surprised at this, and half suspected a conspiracy to ignore him, when an insolent voice drawled, "And who says so?"

Johnny leaped down into the crowd, but Turk and Hank were already ahead of him. Violently, they shouldered their way through the crowd until they got to where the speaker stood. It was one of Leach Wigran's men, and nobody in that crowd had to be told that Wigran was one of the most successful and insolent rustlers in the county, and that his spread, the Running W, was a robber's roost.

Neither Turk nor Hank wasted words. The man who had called was behind four other hard-cases who made a solid rank in front of him. He was grinning over the shoulder of one.

**H**ANK simply flipped out a gun and slugged one man of the four. He went down like a shot quail, and Hank stepped back then, covering the other three with his gun. It was Turk who stepped over the fallen man into the breach in the ranks, put out a hairy, hard fist, grabbed the grinning man's coat in a tight ball of his fist and yanked. The man came out sailing, to land squarely on his feet in the circle that had been cleared for the scuffle.

Then Turk, holding the man erect by his coat, hit him once in the face.

Then, for that whole crowd to watch, Turk finished the job. The man was fighting now, but Turk ignored his blows as if they were not even aimed at him. With the spaced precision of a ticking clock, he hit the man twelve times in the face. After four of them, the man's knees buckled, and Turk had to hold him up. But he kept on, until each sodden punch smacked over the hushed silence of the crowd. At the twelfth blow, Turk rolled his shoulder under and heaved the man off his feet and then threw him at the other Wigran men. They caught him, and let him slide to the ground.

"Anybody else want a taste of what's comin'?" Johnny drawled from behind Turk. Nobody did, it seemed; but if ever hatred was a living and tangible thing, it was then. It would only take a spark, a word, a voice lifted in anger to turn the crowd into a lynch mob.

Johnny said quickly, "Then break it up. The other offices won't be announced for an hour yet."

Slowly, the crowd started to mill, and then tension eased off. The Wigran men, without a word, took their two casualties and disappeared in the throng.

Turk turned to Johnny and said, "That was close, wasn't it?"

"There'll be closer," Johnny replied grimly.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his arm, and turned to confront Nora. Her face was paler than he had ever seen it, and he had his mouth open to speak when Nora said passionately, "Johnny Hendry, that was the most foolish thing three men ever did!"

Turk only grinned and Hank looked sheepish while Johnny smiled broadly. "We've got to make our brag good now."

Nora shook her head in earnest bewilderment. "But Johnny, nobody can get away with a thing like that twice! You were lucky tonight!"

"I know it."

"What about next time, though?"

"Wait till it comes, Miss Nora," Turk said gently. He looked quizzically at Johnny. "You know," he said slowly, "somehow I feel better for doin' that than I'd feel if I'd won a couple of thousand dollars."

Johnny looked swiftly at Nora to see if she had understood, for Turk had spoken with the simple honesty of a man who has had a chance to make good, and who is thankful.

Nora said gently, "You three will have to stick together from now on. Let me change your room, Johnny, so that nobody will know the number. And whatever room Mrs. Jenkins gives you, I'm going to have three beds put in it. From now on, you'll have to hang together or be shot separately."

And all of them, without saying anything, knew it was true.

As they turned to go, Major Fitz approached and held out his hand to Johnny. "Damn glad," he said bluntly, and then, turning to Turk, observed, "Once upon a time, Hebron, I would have said that you were about the least choice trash I ever had the misfortune to know. Mind if I take it back now, in public?" and he held out his hand to Turk.

To Hank, he said, "How did you get in on this, Hank?"

Johnny put in quickly, "I've got a favor to ask, Major."

Major Fitz looked at him and then back at Hank and said, "What is it? I think I know."

"I need a deputy. Hank fills my bill. Do you think you could spare him

from the Bar 33 until I get this mess cleaned up?"

"Certainly," Fitz said with surprising abruptness, and smiled at Hank. "He's wasting his time with me. Keep him as long as you like. And Hank, there's always room at the Bar 33 when you've done."

Hank, inarticulate at his best, only nodded gravely and Major Fitz turned away, after saying good night to Nora. Hank looked over at Johnny, his eyes asking a question, and so did Nora. Johnny knew that both were wanting to ask him now about Major Fitz. If possible, Nora would have asked him if he still thought Major Fitz was the guilty party, after such a gracious acknowledgment as he had made to Turk. And Hank would have asked if this didn't fit in pretty well with what he had felt was coming. But Johnny, more puzzled than both, could not have answered either question yet.

THE room Mrs. Jenkins provided for them at the Cosmos House was in the attic, with the only entrance a ladder and a heavy trap door. Johnny, Hank and Turk went to bed while the town was still drowning its sorrow.

Johnny was first up next morning, and he dressed quietly, thinking over the incidents of the night before. At last, he had the chance and the position to enable him to get at the bottom of Pick's murder. Whoever it was had murdered Pick, they would not get out of the county while they had a chance to get Pick's gold. One of these men fighting him would be Pick's killer. Of that he was certain.

Dressed and yawning widely, Johnny moved over to the trapdoor and shoved away the trunk which he had dragged over it the night before. Lean-



ing down, he had almost grabbed hold of the ring ready to heave, when he noticed a tiny scattering of shavings around a knothole that was just to one side of the ring. Gently, then, he drew his hand away from the ring and backed off. Lighting a match against the permanent twilight of this room, he knelt down to examine the knothole. In the light it turned out to be not a dark knothole, but twin holes bored close together in the wood of the trapdoor. Gently, Johnny put two fingers in these holes and felt cold steel. He had looked at the business end of enough shotguns to recognize those twin holes. Somebody, during the night, had drilled holes right by the ring, over which a man would have to lean in order to move the heavy trapdoor. In these holes had been inserted two barrels of a shotgun.

Johnny pondered this a long moment. Then he went back and woke up Hank and Turk and brought them over to the trapdoor.

"That's it, all right," Turk murmured. "Let's see how it works."

They lighted the lamp and brought it over beside the ring, and Johnny knelt down to examine it closely. There was another, smaller hole right under the ring, and over the shank of the heavy ring was a tiny fish-hook. From it, a tight wire stretched down through the hole.

Turk whistled in exclamation. "You pick up the ring to heave, that pulls the wire that sets the shotgun off and the next thing you know, your head is plastered on the roof."

"Let's try it," Hank suggested.

"And blow a hole in the roof?" Johnny grinned. "Let's don't. We got a landlady here."

They compromised by prying the trapdoor up without touching the ring.

As they had suspected, there was a shotgun underneath. The hole had been drilled so expertly that the gun barrel was wedged tightly in position. The wire was drawn down tautly over the butt and up to the trigger, so that the slightest pull on the ring would have set it off.

After it was dismantled, Johnny said grimly, "There's no sense in anybody else knowin' this. We'll settle this by ourselves when the time comes."

**B**UT that was the only incident of the day. The town was quieter than usual, and Johnny and his deputies did not molest anybody. They spent the day cleaning out the sheriff's office and getting it ready for their own occupancy. Ex-Sheriff Blue appeared at midday and was entirely amiable. He tendered no advice to Johnny, and Johnny, on his part, asked for none. But as evening drew on and dark fell, there was a noticeable tension in the town.

Little groups of men clustered in the saloons, engaged in a conversation which they were at pains to keep private. Hank, on his rounds, was met with sullen, defiant stares. Nobody offered to buy him drinks. The saloonkeepers, members of a usually wise profession, did not bother to set up drinks and toast the health and long life of a new marshal. Hank had the growing conviction that the town, for once in its mushroom career, was co-operating—and in a way which was merely a gang-up.

He reported this to Johnny late in the evening. Turk, a few moments before, had reported the same thing. Johnny almost wished that he had set the deadline so that it would expire in daylight. It was not reassuring to know that a hundred men, all willing

and able to shoot, had the protection of night behind them. But a stubbornness in him would not let him admit it to Turk.

Their plan was simple. It would consist of swift raids after midnight. There would be no orderly schedule; suddenness would be the secret. Johnny realized that it was within his authority to deputize as many men as he wished, but if he did that, the hard-cases would fade away until the deputies were dismissed, then return again to plague him. No, it would have to be a swift and sudden showdown. But he took one precaution.

Along in the afternoon, he drifted down to Hugo Miller's place, and to Hugo made this proposition. The three of them could take care of the trouble in the saloons, but what about the street? It would be open, and at the first ripple of excitement would fill with hard-cases. Would Hugo, then, consent to being conscripted as a shotgun guard?

"Shotgun guard where?" Hugo asked, with all good humor.

"If you fort up on the roof of the place we raid, then you're in a position to keep the streets clear if any trouble comes up."

"Sure," Hugo said immediately, so it was decided that he would cover them while they were engaged in their own kind of disciplining.

As midnight drew near, the streets began to empty, which was pretty unusual because night in Cosmos was hardly different from day. Johnny, watching it from the window of the darkened sheriff's office, said to Turk, "They'll be ready for us."

"Where first?" Turk said.

"Prince's Keno Parlor, I think."

Turk faded out into the night, Hugo beside him, a shotgun in his hand. And

then that careful silence settled on the town, and it lasted until midnight, when Johnny murmured to Hank, "Come along."

A MAN lounging in the doorway of Prince's Keno Parlor faded back into the room at sight of them. At the swing door, Hank leaned his shotgun against the building, and shoulder to shoulder, they pushed through the doors—to confront the strangest sight either of them had ever seen.

In a line across the room, from bar to sidewall, a row of chairs had been drawn up facing the door. And on each of these chairs a man sat, hands folded on his lap, staring innocently at Johnny and Hank.

In the middle of the group, bulking large and dominant, was Leach Wiggran. He was a black, scowling man with a shovel beard down to his collar. His clothes were incredibly dirty. Above a small hooked nose, he had deepset black eyes that never lost their mockery. His great hands folded loosely around the six-gun in his lap gave him the ridiculous appearance of a peaceful child on a chair—which was exactly what he had intended. To Leach's right, his tough face wearing a mocking smile, sat Mickey Hogan, Leach's foreman.

As Johnny let his gaze rove the crowd, Leach Wiggran piped up in a falsetto voice, starting a tune which every school child uses to greet his teacher. Only the words were changed, and the whole row of men lifted their mocking voices to join him.

Good morning to you,  
Good morning to you,  
Good morning, dear Sheriff,  
To blazes with you.

As the song ended, a mighty chorus of laughter roared through the room. Tim Prince, the sour and cynical owner of the place allowed himself a spare smile which Johnny did not miss.

Johnny walked forward a little to stand in front of Wigran.

"Why, Leachie," he said in mocking tones, imitating the inflection of a schoolteacher. "You haven't washed your hands or wiped your nose this morning." Slowly, so that his movement wouldn't be misunderstood, he reached in his hip pocket and drew out a handkerchief, and walked slowly over to the bar. There, he picked up a half-drained schooner of beer and stalked back to confront Leach.

"Well, Leachie," he drawled.

Leach's eyes flickered faintly. He could also see Hank Brender closing the weather doors and leaning against them, shotgun in hand. But Leach Wigran was not a man to be bluffed. He answered in a mincing voice, "Why, teacher, I had my mind so set on bringin' you an apple this mornin' that I plumb forgot. You want to see the apple?"

"Wash your face first, Leachie," Johnny said gently, ominously.

Here was the challenge. Leach said just as gently, "Suppose you try to do it, teacher."

His last word was not out of his mouth before Johnny's foot shot out and kicked Leach's chair. It tipped over and Leach, arms sawing wildly, shot once at the ceiling as Johnny dived on top of him.

Then, inevitably, someone shot out the lights and there was a wild tangle on the floor. Johnny, knowing instinctively that no one would risk gunplay at these close quarters, grappled with Wigran and rolled under him, just as half that milling, shouting,

kicking and screaming mob got into action, tangling men and chairs and even women.

Then, over this uproar, came the mighty, deafening blast of a shotgun and the bar mirror simply collapsed in a jangle of glass. Another spot, and the front door boomed hollowly. Here was real panic, for not a man or woman in that room could mistake the message of that shotgun and what it meant. A sudden clangor on the piano, as if a man was stamping on the keys, crashed through the room, and then Turk Hebron's voice lifted above every other sound.

"Prince, light a lantern up there or I'll bust this wall lamp and fire your place!" Turk bellowed. The fighting ceased abruptly.

**I**N a very few seconds, Prince struck a match, then another, and finally a trembling barkeep came out into the middle of the room and pulled down an overhead lamp and lighted it. The disorder had ceased now. Johnny was in the midst of a dozen of Wigran's men, and he still had a hold on Wigran's collar. Now everybody turned to look for Turk. He was sitting on top the piano, hat pushed back on his head, his shotgun slacked just away from his shoulder.

"Anybody want to try and knock me off here?" he inquired in the sudden silence.

"Or me out of here?" Hank asked. He was planted against the closed doors, a shotgun in his hands.

Johnny laughed quietly. "Line forms at the bar, gents. Put your hardware on it, then get these chairs untangled and take your seats again. I'll give you about twenty seconds to get back to school again."

There was no choice, and Leach

Wigran was the first to see it. Cursing sulphurously, he put his guns on the bar. In a few moments, the whole room was crowding to the bar. After that, the chairs were pulled upright and a sullen, surly and sheepish crew of men took their seats. Johnny had a smear of blood on his face, and an eye which was rapidly swelling shut, but he was grinning broadly.

"So you bunch of tinhorns thought you could laugh the law out of this town, did you?" he asked, when they were all seated.

No one answered. Johnny addressed himself to Leach, now. "Never give a ranny you want to kill an even break, Leach. Haven't you learned that?" Leach didn't answer. "If I want to kill you, Leach, I will. And I'm loco enough to give you an even break." Paused, he let his hard gaze rove the room and then settled it again on Leach. "What'll it be, Leach? Guns? I'll fight you now, here."

Leach's gaze shifted. He was motionless. "Well, well," Johnny drawled. "You don't like the idea of sassin' teacher back with old man Colt's language. How would you like to settle it with fists, then?"

Leach only shifted faintly in his seat, and did not answer. Johnny looked over the rest of the hard-cases. "Anybody else want to make it guns or fists with teacher?"

Still he got no response. He was carrying the room now in a magnificent mocking bluff. He ran a hand through his hair and scowled. "Maybe you'd like a kickin' contest, Leach. No? Let me see." He pursed his lips. "Get up, Leach," he said finally. Leach hulked out of his chair.

"You too, Mickey," Johnny said to Hogan. Hogan did. Johnny walked over and yanked Hogan's chair out

into the middle of the floor and grasped the back of it. Then he said to Leach, "Pick up your chair, Leach. I'm goin' to see if you've got a sign of a brain in that skull of yours. I'll crack it wide open with this chair if I have a chance—and I will."

Leach hesitated for a moment, then picked up his chair and circled out into the cleared space. Johnny, grinning now at the absurd weapons of this fight, came at Leach with chair out-thrust, jabbing. Leach raised his chair up and swung it viciously at Johnny's, but Johnny drew his own back and the momentum of the swing carried Leach half way around, exposing his back. Johnny put the legs of his chair in Leach's back and shoved with all his weight and strength and Leach went off balance to sprawl across his chair on the floor. There was a scattering of subdued laughter throughout the room.

Leach rose with a growl of fury and threw his chair at Johnny, who caught it in his own chair. Then Johnny picked it up and threw it back, and Leach, dancing to escape its low sweep, got his feet tangled in the rungs and crashed to the floor again. There was a howl of laughter through the room.

"Give him your chairs," Johnny called to the seated men. He was laughing delightedly now. But Leach could see nothing funny in all this. Impotent, he was cursing in bitter fury, and as each chair skidded out to him, he picked it up and threw it at Johnny. Johnny stopped two of them, ducked the third, and then, still on his knees, saw the spittoon beside the bar rail. Without hesitating a moment, he picked it up and sailed it at Leach. It crashed on the wall behind Leach, and all its contents were dumped over

Leach's shoulders and clothes. Before Leach could collect his wits, Johnny had vaulted behind the bar and was leveling a barrage of bottles at him. They came fast and furious, breaking on the wall and splashing over Leach, who could not get out of the way. The room was in an uproar of laughter.

When Johnny had hit him a half dozen times, Leach picked up a chair to use it for a shield. Johnny sailed five bottles over Leach's head, and as each one broke, Leach got a fresh bath of whisky, brandy, gin, and rum. Finally, when Leach was cowering against the wall in the front corner, Johnny called to Hank, "Open the door, Hank."

Hank did, and Leach made a dash for it. Johnny had a waiter's tray in his hand, and as Leach was almost to the door, he sailed it, flat, at Leach's head. It hit him a glancing blow, just as he was in the doorway, and the last that laughing crowd saw of Leach Wigran, bully and bucko rustler, was a flash of his boots as he sprawled out onto the sidewalk.

Johnny turned now to confront the rest of the hard-cases. He had a bottle in each hand. "Make a run, boys," he invited. "My aim's improving."

Three of them made a run for the door, and Johnny, laughing himself now, let them have the bottles. They were clean misses, as he had intended, but that did not lessen the stampede for the door. In a very few moments, under that barrage of glassware, the room was cleared of the hard-cases. Only the townspeople and punchers and miners were left. Johnny waited until he heard the pounding of horses' hooves in the streets, and then Hugo, up on the roof, sent a peppering of buckshot at the retreating riders.

JOHNNY'S grin died as he faced Tim Prince, who was regarding the wreckage of his place with a dour poker face.

"How do your bad boys stack up now, Tim?" he asked quietly.

Tim only shook his head.

"Still think they're worth backin'?" Johnny asked him.

"They never was," Tim said dryly. "I don't give credit."

"But as long as you thought they had a chance to lick me, you were on their side. Wasn't that it?"

"Pretty close," Tim said, and spat at a spot where the spittoon had been.

Johnny looked at the mess across the room, the broken chairs, the broken mirror, the shattered door, and then he smiled narrowly. He walked over to Prince. "How would you like to be put under bond to keep the peace, Prince?"

Tim regarded him levelly, and did not speak for a long moment. "I don't think you could do it, Sheriff. You don't *own* the town."

Without turning, Johnny said to Hank, "Go get Stevens, the J. P., Hank."

Hank started for the door when Prince raised a hand. "All right, you could," he said calmly. "I guess this is your town, now, Johnny. What you say goes."

"You guess right," Johnny said. "I'm givin' you your choice, Prince. You hire a bouncer tough enough to keep these hard-cases from makin' trouble in your saloon. When one of that gang comes in—and they'll try it—throw them out. Either do that or I'll put you under bond to keep the peace. And once I do that and one of my deputies walks in here and sees one of these tin horns in your place. I'll



shut you down for good and all. What about it?"

Prince threw up both hands and said, "I got a livin' to make here, and why—"

"What about it?" Johnny asked.

Prince shrugged and said, "All right. I'll hire the bouncer. You're the boss now."

Johnny rapped the flat of his palm on the bar and it echoed in that silence. "You will!" he said bluntly. "If you don't I'll run you out of town, Tim. I first laughed Leach Wigran out of town. When you go, nobody'll laugh—not even me—because it won't be a laughing matter."

With that, he signaled to Turk and Johnny and walked out the door. The street was ominously quiet.

"Let's make it the Gem next," Johnny said.

They approached the Gem in the same way they did Prince's, but their reception there was different. The games and drinking were orderly. Only one known hard-case was in the place and he was playing solitaire at a lone table.

Johnny approached him and said, "The curfew's rung, fella. Clear out. Go home to bed."

The man only nodded and rose and went out, and Hank reported that he had ridden out of town. At the bar, Johnny asked the barkeep, "What happened to the bad boys, Jim? It's sort of quiet in here. Quiet's awful noticeable in your place, ain't it?"

"They cleared out," Jim said, and grinned.

The three of them went down the long line of saloons, not skipping one of the twelve. And each one was orderly, with not a known hard-case in the whole crowd. To each saloon-keeper, Johnny made the same proposition that he had made Tim Prince. He said he was going to try and keep the hard-cases out of Cosmos, but he wanted co-operation. They could either hire a bouncer to keep order, or be bonded to keep the peace. And one and all, they agreed to his proposition. They had no alternative.

Back at the office, Johnny and Turk and Hank and Hugo looked at each other and grinned.

"Well?" Johnny said.

"They ain't out of the county yet," Hank told him.

"They will be," Johnny said quietly, and that was a promise that he planned to keep.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



# At Noon: BEWARE

By CARL RATHJEN

Author of "Beyond Control," "Confidence Flight," etc.

## I

THE message did not come by letter or telegram. Those might be traced. Nor did it come by personal messenger.

It came by telephone. Mr. Gregory H. Rowncliffe, chairman of the board, Euro-American Steamship Lines which ran the largest, fastest, most expensive, most luxurious ocean liners, had acted quickly when his first amazement and shock were over. Covering the mouth-piece he had ordered one secretary to trace the call. Calmly, very calmly, he ordered another to communicate with the police. And a third, he ordered to listen in on another telephone.

But none of that helped. The telephone company could not trace the call to any one number. It appeared that



whoever made the call to Mr. Rowncliffe had used a repairman's dial transmitter, obviously stolen, and had simply climbed a pole somewhere, hooked into a line and dialed the number of the Euro-American Steamship office.

It was all very perplexing, and more than disturbing. The police said the message was from a crank. But Mr. Rowncliffe was not so certain that it was. The voice on the telephone had been calm, assured. A crank is usually irate, aroused.

The police had another theory, a good old stand-by for situations like this. Labor trouble, they claimed. What had Mr. Rowncliffe's company done to irritate the longshoremen's or seamen's unions? Nothing. All was peaceful on the waterfront and the high seas.

It must be a crank then, the police



"What," shouted the lieutenant, "what are you standing on?"