



Author of "The World Next Door," "The Measure of a Man," etc.

THE young man, his slenderness accentuated by ravages of alcohol, sank upon a chair. Hoarsely, terrifiedly he whispered:

"I've killed her! I've killed her!"

"You haven't killed her," retorted the bronze-faced doctor, "but it won't be healthy for you to run away. They'll have you swingin' from a Montana telegraph-pole by sunset."

"It was booze did it!" wept the thoroughly sobered, thoroughly miserable young man.

"Booze! Where did you get booze? You're posted in every saloon in the county."

"Art give it to me. Art said I'd kept away from it so long, it was all right for me to have one little drink. Then I had to have another."

"He let you have them?"

"He let me have them! I went mad. I came home. I broke down the door. I struck her—"

The old doctor paused in his desperate work of keeping the pathetically damaged little wife in a world which had proved very dreary, very hard, very disappointing.

"Instead of running from this," advised the doctor, "steer your pony for Sago City and see Lawyer Sanders. He can help you because he can sympathize. He came out here five years ago, a drunken sot. Where you were weak, he was strong. He cured himself. For five years Art has sworn to 'get' him. Not enough of Sanders' family fortune has been dribbling into Art's till. This is a case at law. Go quick before it is lynch law. Meanwhile I'll do what I can for the wife!"

UP AND down the floor of a very modern lawyer's office in a very modern Montana, the handsome Henry Sanders strode with a chiseled frown.

"Did any one see Art give you this drink?"

"I guess not," the boy replied.

"Thought so," grunted Sanders. "That's Art's business—pulling down men who are trying to straighten up and be rid of the stuff."

"I've tried to straighten up," wailed the boy. "I've tried and I've tried."

Sanders forebore to lecture. Having been in Jimmy Baggs' place he knew that lecturing did no good. Instead, he took from his hip a beautiful gun. He crossed over and sat on the edge of the plateau desk.

"See this gun?" he asked. "It's the most wonderful gun in the world, boy. Why? It cured me of drink. Once back East I took too much. My friends called me the Human Sponge—not because I absorbed such quantities of the stuff, but because I submerged myself in it. They had to tear me off the bottom with a hook. I'm not joking, son. I was in a bad way.

"Finally I nearly killed a man. I had to disappear. My folks sent me West. Coming out I thought the thing over. I wanted something to take my mind off booze. I got it. On the train was a man who told me about the old days of the West. His tales put some ambition into me. I would be the best shot in Montana. I bought this gun.

"When I felt the longing for a spree coming on I rode over the foot-hills and practised shooting with

this gun. It took me out in the open—away from the chance to get the stuff—for shooting in town is popular no more in the sagebrush country. The thing was: it took my mind off booze and put it on something else till the fever passed. So I cured myself from the inside, instead of hearing lectures on Francis Willard. That's the way every man must cure himself, Jimmy—from the inside."

Sanders fondled the gun.

"I know you're the best shot in Montana," acknowledged the lad.

"When I'd controlled myself, I took up law, built up this practice. But Art still swears the day will come when he'll get me. Drink drives me mad the same as it does you, Jimmy, so I'll take your case because indirectly, it's my own."

AT TWENTY minutes past eleven of the same Montana forenoon, a hatless, breathless, white-faced youth banged into the office of Sheriff Cole. He cried:

"All hell's broke loose down to Art's! There's a gun-fight on and it's a walloper!"

A dull, sullen roar came on the droning sunshine, punctuated by three sharp cracks. For the first time the grizzled old sheriff noted the street without, deserted.

"All Sago's down there. That roar is the crowd, excited!"

The sheriff lifted two ugly revolvers from a drawer of his desk. They were the guns of the Western yesteryear. It had been a long time since their wicked muzzles were aimed at men.

The side street connecting Main with the depot was sardined with humanity. Through it plowed the man of law, profanity and devastation behind him.

Midway of this street some one in the crowd shouted and the words struck the kindly old sheriff harder than a knotted fist crashed against his forehead:

*"Art's got Sanders!"*

From the open square at the end of the street, across the tracks to the one-storied saloon, was a bullet-swept area of destruction where a sizzling noon sun beat down.

The plate-glass front of this saloon had been shattered. Out of the low-studded door drifted smoke of exploded cartridges. Even as the sheriff paused, a man staggered out, clutched at the door-casing and fell on his face. Two more shots banged in the dark interior. Came a long, agonized cry, a

plea for mercy, the tinkle of glass, another shot, the whole trailing off into inarticulate blubber.

"Sanders went to see Art about a case at law," cried a breathless barber. "One of my men was gettin' a drink and saw the whole thing. Art doped the soft drinks, little at a time. Sanders tumbled off the wagon without knowing it. Thought he was fixin' up the matter all sociable with Art and every drink was makin' him worse. Art got a good stiff whisky down him and the man's gone mad. He's shootin' Art into little pieces!"

SAGO CITY was in an uproar. Stores had been locked. Proprietors had bolted for the depot. A mob surged dangerously near the limit of the buildings' protection. Above the bedlam came the steady paragraphing of shots from the depths of the depot saloon.

One of these hit an arc lamp. The globe crashed in a thousand slivers on the asphalt. Another struck the window in a block on the far side the square and bored within to do what damage might later be discovered.

Something like a sob escaped the sheriff. He knew the heroic fight that Sanders had made to keep clear of the hellish saloon-man's machinations. There was but one redeeming feature. Art might have made good his threat. But within those dark depths was being enacted a frightful retribution.

With a juggernaut of emotion, the old sheriff saw and understood. But there was his duty. The glint of the old fighting West leaped in his eye. He faced the danger of the situation with the battle-light on his features that will ever enshrine the land of the copper sage in song and story.

As he made the depot tracks in safety and headed for the door, an ashen-faced young man stumbled out. One arm hung useless. The hand of the other was held up tragically to keep the sheriff away.

"You ain't goin' in!" declared Jimmy Baggs in a terrible whisper.

"I'm an officer of the law," swore the sheriff. "I'm in office to stop murder—and I'll do it!"

One look at Jimmy Baggs told the sheriff the boy was hysterical.

"Of the law of Montana," mouthed the boy, "but not of the retribution bein' carried out in there. Art fed him 'fixed' drinks—same as he fed me—and he's brought his punishment on himself. Let him

suffer!"

The sheriff paused, thinking dynamically.

The spectator who had been in the saloon when the shooting started, who had been hit and stumbled from the building, had drawn a gun in his flight. Dragging a damaged limb as he pulled himself out of danger, he left the weapon behind him on the sidewalk cinders. The boy saw it. In an instant it was in his twitching fingers.

As the sheriff debated, the boy aimed the gun. Only the sheriff's guardian angel held Jimmy's finger from tightening on the trigger.

"You're not goin' in!" the boy declared in a white whisper.

"Anybody else in there but Sanders and Art?"

"No."

The sheriff turned abruptly and walked back across the tracks.

It was not because he feared the gun the youngster aimed in his hand.

THE crowd saw a strange thing. Sheriff King Cole, bravest man left from a West which has gone, deliberately turned and struck a Sago City police officer who had summoned courage to charge where he saw the sheriff leading. Maybe it was a remark the officer made as he saw the sheriff returning.

But before explanations were in order, a white-clothed, bloody figure stumbled from the fatal door.

Before he could gain the safety of the corner, another flash belched in the dimness. A leg doubled under the punished barkeeper. He lurched and fell against the boy. The sheriff started back.

"Save me!" pleaded the man, his features purple with pain and terror.

"I will not!" retorted the sheriff. "He was pullin' himself from the gutter and you deliberately kicked him back in for his money!"

"I'm goin' to die!" moaned the liquor man in agony.

"You won't die," snarled the sheriff. "You're too dirty to die! Poor Sanders!"

Sanders had appeared at the door. The panic-stricken crowd left coverts and fled in terror at sight of him. He was reloading the big weapon with pink cylinders of destruction. He turned it, brought

it to his hip, tightened on the trigger. The scarlet semaphore fell with a crash.

"I'm besh shot in Montana!" he sang. "Dirty shkunk—where ish he? Sherved poshted—Jimmy drinks!"

Came a blubber of abject terror from the man at the sheriff's feet.

"Oh, there you ish!" Sanders declared. "Wash me kill you!"

Then, paradoxical to relate, it was none other than Jimmy Baggs who shrieked:

"Gad—you mustn't! It's murder!" And Jimmy Baggs threw himself upon the wounded and helpless barkeeper's assailant.

AS A wonderful twilight descended on the Montana foothills that evening, Jimmy Baggs was sobbing by the bed of his living wife. In many pauses he told her the story.

He ended the tale by drawing forth Sanders' gun.

"He gave it to me. He said he liked the spirit I showed in keepin' him from perhaps killin' the barkeep. He was our worst enemy, Art was! But, oh Mayme, I simply couldn't see him shoot at a man that was down!"

They were alone in the room. The boy was on his knees.

"He gave it to me and told me to use it as he had done—to cure myself. When the fever for drink comes on I'm goin' over the foot-hills, far away, and do revolver practise till the hunger's worn off."

"Would poor Mr. Sanders really have shot the barkeeper?" asked the frail and broken woman, toying with the boy's hair.

"Mayme," he whispered, "swear by all that's holy you'll never tell. He shot the legs off Art in punishment. He wouldn't have gone further, anyhow. He dumped all those doped drinks in the sawdust. The spree was to blind Sago City from punishing him for takin' the law into his own hands. There wasn't any other law to 'get' Art for draggin' weak fellers down. The minute I stopped him from what I thought was goin' to be Art's murder, I saw it was all a brilliant piece of actin'—for you and me and the little stranger that's comin'!"