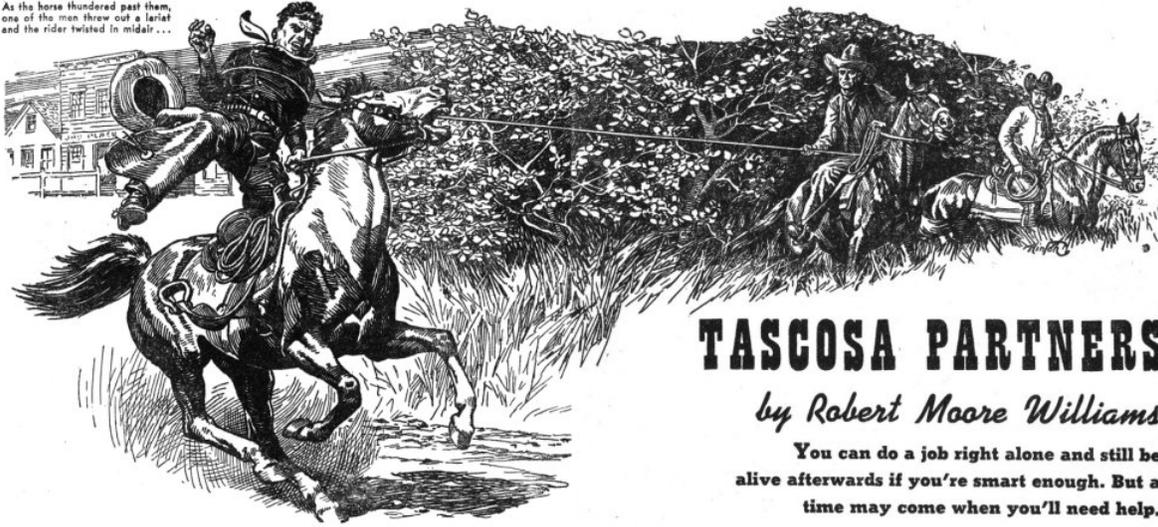


As the horse thundered past them,
one of the men threw out a lariat
and the rider twisted in midair...



TASCOSA PARTNERS

by Robert Moore Williams

You can do a job right alone and still be
alive afterwards if you're smart enough. But a
time may come when you'll need help.

You can do a job right alone and still be alive afterwards if you're smart enough. But a time may come when you'll need help.

Jones, his three partners, watched him as he strode across the room and took the double barrel sawed-off shotgun from the antler prongs on the wall. Opening the breech, he slipped two buckshot-loaded shells into the barrels, put four more shells into his pockets. He took two blankets from the empty bunk and wrapped them around the shotgun. Then, using slip knots, he tied both ends of the blankets with a piece of rope, slipped them over his back, the rope coming across his chest.

The blankets looked like an ordinary bedding roll. A buffalo hunter, a wandering cowboy, even an outlaw riding the long trail, might carry a bedroll like this. The shotgun in the blankets was completely concealed.

His partners watched him in speculative silence. He took a box of .45 caliber pistol cartridges from the shelf over the fireplace and filled the empty loops in his pistol belt. He checked his gun, made certain that the barrel was perfectly clean and that the cylinder turned smoothly and easily. Then he stepped out the door. When he returned a few

moments later he was rubbing mud on the walnut grips of his pistol.

THE mud was an artistic touch. He smeared it liberally on the handle of the gun, slid the pistol into its holster, looked at Jones lying on the bed.

"What was the name of that gambler who held you up?"

Cal Jones tried to lift his bandaged head from the pillow. The effort was beyond his strength. His left arm was broken and there was a slug through his right lung, both relics of the town of Tascosa.

"Hewitt," Cal Jones whispered. "He's a—little man—with a crooked nose."

"Where does he hang out?"

"When I first saw him—he was playing for the house—in the Red Dog saloon. I guess that's his hang out."

"You sure he's the man?"

"I'm—dead certain of it. His first shot—knocked me off my horse and broke my arm. He came out from behind the bushes—and I got a good look at him—before he shot

the second time. He's the man all right."

"And how much did he get?"

"Thirty-eight hundred. It was all—in twenty-dollar gold pieces. That's the way—the construction gang at Trinidad paid me—when I delivered the steers to them."

"Thanks," Jorgenson said. He picked up his hat, turned toward the door.

"Wait," Cal Jones whispered from the bed.

Jorgenson hesitated. "What is it, Cal?"

"Wait until tomorrow," Cal Jones begged. "I'll have some of my strength back then—and I'll go with you."

Cal Jones must have known that tomorrow might never come for him. He had been left for dead in the road and his life still hung in the balance. In spite of this, he wanted to go to Tascosa with Jorgenson.

Jones' request startled Jorgenson. More than that, it somehow sent a warm glow through the big man. Near death, Jones was still trying to help him. Jorgenson appreciated the effort, but he shook his head.

"Tomorrow may be too late, Cal," he said gently. "Hewitt may be gone by then. I can't wait, Cal. I've got to go today."

"Then—I'll go with you, now."

Jones tried to sit up in bed. Sim Sebastion and Ron Carter, sitting beside him, hastily but gently grabbed his shoulders. Jones thrust a foot over the edge of the bed.

"No, Cal," Jorgenson said.

"I got us into this," Jones argued.

"You can't help an ambush, Cal." Although Jorgenson didn't say it, he had the feeling that anybody who ran into an ambush was not up on his toes.

"But we need that money bad," Jones argued.

"And I'll get it for us, Cal."

"I'm your partner. It's my right to help you."

Jorgenson shook his head. Jones tried to thrust his other foot over the edge of the

bed. The effort was too much for him. He coughed heavily, his strength failed. Sebastion and Carter hastily helped him to lie back down. Jorgenson went quickly out of the cabin, closed the door behind him.

He knew Cal Jones was a hopeless fool for trying to help him in his present condition but Jones' desire to help was a warm and friendly thing.

THERE were eight horses in the corral. Jorgenson looked them over carefully. He knew that the man who rode a good horse into Tascosa was taking a chance of having it stolen if left unguarded for a moment. He put his rope on the sorriest-looking mount in the bunch, an animal so nearly worthless that even the lowest horse thief would not stoop to steal it. He was tightening the cinches on his heavy silver-mounted saddle when his two partners emerged from the cabin. He watched them walk toward him.

Sim Sebastion was thin and slender. His frosty blue eyes were as bright as ever but the stoop of age was beginning to appear in his back. Sebastion wasn't a young man any longer. He walked with the shuffling gait of a man who has spent much of his life in the saddle.

Ron Carter was much younger and much bigger. Carter was as strong as a mule but like that animal, he was also heavy and slow-moving.

Neither an old man nor a slow-moving man would be able to help Jorgenson in Tascosa. He waited until they came up to him.

"We think we better go with you," Sim Sebastion said bluntly.

"That's right," Ron Carter nodded in agreement. "There ain't no law in Tascosa. There never has been. The town is a damned sight too tough for one man."

"I'm not going to fight the town," Jorgenson answered. "I'm going after one man."

He swung into the saddle.

“Jorge!” Sebastion said sharply.

“I can do the job,” Jorgenson said. “You two stay here and take care of Cal.”

Touching his pony’s flank with a spur, he rode away. His two partners watched him in silence. Hard riding would get him to Tascosa by night. He wanted to reach his destination just after dark.

Tall and lean, Jorgenson had an easy seat in the saddle. Born in Missouri, he had come west when he was barely sixteen, following the growing tide of migration that was flowing into Texas after the Civil War. He had been successively a horse wrangler with the trail herds, then a regular hand, then a *segundo*, then, always moving up, he had been a full trail boss taking herds into Dodge.

Extension of the rail lines westward — construction at this time had reached Trinidad, Colorado, ten day’s ride to the north—had ended the cattle drives to Dodge. By the time this had happened, Jorgenson was ready to quit the trail. He had discovered there wasn’t much money to be made by working for the other fellow. The money lay in owning cows, not in taking care of cattle owned by somebody else. Jorgenson knew cattle. He had saved his salary. Using the money he had saved, he had gone into partnership with Sebastion, Carter, and Jones. They operated under the Z brand.

Although it had been started on a shoe-string, the Z brand gave every prospect of being a profitable venture. The four men knew cattle, his three partners had range-savvy, and they were willing to work.

CAL JONES had taken the first bunch of Z cattle north and sold them to the railroad construction gangs near Trinidad. It was a small bunch of steers but the \$3800.00 he had received for the beef represented the first income of the Z brand. That money would keep the four partners going. Without it, they

would also be going—going bust.

Jorgenson rode northeast. He crossed the two enormous gashes in the Plains known as the Palo Duro. Deer and antelope were plentiful here. He saw them on every side. There were mustangs and mavericks here too, and an occasional buffalo, haunting a half-empty water-hole or loping lazily in play across an almost barren plain.

The day of the buffalo in this section of the Great Plains was past. The buffalo hunters had thinned the huge shaggy animals to the point of virtual extinction. The buffalo hunters had moved farther west.

Jorgenson, like most ranchers and cowmen, had only contempt for the buffalo hunters. He regarded them as the off-scourings of civilization and was glad that the majority of them had moved out of the country following the game.

All of them, he knew, had not left. The worst of the lot, those too shiftless to hunt and too worthless to work, the off-scourings of the off-scourings, lived in or around Tascosa. Night was falling when Jorgenson saw the town from the distance of about a mile. His horse clip-clopped down the main street in the gathering darkness.

There was only one street in Tascosa and it was more of a road than a street. The Red Dog saloon was a one story log building on the right side of the street. Jorgenson rode past without turning his head. He stopped in front of a ramshackle log structure that had the crudely lettered sign LIVERY STABLE above the door.

“I want my horse fed,” he said to the surly proprietor.

“That’ll be a dollar, in advance,” was the answer.

Jorgenson paid the dollar. He led his horse into a stall and personally saw that the animal was fed before he sought food for himself.

There was no restaurant in Tascosa.

His own meal was two cans of sardines with cheese and crackers in the general store.

Neither the owner of the livery stable nor the proprietor of the store asked him any questions. His name, where he had come from, and where he was going, were his own business.

Nobody in Tascosa asked a stranger his business. Such questions were not considered polite. Jorgenson spent an hour munching crackers, sardines, and cheese, then went back to the livery stable where he had left his horse. He saddled and bridled the pony, rode down the main street, dismounted one door away from the Red Dog saloon. He used a slip noose to tie his horse to the hitching rack. A single jerk of the reins would free them.

He chose not to tie his pony in front of the Red Dog for two reasons. The first reason, a man mounting a horse in front of the saloon was an easy target for a shot through the two front windows of the place. The second reason for choosing this particular spot was an opening between two buildings. When he came out of the Red Dog, he could spur his horse directly through the opening between the two buildings and thus escape running down the main street where again he would be a target.

He used a slipknot in the reins because he expected to mount in one hell of a hurry when he came out of the saloon.

He checked the slipknots on his bedding roll, gave the whole roll a hitch so that it rode easily on his shoulders. He pushed open the door and entered the saloon.

THE bar was at the back. There was a side door at the right. To the left was a big cast-iron stove. The gambling tables were also to the left. Three smoky coal oil lamps shed a wan illumination over the fifteen to twenty persons present.

When he entered the door, Jorgenson

had the instant attention of perhaps two thirds of the men in the saloon. He was a stranger. These men were instantly wary of him. Here and there around the room hands moved a little closer to bolstered weapons.

Two thirds of 'em either dodgin' the law or dodgin' personal enemies, he thought. The other third aren't much worried about strangers.

He walked up to the bar.

"Whiskey," he said.

He turned to the group. "Be glad to have you gentlemen drink with me."

"Free whiskey!" the bartender sang out. "Line up and name if you want it mixed or straight."

It was an invitation that was seldom or never refused. With the exception of five men playing poker at one of the tables on the left, every person in the saloon lined up at the bar. Jorgenson glanced at the card players.

One of them was a rat-like little man with a crooked nose. Was this Hewitt? He suspected it was but he didn't know. Crooked Nose was smoking a cigar and studying the cards in his hands. Stacks of twenty-dollar gold pieces were lined up on the table in front of him.

"Aren't the card players drinkin'?" Jorgenson asked the bartender.

"Sure, they're drinkin'," the bartender answered. "Hewitt, what'll you and the boys have?"

Crooked Nose looked up. He stared at Jorgenson for a split second, then glanced back at his hand.

"We'll have cigars instead," he said.

Jorgenson had found his man. The twenty-dollar gold pieces on the table in front of Crooked Nose showed he had found the money too. He hitched his bedding roll to an easier position on his back.

"Give me the box of cigars," he said to the bartender. "I'll take the gents their smokes."

The bartender slid the box of cigars across the bar. Jorgenson picked it up. Silence fell in the room.

Most of the men in this place were on the dodge. Men on the dodge develop a keen sense of danger. Some of them sensed danger now. They didn't do it openly but out of the corner of their eyes they watched this big stranger who had come into the saloon. What they saw was a tired-looking but big cowpuncher with a bedding roll slung across his back. He was walking across the room to deliver the cigars he had bought, to the men he had bought them for. It was a polite thing to do. True, this big waddie had a gun on his hip, but so did every other man in the place except the bartender and he had a gun under the bar. If Jorgenson hadn't been carrying a gun, they would have known something was wrong with him. If he hadn't had a gun in sight, they would have suspected he had one hidden, and they would have looked closely to see where. But he had a gun in plain sight.

They could even see the mud on the butt of his gun. Nobody who expected to use a gun would ever leave caked mud on the handle.

HEWITT glanced up when he saw Jorgenson coming with the box of cigars. His hand went under the table and his eyes narrowed. He looked this big stranger over very closely. He also saw the mud caked on the butt of the pistol. It was a reassuring sight, that mud.

Jorgenson set the box of cigars on the poker table.

"Excuse me for interruptin' your game," he said. "But help yourselves to some cigars."

Two of the men reached immediately for the cigars. The man on Hewitt's left hesitated, then accepted. Hewitt eyed Jorgenson. Crooked Nose had eyes that were half-yellow and half-green.

Jorgenson met the stare. "Have a cigar,

friend," he urged.

Hewitt's hand slowly came out from under the table.

Jorgenson reached up to steady the bedding roll. Hewitt glanced at the box of cigars. He started to select one. Jorgenson gently tugged at the rope on his bedding roll. The knot gave. The blankets started to come loose.

"Dang that knot," he muttered. "I'll bet I tie it this time so it stays tight."

He lifted the bedding roll over his shoulder. His hands went inside the blankets. His fingers closed around the butt of the shotgun.

"Take all the cigars," he urged. "Then put nine of those stacks of gold pieces into the empty cigar box."

The tone of his voice jerked Hewitt's eyes up to him. Crooked Nose found himself looking into the twin barrels of the shotgun.

Jorgenson stepped back from the table, placed himself so that his gun covered the men at the bar, the bartender, and the card players.

"Don't anybody move!" he ordered. "That goes especially for you, Hewitt."

In the Red Dog saloon at that moment no one showed any signs of wanting to do any moving. The men in this place knew guns. Jorgenson had taken their knowledge into consideration when he chose the shotgun to hide in his bedding roll.

A pistol they would have respected. The Colt was a deadly weapon all right. A Colt would have held them motionless for a minute, maybe two minutes. At the end of that time, out of fifteen to twenty desperate men somebody would have figured he could take a chance on a Colt. Somebody would have gambled on a six-gun.

The men in this saloon knew better than to try to gamble with a shotgun. When they saw the shotgun in Jorgenson's hands, they froze where they were standing.

"I got business with only one man in

this saloon,” Jorgenson said. “If nobody else moves, nobody else is going to get hurt.”

Stun them for a second with the shotgun. Then tell them he wanted only one man. That would keep the pack off him. That would keep some desperate man from making a break.

“You, Hewitt—”

Crooked Nose wet thin lips with the tip of his tongue. His yellow eyes were unwavering in their stare.

“Have you got twenty gold pieces in each of those stacks in front of you?” Jorgenson asked.

Hewitt nodded slowly.

“Then put nine stacks in that cigar box.”

CROOKED NOSE was surprised. If Jorgenson had said to put all the gold pieces in front of him into the cigar box, he would have understood what was happening. This would have been just a hold-up. But when the big cowpuncher demanded nine stacks, it surprised a question out of him.

“Why nine stacks?”

“That’s what you took off my partner yesterday,” Jorgenson answered. “That’s what I’m taking back tonight.”

“Your partner!” Sudden understanding glinted in Hewitt’s eyes. “But—”

“You left him for dead, didn’t you?” Jorgenson answered. “Anyhow that’s what you thought! *Start dumping gold into that cigar box, you tin-horn gambler, before I blow your guts all over this saloon and take the money out of your estate!*”

When he wanted to use it, Jorgenson had an edge on his voice that would curl the hide on a three-year old steer. He used it now. There was sudden death in that voice. There was boiling anger in it. Here was the man who had bushwhacked Cal Jones, left him for dead in the road. Jorgenson’s finger itched on the trigger of his gun when he thought about Cal.

Hewitt heard the tones of sudden death in Jorgenson’s voice. He hastily dumped nine stacks of gold pieces into the cigar box. Listening to that voice, looking at that shotgun, only a crazy fool would have done anything else.

“Toss one of them to the barkeep to pay for the drinks and the cigars,” Jorgenson ordered. The hot edge of his anger was cooling a little. He was beginning to think about getting away. Lifting the now heavy cigar box from the table, he stuffed it inside his shirt.

Keeping his back to the wall and his eyes on the crowd, he moved toward the door. Reaching behind him, he lifted the latch with his left hand, opened the door. He stepped outside.

A stampede started inside the saloon.

“Get that bastard!” he heard Hewitt scream.

He was ready for the stampede. He had anticipated what would happen the second he left the saloon. He stepped quickly to one of the front windows, lifted the shotgun to his shoulder. It roared heavily.

Over the tinkle of falling glass came the sound of men hitting the floor. The stampede of moving feet stopped.

Jorgenson grinned. He had aimed high. The buckshot hadn’t done any damage except to the window but the rattle of the heavy slugs inside the saloon had stopped all activity. He turned, ran for his horse.

He still hadn’t found a job he couldn’t do. This had been easy. All he had needed was a shotgun and boldness.

HE FOUND the hitching rack where he had tied his horse, reached for the reins. He didn’t find them. For a second he fumbled in the darkness.

Then he realized his horse was gone.

While he had been holding up the saloon, one of the thieves in Tascosa had

stolen his horse.

“Who in the devil would steal that plug? The saddle! Damn me for a fool! I forgot my silver-mounted saddle. They stole the horse for the saddle!”

Although he had deliberately chosen a horse that would not attract the eye of even a Tascosa horse thief, he had forgotten that his saddle was a valuable and expensive piece of riding equipment. He was so accustomed to using it that he had forgotten it was valuable in the eyes of other men.

Jorgenson was afoot in Tascosa.

In that moment, possibly for the first time in his life, he realized that sometimes even the strongest, the bravest, and the smartest man may need help. If he had let either Sebastian or Carter come with him, they could have guarded the horses while he held up the saloon. They could have covered his retreat. If—!

Carter and Sebastian were back at the Z ranch and he was alone in Tascosa.

With a thud that rattled its hinges, the door of the Red Dog saloon was kicked open.

In split seconds Jorgenson knew that men would be boiling out all the doors in the saloon. With a horse, he could have made a clean getaway. On foot—

He ran between the two buildings. At the back end of the log structure the ends of the logs made a kind of a ladder that an agile man could use to climb to the roof. Jorgenson used that ladder. Hooking his heels in the wooden eaves trough, he lay flat on his back on the roof.

On foot, he couldn't escape. All he could do was hide. Sometime during the night—if he could stay out of sight and stay alive, maybe he could get his hands on a horse.

Fifteen minutes later every saloon in Tascosa had disgorged its occupants out into the street. The story of how some lone hand had held up Hewitt in the Red Dog saloon had

been told and re-told. On the street out in front of the building on top of which he was hiding, Jorgenson could hear Hewitt making a speech.

“No damned road agent can come into a community of peaceful law-abiding citizens and pull a holdup like that!” Hewitt shouted.

Hewitt's statement that Tascosa was a community of peaceful law-abiding citizens was so much hog-wash.

“I'll give half the money he stole as a reward to the man who captures him,” Hewitt continued.

Two men passed along the side of the building where Jorgenson was hiding.

“Half the money, hell!” one of them snorted. “If I can get my hands on that money, I'm heading west with all of it.”

“Me, too!” the second man answered. “Almost four thousand dollars that buzzard got. If I can get my sights on him—”

HEARING this conversation, Jorgenson realized he had roused something hotter than a hornet's nest. Practically the whole population of Tascosa was hunting for him, not because they wanted to help Hewitt get his money back, but because they wanted the money themselves. Why split a reward when they could have the whole take? Jorgenson began to sweat. At least a hundred men were looking for him with what was to them the perfectly sound motive of shooting him for the cigar box of gold pieces he was carrying.

At this point he realized how big a job he had tackled.

He heard horsemen ride out of town, he saw lanterns bobbing around the back doors of the buildings in Tascosa. He wasn't much worried about the men who carried lanterns. They were just poking around in the general excitement but they weren't really looking for him. You don't carry a lantern when you go looking for a man armed with a shotgun. It was the men who didn't carry lanterns, the men he heard slipping silently

between the two buildings, the men who kept in the darkness and moved quietly, who scared him. They were the fellows who were out for business.

Jorgenson didn't like his position on the roof even a little bit but it was the best he could do for the time being.

He heard something clink below him. He craned his neck but could see nothing. Off to the left he saw three men near a building. One of them had a lantern, one of them had a Winchester, and the third had a long pole. He wondered what the pole was for.

He soon found out. They were using the pole to poke under the building. They found a dog. Bang! went the Winchester. The dog yelped, died in a flurry of kicking legs.

The three men moved on to the next structure. Watching them, Jorgenson was damned glad he hadn't crawled under a building. The clinking sound came again. It was right under him but he couldn't see the source. He lifted his head and watched closely. He saw a twenty-dollar gold piece slip out from inside his shirt, bounce from the roof, and drop over the edge. The clinking sound came from the gold piece striking the edge of the roof.

His profanity was none the less vicious because it was silent. He reached inside his shirt and hastily adjusted the cigar box so no more of the gold pieces would slide out. From the weight of the box, he decided he hadn't lost enough of the gold coins to make much difference. Anyhow he wasn't greatly concerned about the fate of the money any longer. He was far more concerned about his hide.

TWO men with lanterns came out of the back door of the building where he was hiding. They passed directly under him.

"Hey! What's that?" one said.

"By golly, it's a twenty-dollar gold piece!" he heard the second answer. "Look!

There's another one!"

There was a few minutes of silence while the two men searched for more golden coins. They found one more.

"That's all of them, I guess."

"Guess it is. Where do you suppose they came from?"

"Where did they come from? That's easy. The buzzard that held up Hewitt dropped them when he went by here."

Silence again. Jorgenson could almost hear the two men thinking. He was in a cold sweat. They had found the gold coins he had dropped. They were wondering how he had happened to drop them in this particular place. Sooner or later they were going to think of looking up on the roof.

Talking in a low tone of voice, they passed between the two buildings.

Jorgenson tried to hit the ground softly but his boots thudded into the hard dirt and the gold pieces in the cigar box rattled like a half empty keg of nails dropping from a wagon.

"What's that?" he heard a voice exclaim from the street in front of the building.

Jorgenson didn't run. He didn't dare to run. He walked away in the darkness. Skin crawled all over his back as he walked. He felt like he was fifteen feet tall and as broad as a barn door, all of him a target.

By the time the lanterns came around the corner of the saloon he was lying flat in a patch of dry weeds fifty yards from the back end of the building, his heart pounding like a trip-hammer.

"That son-of-a-gun was up on the roof!" he heard a man shout. "Here's his tracks where he jumped off!"

Lanterns came bobbing from all directions. The three men with the pole left off their efforts and joined the crowd. They held a regular pow-wow.

The sound of a stealthy footstep startled Jorgenson. A man with a Sharps rifle

walked within ten feet of him, moving toward the crowd at the back end of the saloon. Jorgenson had a wholesome respect for the Sharps rifle in the hands of a buffalo hunter. He lay in the patch of weeds and tried not to breathe. He considered slipping away into the darkness. He might get safely away. On the other hand there might be another silent watcher out there in the night. Without knowing it, he might find himself in the sights of a Sharps and never know anything thereafter. The big guns, designed to stop a buffalo, tore a hell of a hole in a man.

He didn't dare move, he decided. On the other hand, he didn't dare stay still. The crowd was breaking up. Lanterns were moving to the right and the left along the back ends of the buildings. At the far end of the street to the right he could see three lanterns.

"That buzzard can't be far away," he heard someone say. "And he's still got the money!"

The knowledge that the man they sought—and the money—was still somewhere in the vicinity intensified the search. High heeled boots walked all around Jorgenson. A lantern moved toward him. It was coming closer and closer. He watched it, an idea growing in his mind.

THE man with the lantern moved closer. Jorgenson silently laid his shotgun down. He waited. The lantern passed within five feet of him. He rose to his feet, took three quick steps.

His gun barrel smashed across the skull of the man. He grabbed the lantern before it hit the ground.

The man who had been carrying the lantern never knew what hit him. He fell silently. To anyone watching it looked like the lantern had bobbed a little. Maybe the man who was carrying it had stepped into a ditch and then stepped out.

Swiftly, Jorgenson traded hats with the

man he had slugged. Nothing changed the appearance of a man so much as a different hat.

Lantern in hand, he walked back toward the main street of Tascosa.

Boldness must carry him to safety.

His shotgun he left where it was lying. Any man carrying a shotgun would automatically be an object of suspicion.

A hat, a lantern, and boldness against the ruffians of Tascosa!

"Seen anything?" a man asked him as he stepped out on the main street.

"I ain't seen a thing," Jorgenson answered, shaking his head. "It beats the hell out of me where that buzzard went. Seen anything of Hewitt?"

"He was going back to the Red Dog the last time I saw him."

"Guess I'll find him there," Jorgenson said. He didn't want Hewitt. Crooked Nose was the last man on earth he wanted to see. But if he used a familiar name, he would seem to be a resident of Tascosa. Hewitt was the only man he knew in the fierce little town.

He walked down the street. Again he felt fifteen feet tall and as broad as a barn door, all of him target. The man who had asked him if he had seen anything paid no further attention to him.

The search for him was continuing. Knots of men were talking in the street. The roof of every building was being inspected. The three men with the long pole were again at work poking under each building.

JORGENSEN walked down the street. He was looking for a horse that did not seem to be too closely guarded. Outlined against lanterns far down the street, he saw three horses tied to a hitching rack in front of a saloon. He passed the Red Dog saloon. Hewitt was standing in the front door.

"Hey, you!" Crooked Nose called out.

"What do you want?" Jorgenson

gruffly answered.

"I want to borrow your lantern for a minute."

"Go hunt up your own lantern," Jorgenson answered. "I got use for this one."

He kept on walking. Hewitt swore at him. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw the gambler turn around and walk back into the saloon.

The feeling of being fifteen feet tall disappeared. If the lantern, the hat, and boldness, had fooled Hewitt, they would fool anybody.

Five minutes later, he had blown out the lantern, left it sitting on the ground, had stolen a horse and was riding out of town on the main street. Only iron-nerved self-control kept him from putting spurs into the pony's flanks. He held the horse to a trot. The men he passed on the street glanced casually at him, then went on with their search for the road agent who had held up Hewitt. They weren't looking for a man riding a pony at a slow trot down the main street of Tascosa.

The twenty-dollar gold pieces, jingling softly in the cigar box inside Jorgenson's shirt, told him that he still hadn't found a job he couldn't do. For a time, it had looked tough. For a time he had thought he was a goner but all he had needed was intelligence and boldness. That was all anyone ever needed.

When he passed the last house of Tascosa, he put spurs to his horse and began to gallop.

He didn't see the two men on horseback beside the road. They were completely hidden in the darkness. He didn't know they were within miles of him.

As soon as they heard his horse, one of them began to swing a rope. He went past them at a gallop. The thrown loop leaped after him.

He never did see the rope but he heard it hiss through the air and knew instantly what it was. He ducked low in the saddle.

The rope was already around his shoulders. He yanked back on the bridle reins, grabbed with the other hand at the rope.

The yank on the reins slowed his pony, saved his life. But he didn't have time to throw off the rope. He was pulled back and out of the saddle. He had the sensation of sliding and falling. He hit the ground with a jar that knocked him unconscious.

"IS THAT the bastard?" he heard a voice say. It was a thin, far-away voice.

"I don't know yet," a second, gruffer, closer voice said.

"Well, hurry up and find out," the thin voice spoke. "There's somebody coming."

"I'm lookin' as fast as I can," the gruff voice answered.

Jorgenson was aware that rough hands were going over his body. He was lying face down in the road. His nose, his mouth, and his eyes were full of sand. He gasped for breath, blew sand out of his nostrils.

"Hello," the gruff voice said. "This jasper is waking up!"

"Then shoot him!" the thin voice said. "But find the money and be quick about it. I hear horses."

"Let 'em come," the gruff voice said.

Jorgenson abruptly stopped trying to regain consciousness. He let himself lie limp. He didn't have enough strength to make a fight.

There was bitterness in his mind. He had been ambushed, just as Cal Jones had been ambushed. He had thought that only a weakling let himself be ambushed.

He was turned over. Hands poked around inside his coat. He didn't dare move. He wasn't able to fight. If he even revealed he was alive, he would be shot.

A match flared. Jorgenson kept his eyes closed.

"There's twenty-dollar gold pieces scattered to hell and gone here in the road!"

the gruff voice exclaimed. "Come and help me pick them up."

"I'm coming. But we got to hurry."

Saddle leather creaked. A frantic search began in the sandy road. His fall had smashed the cigar box and had scattered golden coins everywhere. He could hear the two men swearing and scratching in the sand. He could also hear the clip-clop of trotting horses coming nearer and nearer.

"Them ponies is gettin' awful close," the thin voice said.

"What the hell of it? We found him. I'd like to see anybody else cut themselves in on him."

The search continued.

The horses clip-clopped to a stop.

"What's going on here?" one of the riders asked.

"Burn the wind, you two," the gruff voice snarled. "We found him. Nobody else is going to cut in on him. See?"

"Wouldn't think of it," the rider answered. "Come on, Ron. We'll not disturb these two gentlemen."

Jorgenson blew sand out of his mouth.

"Sim!" he croaked. "Sim!"

THE voice of the rider was the sweetest voice, he had ever heard. It was the voice of Sim Sebastion speaking to Ron Carter. His partners! For the first time in his life he fully realized the meaning of the word partner.

There was a split second of silence after he spoke.

Jorgenson vaguely saw his two captors stand up. They were dim and indistinct figures reaching for their guns. Sim Sebastion shot first. Ron Carter shot later.

For the space of thirty seconds

Jorgenson did not know whether he was going to be killed by a flying bullet or crushed by a plunging horse. He crawled toward the edge of the road. Bullets were thudding all around him. Sebastion's and Carter's horses, frightened by the sudden thunder of guns, were trying to buck and to run at the same time. Carter was thrown. He fell heavily but dragged himself to his knees and was looking for a target when the battle ended.

It ended with one dead bandit sprawled in the road. The second bandit darted into the brush that lined the road. For minutes Jorgenson could hear him running.

Then Carter and Sebastion were kneeling beside him and were gently helping him to a sitting position.

"Where," he whispered, "where did you two fellows come from?"

"We talked it over and decided you might need help whether you knew it or not," Sebastion said.

"I sure needed it," Jorgenson answered.

For him, this was the biggest admission he could possibly make.

"We stayed at the ranch as long as we could stand it," Carter said. "Then we decided to come after you. After all, we're your partners."

There was solid satisfaction in that word partner. Jorgenson let the satisfaction flow through him. Somehow it soothed his jolted, sore, and aching body. Partners. Men who help each other, men who fight for each other, if the need arises, men who share trouble and danger together. That was what the word meant. It was a grand word, one of the grandest words he had ever heard.