

# JOHNNY SILVER



By FRANCIS W. HILTON

*When Johnny falls for the so beautiful senorita, he realizes his peril—for he is the man accused of killing her brother!*

**B**ELOW the Rio Grande they called him Juan de la Plata, *el torero*. Above it was plain Johnny Silver, bulldogger. But there in San Ysidro that hot September night he was just another caballero. One of many coming to compete in the big rodeo.

Envious eyes only skimmed his pleasant, wind-whipped face and muscular shoulders to center on his clothes, black leather chaparejos with rosettes of silver, black hat with chin cord of silver, carved

cartridge belt filigreed with silver, silver-mounted gun in finely-tooled silver-inlaid holster.

La Cantina El Toro was packed with vaqueros celebrating the fiesta that marked the beginning of the rodeo. But Johnny Silver took no part in that celebration. He sat in the rear of the cantina, hall-facing an open side window. Many times he refused an invitation to join the merrymakers. But his sharp black eyes missed nothing that was going on around him.

One in particular in the cantina held Johnny Silver's interest. A young ranchero with a pale-tan face. Dust powdered his thorn-scarred chaps and sombrero. He was spending recklessly. Yet the tequila he gulped only tightened drum-keyed nerves, deepened his chalky pallor. And the fiery liquor seemed to loose some hostility within him. His voice rose suddenly in anger directed at a companion. Hot, ugly words gushed from his bloodless lips. In an instant the cantina was in an uproar. A shot cracked. The young ranchero buckled, dropped to the floor, dead!

From the corner of his eye, Johnny Silver glimpsed a smoking revolver jerking back from the open window. He came to his feet, silver-mounted gun in hand. He bounded to the window. Swift as was his movement the darkness had swallowed up the killer.

A fresh gouge in the window frame caught his eye. Partly embedded in the soft wood was a piece of metal. He got it, slipped it into his pocket just as a growl broke the stunned silence. He whirled. At sight of him, gun in hand, the growl swelled threateningly.

"Hang him!" came drunken shouts. "He's killed Ramon Orianna!" Only then did Johnny Silver hear the name of the dead ranchero.

"The señors have made the mistake," he said quietly. "See, there is not so much as one single discharged cartridge in my revolver." But he was quick to realize his peril.

He spun about, dove headlong through the open window. Before the stunned crowd moved he had reached his horse, vaulted into the saddle. A few miles south lay Mexico. But the American patrol would be notified and block him at the Border. East was the high Laguna country. And in that direction his quick ears caught the drum of hoofbeats.

Curses and shouts arose from the cantina. Judgment was swift and terrible on the Border. Poses gathered quickly, clung to a trail with deadly grimness. So Johnny Silver gave his pony rein. It lunged away, another shadow racing through the darkness toward the high Lagunas.

Once during the night he found water, paused to rest. Occasionally he could hear the distant voices of his pursuers.

Occasionally his straining ears picked up the hoofbeats of the horse ahead. But he lost them both in the Laguna foothills in which he found himself at daybreak.

The rising sun quickly turned the wild region into a bake oven. Heat shimmered from the griddle floor. Dust exploded beneath his pony's hoofs to swirl chokingly about him. A vast and empty loneliness enveloped the stunted mesquite, the only life the great scattered herds of cattle seeking shelter from the fury of the sun.

WHERE the trail knifed along a deep barranca to climb over a hogback, a sense of impending danger wound Johnny Silver's nerves. His first thought was of ambush by the killer of La Cantina El Toro. He slid from his horse, hunkered in a clump of mesquite to look around. He saw nothing but the herds of fly-fighting cattle.

He moved cautiously up the trail, leading his pony. A great roan bull suddenly barred the trail. It let forth an angry challenge. Johnny Silver whirled to throw himself into the saddle. His pony shied violently. Reins ripped through burning fingers. His gun swung up only to fall. A shot would echo endlessly through the quiet foothills.

A cracked bellow burst from the bull. It pawed dust, charged. But Johnny Silver had learned to dodge in a rodeo arena. He leaped aside. The bull thundered past.

The brute lurched around, came back. The scattered herds, too, were closing in, bawling as they came. Johnny Silver bounded to his horse which, ground-reined, had stopped. He sprang into the saddle. Range cattle might attack a footman, but they seldom molested a man on horseback.

He roweled his bit-fighting pony up the trail. The bull held its ground, trumpeted its anger. Then one of the brute's sweeping horns grazed the pony's shoulder. It lunged away and went down. Johnny Silver threw himself clear. The bull whirled, leaped from sight over the hogback. The pony struggled to its feet to stand on three legs, trembling.

Johnny Silver set to routing the collecting cattle. They only edged back to paw dirt, shake their heads. Then presently a steer broke. The brutes took refuge in surrounding arroyos to watch as he went back to his pony.

"*Que diablo!*" Johnny Silver muttered, examining the horse's leg. "It is not enough that we are accused of murder, no? Not enough that we have the bullfight without toreadors, matadors or even so much as one picador? So you have to fall down like a clumsy cattle and make yourself lame." He stroked the pony's nose affectionately. "And now that you have done all these, perhaps you will be so kind to tell me what we do next?"

The nuzzling pony may have had the answer. Johnny Silver didn't. He dared not turn back to San Ysidro. At least, until after the rodeo and he could demand a fair hearing. Ahead somewhere, he was certain, was the real killer. Perhaps even now in ambush. His roving gaze revealed no rancho. Had there been one to ride into, it meant capture. Still, he had no alternative, but to locate one. The way the pony favored the leg might mean permanent lameness unless it rested.

Without a mount a man's life was worth little in this wild and thirsty country.

Johnny Silver eased cautiously up over the hogback and trudged along, leading the limping pony. He took to the shelter of barrancas for the small protection they offered from the blazing sun. As day advanced he gave little thought to either a pursuing posse or the killer. Thirst, hunger and aching weariness drove all else from his mind.

A blow torch of a sun ate its way up through metal heavens, melted down toward the dancing skyline. Panting, dripping sweat, choking, Johnny Silver plodded on, blind now to any sign of danger.

The horizon was burnished copper when finally he dropped the reins, crawled to the rim of a barranca. He swept the region with bloodshot eyes. A mile or so beyond, set in a lush valley, was a large rancho. Hope flared only to give way to apprehension. Suppose the posse already had reached the rancho? It was a risk he had to take. As for the killer, he probably would avoid all habitation. Keeping a sharper lookout now, he led the pony on.

Finally he reached the rancho, a place of many well kept buildings. He left the pony outside a fence, crawled through, came up to a long 'dobe hacienda from the rear. He hugged the rough wall, edged toward the front of the building. At the corner he caught the sound of voices. He risked a glance. A girl garbed in a clinging white silk blouse, and black, hip-tight, bell-bottomed pantalones, was pacing the porch. A huge ornate sombrero, caught about her throat with a ribbon, hung down on her shoulders. She halted above a man sprawled on the steps below.

"You've offered excuses long enough," she said angrily. "Now I expect you to do something."

THE man was tall, loose-jointed, his worn garb as drab and somber as his long and gloomy face. "I've done as much as anybody can," he replied.

"You haven't!" The girl turned. Johnny Silver caught his breath. She was the most beautiful woman he ever had seen. Her skin was tan-olive, her eyes big and gray, smoky now with fury. Her hair was auburn, rich and lustrous. There was anger in the proud carriage of her head, the tautness of her trim young body. "Yet we're losing cattle every day." She brushed aside a wisp of hair that strayed across her eyes.

"A man can only do his best," the fellow returned. "These cow thieves are just too slick for us."

"You never admitted that to—Daddy. When he was alive things were different."

"He trusted me or he wouldn't have left me in charge under his will," he answered coldly. "I've run this rancho a good many years without takin' orders from a woman. Those cow thieves can't be caught."

"You've got my brother believing that, too," the girl cried furiously. "But I happen to own half of this rancho. And I'm giving you one more chance to explain what is becoming of our cattle."

"And if I can't?"

"Brother and I will get someone who can!" She started into the house.

Johnny Silver stepped around the corner. "Pardon, señorita."

The girl whirled. "Who are you?" she demanded, startled. She swept him, his dust-dulled clothes, in a single, searching glance that made him tingle.

"Juan de la Plata." He doffed his hat, bowed. "And I offer the apologies for appearing so unpresentable. But my horse is lame. Perhaps there would be something I could do around the rancho until he is rested, no?"

"My *primero* here, Senor Greer, does all the hiring," she said.

Johnny Silver pulled his frankly admiring gaze away from her to glance at the *primero*, who had come to his feet and was regarding him suspiciously.

"And we're not takin' on any help," he said coldly. "Keep goin'."

The venom of his tone amazed Johnny Silver. "But my horse is lame, senor," he protested. "Surely you would not—"

"Of course, you can stay," the girl put in. "You are a caballero?"

"Si, señorita. And you will pardon, but I could not but hear that of which you were talking. You mentioned thieves, those who steal the cattle. Perhaps I—"

"We certainly could use anyone who could find out where our cattle are disappearing," she interrupted.

"There you go," Greer growled. "One minute you say I do the hirin', the next you want to take on some *vagamundo*. You don't know anything about this hombre."

The *primero's* belligerency baffled Johnny Silver. Strangers were not treated with suspicion and mistrust on Border ranchos. Jealousy at the way the girl had overruled him might account for it. Then, again, there was the girl's threat to discharge the gloomy *primero* unless some account was made of the disappearing cattle. Had she been even less beautiful Johnny Silver's sympathy would have been with her.

But beyond the fact that she was the most naturally charming woman he had ever seen, he had taken an instant dislike to Greer. That dislike was plainly mutual. Yet he had no choice out to remain.

"Because one's pony goes lame is no reason he's a criminal," the girl said hotly. "Nor necessarily a fugitive, either."

"All right," Greer gave in sourly. "But where you goin' to use another hand with

the crew comin' back from the rodeo tomorrow?"

So the crew was at the rodeo, Johnny Silver thought.

"Why not let a stranger see if he can find out what's becoming of our cattle?" the girl suggested.

"Nothin' to lose." Greer shrugged insolently. "But nothin' to gain. I'm tellin' you though, you're makin' a mistake hirin' a drifter."

Dog tired as he was, Johnny Silver stiffened: "I am no *vagamundo*," he said with frozen emphasis. "I have plenty of money. Yet where I come from one does not insult by offering payment while a pony rests to cure a lameness."

"Nor do we want payment here." The girl flushed. "You are welcome to remain." Her eyes met his frankly.

"*Muchas gracias, senorita*," he said. "You won't regret your action."

"I'm sure of that." There was triumph in the look she gave the glowering Greer, who snorted, strode away, big-roweled spurs slicing up dust.

JOHNNY SILVER looked after him. "The señor doesn't like strangers?" he observed soberly.

"Worse than that," she smiled. "He's been *primero* here so long he thinks he owns the place. When Daddy died last spring he left Pete Greer in charge. Since then he's been taking advantage of us."

"That is bad, señorita," Johnny Silver sympathized. "But it is plain there is something eating on these hombre."

"Just an inflated sense of his own importance," she told him. "Daddy thought Pete was the best *primero* on earth. So in his will he provided that if either brother or I die, Pete gets the interest. If he outlives us both he gets the rancho. But forgive me," she broke off. "I

don't know why I'm blurting this out to you—a stranger."

"I like it, señorita," he assured her.

"I'm not usually such a baby," she apologized. "But Pete has become impossible lately. When brother is away he seems to delight in pestering me. He's angry now because brother sent him back to the rancho after the rodeo, while he and the rest of the men remained in San Ysidro. So Pete is taking his spite out on me. There's only one other man on the rancho. And—" she regarded him with appealing frankness—"you look honest. That's why I wanted you to stay. I'm—I'm—afraid of Pete Greer."

Her startling admission set blood pounding in Johnny Silver's temples. He wanted to thank her, reassure her, but—

"The name of this rancho is?" he found himself asking.

"Rancho Orianna. I am Rita Orianna."

Johnny Silver smiled acknowledgment of the introduction. Orianna? The name had a familiar ring. But he could not place it. "And the country is?"

"The Cuyaipé Valley in the Laguna Mountains, fifty miles east of San Ysidro."

Then, suddenly, Johnny Silver remembered. Ramon Orianna! That's what they had called the pale-faced young *ranchero* who had been killed in La Cantina El Toro! Could he have been her brother?

"But these lost cows?" He changed the subject quickly. "Cattle sometimes stray. Or are yours stolen?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "Pete has my brother half believing there are ghosts in Cuyaipé Valley. But that's silly. If someone—if you could only help me."

"These *espanto* the senorita's brother believes—aw, heck!" he broke off abruptly. "Why keep twisting my tonsils with this, crazy lingo? Let's talk English."

“You’re an American?” She regarded him in amazement.

“Plain Johnny Silver of Waco, Texas. But Greer nor nobody else need know. I’m a rodeo bulldogger. That’s why I’m dressed up like a Don Quixote. I was entered at San Ysidro.”

“But the San Ysidro rodeo is today.”

“It’s a long story, Miss Rita.” He braced himself against a porch upright. She saw the weary movement.

“Sit down,” she cried. “Here—in the shade. I’ll get you a drink.”

He thanked her, dropped down onto the steps. She returned quickly with an olla filled with cold water. He gulped it thirstily.

“Why aren’t you in San Ysidro?” she asked, sitting on the arm of a chair just above him.

“Oh, I’ve changed my mind.” He didn’t tell her why. He wanted to, but didn’t dare. “I decided to hunt *ladrones*—for Rancho Orianna instead.”

“Ghosts,” she corrected smilingly. “At least, Pete claims they are. All I know is that we’re losing too many cattle.”

Johnny Silver stretched out on the steps, half turned where he could look up at her.

“Do you have any leads on those missing cattle?” he asked after a time.

“None.” The girl started from her reverie, looked down at him. “We’ve never run across a strange brand or an altered one. We know every rancher within a hundred miles. Our cattle are just disappearing. I do hope you—” She stopped, flushing.

Again her unspoken trust stung Johnny Silver. He arose abruptly. “With your permission I’ll tend to my horse,” he said.

“What made him lame?”

“I met a big roan bull back on the trail. My pony tried to dodge him, and fell. Pulled a tendon. He’ll be all right with a

little liniment and rest.”

“That bull was Pancho Villa,” she said. “The terror of Cuyaipa. He’s killed two vaqueros, gored many horses. He runs on Diablo Mesa. Pete finally talked brother into forbidding anyone to ride out there.”

THERE seemed nothing else to say then, so Johnny Silver tore himself away. He got his pony, watered it, unsaddled. He led it into the barn, fed it, rubbed its leg with liniment. When he had finished he washed himself at the horse trough, and prowled around, waiting impatiently for the evening meal. Meanwhile, he kept a sharp lookout for a posse. But no one put into Rancho Orianna. Nor did he see the girl again. But when he had eaten, a servant led him to a bedroom in the hacienda and he slept.

Dawn found him up, his first thought was of a posse. But still there was only one vaquero at the barn. He was determined, now that he was rested, to ride for it. He would get a horse on the pretext of hunting rustlers, leave his own in payment, and strike out.

“With the permission of the señor, I will make the *pasear* onto Diablo Mesa,” he suggested to Greer at breakfast.

“Rancho Orianna vaqueros are barred from Diablo Mesa,” the *primero* said gruffly.

“I’m not,” Johnny Silver said. “If you have no thought to loan me the *caballo*, then I’ll wait until my own is rested.”

“I’ll stake you to a horse, all right,” Greer told him.

Later at the corral, Johnny Silver saw that horse, a rangy gray bronco. It stood on spraddled legs with joints that caved like rubber.

“Locoed?” Johnny Silver questioned.

“No,” Greer laughed. “Just tough.” Johnny Silver shrugged. He got his saddle, entered the corral. Once he had a reata on

the bronco, save for a savage shaking of its head, it was docile. He rigged it up, led it outside. He had his plan in mind. First he would ride back there onto Diablo Mesa and look around. Why, he didn't know. After that he'd just keep riding. He busied himself with his latigo, hoping for a glimpse of the girl. But he was disappointed.

He swung into the saddle. The gray fought its head, twisted and spun like an awkward, unbroken colt, fought the reins. It made a few savage pitches. But Johnny Silver took care of that. He got the brute headed south. Greer rode alongside. He sliced the horse across the rump with his quirt. It lunged away.

"*Vaya con Dios!*" the primero shouted.

But Johnny Silver was too busy with the gray to get the full import of the words. The bronco worked the bit between its teeth, clamped jaws of iron, raced on. Johnny let it go.

The ugly stretches of Diablo Mesa rushed toward them out of the smoke blue air. The gray stumbled over a rock and went down. Johnny Silver catapulted from the saddle, hit the ground, and blacked out.

Seconds or hours later he sat up, wiped the dirt from his eyes and face. It was broiling hot. Thirst gummed his mouth. He looked about, half expecting to see Greer gloating over him. But the *primero* was nowhere in sight. The gray, too, had disappeared.

Johnny Silver grunted, rubbing his bruised body. Anger burnt him like the searing sun. Not so much because of the spill but because of the long walk back to Rancho Orianna. He had measured that endless distance the afternoon before.

He got stiffly to his feet. Cattle were coming from every direction, bawling as they came. Pancho Villa, attracted by the raucous bawls, also had appeared. The bull

threw up its massive head, sniffed, pawed dirt and ambled toward him.

Johnny Silver knew his peril. He got his gun. But he dared not shoot. Blood drove range cattle crazy.

**T**HEN a rifle cracked. Where, Johnny Silver couldn't be sure for even the smoke was lost in the thin blue air. But a gaunt steer in the lead of an oncoming herd went down kicking. The cattle stopped. Whistling snorts tore through flaring nostrils. The brutes caught the smell of blood gushing from the twitching steer. They went wild, crowded around the steer, horning it savagely.

Johnny Silver backed away. A thousand yards behind him was a butte. Intent on their sanguinary orgy the cattle paid no heed. He turned and ran. Halfway he halted. From behind the butte came another bunch of cattle, wild-eyed, snorting.

Johnny Silver was range wise. He knew vaqueros who had been menaced by wild cattle and who had saved their lives by shamming death. For even crazed cattle would not molest a dead man unless there was the scent of blood on him.

He shuddered. Yet he had no choice. He dropped down on his back, arms folded across his chest, gun in hand.

Weary of their bloody orgy, the first bunch of cattle left the trampled steer, came on a run toward the newcomers. Almost over Johnny Silver's body they met. The brutes fell to sniffing his rigid form. One of the animals pawed him. He hung onto himself, finger twitching on the trigger.

Now the animals were bawling deafeningly, throwing dirt in his eyes and mouth. He choked back a sneeze. A brute licked him in the face. Its rough tongue all but brought him to his feet.

The animals were circling him. He

dared a glance. Every brute within his range of vision was branded with the little "s," of Rancho Orianna! It was clear enough to Johnny that Greer was using the bull as an excuse to keep people away from the stolen cows. The breeze shifted.

Again the cattle scented blood. They broke around him in a race for the dead steer.

Johnny Silver got cautiously to his feet. He started for the butte. Pancho Villa blocked the trail. At sight of movement the bull charged. Johnny Silver leaped aside. But now he was Johnny Silver, the bulldogger.

Pancho Villa shot past. Johnny Silver dove for lowered horns. Then he had them, braked the brute to a stop while heels gouged in the earth. He threw all his weight on those horns. But twist as he would the bull tossed him about.

It was a grim and deadly battle there under the broiling sun. If he could pin the animal he might gain time to make the butte. Provided the other cattle did not interfere. But as he wrestled the bull he heard them. Drumming hoofs on sunbaked 'dobe. Crazed now by the blood they would make short work of him.

Johnny Silver did the one thing that popped into his mind. He vaulted aboard the bull, sunk home his rowels. For an instant the startled animal stood still. Then it bolted across the mesa.

Johnny Silver had come out of rodeo chutes on bucking brahmas. He knew the cruel punishment bareback riders took from the sacred cows of India. But never had he been bruised and battered like this. Pancho Villa was lunging into the air, twisting his rump viciously, bawling furiously, and always landing on four legs, running. Johnny clung to his horns, rowels sunk in the massive neck. The bull's threshing head tore at his straining muscles. Yet he clung on for life.

Hours later it seemed the brute left off its pitching, but kept on running. Far behind now he could hear the bawling cattle. Then, for all his bruised and aching body, Johnny Silver chuckled. Pancho Villa was making a beeline for Rancho Orianna. When the brute finally slowed to a walk he could see the fence through which he had reached the rancho the afternoon before.

Then the bull sank down, panting. Johnny Silver's legs gave way when he tried to stand. He fell to laughing as he sprawled beside Pancho Villa. The bull only stared at him with dull, tired eyes.

"*Muchas gracias, el toro,*" Johnny Silver chuckled. "Have a good rest. I'll see that you are fed and watered."

Again, as on the day before, he approached the hacienda from the rear. But now there were several saddled horses in the barnyard. The vaqueros had returned! Either that or the San Ysidro posse had reached Rancho Orianna!

His first impulse was to run. But how? And besides, there was Greer to settle with—the man who had sent him onto Diablo Mesa astride a locoed bronco, and who, he had no doubt, had shot the steer to set the cattle crazy so they would kill him. But what lay behind Greer's hostility?

He crept along the wall to the corner of the hacienda. Again two voices reached him from the porch.

"But your father put it in his will," Pete Greer was saying. "A half interest in Rancho Orianna belongs to me."

"I'll break that will if I have to take it through every court in the country," Rita Orianna stormed. "You hoodwinked Daddy. You had brother eating out of your hand. I'll fight you to the last ditch."

"What's the use of owners of Rancho Orianna fightin'?" Greer wheedled. "If you'll only say the word we'll team up."

"Marry you?" Her voice broke hysterically. "Not if you were the last man on earth." She turned on him like a wildcat. But he seized hold of her, pulled her roughly into his arms.

JOHNNY SILVER slid his gun from its holster, bundled aching muscles. But before he could move, Greer sprang away from the girl and whirled to face a grizzled splinter of a man, who stepped from the house. The stranger had a star on his dusty vest.

"The men have finished eatin', Miss Rita," he said. "If you'll come along to San Ysidro we'll get the inquest over with. We know who killed your brother. It's only a matter of time until we pick him up." He went back inside.

Greer swung on the girl. "You've played the wildcat long enough," he snarled. "Ramon's dead. I own half of Rancho Orianna. You'll either marry me or I'll force you to sell—"

He got no farther for Johnny came bounding around the corner, gun in hand.

"The señorita does not wish to marry you," he said softly. "Nor does she wish to sell her share of Rancho Orianna."

Greer backed off, face twitching. "You—you—" he got out. "I thought—"

"The locoed jughead would finish me?" Johnny Silver dropped his lingo. "Or those wild cattle would kill me when they'd had a smell of blood? Or that Pancho Villa—"

"What's this?" the girl demanded.

"Skip it," Johnny Silver said. "I'll tell you later.

"Don't move!" a voice came booming from the hacienda.

Johnny Silver froze. Only his eyes moved. They whipped to the doorway. Covering him were the sheriff and four vaqueros.

"That's him!" one cried. "The silver-

mounted hombre who killed Ramon Orianna in La Cantina El Toro!"

"You—killed my brother?" Rita Orianna gasped.

"No, señorita. But I was in the cantina when he was killed. They would give me no chance to explain. I tried to catch the hombre who killed your brother. I followed him this way."

"Get his gun, sheriff, before he kills somebody else!" Greer bawled. He whipped out his forty-five.

Johnny Silver stepped back. Greer then stood directly between him and the doorway. The silver-mounted gun spat flame. Blood spurted from the *primero's* forearm. The girl clutched the porch railing for support. The sheriff shouted for Greer to stand aside. But Johnny Silver had chosen his position well. His brain was working lightning fast. His eyes were everywhere, came to rest on Greer's forty-five almost at his feet.

"I'll make a bargain." He appealed to the terrified girl. "I'll hand over my gun to you if they'll throw down theirs. All I want is a chance to talk."

"You can't put that across," the sheriff yelled. "Move over, Greer!"

"Stop!" The girl herself leaped in front of Johnny Silver. "He's got a right to talk. Give me your gun." He passed it over. "Now put up yours," she ordered the five. "If he can't prove he didn't kill Ramon, I'll—" She jammed the muzzle of the silver-mounted gun into Johnny Silver's side.

"Will the señorita allow me to reach in my pocket?" he asked.

"Look out for a trick," the sheriff warned.

But the girl ignored him. Her gaze met Johnny Silver's. His cheeks darkened. Hers flushed. "I've trusted you from the beginning," she said quietly.

His hand went to his pocket, came

forth with the piece of metal he had taken from the window frame in La Cantina El Toro. He pointed to Greer's gun at his feet. "It has no front sight," he said. "Try this one." He passed the piece of metal to the girl. She picked up the *primero's* gun, slipped it into the empty groove.

"That's why he was so hostile." Johnny Silver answered the question in her eyes.

"Drop him, sheriff!" Greer shouted hoarsely. "He's tryin' to—"

"Find the hombre who shot Ramon Orianna," Johnny Silver stopped him. "You killed him, Greer!"

"You can't—" the *primero* began.

"Where did you get that gunsight?" the sheriff interrupted.

"From the window frame in La Cantina El Toro," Johnny Silver answered.

"There was a fresh scratch on that window," the sheriff mused aloud.

"Where Greer raked his gun barrel across it in his hurry to get away after he'd seen me just beside him," Johnny added.

"I'm beginning to see things," the sheriff said. "Get inside," he ordered the

sullen *primero*. "We'll bandage your arm. Then you'd better start talkin'."

THE sheriff turned to Johnny. "We'll want you for a witness," he said. "What's your name?"

"Juan de la Plata. Or just plain Johnny Silver of Waco, Texas."

"Johnny Silver! The bulldogger? That's why I hated to leave San Ysidro. I wanted to see you—"

"I've done my bulldogging for today." Johnny Silver grinned. "Sure, I'll go back to town with you. But first I'd like to ask a favor."

"Yes?"

"I want to make a trip to the fence down yonder. I've got a friend down there. But I insist upon being guarded. Please order Señorita Rita to guard me."

Rita blushed furiously. The sheriff chuckled.

"All right," he said. "But don't try any tricks."

"I won't. Nor will my friend. He's too tired. You see, it's Pancho Villa. And I promised him a drink of water."