



## SIX BITS

By SAMUEL TAYLOR

HE noticed the air of tense suspense in the three figures while the buckboard was still a hundred yards away. None spoke or replied to "Six Bits" Baker's genial "Howdy!" until the flatbed wagon stopped beside the hitching pole.

"Shore sorry, Six Bits," grunted Sheriff Walt Meanwell.

"Can't begin t' say how bad I feel about it, too," came the pious nasal tone of the tall rancher, "Rock" Granite. The loose folds of skin on his thin face assumed lines of intense sorrow. The other of the three was fat, sleepy-looking Hank Clowd—the fastest gunman in the country and Rock Granite's personal bodyguard. Hank said nothing. Only the fractional glint of moist eyeball showed he was not asleep.

"We-ell? Whut's all the cryin' about?" asked Six Bits. "I feel aw-right myself."

"Hain't yuh told 'im, Rock?" asked Meanwell.

"Ye-ah. Notice accordin' to law. Do your duty, sheriff."

"Wait a minute, you-all mebbe better," drawled Six Bits. "I reckon I'm the only one here which don't know what I should. Spill it."

"Yo're behint in yore lease payments, an' I've gotta attach yore cattle an' any property fer sheriff's sale tuh satisfy the judgment."

Six Bits squinted one sunburned eyelid and scratched absently at the back of his broad hair-covered hand.

"So that's the why an' wherefore o' that long legal-like paper I got a month ago, huh, Rock! Well, you-all kin quit feelin' sorry about it an' go home happy, 'cause I've had the cattle rounded up an' ready fer twice that long, all ready t' hand over."

"The contract," came Rock's smooth nasal whine, "calls fer payment in legal tender. Sorry, but I can't take cattle."

"You took 'em fer five years now!" Six Bits snapped. Then he paused and nodded slowly. "I see, Rock. You leased me the ranch an' range, me puttin' up my cows t' guarantee payments. Then you let it go five years, me payin' each time in critters—an' now I've got a good iron built up by stickin' ev' cent back into the herd, you come along an' try to beat me outta all of it! Well, your chance o' doin' it ain't worth six bits! See! Before I'd let

you I'd—"

"Don't," came the emotionless tone of the fat Hank Clowd. His eyes seemed still asleep and his fat bulk slumped in the sagging seat of the buckboard. But one plump hand now held a blue-steel Colt .44 that had appeared as if out of the thin air. Six Bits took his freckled hand from the butt of his own gun.

"No gun play, Hank!" snapped the sheriff.

"Whut's the prop-sition, sheriff?" Six Bits asked.

"Purty bad fer you, I reckon, Six Bits. This is all legal-like, far's I kin see. You owe a six months rent payment on the ranch, an' he give yuh legal notice to take yore security thirty days ago. You ain't come through with the money—"

"But I got them critters ready. An' he's always took—"

"Can't help it. All I kin do is round up yore whole herd an' sell 'em at public auction."

"Okay!" snapped Six Bits. "An' how long've I got 'fore the sale?"

The sheriff squinted at the morning sun. "Reckon I kin get some rannies an' have your bunch rounded up by t'night, yore critters're in open country an' the drift fence's good as I recollect. . . . Yeah. T'morrow noon. I'll hold the sale then."

"Little over a day fer me, huh!"

Six Bits Baker turned on his tapered cowboy heel and strode for the stable. The fat Hank Clowd opened his eyes a slit wider and shot a glance at the tall, loose-wrinkled Rock Granite, who smiled benignly and sucked air through his teeth.

"Too bad how some of these fellows don't seem to understand common business practice, sheriff," he observed. "Now, I've no doubt Six Bits thinks I'm trying to beat him out of his herd."

"No," snapped Meanwell. "I don't doubt but what he does think that!"

**H**ANK CLOWD'S fat figure stiffened imperceptibly as Six Bits appeared in the doorway. The deep loose wrinkles of Rock Granite's face froze to a mask. Sheriff Walt Meanwell hitched his cartridge belt while the others in the Emporium general store, sensing something, looked expectant.

Six Bits stalked up to Rock and slammed his fist on the counter, leaving an oblong greenish paper lying there.

"I'll trouble you fer a receipt, Rock. An' meanwhile I'll serve notice before witnesses that I ain't signin' no new lease. I'll be a'movin' my herd pronto to Old Man Shipley's south place. I made a deal with him fer buyin' it on installments."

Rock picked the check up and examined it closely. "Mebbe I should've told you," came his high soothing whine. "But when I give you notice an' you didn't redeem, it prevented you from doin' it now. Sorry, I can't take this. But of course, you can put in a bid fer the cattle tomorrow."

Six Bits squinted his sun-bleached eyelashes. "Is that the law, sheriff?"

Meanwell shrugged. "Reckon so. That is, onless Rock here sees his way clear tuh—"

"Awfully sorry, sheriff. Business is business. Sorry to have to—"

"Aw, hell," Six Bits grunted. Then his rusty green eyes flashed. "But I bet you six bits y' don't git away with it, Rock!"

The tall man's heavy eyebrows raised. "It's a bet. Sheriff, you hold stakes."

Both men handed a half dollar and a quarter to the sheriff.

"An' something else, Rook! You might have the technical law on your side—but them's my critters an' you won't git 'em without a fight! Legal-like or not, I'll draw iron fer my own brand."

"Shut up yore face," growled Meanwell. "No use shootin' off like that before ever'budy." The sheriff strode out the door, and talked in an undertone with the long angular Six Bits Baker, who went with him.

Rock tightened his hand on the fat arm of his henchman. "Listen, Hank," he muttered. "We don't want no opposition at that sale t'morrow, see?"

Clowd's sleepy-looking eyes surveyed the immediate vicinity beside the counter before he muttered in return. "They's nobody got the guts tuh bid again' yuh, Rock. Not in this country, an' not when they know yuh want a thing. Yo'll git his whole herd with a leetle bid fer enough tuh satisfy yore rent claim. Onless—"

"Ye-ah. Unless Six Bits gits some more backin' from Old Man Shipley. He's the one cuss who ain't got no love fer me an' who ain't afeered to show it. But I don't want that hotheaded Dutchman around, money or no. He'll make trouble fer us."

"We-ell?"

"You climb onto your hawss, Hank, and cut around by the road to Shipley's. When Six Bits

comes along, stick him up an' hold him about three hours. Keep behint something and don't let him see you. After about three hours you ride away."

"Whut yuh goin' to do, Rock?"

"I'll fix him where he won't bother us none at the sale t'morrow—or for awhile afterwards, either. Listen. . . ."

CLOWD and Granite rode out of town together, the fat, squat figure of the gunman in contrast with the long, bony rancher. Out of sight they parted, Rock heading toward his home ranch and Clowd circling around to an arroyo through which led the road to the Shipley ranch. He tethered his mount out of sight in a red dirt wash, then settled his fat bulk in the tall sage on top of the arroyo rim overlooking the road.

In town, Six Bits and Sheriff Walt Meanwell held a powwow for almost two hours. It was dark when they parted, Six Bits going toward Shipley's and the sheriff heading out to look over the cattle herd he had been forced to attach.

Six Bits was soon among the rolling, sage-covered hills, riding slowly, head bent in thought. Three miles out of town he became conscious that his paint horse was developing a limp in the right forefoot. He investigated and found the animal had thrown a shoe and a small rock was wedged by the frog of the hoof. He pried out the rock with his Barlow knife, then mounted and rode at a walk back to town. He rustled the smithy out of bed.

"Hell've time tuh want horse shoein'," the fellow grumbled. "Ten-thirty, almost. Wouldn't do it fer anybody else, dog-gone you, Six Bits."

It was nearly eleven when Six Bits set out on the eight miles to the Shipley ranch. There was no moon, and it was almost pitch dark when he dipped into the black gash of the arroyo halfway to his destination. Above on the rim, Hank Clowd stirred.

"Stop, an' hands up!"

In the first startled lifting of eyes, Six Bits saw the silhouette of the sombrero and hunched shoulders against the gulley skyline. At the same instant he realized it was pitch dark in the roadway where he was. He jammed spurs into his pinto and jerked the animal's startled leap into a two-legged wheel, then clattered back along the road.

"Stop!"

There sounded a rifle shot, followed by two others before Six Bits cut off the fire behind a shoulder of the arroyo. As he came out of the

depression he could see nothing behind him in the murky starlight. But he kept on back toward the town away from the ambush. He had gone perhaps a mile when four riders topped a rolling ridge to his left, and:

"Halt!" bellowed a voice. Six Bits dug his spurs into his pinto and cut from the road. The four riders streaked after him. A six-gun spewed a tongue of fire, then came another.

Six Bits made a wide half-circle, cutting towards the town. He was a hundred and fifty yards ahead when he pounded down the dusty, deserted street and flung off his horse in front of the sheriff's office. The door was unlocked and he slipped inside. Hoof-beats clattered up and stopped in front.

"Come out, Six Bits!"

Recognition flashed over the man inside. It was Sheriff Meanwell who had called the order! Six Bits holstered his weapon and went outside. The sheriff had his gun leveled. With him he had two cowboys who had helped round up the cattle. The other man was the tall Rock Granite.

"Up with 'em, Six Bits!" snapped the sheriff. He jerked Baker's gun from the holster, then:

"Now turn around an' march inside again."

When the lamp had been lighted Six Bits asked: "What's all this fool chase about, anyhow? I run away because I thought—"

"Never mind," cut in Meanwell.

"Just a minute, sheriff! They's a law o' some kind which says you got to tell a guy what he's bein' locked up fer!"

The sheriff snapped back the bolt of the iron door at the rear of the room. "C'mon inside, feller. You know, all right."

"Danged if I'll—" Six Bits made a leap for the outside door, then he sprawled on his face in the doorway as Rock Granite brought the heavy barrel of his six-gun down on the blond head.

SIX BITS' head felt swelled up like a poisoned coyote as he came to. The world seemed to reel as he sat up. He held his face in his hands and sat on the edge of the iron bunk a few moments, then got up and peered through the grill of the door. He could hear the sheriff's regular breathing, and finally he made out the figure lying on the cot in a corner of the office.

"Walt!"

The sheriff stirred. "Huh? G'wan back tuh bed,

feller.”

“I’m still askin’ you a question, sheriff. Why am I in here?”

The cot creaked as Meanwell swung his boots to the floor. He strode over to the door and peered curiously through the bars.

“Danged if yuh ain’t the most unknowable human I ever stacked up again’.”

“That’s no answer.”

“Aw-right, Six Bits. Fer yore benefit an’ tuh comply with the law I’ll refresh yore memory: You climbed on yore paint-horse—which wasn’t very bright tuh start with—an’ yuh tried tuh rustle yore own cattle which I’m goin’ to auction off t’orrow noon.”

“Huh?”

“Ye-ah. An’ further, when the boys which was watchin’ said cattle tried tuh interfere, you opened up an’ kilt two o’ their hosses an’ wounded Lefty Bird in the arm, then hightailed out of it.”

“How you know it was me?”

“Tell that pinto paint-hoss o’ yourn as fur as it kin be seed, an’ the boys got a good squint at it, even at night. Now, I ain’t sayin’ them critters didn’t belong to yuh, but you got enough sense not t’ try anything like that while the herd’s attached by my office. An’ shootin’ Lefty—”

“Jist a minute, Walt. My memory’s a little cloudy right now. When’d all this here happen?”

“Huh? Why, ‘bout ten, ten-thirty t’night. I’d jist been out an’ looked over the critters and was headin’ back when—”

“In that case, Walt, I’ll thank you t’ open this here iron door. I wus here in town frum ten-thirty to eleven gettin’ a shoe on that paint-hoss which yer boys seen—an’ old Rib Jones the smithy kin swear to it!”

“Huh?”

“Ye-ah, huh! You round up Rib an’ ask him!”

THE morning sun was glinting over cedar-topped hills as Six Bits swung from the saddle in front of the Shipley ranch house. The old man came out to meet him.

“Wouldn’t take the check,” announced Six Bits, and handed the greenish slip of paper back. “Reckon the only thing t’ do is fer us to go over there an’ bid at the sale so’s Rock won’t be able to buy the whole herd fer jist the price o’ the rent account.”

Shipley cleared his throat with difficulty.

“Gosh, Six Bits. I hate tuh say it, but Rock, he come around late last night, an’—”

“Bought you off. Scared you out?”

“Now listen, Six Bits. I’d give plenty tuh git that skunk! You know that. But yuh know that bottom land over by Ferguson’s which I’ve had a option on an’ goin’ to buy. Well, the option run out last week an’ I didn’t renew—an’ Rock turned up here wavin’ a option in my face.”

Six Bits nodded. “An’ that bottom land’s the only water fer the best part o’ your range, huh?”

“Yeah. Rock told me if I bid again’ him, or give you money to, he’d take up that option an’ fence in the water. Sorry, but . . .”

The cowboy was not listening as he rode off. His mind was darting back and forth like a cottontail between two coyotes. Shipley had been the only one with the courage to fight the powerful Rock, who controlled directly or indirectly two-thirds of the valley’s property. And now even Shipley was afraid. It was solely up to Six Bits to save his own financial neck. But he had no intention of letting the result of five years’ work in building up a herd go without a struggle.

“Reckon I’ll beard the lion in his filthy den,” he mumbled. He cut straight across country in the direction of Granite’s home ranch. It was ten-thirty by the time he swung into the grassy, fertile hollow in which were Rock’s ranch buildings.

No one appeared in view as he rode up and dismounted. He knocked on the door of the ranch house, then investigated the bunk house.

“Ever’budy’s to the sale aw-ready,” he grunted. “But funny Rock didn’t leave somebody to watch.”

He stopped still and sniffed the air. On the faint breeze came the wafted whiff of turpentine and oil. He wet a freckled finger and held it to the air, then followed the direction of the breeze to a small log lean-to stable. The turpentine odor was strong as he opened the door.

Then came the reason for the smell. A spotted cow-pony was tethered at the stall inside. The horse, a sorrel, had been painted with white paint in an imitation of the spottings of Six Bits’ pinto.

“So here’s the reason fer the chase last night, huh?” he mumbled. “Rock was mebbe a little afraid I’d git nasty with my gun if I lost my herd o’ critters. Or mebbe he figgered I’d git some money some place. So he played a little game to put me behind bars an’ outta the way—keep me from gettin’ ornery.”

Then his freckled face slowly formed a wide, beatific smile.

"But this here little thing changed the on-tire sun-burnt shade o' the case. I reckon if I jist whisper a word to Walt Meanwell—"

"High in the air, you!" The voice was sharp, yet curiously casual and emotionless.

Six Bits obeyed, then turned. The fat, sleepy-looking figure of Hank Clowd was leaning in the doorway, his revolver dangling negligently from a plump, soft hand.

"Didn't think Rock'd go off an' leave somethin' like this here without nobody around, did yuh?"

"He's done worse. Usin' this here painted hoss while mine was bein' shod—that didn't show no more brains."

"Acts o' God an' circumstances beyond the control o' man," droned Clowd. "Can't help 'em. How'd we know that shoe would come off? But Rock figgers he'll git as many good luck breaks as bad. Fer instance, right here now."

"Figger I won't be able to prove nothin'?"

"Hadn't thought o' that. You won't never try tuh prove nothin'—after this."

Six Bits eyed the other man. That casual, indolent pose was deceiving. That drooping six gun was not as harmless as it appeared. He had seen Hank Clowd in action before. The fat man was unbelievably swift.

"Look bad, Hank, them findin' me with a bullet through the guts—an' you not havin' a good alibi."

"Turn around," came the expressionless retort. Six Bits turned, and felt his gun lifted from the holster. Then at a command he lowered his hands and placed them behind him around a pole running to the roof. He felt thongs cinch into his wrists as the fat man lashed his wrists behind the post with a long length of binder twine.

"I could jist let yuh go an' be damned," droned Clowd. "Yo'd never be able tuh prove nothin' by the time yuh got back here with the sheriff. But, on the other hand, yuh might git plumb ornery fer us."

As he talked, the fat man took a gallon can with a turpentine label that sat in the corner with an array of paint brushes and cans of paint. He pulled the cork and sprinkled some of the liquid around Six Bits' boots, sloshed some of the volatile stuff on the twine around his wrists.

"Reckon that'll burn off them strings—but not too soon."

"Goin' to burn me alive?"

"Yuh got the most horrifyin' way o' puttin' things," clucked the fat man. He slapped the painted horse on the rump and moved to the head of the stall, came back with his arms full of hay. He strewed this around inside the stable, then went outside. Six Bits tugged at the cutting thongs. The twine lashed his wrists tightly together behind the pole, and his groping fingers could not reach the knots.

Clowd reappeared with a huge fork-full of long, dry grass-hay, brought two more. He piled the hay over the floor of the small shed-stable, then sloshed the remainder of the can of turpentine around over it. He placed his fat hands on the approximate position his hips were in his round, shapeless figure and surveyed his work with satisfaction.

"Naw, I don't think yo'll do much gettin' away. An' that marked hoss, he'll be outta the way at the same time. Didn't have no chance to git rid o' it. An' burnin's not so bad a death; they say. The smoke makes you unconscious before you git burnt very bad."

"The law makes a fuss when a human dies, Hank. The sheriff'll investigate."

"Ever'budy in town knows 'bout you throwin' threats around 'bout getting even with Rock an' me. When they find yuh it'll look like yuh tried to burn Rock's ranch in spite while he wus at the sale, an' then su'thing went wrong an' you got burnt yo'self."

Hank took a bit of candle from a dusty shelf, lighted it, dropped some wax on the grass-hay and set the stub of the candle atop.

"Not much candle, but it'll last me until I git fur enough away in case somethin happens I need a alibi, an' meanwhile"—he doffed his sombrero in an elaborate, mocking bow—"meanwhile, it looks like yuh lost a leetle six-bit bet. I'll do the collectin' from the sheriff after we find yore poor charred body."

THE stub of candle burned a steady yellow flame on its perch atop the hay. A half-hour it would last, Six Bits estimated, before it ignited the turpentine-splashed hay. He pursed his lips and spat. The saliva fell short a foot of the candle. He tried again, came closer, but still inches away. His mouth was dry and his lips ached before he finally hit the flame. There was a guttering sizzle and the candle burned as before. That would not do.

He edged back down the pole until he was

sitting down, then he squirmed until his shoulder blades were cramped against the post and his lashed wrists strained behind. He snaked out a long boot towards the candle. His foot was a good yard from the bit of burning tallow. Six Bits dug his spur into the hay and began pawing cautiously, trying to pull the hay and the candle within reach where he could stamp out the flame.

The hay pulled apart, but he fancied the candle was a trifle nearer. He flung out his long leg again and jabbed his spur rowel into the hay. The candle edged toward him a trifle, teetering. Then it half tipped and the flame came dangerously near the dry hay. On the next move of his foot it tipped more. Only the wax on its bottom prevented it from overturning.

Six Bits unhooked his spur and tried pushing the hay back to the former position. The attempt was fruitless. He edged to a sitting position again, then stood up. Once more he bulged muscles in an attempt to loosen the bonds. The twine cut into his freckled wrists, but did not give at all.

"Hell've way to pass out," he grunted. "With that dog-goned Rock Granite beatin' me on every turn."

He pulled away from the pole as far as his tied wrists would permit, then crashed his back against it. The pole shook, but gave no signs of loosening. It was cut from the trunk of a jack pine, one end was buried in the ground and the other spiked to the log rafters. He lunged his back against the upright, and felt the stubs of the rough hewn limbs bite between his shoulder blades.

The yellow stub of the candle gave a sudden little lurch and lay flat on the hay. The dry, coarse grass around the flame browned, smoked, crackled into flame which widened like ink on a blotter. Six Bits got the first whiff of smoke.

His eyes shifted quickly around the inside, darting in a last desperate effort to avoid destruction. The gaze stopped and riveted on the spot above his head where the pole at his back was spiked to the rafter with a big square-headed iron nail. If he could get a pry at that, somehow . . .

The painted horse began moving restlessly in the stall with the smell of the smoke. Six Bits could feel the heat on his face. Flames licked close to the pole.

He kicked off his boots, raised his lashed wrists as high as possible up the pole at his back and spread his big, freckled hand around the rough bark

as far as possible. Then, clamping his stockinged feet like a monkey, he edged his back up the pole a foot.

It was slow work. The fire was at the post, scorching his feet. Smoke rose in a hot, smothering cloud in the confined space. The air seemed filled with the burning crackle; it smarted his eyes and stung his lungs. He hitched higher up the post. The knot stubs and rough bark chafed through the skin of his wrists, gouged his shirt to shreds and rasped his back.

The painted horse jerked wildly at the hackamore, stomping and kicking at the unknown enemy, squealing in fright. As he neared the roof, Six Bits' head entered denser atmosphere as the smoke billowed upward. His eyes ran tears that made vision almost impossible. He seemed drowning in boiling dry oil that seared his lungs with each shallow breath. Everything was black except for red tongues of flame that leaped.

His head thumped hard against the roof. The blow steadied his senses for the moment. With the smaller diameter of the pole at the top, Six Bits' big hands almost spanned it. He took a firm grip, braced his back against the upright, swung his long legs up from the hips. Toes slipped from the roof beam and he jarred back. Then again he strained in that wrenching rise, raising his stockinged feet outward and above his head. They caught against the log rafter. He edged his broad shoulders a trifle lower to get a good pry, then shoved.

The spike held, seemingly immovable, while both legs quivered in the straining effort. He grunted, threw every ounce of strength into the effort. The upright pole gave way suddenly, the spike pulling out with a rusty squealing wrench. Still tied to it, Six Bits arched through the smoky, hot air.

He twisted like a cat and smacked on his knees with a vast shower of sparks. A squirt of flames singed his face. Holding his breath he unhooked his lashed wrists from the end of the pole and tumbled over the burning footing for the door, lunged against it, rolled in the dust outside to smother his smoldering clothing.

Finally he sat up. Blackened, scorched, his stockinged feet blistered on the soles, holes burned in his shirt and with the legs of his leather chaps stiff at the bottom from the heat, he panted heavily and squinted smoky eyelids whose lashes and brows were singed to the hot skin.

He hobbled to his feet. Hanging under the eaves of the bunkhouse was a long, rusty hay knife. He limped to it and sawed the twine from his wrists. Gingerly he reached his tender hand in his pocket and took out his nicked watch. It was still going.

"Five after eleven, huh? An' the sheriff's sale twelve miles away. Nice leetle run—but I'm goin' to be on hand at the finish!"

He climbed onto his pinto. Without guns, boots, and with a goodly portion of his hide a raw burn, he headed on a run toward his enemies and the auction sale of his cattle. Six Bits Baker might have lacked something in the nature of luck lately, but he still had plenty of the stuff called guts. Plenty.

"AN' so, in accordance with the law, I offer this here herd o' critters which you've all seen tuh the highest bidder! What am I—"

Sheriff Walt Meanwell stopped with his mouth half-open. Every neck craned to see the dirty, singed rider who cut over the ridge on a foam-flecked pinto horse.

"What the hell's the matter, Hank!" Rock Granite hissed to his fat henchman.

"Good gosh, Rock!" For the first time Clowd's voice betrayed strong emotion. "I left that guy—why, you kin see the smoke . . ."

"Bungler!"

"But he . . . it ain't possible!"

"Keep that gun ready!"

Six Bits rode through the circle of cowboys and ranchers and stopped before the buckboard which the sheriff was using as a platform. He fished gingerly in the pocket of his scorched shirt and handed a crumpled brown paper to the sheriff.

"Here, Walt. If Rock or any o' his men leave before this here sale's done, you read what's on there, then do your duty! Otherwise, I'll collect it back after the sale."

The sheriff nodded, his assent being helped by the fact that one scorched-edged eyelid of the long Six Bits closed in a wink only he could see. The cowboy dismounted and hobbled painfully to where the tall, loose-skinned Rock Granite stood among his cowboys.

"Listen, you-all!" Six Bits hissed in an undertone. "That stable o' yourn burnt down, aw-right, but I got loose an' I got that painted hoss out also! If any o' you make one funny move the sheriff's goin' to read about it an' foller. They got a place fer the kind which does tricks like that, an'

shootin' that deputy in the arm'll bring a stiff sentence fer the whole crew of you!"

Rock and his group made no sign they heard. The rancher's face set into a wrinkled leather mask.

"Go on with the sale, sheriff!" Six Bits called.

Sheriff Meanwell cleared his throat. "We-ell, folks, bids open! What am I bid?"

Except for Rock's crew and for Six Bits, the other ranchers and cowboys around the buckboard were there out of curiosity. They dared not bid against Rock. All were in sympathy with Six Bits, but helpless to aid him. Rock cleared his throat, then shut his mouth at a glance from Six Bits.

"What'm I bid?" repeated the sheriff.

"Six bits!"

The bid came sharp and clear. It was the voice of Six Bits Baker.

The sheriff gulped. "Huh?"

"Six bits!"

Every eye now was on Rock Granite, to see what the country's richest cattleman would do. The long, lean Granite's benevolently-lined face was drawn into something suspiciously like an enraged fury—but the mouth remained shut. Cowboys and ranchers of the valley looked at one another, mouths half-open in amazement.

"Well—uh—six bits bid. Seventy-five cents," called the sheriff. "Do I hear any more bids! Anybody go a dollar for the herd? Any more bids? Do I hear eighty cents? Six bits, once . . . Any more? . . . Six bits twice . . . For the third and last time . . . Sold to Mr. Six Bits Baker for seventy-five cents!"

"You got the money, sheriff," Six Bits stated. "You're holdin' a little bet between Rock an' me."

Then from the group around the buckboard bellowed a wild burst of uncontrolled laughter. Nobody knew the details, but it was plain to every last woodtick-bitten horse-forker that somehow Six Bits Baker had put over an extremely speedy one on Rock Granite and his crowd. Rock and his bunch mounted and rode away, without speaking a word.

"But good leapin' horned-toads!" rasped Sheriff Meanwell. "What the heck? That paper yuh give me—it didn't have nothin' on it! What—?"

"Mind over matter, Walt," grinned Six Bits. "Crazy scheme, but I couldn't lose nuthin'—an' it looks like I wipe out a rent judgment fer the vast sum of nothin' at all. I won that six bits on a bet, which reminds me they's still six bits of that bet

you owe me.”

Meanwell handed over the money. “But—good heck—whut—?”

“Napoleon an’ Waterloo,” Six Bits Baker

grinned. “Reckon it jist takes one good defeat fer guys who’s used to winnin’. I got a hunch Rock’s goin’ to be a lot less hard to crack after this—after bein’ laughed at by everybody in the valley.”