



THE CODE

By WILL RYAN

THINGS LOOKED PRETTY ROUGH FOR STEVE RAND WHEN HE FOUND HIMSELF A PRISONER OF THE MOST EVIL LOOKING HOMBRES WHO EVER FORKED BRONCS. BUT YOU CAN'T PULL THAT STUFF AND GET AWAY WITH IT—NOT IN THE CATTLE COUNTRY

HE had no sooner turned into the canyon than he knew something was wrong. What it was, he could not decide.

The trail was newly traveled, broad, and not particularly steep. The cool wind sweeping down through the thickets of alder and quaking-asp rustled the leaves softly. There were no other sounds but the distant call of a mountain jay, and the song of running water. Yet in every nerve of his body Steve Rand felt that queer sixth sense of danger, and he had lived in the open too many years to disregard its warning.

With a grunt of mild disgust he brought the sturdy bay gelding to a halt, swung one long leg up over the roll of the saddle, and settled himself to a careful scrutiny of the surrounding country, his blue eyes narrowed with thought.

Before him the rugged canyon, shadowy now in the late afternoon light, led into the heart of the Blues. On one hand the fringing growth of alder hid the foot of a steep talus slope like a giant mine dump; on the other, the exposed face of tilted rock strata stretched away in a broken gray wall until it was lost in the dark of the higher ridges. In the fissures of the wall stunted pines and squaw-berry bushes

were growing. The trail itself lay through a grassy park, following the mountain creek which leaped and brawled and foamed over the boulders of its narrow bed. Beyond, the trail climbed an out-thrust shoulder of the talus slope; then it disappeared on its way to Tired Lady pass, high up there on the gray backbone above timberline. There was no movement of life anywhere on the broad sweep of the range.

Steve Rand shook his head, perplexed. "Loosene it, Tony," he muttered, "I sure feel somethin' funny here, and yet there ain't. That's reason enough why you and me'll act like there was. We'll make camp early, hawse."

He slid his foot back into the stirrup and caught up the reins. The bay raised its head from the mountain grass reluctantly, then, making up its mind to get the day's work over as soon as possible, took up the trail at a rapid running walk. Steve loosened the saddle gun in its sheath under his left knee, hitched the holster of his Colt a bit forward, and rode on, alert.

Up and down the trail climbed, sometimes bending abruptly upon itself, sometimes narrowed to a bare passageway between overhanging rocks, sometimes widening and growing faint as the canyon

broadened into a green-carpeted park. In one of these Steve Rand, drew rein just before sundown. There was abundant feed for the bay gelding; the rock wall gave protection to the east; plenty of dry wood littered the banks of the creek; and best of all, a tiny trickle from a fissure in the ledge filled a rock basin beneath it with clear spring water.

The bay gelding pawed the sod with one front hoof. "You're right, Tony," agreed his rider. "She's a right good-lookin' camp. I add my vote to yours, and we stop right here."

But as he dismounted to free the cinch Steve shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. "Must be gettin' old!" he muttered. "Reg'lar Aunt Mary, feelin' spooky for no reason at all. Oh, well, we'll take a look 'round after supper; then we'll just forget it."

Out where the grass was heaviest he picketed his horse. Then he selected a cleared spot close to the rock wall, unrolled his light saddle pack, set out the battered frying pan and coffee pot, and last of all turned his attention to the building of a diminutive cook-fire. Ten minutes later he settled himself to eat, and as he satisfied his hunger he puzzled over the events of the day.

Even the cow-town into which he had ridden late in the morning had seemed queer. Too many loafers about the saloons for that time in the season. Too many saddle ponies bunched in the corral behind the Elk Horn feed barn. And his efforts to scrape acquaintance—as he looked back now he certainly had been given the cold shoulder. Nothing rough, but, come to think of it, mighty suspicious. The lanky, poverty-stricken homesteader at whose shack he had stopped to ask directions, he, too, had been mighty close mouthed. Steve recalled his parting words:

"But o' course, if yuhr plumb set on takin' that Tired Lady trail—— Wus I you, I'd sure go round by way o' Dickman. 'Tain't but a day's ride fudder no-how."

Steve rather wished that he had followed the man's advice.

What was Steve Rand doing there in that canyon of the Blues? To make a long

story as short as possible, he had received his discharge from the Marines at the close of the Great War with a fervent resolve to settle down on the home ranch in southern Texas and never take another unnecessary step as long as he lived. The resolve had held good until his father's death, two years later. Then the cumulative effect of those months in the service had struck him full force. Steve developed a bad case of itching foot—that longing to go over the rim and find out what lies beyond. He sold off his best cattle, leased the ranch for a year, threw a saddle on his top-horse, and started north with the spring.

Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Wyoming—he had savored to the limit the freedom of the range rider who doesn't know where he is going, doesn't care where he is going, and doesn't expect to get there, anyhow. Steve was foot-free, twenty-four, clear of eye, sinewed like a plainsman. In the pocket of his coat, carefully wrapped in oilcloth, were his bank letter and his still more useful letter of introduction from his neighbor, Capt. Dutton of the Rangers, a letter which had brought him many new friends and much welcome entertainment along his devious route. Now, in Montana, for the first time in his trip Steve was worried.

When he knocked the last of the bacon grease into the embers of his fire, stood up and stretched himself, all the canyon was growing dark about him.

"Now for dishes," he soliloquized, "then a little look-see round, and then hit the hay. Only I'm sleepin' in the brush yonder, not near this fire. A man don't feel like I do for nothin'."

So saying, he gathered up his eating utensils and made his way down to the gravelly creek bed, where he rubbed them in the sand till they shone clean. He was kneeling over the rushing water when the faintest trace of a strange sound reached his ears, the sound a pebble might make under a careless foot. He looked up quickly, nerves crawling. But though he listened carefully, breathlessly, he heard nothing more; and he bent to his task again, convinced that his fears had played him a trick.

When he next looked up, he saw the head and shoulders of a man shadowed above the great boulder on the opposite bank, and the glint of metal down the face of the boulder could mean but one thing.



Steve Rand was covered!

The hand which slid toward his Colt came to a sudden stop. An instant later it had joined its mate, as high above his head as he could

reach. Slowly Steve rose to his feet, the empty coffee pot clattering on the stones beside him.

"Well," he said quietly, "I got 'em up, mister. What's the game, anyways?"

There was no answer. The dark figure across the creek held motionless. Were his senses playing him false? Steve repeated his question.

And then, even as he started forward, there came the quick swish of a rope; and the boy, jerked backward by an irresistible force, crashed down among the rocks in a stunning fall that sent great streamers of red flashing across the blackness of the distant slopes.

HIS head was wet, when he began to regain consciousness, wet and cold and aching terribly. There was a salty taste in his mouth, too; the taste of blood. He attempted to move, and groaned with pain. His arms were pinioned close to his sides by a constricting band that made breathing almost impossible. His eyes, opening, caught the flare of a match.

"He's comin' to!" said a voice. "Give 'im another hatful, Jake."

The sudden flood of icy cold water that sluiced over his face and chest brought him to a sitting posture, gasping. A hand thrust him roughly back.

"Don't be in no hurry, feller," said a second voice. "We got yuh where we wants yuh, an' we aims tuh keep yuh there. What's that letter say, huh?"

Another match had flared in the darkness. "He's the guy, all right," came the

answer. "Looky here, Jake—Texas Ranger, he is. It's a letter from his cap'n. Yessuh he's the bird the chief was wor-ryin' over!"

Steve's head was clearing slowly. Yes, his coat was gone; and they had searched his pockets. Whoever had bound his arms had done a thorough job of it. Already the hard rope was cutting into his flesh. Dog-gone it, this was what comes of laughing off a danger hunch! Well—

He became aware that his captors were tending over him. A heavy boot drove into his ribs, and in words which left no doubt as to their meaning he was told to crawl up onto his especially condemned feet "an' git a-movin'."

Stumbling, hauled by the rope, driven forward by the heavy boot, Steve crawled up the bank and staggered toward the glowing embers of his fire. It was a trifle lighter there. He saw that his captors were roughly dressed, sturdy ruffians, in the broad hats of the range country. One, he thought, was bearded; the face of the other he could not make out.

Then the bearded one walked away, only to return shortly leading the bay gelding. Steve was pushed up into the saddle, and his feet were lashed together beneath the cinch.

"Now," they told him, "we're ridin'. An' y' better not try nothin' funny 'cause yuhr liable tuh git pulled plumb in two pieces. See!"

Then they, too, mounted; and one—Jake, Steve thought—caught the reins of the bay gelding, leading out into the darkness. The other rode in the rear, holding the loose end of the rope that bound the boy's arms. Soon Steve felt that they were climbing a steep gradient, back into the heart of the hills.

An hour passed, while the three rode in silence. He guessed that they were keeping to the main trail, for the footing seemed fairly easy, though they were continually twisting about, rubbing his knees against rocks or brushing through stiff pinegrowth. As he rode he worked at his bonds, hopefully at first, then with the dogged courage of despair. Not an inch of slack could he gain.

At last he knew by the sounds of the

hoofs that he was in an open space. Then came an abrupt climb which suggested a side trail. The leader's horse nickered gently, and his rider, with an oath, jerked him to silence. Far ahead the yellow square of a window shone through the darkness.

Another quarter mile, on a trail that pitched slightly downward, and the leader raised his voice in a shout of warning.

"Hello, the house! Jake an' the Swede comin' with a prisoner!"

A door flung open, letting loose a flood of light by which Steve caught a quick impression of his surroundings. On his left a corral, in which saddle stock milled restlessly, led up to the very wall of a log building. Close by the wall a gate had been cut in the pole fence. On the right an open grass slope rose abruptly. Beyond, darkness. Now the bright oblong of the doorway was filled with crowding figures.

"Bring him in!"

"Let's see what yuh got, Jake!"

Men were pressing about him. They freed his feet, jerked him from the saddle,



and shoved him, reeling, across the threshold into the blinding glare of a dozen oil lamps. With the speed of one whose life depends upon it Steve took note of the interior.

It was a long, low room with a triple tier of bunks built almost the whole length of the farther side. Between the bunks and the end wall was a rough sink, and next to that a smoking cook stove at which a frowsy cook, his apron spotted with grease, stirred at a steaming kettle. Broken chairs—a card table littered with the pasteboards. Another long table, covered with a torn oil cloth, was set with heavy dishes, ready for a meal.

At the head of that table sat a man the sight of whom sent a chill of numb terror to Steve Rand's heart. His round head was hairless even to the absence of eyebrows, a lack which gave a strangely babyish expression to the pasty countenance, and the great body sunk in the wooden

chair seemed heavy—without bony structure, flaccid like the body of a toad. He sat motionless now, apparently immersed in thought as the shouting, gesticulating mob pushed their captive before him. Then his cold, triangular eyes opened slowly as he fixed them on Steve's face.

"Here's the guy, Chief! We got 'im when he wus makin' camp. An' here's the letter which proves it."

Without reply the amorphous "chief" took the paper and read it with care, one stubby forefinger following along the written lines. At last he broke silence, in a voice as flat and cold as the speech of a sleepwalker.

"So you're the detective from the Cattle Association, are yuh? All right; get back on your job, you two. The rest of yuh, take this feller over the ridge an'—cut his throat for him. We don't bother to shoot spies."

Spies! Steve opened his mouth to shout his innocence. They were crazy! He had only—only— Then he realized the hopelessness of the task, and set his teeth.

From the throng that crowded about him came murmurs of approval, negated only by a protest from the slovenly cook:

"Aw, Chief!" he whined. "I been a-holdin' back this mulligan two hours a'ready, waitin' till yuh got home. Leave him be till after supper, kain't yuh? I won't never get these dishes done, nohow."

For an instant the room fell strangely quiet, then the great bulk of the hairless leader sprawled forward upon the table, one dirty fist extended toward the offender; and even before the voice broke out in a bull-like roar of anger Steve sensed in the sudden shrinking back of those about him something of the terror which this man inspired in his followers.

"Jest one more crack like that, Scotty, an' there'll be two throats slit, 'stead o' one. What d'yuh mean, talkin' to me like that? If there warn't some sense in what yuh said I'd bump yuh off right now, myself. We'll eat first; and for buttin' in, Scotty, I appoints yuh to do the job when we're finished. Tie that son-of-a-gun to a bunk, somebody!"

There was a breath of evident relief as Steve was whirled about and thrown back

against a bunk end. They kicked his feet from under him, sending him to the floor; then they bound him tight to the post.

"Come an' git it!" sang the cook.

Laughing, cursing, shoving one another in the horseplay of bravado, the strange company rushed for their seats at the long table. Soon they were feeding noisily.

Though he ached with pain in every nerve of his body Steve Rand's brain was working at high pressure. Lashed to the rough bunk, his arms bound to his sides, cramped by the awkward sitting posture, he thought desperately. In less than thirty minutes he was slated for death, yet somehow he no longer felt afraid. He had been in tight corners before! always there had been a way out. For the present he could do nothing, only wait, alert for any chance which might come.

He studied the dozen men seated about the long table. Without exception they were degenerates of the worst type—scum of the range, half-bloods, weaklings who had found knavery and gun play the easiest way of life, men who naturally attach themselves to an unscrupulous leader. Rustlers, stage robbers—worse, perhaps. No hope there.

As the table crossed one end of the room five of the men had their backs turned toward him. Steve had a feeling that the fact reduced his danger somewhat. The door by which he had entered was distant hardly twice his length. If he could only free himself there ought to be a chance, at least. He remembered stories in which captives had cut their bonds with broken glass—torn them apart with their teeth—burned them with flaming lamps. Not one of those devices was workable.

Minutes passed. It seemed to Steve that

he could actually hear them, thundering in his ears. He almost laughed when he realized that the sound was the beating of his own pulse.

At the disordered table



plates were being passed for a second

helping, as the aproned cook scuffled busily about. Something in the carriage of that dirty, unshaven scoundrel seemed vaguely familiar. A chance resemblance, of course, Steve thought. He was leaning against the wall, now, with a callous grin on his scrubby lips. Steve caught his eye. The grin became wider. Almost physically sick with disgust Steve turned away his head; yet it was hard to avoid that evil face.

A moment later Steve again stole a glance. The cook had not moved from his place, he was still staring at his promised victim; but this time the boy saw his glance flit toward the crapulent chief, then meet his own steadily. Again and again this happened, a strange sequence which set his alert mind wondering. He studied the man cautiously. What was—?

A flame of hope shot through him from head to foot. He could barely keep from shouting aloud. For the cook's left hand hung at his side, and the forefinger of that hand was playing nervously back and forth—right—left—pause.

A signal? It cost nothing to take a chance, Steve decided. He moved his own left forefinger from right to left.

With a thrill of joy he saw the cook turn his head slightly, twice; a negative motion, but proof that his reply had been noted. Again the man's finger jerked—right—left—pause.

Something in that particular repetition which he must interpret, then? Steve bent all his energies to the task. What was it? What could it be? The sweat stood on his forehead; his throat grew dry and painful. And slowly the long room faded away as the boy's mind tracked back over his past experience; only that moving finger remained in focus, that signal calling impatiently, demanding his recognition.

Of what did it remind him? Something waving right and left. That was it—*flags*! Like a picture on the silver screen it came before him, the sunny, broad drill ground of his rookie days in the Marine Corps. Far away against a background of trees, a red flag with a white center flapping briskly to and fro. The wig-wag! And the language of the wig-wag was—International Morse.

Steve forgot the riotous crowd at the

table, forgot even his distrust of the slovenly cook, the man appointed to draw a knife across his throat less than a quarter hour hence. He forced the memories that came flooding, with every fiber of his being, till the object of his search stood clearly before him; that page of "Service Regulations," which bore the code. There they were, letters and figures in neat columns!

What was the signal? Right was *one*, left was *two*. Twelve meant *a*, and *a* meant "acknowledge."

He was breathing in gasps, like an exhausted runner, as he attempted to send his answer. Three times to the left—222; then left-right-left again—212. "OK."

The cook nodded. The forefinger began to move once more, slowly, that Steve might make no mistake. Left, right, left, right, and a pause: 2121, that was *j*. 112-*u*, 22-*m*, 1221-*p*. Steadily the message went on: *Jump—for—the—door—when—I—whistle—"Hinky."*

The moving finger stopped.

"OK" signalled Steve again. There was no more.

Feverishly he tried his bonds. Still fast! He knew that if he would follow instructions they must in some way be loosened, yet he was as helpless as ever. As he labored, straining carefully lest his movements should attract attention, he saw the cook leave his place by the wall to circulate ostentatiously about the table, removing soiled dishes here, collecting food there. And as he worked he jested laboriously with the eaters.

"Hurry up there, Shorty. Anybody'd think yuh 'ain't never et nothin' but cow-fodder. I got a job tuh do, and I kain't wait round all night tuh do it, neither. What's that, Three-toe? More punk? Gosh! Well, here she is; an' that's all you'll git to-night."

He sliced the bread with a great carving knife and slammed the loaded plate down upon the oil cloth. For a moment most of the crew were watching him. He held up the knife and ran his thumb lightly along its gleaming edge. "That's the baby'll do the work!" he giggled. Then he turned, and shuffled over to the bunk where Steve sat bound. A youthful outlaw at the far

side of the table found his view obstructed and rose to watch.

Crouching, the cook thrust forward the knife till the point touched Steve's throat. "There," he growled, "what d' yuh think o' that, boy? Plenty good fer spies, that is. Jest lean forward, will yuh? Jest once!"

The chief crashed a heavy fist on the table. "Quit it, Scotty," he ordered. "Wait till we're through, I tell yuh."

With a growl of disgust the cook turned toward the table; and as he faced the company his knife hand dropped behind him.

Steve felt the binding ropes give way. How many of the coils had been cut he



did not know; every strand that held, even for an instant, was a mortal danger to the plan. Slowly, carefully, he set to work again, testing them out.

His ally, the cook, was moving about the sink now, whistling softly through his teeth. A moment later he broke off, edged over to the table, and slapped the nearest of the company on the shoulder.

"Hey, Stub," he pleaded, "sneak down t' tuh spring an' git a couple o' pails o' water, will yuh? I'm plumb tired out."

There was a roar of laughter as Stub profanely refused, nor did the cook have any better luck on a second attempt.

"Yuh ain't done nothin' all day," they told him. "Git it y'self." And the amorphous chief added his bit. "Bein' the main guy in the ceremony what's comin' don't let yuh out of yo' reg'lar job, none whatever, Scotty."

Grumbling, but obedient, the cook picked up a pail. When he stepped out into the darkness he left the door well ajar behind him.

Steve, holding close to the bunk end, felt the sweat roll down his face, stinging in his eyes, as he realized that the moment was close at hand. Some at the table were watching him idly. He let his head fall

forward on his chest in the attitude of exhaustion, but not so low but that he could watch the villainous group from the corners of his eyes.

He guessed from what he could see that it was only a matter of minutes, now, before they were through eating. Most of them were armed, he knew. Of those on his own side of the table he had little to fear; he could be through the door before they could possibly get into action—if his bonds would only come loose! As for the others—well, he must take the chance. What if the cook—how in thunder did he know the wig-wag code, anyhow? And what made him think Steve knew it? What if the cook were doublecrossing him? What if he should leap for the door only to meet that keen knife waiting for him in the dark?

Out in the night, softly at first, began a tuneless whistle, barely audible above the tumult of conversation and the clatter of dishes. The hairless leader had leaned back in his chair, full to repletion. With infinite caution Steve worked his feet in under him, squatting on his heels.

The tuneless whistle drew nearer. It ceased for a moment, then broke out again, loud and clear, in the strains of the old song of the overseas service, "Hinky Dinky Parlez Vous."

Steve drew a long breath, leaned boldly forward against his bonds, felt them give! Then he was writhing, twisting on the floor. A single coil held for one split second, tripping him; but he fought loose even as pandemonium broke out in the smoky room. He heard the crash of a falling chair, yells of rage, and the stunning roar of a gun. Again he dived, rolling desperately for the sill, bruising his shoulder on the stone beneath.

A hand reached from the darkness and jerked him to his feet; then he was swung toward the corral gate and hurled against a saddled horse.

"Quick!" yelled a voice in his ear. "Git on that hawse an' drive the cavy down the trail—gate's open at the lower end. I'll hold these—"

Already Steve was up. As his mount reared a six-gun spoke beside him—again, and again, and again. In the flash of the

discharge he saw the white-aproned cook, crouching low, his horse wheeling restlessly on the reins. Steve saw two black figures sprawled grotesquely in the brightly lighted doorway. Then he was pushing the frightened cavy before him toward the lower end of the corral.

A quick *mêlée* of squealing ponies, and they were through the gate, thundering down an invisible trail somewhere in the darkness. He followed blindly, reins loose, his heart pounding in his throat. Something white forged up on his left.

"Keep a-goin'!" yelled the cook. "Couldn't hold 'em no longer; they put the lights out. Follow the cavy close."

Behind them a fusillade of shots rang out, and Steve heard a bullet spit and whine overhead.

"They's a gun hung on yo' horn. Git her loose. Y' may need her when we ketch up with Jake an' the Swede—if the cavy don't run 'em down."

Steve found his gun. He could see better, now that his eyes had become accustomed to the night. There were stars above him, and a faint glow in the sky over the black ridge to his left suggested that a waning moon was rising. The terrible strain of watching death's approach was giving way, now, to the thrill of battle.

"Pull off that apron, man!" he called to his companion. "They can see it a mile away."

He heard the cook grunt. A moment later the fluttering white thing was gone.



On they thundered, mounts stumbling, catching their feet only to stumble again on the rough trail. Steve was forced to give all his attention to the animal he was riding. And then the cavy bunched, holding back upon them.

"Shove 'em!" yelled the cook. "We're up with them two. Shoot, kid! Shoot!"

Together their guns roared out and the cavy, crazed with terror, once more plunged forward. Up from the trail ahead

came a yell of anger, then the quick *one-two-three* of a .44. Fifty yards more and Steve's mount leaped sideways, almost unseating him. He caught a glimpse of a fallen horse, kicking wildly. Then up at his right, against the brightness of the stars, he saw a moving blot of darkness. He fired twice, and the blot was gone.

No more gun play now, only breakneck riding after the cavvy ahead. And then they were out of the canyon at last, out on the broad sweep of the night plains, and the cavvy was gone, scattered to the four winds. Wearied, they drew rein to ease their panting mounts.

For a while they sat silent, these two who had come through death together. It was the cook who spoke first.

"Got a cigarette, buddy?" he asked. "Honest, I plumb forgot to bring the makin's."

So they lit up, laughing awkwardly as the tension broke. The question that had boiled in Steve's mind for all that last hectic hour came crowding to his lips.

"Man," he pleaded, "I'll say 'thank you' later on; but right now, for gosh sake tell me something. Who are you, and why was that gang so doggone hospitable to a poor li'l stranger like me, and how-come you know the wig-wag, and—?"

The cook chuckled. "Wait on!" he objected. "Give a guy a chance. That was Tray-o'-Spades Charlie's bunch, if you must know; an' being as yuh come from the South I'll tell you they're the worst crowd o' rustlers, an' bank stick-ups, an' stage robbers in the Northwest. When they aimed to cut your throat they were actin' plumb civilized—for them. An' as for me—haven't you ever seen me before? Think."

"I been thinking," Steve confessed. "You sure looked some familiar, but I can't get you located. Give me a lead, can't you?"

"Well," said the cook, "where were you

about July 19th, 1918? Personal, I was lyin' outside a shell hole near Vierzy; an' one o' my buddies in the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, an ornery sergeant by the name o' Rand, he pulled me down in that shell hole an' tied up my leg where a piece o' shell had gone through. So tonight when I got the job of cuttin' my old buddy's throat I sort of thought—

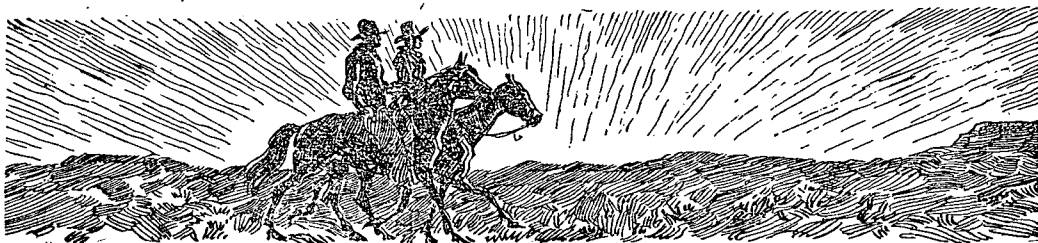
"Tommy Knight!" Steve shouted. "You darned ol' leatherneck! So that's where you learned the wig-wag. I'm sure glad I haven't raised a beard since last time you saw me; never would have known you in the world. But how in blazes did you get mixed up with a bunch like that?"

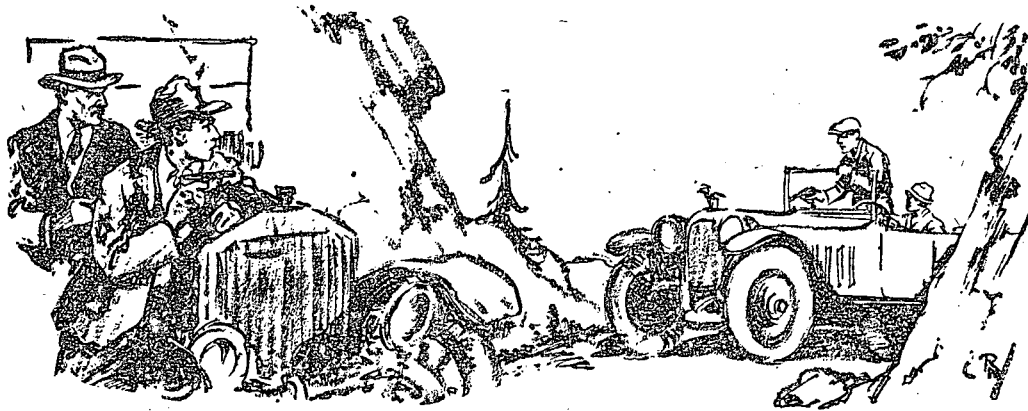
Again the cook chuckled. "I'm the detective from the Cattle Association they were watchin' for," he confessed. "Been with 'em two months. Kind of hated to see my own throat cut by proxy, too. There's a posse o' deputies waitin' orders at Bland—you must have come through there this mornin'—an' another posse across the pass at Fontain's. They were goin' to close in when I gave the word. You kind of hurried things, but those guys can't get out o' the hills afore daylight, not on foot. We got 'em like rats in a trap.

"Let's get ridin', kid. There's a ranch couple o' miles ahead, where I can telephone from. You'd better hole-up there an' rest a little, then—

Steve Rand grunted. "Tommy Knight," he growled, "those crooks got my hawse, and he's the best hawse I ever owned, and they darn' near spoiled my vacation trip, too. Beginning right now I'm a deputy sheriff. Doggone it, Tom, did you honest think I'd miss a fight?"

For answer the ex-cook dug his knuckles hard into Steve Rand's aching ribs. "You darned old leatherneck, yourself!" he shouted. "Pick up that cayuse an' let's be goin'. The Marines have landed—with both feet!"





THE BEST MAN

By E. CHARLES VIVIAN

Author of "Getting Your Man," "Freedom of the Gang," etc.

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS CONCEAL THE SPEED LINES OF A CAR; THE DOPE TRAIL THAT LEADS ACROSS THE BORDER; THE IRON THAT LIES UNDER A TRAMP'S RAGGED OUTFIT, OR THE SECRET OF A WOMAN'S LIFE

THE little town of Four Bits drowsed in hot sunlight when Joe Hardy tramped in from the south, hobo-fashion, his worldly goods tied in a dingy handkerchief which reposed on his back, held there by the end of a stick thrust over his shoulder and through the knot in the handkerchief. He passed up the one street of the town, slouching along in the dust; an old rancher on the veranda of Hedges' Hotel, dozing in the shade, hardly opened his eyes to see Joe pass in. Loafers were plentiful enough, and this one looked too frayed and rusty to be interesting.

Joe slouched along the entry, found an open door, and entered what had once been the bar of Hedges' outfit, before the law decreed that all drinks should be soft. The bar itself remained to testify to past glories, and Dan Hedges, behind it, tried to keep awake and read the *Border Herald*; over by the partition wall four cowboys whiled away the hours at poker until Kate Rainer's dance saloon across the way should open at sunset. By the window sat a keen-faced, military looking man—though not in any kind of uniform—amusing himself at solitaire.

Joe slouched up to the bar, deposited his bundle on the floor, and leaned on the pol-

ished metal till Hedges looked up. Then he nodded, and winked, and smacked his lips.

"Whaddye want?" Hedges asked sharply.

Joe removed his hand from his pocket and held it up. A twenty-dollar gold piece stuck mysteriously to his thumb, and he smacked his lips again.

Hedges shook his head. "Not on your life!" he said, with a momentary glance at the solitaire player by the window. "Where'd you plant the corpse after the robbery?"

Joe planked the coin down on the counter. "Lemonade," he said, disregarding the query. "Weather's enough to knock a buzzard cuckoo."

Hedges produced the drink. "You do look a bit queer," he remarked, as he turned to the cash register for change.

"Hey!" said Joe angrily. "Reckon you gotta insult an honest man when you see one?"

HEDGES turned and put down the little heap of change. "No," he replied unmovedly, and resumed his seat and paper.

Joe gave him a look which implied that he could have said much, but he refrained from further argument, took up his glass,