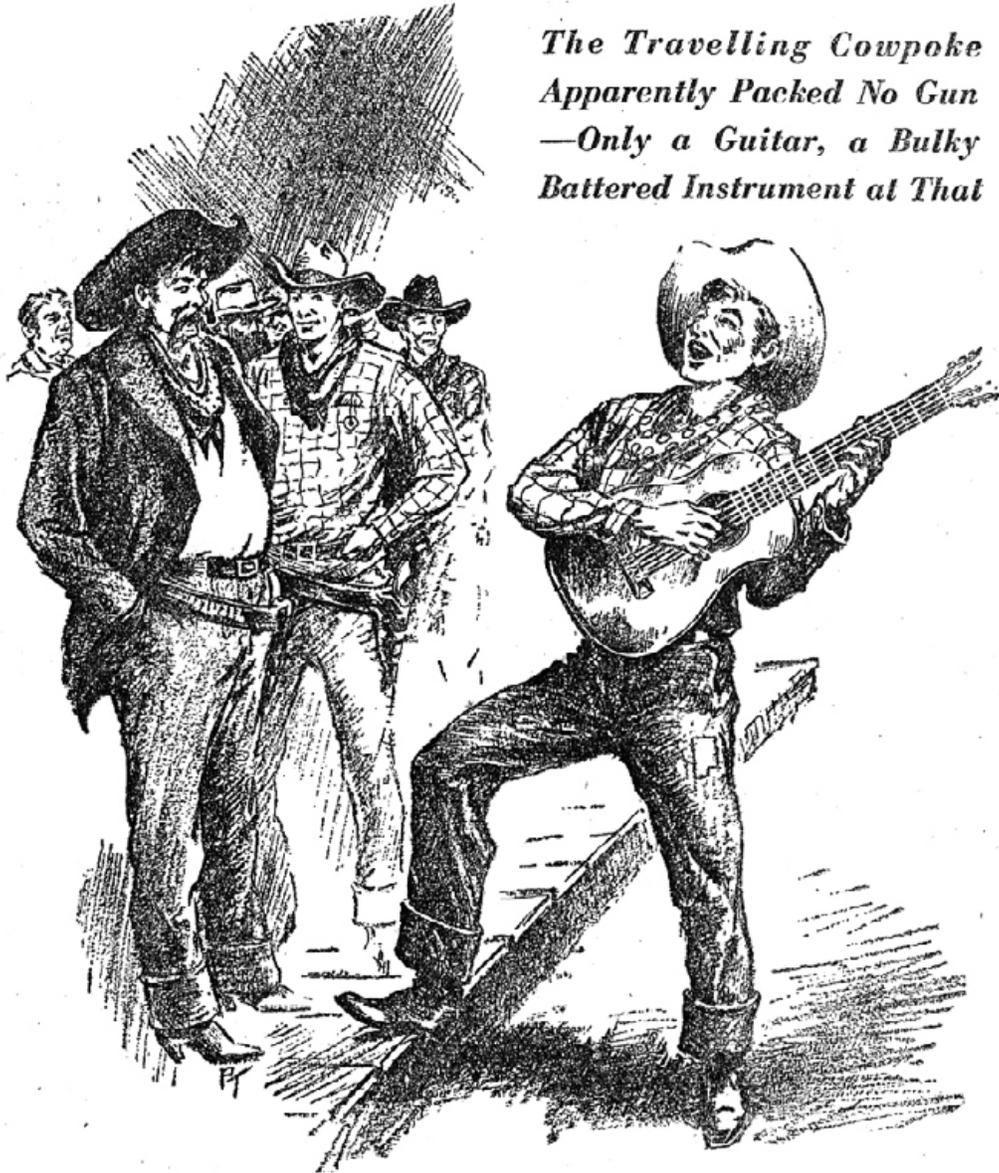


*The Travelling Cowpoke
Apparently Packed No Gun
—Only a Guitar, a Bulky
Battered Instrument at That*



DEATH MUSIC

By JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

THE stage from Tucson dropped a single passenger at Loda, and the sleepy little cow-town roused itself from lethargy to stare at the newcomer. He had the watchers puzzled. The flatness of their eyes acknowledged it.

He looked like a cowhand, saddle-

seasoned, rangy, a down-and-out cow hand with empty jeans, scuffed boots and weather-beaten Stetson. But he had no horse, no riding gear, and, what is more, no gun—none visible, at any rate, which was a cause for wonder. No one with proper sense would board a stage without a gun. Apaches were too numerous and

frolicsome.

His only visible weapon of defense was a guitar, a bulky, battered instrument hanging from his neck by a rawhide thong. The citizens of Loda stared at it, and wondered what the hell. No one, however, voiced the thought as the stranger reached the ground on springy legs, steadying the guitar with one hand, his war bag in the other.

The small crowd was standing on the raised boardwalk in front of the Wells Fargo office. The men watched carefully, without expression, leaving the first move to the new arrival. He accepted the challenge with a quick, wide grin which carried a disarming force. He tossed his duffel bag upon the walk, then cocked a foot upon the knee-high boards, resting the guitar upon his legs. He said:

“You’re starved for music, folks. That much is plain to see. So bend your ears and tap your feet.”

His long brown fingers touched the strings, and the music leaped into the tumbling strain of “Whoopee-ti-yi-yo.” He sang the words. His voice was strong and rollicking. The watchers’ eyes relaxed, their feet began to tap. He had them grinning soon, and that is what he wanted. He brought the music to a close and asked, “What next?”

A big man elbowed his way forward. He was broad, red-faced and partly bald. His voice was friendly as it rumbled:

“I think a drink’s the next thing on the program, friend. I own the place next door. Come in. I’m Terry Flynn.”

The place next door was Flynn’s Saloon. The stranger followed him inside and said, “I’m Blake. Pete Blake.”

THE room was big and odorous like a hundred others Blake had seen. It was empty; too early in the day for customers. Blake tilted his hat back, rubbed a sleeve

across his sweating forehead, then shifted his guitar until it hung behind him. He leaned against the bar while Flynn moved in behind it. Flynn set a bottle and two glasses on the polished surface. They poured and drank. Blake said:

“The world needs more and better music.”

“You sound a little loco,” answered Flynn good-naturedly. “But you may be right, at that. If you need a job I’ll hire you, just to bat out music for the customers at night.”

“A deal,” said Blake.

FLYNN looked surprised. He studied Blake more closely, as if trying to unearth something he had missed. He saw wide shoulders, well filled out, but supple. Blake’s face was bony, amiable and homely. He looked younger than his actual age of twenty-four, but the softness which Flynn searched for wasn’t there. Blake’s eyes were gray, wide-set, assured, lacking the frustration of a man whose luck had petered out. Flynn said:

“I didn’t think you’d take it.”

“Why not?”

“You’re not the type. I’ve seen enough top hands to know. This section needs good riders.”

Blake laughed, and said, “Good music, too. Another drink? On me, this time.”

Flynn shook his head. “Too early in the day.”

“I guess so,” Blake agreed. “Well, adios. I’ll be back for work tonight.”

He left the bar and pulled his hatbrim down against the outside glare. He moved slowly along the boardwalk of Loda’s single street, staring about him as a stranger might.

He noted with surprise the town had not changed much in ten years’ time. The street was longer, to be sure, a few more buildings, but not many. Most of the old

business places were still there, Hack's General Store, Tony the barber, Lin See's laundry, and the Ranchers' Rest Hotel. Blake hoped that he himself had changed a lot more than the town.

His mind, in this respect, was promptly eased when he passed the General Store. Jake Hack was out in front, loafing beneath the wooden awning. He eyed Blake curiously, but showed no sign of connecting Blake with the gangling kid who had accompanied his uncle to the store so many times ten years ago. Blake let his breath out slowly. He went to the hotel and hired a room. He'd missed a lot of sleep, so he set about the pleasant job of catching up on it.

That night at eight o'clock he went to work. His guitar was dangling down his back as he entered the saloon. The place was fairly crowded. A dozen or so cow hands lined the bar, and three stud games were already under way. The smoke was forming layers overhead.

Blake felt the flat impact of many eyes which worked him over carefully. Flynn obviously had spread the news, and the customers were studying a breed of cat they'd never seen before—a healthy man who chose to make a living as an entertainer.

Blake passed among them jauntily, meeting their blank stares with a grin. The grin, that is, was on his lips. His eyes were slightly narrowed with a challenge none accepted. The men were puzzled, just as Flynn had been.

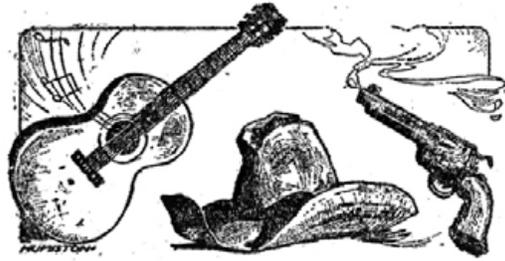
Terry Flynn was the one who was embarrassed now. To cover it he yelled. "How about a tune, Pete? Give the boys a tune."

Blake kicked a chair in place, sat down, tilted back against the wall and hooked his heels into the rungs. He went to work and let his music speak for him. It did. They liked it. He gave them "Oh

Susannah," then swung into the mournful "Dying Cowboy." There was an emotional shuffling of feet when he had ended. A few tough waddies downed quick slugs of rot-gut.

Flynn, with the instincts of a showman, yelled, "More later, boys! Step up, Pete. Wet your tonsils."

Blake moved to the bar and found himself beside the gambler, Mart Kirby. Blake's nerves went taut. He hadn't dreamed that Kirby would still be here after all these years. Yet here he was, tall, quiet, handsome, dressed, as Blake remembered him, in somber black.



Mart Kirby, scrupulously honest, had been a close friend of Blake's uncle Bart Stevenson. As a lonesome, awkward kid, young Pete had found great pleasure in the gambler's quiet understanding of a youngster's problems. Blake was glad to see Mart Kirby now, but worried tense that Kirby might speak out his name.

It was a wasted worry. Kirby moved to make more room, then looked at Blake without a trace of recognition as he said in his quiet, precise way:

"My name is Kirby. I work here, too. You play extremely well. I hope you stay a while."

Blake downed his drink and said, "I like to play. Excuse me now, I'll get back on the job."

He went back to his chair, his feelings mixed. He felt he should be grateful that Kirby had failed to recognize him, yet he was disappointed, too. It didn't make much sense, but that's the way it was.

He rolled a smoke and settled back to wait Flynn's order for more music, but before it came all thought of music was blotted from Blake's mind with the violence of an avalanche.

His first warning came from the sudden, unnatural silence of the room. Voices became muted, movement ceased, even the smoke layers in the air seemed temporarily motionless, Blake's eyes, beneath the hat-brim, moved quickly toward the door. He saw the two men who had just come in. He recognized them both, Dutch Trogg and his ramrod, Patchy Creel.

For many years Pete Blake had wondered what would happen when he saw them, how he'd feel. He had wondered if his years of training would prove sound, or if the paralyzing fear he'd once known would return.

He had to wait until his heart quit hammering at his ribs. He slowed it down by force of will. It was then he knew he wasn't scared, that only hatred, chill and wicked, ruled his thoughts. He calmed himself still, further with long drags upon his cigarette. The sheath of ice around his muscles melted slowly. He sat relaxed and steady-eyed.

His luck, he told himself, was good. He'd expected to find Trogg, but hadn't based his hopes too high upon the fact he'd also find the half-breed Creel. Half white and half Apache, Creel possessed the lowest qualities of both. His lust to kill was always near the surface, and he had the skill, the swiftness of a lizard's tongue, to satisfy his lust.

Dutch Trogg was worse because he masked his ruthlessness behind a stolid front. He was German, Prussian to the core. Blocky, flat-skulled, he watched the world through pale blue eyes, and plotted evil in his crafty brain, a fact which none knew better than Pete Blake.

Men feared Trogg, but respected him. They also feared his killer, Patchy Creel, particularly when the breed was drunk. And Creel was drunk right now. The watchers knew it, and played safe. They took their eyes away from him, and kept their conversation low.

Creel wanted trouble, and his beady eyes played around the room in search of it. His nose was like a vulture's beak. His face was pock-marked, and his lips were thick. He was squat of build, but powerful.

His head stopped turning when his gaze encountered Blake. Creel's lips moved up to show his yellow teeth. He was amused. He roared at Blake:

"Let's have a tune!"

BLAKE didn't move, just looked at Creel and blew a swirl of smoke in his direction. Creel said:

"Play." His voice, thinned to a fine edge, sliced through the silence of the room.

Blake said, "Go to hell."

Creel's gun came out with a speed which Blake could scarcely follow. Blake had expected this, but knew instinctively that Creel would not shoot an unarmed man, not before so many witnesses.

"How brave are you without your hogleg?" Blake asked quietly.

Creel got the idea—seemed to like it. He turned and tossed his Colt to Trogg. Catching it smoothly, Trogg stuck it in his belt. Blake reached his feet unhurriedly, undraped his guitar and laid it carefully on the chair.

While his back was turned, Blake heard the swift rush of Creel's feet upon the floor. Timing himself, Blake whirled at the final instant, crouching low, feet braced. He caught Creel in the middle of the leap which Creel had thought would land him on Blake's back.

Instead, Blake's shoulder slammed

into Creel's belly. Blake straightened his legs at the same instant, and gave a mighty heave. Creel's body hurtled through the air. It crashed upon an empty table, smashing it. Creel scrambled in the wreckage, rolled free and gained his feet. He was unhurt, and as dangerous as a cornered cougar.

He came at Blake the second time with greater caution, his movements silky, carefully controlled. He balled his fists, made out as if to swing, then aimed a savage kick at Pete Blake's groin.

But Blake had that one figured too, knowing the breed was incapable of staging a clean fight. Blake's lean hips swerved, the kick went wild. For an instant Creel was teetering on one leg, and on that instant Blake's right fist came driving through with blasting force. It crashed against Creel's pock-marked cheek, laying the skin open in an ugly gash.

The blow spun Creel halfway about, but didn't knock him down. He would have hit the floor, but managed to catch himself upon a chair. His hands closed on its back. He lifted it like a club, and tried to bring it down upon Blake's head.

Blake went in under it, flashed in with a low hard dive. His shoulders hit Creel's knees. The chair flew free as they both slammed down upon the floor.

Blake moved like a streak of lightning. Creel tried to roll away, but Pete Blake was too fast for him. Blake swung his fist in a short clean arc. He exploded it against Creel's chin. The half-breed's head snapped back and banged against the floor. It dazed him long enough for Blake to climb astride of him, to pin his arms down with his knees.

Blake planted two sledge-hammer blows upon Creel's jaw. The breed went limp. Blake's big hands made an involuntary gesture toward Creel's throat, but checked in time as their owner fought

off the almost overpowering urge to strangle Creel upon the spot. Blake had never had the crazy urge to kill before.

HE CAME to his feet slowly, observed his handiwork and found it good. Sound broke out about him, but he, stood there until Creel's eyes came open. They were blurred at first, but they cleared with amazing suddenness. There was a sharp, incredulous expression in them as they rested upon Blake. It was as if the breed had had a vision in his moments of unconsciousness, a vision which materialized before him when his conscious thoughts began to move again. It was weird, unbelievable, but Pete Blake knew that Patchy Creel had finally recognized him.

Blake turned away, knowing, then, it was too late. He was unaware of the wondering respectful looks from men around him. He turned back toward the chair he'd left. His guitar was no longer on it. Blake's breath jerked sharply through his teeth, then saw with quick relief that Kirby, the gambler, was standing nearby holding the unharmed instrument. When Blake came up to him, Mart Kirby said:

"Let's talk. Come on."

Blake followed Kirby to one of the empty gambling rooms at the back of the saloon. Kirby closed the door, placed the guitar carefully in a corner, then turned to Blake.

"That's a mighty heavy instrument you have," said the gambler.

"I had it built that way."

"I imagine you could floor a man with it."

"And he'd stay floored," Blake agreed.

Then Kirby said, "It's nice to have you back, Pete. Mighty nice."

Blake grinned. "You recognized me, then."

"Of course. Sit down. Let's talk it

over. What happened, son?"

They took chairs at the table. Blake rolled a smoke and lighted it. Kirby waited calmly until Blake had inhaled several drags.

Without preamble, Pete Blake said, "I saw Dutch Trogg and Creel shoot Uncle Bart in cold blood."

Mart Kirby nodded, his face a mask. "I'm not surprised," he said. "A lot of us thought that, but had no proof. That's what you're after?"

Blake nodded. "I'm also after my uncle's ranch. It belongs to me. He made a will, which Trogg probably found out about later, after he killed my uncle and moved in on the land. He wanted that two hundred-acre valley of winter feed, and my uncle wouldn't sell."

Kirby nodded again, and Blake went on. "Uncle Bart went off one night to talk business with Trogg. They had a lot of deals together. Uncle thought Trogg was his friend. They usually met at one of Trogg's line shacks which was on the line between the two spreads. About that time I was all hopped up about being an Indian scout. Kid stuff, but I followed Uncle Bart for practice."

He tilted his head, blew smoke toward the ceiling, and continued. "They met at the shack. Creel was along. They'd covered the windows with gunny sacks but one of the sacks slipped off. They both shot Uncle Bart at the same time. I must have made a noise. They looked toward the window and saw me. Creel threw a shot, but missed. They hunted for me, but I got away."

"Why didn't you go to the sheriff—or to me?"

Blake shrugged. "Even as a fourteen-year-old kid, I knew it would be a waste of time. It would be my word against theirs. Then Trogg'd kill me. Besides I was scared to death?"

"Are you still scared?"

"Yes," Blake answered simply. "That's why I finally had to come back. I couldn't live with it. I'm using my own name, because my uncle adopted me and everybody knew me here as Pete Stevenson."

"You can use a gun," Kirby reasoned shrewdly. "Or you wouldn't be here. Why aren't you wearing it?"

"If I'd had one on tonight, I might have used it. I might even have killed Trogg and Creel, which would have got me nowhere, because I want to prove Trogg killed my uncle."

"How do you intend to go about it?"

"Just by playing a wild hunch," admitted Blake. "I intended for Trogg to know who I was after I'd looked around a bit. He's a German, and he has a one-track mind. I'm merely gambling he'll make the same play he did with my uncle. It worked then, and he'll figure it'll work again."

"A long chance," Kirby said.

"I'm takin' it—sooner than I expected. Creel recognized me."

"I noticed it," said Kirby soberly.

BLAKE stretched to his feet and grinned, "Let's not forget we're working here. Let's get back to our customers."

When they got back to the main room, Trogg and his gunman had disappeared. The cowhands were still discussing the recent fight with much enthusiasm. Everybody wanted to buy Blake drinks, but Blake drank sparingly.

Most of the customers were gone by midnight. This was a week day, with another heavy day of work ahead for most of them. A desultory game of stud for small stakes broke up last. Blake slung his guitar behind him and started to leave. Kirby said:

"Hold on a minute, Pete. I'm living at

the hotel, too. Wait'll I cash in. I'll go with you."

Blake waited, understanding Kirby's move. He'd be grateful for Kirby's company, even though the gambler never packed a gun. The story was, that Kirby, years ago back East, had killed a friend in a so-called duel of honor, and that Kirby had sworn never to fire a gun again. But he wouldn't need a gun in his walk to the hotel with Blake. His presence as a witness would be enough to hold back any move Dutch Trogg might want to make. Blake understood this. So did Kirby.

They said goodnight at the foot of the stairs. Kirby's room was on the first floor, Blake's on the second. Blake went up the creaking stairs, and down the dim corridor which was lighted by a small oil lamp with smoked-up chimney.

Pete Blake was tired, dog tired, more fagged out than he'd believed. Even his brain was weary, slightly dulled, a fact which may have accounted for his carelessness.

He reached his door and opened it, standing outlined in the light. But just as his sixth sense warned him there was someone in the room, he heard the soft command:

"Get 'em up, Pete Stevenson! Grab air!"

Pete Stevenson! Blake caught the significance as his hands went up. He'd been right in, his guess that Creel had recognized him, and that the breed had promptly told his boss. Trogg's voice went on.

"Step in."

Pete Blake stepped in. A gun was jammed against his ribs. The door was gently closed behind him. A match scraped, flamed and was applied to the wick of the oil lamp on the dresser. The light revealed Creel's face, battered, venomous.

Trogg moved in front of Blake. He studied Blake's face carefully, and nodded.

"Yep," he said with satisfaction. "It's young Pete all right. I'm glad to see ya, Pete." His pale blue eyes were greedy.

Blake kept his own mouth shut. He let Trogg stare his fill, then Trogg said, "Well, let's go. You can leave that gee-tar here. You won't need it any longer."

Creel pled, "Aw, let him bring it, Dutch. He ain't played me my music yet."

Trogg hesitated, then humoring his gunman, said, "All right. Turn out the light."

They herded Blake carefully down the back stairway, and out the rear entrance of the building. Blake wondered how they'd find him transportation, but he soon found out. A buckboard waited at the back of the hotel. He could hear the restless shifting of the mustangs in their harness. When his eyes became accustomed to the dark he saw some bulky objects in the buckboard, obviously ranch supplies. Trogg had been lucky to have the buckboard in town at this time.

Blake sat beside Creel on the driver's seat. Trogg rode beside them on a horse, his gun still in his hand. They left the darkened town behind and headed for the open range, the mustangs fighting for their head, the buckboard rattling across the bumps, making too much noise for conversation. It suited Blake. He didn't want to talk.

But he had to think, and he had to ride close herd upon his thoughts for fear they'd get away from him. He knew Dutch Trogg was bent on killing him, but he also knew Trogg wouldn't risk it on the road nor on the range itself. Dutch Trogg was too methodical. He wouldn't want to leave a body where someone might find it. No one had ever found Blake's uncle's body.

Blake knew the road they followed.

They were heading for Trogg's ranch, the T-bar-T. So far, Blake told himself, his hunch was sound. Trogg was behaving as Blake had hoped he might, obeying the dictates of his one-track mind, following a line of action which had proved successful in the past.

All doubt was swept away when they came to a fork in the road. The well-used fork led directly to Trogg's spread. The other fork, no more than two faint wagon ruts, led toward the line camp shack where Trogg had murdered Pete Blake's uncle. Creel reined his mustangs toward the shack.

BLAKE soon would have the chance to give his hunch its final test. He wondered if his luck would hold, if he would learn the facts he sought, and would live to tell about them. The chances were against him, but he knew he'd have to draw his final card. He filled his lungs with crisp clean air. He looked at the stars and found them beautiful, more beautiful, it seemed, than he had ever known them.

They finally reached the shack. Creel picketed the mustangs with a bridle weight. Trogg stepped from his horse, leaving the ends of the reins upon the ground. He said to Creel: "Go in and make a light."

Creel went inside the old log hut. Trogg herded Blake inside a moment later. As Pete Blake stepped across the threshold, memories ten years old arose to clamp cold hands about his throat.

The interior of the cabin was as he had seen it last, each detail of which had been stamped painfully in his memory. A lantern dangled from it rafter. Two built-in bunks with dirty bedding faced the door: A rusty stove was at the left end of the room. There was a table with, a greasy top, three chairs. The rawhide chair was the one on

which his Uncle Bart had sat when he'd been murdered.

"Take *that* chair, Pete," Trogg ordered, pointing the muzzle of his gun to the chair with the rawhide seat.

Blake did as he was ordered, but he felt as if a clammy snake was slithering along his spine. He sat down carefully, schooling his muscles to obedience. He slid his guitar around upon his knees. He rested his hands upon it, glad that they were steady.

Trogg shut the door and leaned against it with his heavy shoulders. Creel, significantly, assured himself that the burlap bags covering the two windows would not slip—this time.

Neither Trogg nor Creel was in a hurry. Both seemed willing to prolong the moment, to savor what it had to offer—Trogg because he was a Prussian, Creel because he was half Indian. Creel placed a chair six feet in front of Blake, and sat in it. He shucked his gun and rested it upon his knee.

"Now play," he growled. "Yer funeral march. Let's hear it."

Blake strummed a few exploratory chords. He was working for time, thinking hard. Still fingering the chords gently he asked Trogg:

"You figurin' to shoot me pretty soon?"

The lantern light fell flat against Trogg's pale blue eyes. He nodded. "Pretty soon."

"Just like you shot my Uncle Bart, in the same chair?"

"You ought to know," said Trogg. "You saw us do it, and you knew we saw *you*. You were a fool to come back, Pete. You knew what to expect."

"I didn't think you'd recognize me."

Trogg took this as a compliment. "I spotted you before Patchy did. You ain't

changed much. Just a little older—as old as you’re goin’ to get.”

“I’ll disappear, huh? Just like my uncle did. Where did you hide his body, Dutch?”

The question amused Trogg. His thin lips raised a trifle at the corners. He said, “The same place we’ll hide you, Pete. In fact, you’re sittin’ right above your uncle now. He’s buried underneath the floor.”

Blake’s muscles jerked involuntarily. Trogg laughed at the effect his words had had, not knowing how completely wrong he was in believing Blake had twitched in horror.

Blake’s emotion had been far removed from that, and he broke his eyes away from Trogg’s to hide the savagery of his elation. The Prussian had run true to form. He’d had to brag. He’d given Blake the information which would send Trogg to the gallows—if Blake could stay alive to use the information.

“Too much talk,” the half-breed broke in pettishly. “Let’s have the music. Play, damn you! Pronto!”

Blake shrugged, and said, “Just let me think what tune I want to check me out.”

He stared hard at the ceiling, pretending gloomy concentration. The half-breed fell for it. Blake let his left hand stay upon the frets of the guitar. His right moved aimlessly to the base of the guitar, and rested casually upon the lower end, the side which was away from Trogg and Creel. When his hand was hidden, Blake’s long fingers went to work with smooth precision.

They opened a small door in the instrument, cleverly concealed. His hand slid gently in the opening. It closed about the cool firm handle of his Colt. The gun was bracketed in place, but cunningly adjusted for removal.

Blake had the six-gun in his hand, but had no chance to pull it from the opening. An animal instinct must have warned the

breed, but he made the mistake of snorting his alarm before he lined his gun and fired.

The split-second warning was enough for Blake. His hand was still inside, but he snapped his first shot through the wall of the guitar. His bullet smashed into Creel’s heart, destroying his aim by the merest flicker of an eyelash, and toppling him backward off his chair.

Creel had managed to get a shot away, however, and it had slammed against the heavy handle of Blake’s instrument. The impact threw Blake off his balance, sent him toppling from the chair upon the floor, his gun hand temporarily jammed inside the splintered box of his guitar.

Things happened in a blur of motion then, things Blake didn’t understand till later. From the corner of his eye he saw Trogg taking careful aim. Then came the crashing sound of splintered glass. What caused it, Blake had no idea, but the diversion surely saved his life. The sound threw Dutch Trogg off his aim. His bullet slashed into the floor beside Blake’s head, driving splinters in his cheek.

Blake gave a final mighty jerk and freed the hand which held his gun. Trogg, showing panic, threw another slug at him, which missed. Blake’s wrist flipped up, and the .45 bucked hard against his palm. He didn’t need another shot. The first one went exactly where he’d aimed it, tearing an ugly hole in Dutch Trogg’s shoulder. Trogg’s six-gun clattered to the floor. His face went green. He yammered incoherently for mercy.

Blake climbed up off the floor and said, “Shut up! I wouldn’t waste another bullet on you. I’m savin’ you for the rope.”

“Exactly,” said a calm, collected voice. “An excellent idea.”

Blake whirled. He hadn’t heard the door come open. Mart Kirby stood unruffled in the entrance.

Blake gasped, "What the hell!"

Mart Kirby flashed an unaccustomed smile and said, "I heard them take you from the hotel. I got my horse and followed. It was easy. The buckboard made a lot of noise."

"But *why?*" insisted Blake. "Why did you deal yourself a hand?"

Kirby shrugged. "Who knows? Anyway, it wasn't a very big hand. I didn't have time to bring someone who wore a gun, but I knew that you had one in your guitar. I guessed it from the weight. Also my fingers are quite sensitive. They felt the hidden panel."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Blake.

"I was certain you'd get one of them, but I wasn't sure you'd get them both. So when I heard the first shot, I smashed the window with a rock, hoping it might help."

"It saved my life," said Blake.

"I also heard Trogg's full confession," Kirby said. "It will be a pleasant hanging, Pete."

"I wanted him to face the law."

"Quite right. And when," he asked, "are you taking over your own spread?"

"Tomorrow."

"Fine. We'll all be proud to have you, son," said Kirby solemnly.