

"Five!" Rusty yelled, and kicked Madden in the jaw



HAIR OF THE DOGIE

By JAMES P. OLSEN

Hoolihan-raising Rusty Quest, just recovered from a six-gun jamboree, hightails out Montana way when trouble calls!

PALLID from a spell of roundsiding in an El Paso hospital, "Rusty" Lee Quest went directly to the Helena office of the Quest Land and Livestock Company when he landed in that Montana town. There, facing his uncle, Buck Quest, Rusty braced himself against the disapproval he expected to be heaped on his red-thatched head.

Scowling, old Buck studied his nephew. His springy muscles concealed by a neat business suit, his gray eyes and twisted smile deceptively mild. Rusty puzzled Buck.

"Rusty," Buck snapped, exasperated, "darned if I can figger you out! After yore paw died an' yore maw got yuh to go East to school, I reckoned yuh'd someday come to 'tend QLL's business ends. But

yuh quit the college bunch right after yore maw died, two years ago. Why?"

"I'd hung and rattled only because Mother wanted me to. Fact is"—Rusty wrinkled his nose, slightly crooked since being broken in a saloon brawl on Kansas City's turbulent Market Square—"I hated the whole polished dude layout and ached to get back West."

"Yuh've rubbed off any polish that got on you," Buck acridly observed. "Huh! Since leavin' college, all yuh've done is get into gun an' fist scrapes from Denver to Deadwood, an' Kansas City to Kalispell. An' in this last mess yuh was in, backin' a two-bit Mexican revolution, yuh lost the last of the cash yuh'd inherited."

"And had to swim back across the Rio Grande with a bullet in my left side," Rusty cheerfully added. "I never got the land and cattle I would've if my side'd won—but I had fun trying."

"Fun? Hell-raisin' an' goin' busted cuttin' fat hogs in the hams," Buck snorted. Then, plaintively: "Rusty, ain't you learnt nothin' a-tall useful?"

"Don't know. Ain't tried anything very useful." Rusty grinned.

"Well, yuh're goin' to!" Buck snapped. "As guardian of yore share of QLL holdin's, I ain't givin' yuh the price of a sack of smokin' that yuh don't earn. That's why I wrote yuh to hightail it here when yore bullet wound healed—I got a job for yuh. I'm hopin' yuh'll settle down to it an' prove yuh can bear responsibility, so I won't have to keep on close-herdin' yore estate for yuh."

"Yuh got me by the tail." Rusty grimaced. "Name the job."

"A spell ago," Buck began, "QLL locked horns with an Eastern syndicate that was raisin' a ruckus around Lombardy, Idaho. We won an' bought 'em out. Now, we use the home ranch for Idaho headquarters an' lease other spreads on shares. I aim to make it easy for them sharemen to buy their places, once they prove honest neighbors."

"And I'm to see who behaves? Oh, Gentle Annie!" Rusty groaned, then demanded, "Why can't yore Idaho ramrods do the dry-nursing?"

"Yore job," Buck snorted, "is to find out what's happenin' to QLL's yearlin' stock. You see, we had a whoppin' big calf crop a year ago. Spring roundup just past, we checked yearlin's in view of next Fall's shipments, an' found that calf crop'd shrunk to beat heck while gettin' a year old."

"Nobody around us lost anything, an' we only

lost yearlin's. So we gotta find the guilty apples before the rot spreads, but neither our actin' manager, Brownie Shane, or Bart Clune, the range foreman, have had any luck cullin' so far. So I've wrote an' told 'em yuh'd mebbe be there to try your hand."

"Try?" Savoring the idea of trouble, Rusty grinned wickedly. "Unc, I'm the huckleberry who'll bust the apple barrel wide-open!"

"Oh, no, you ain't," Buck contradicted him. "I won't have no shootin', hoolihanin', hell's-a-blazin' started on that range. You go there as peaceful as pie. If you dab a loop on the snakes in the weeds, let the law handle it from there on. Start any of yore partic'lar brand of 'fun' an' I'll pitchfork yuh into a line camp at twenty a month an' doggone sad found. So you keep yore Colts covered, yore fists fettered an' yore hell hobbled! Yuh hear me?"

"Yeah," Rusty rasped. "And yuh don't sound good, because the first thing I'd likely have to do would be run yore dumb foreman up a tree an' spur yore likely-crooked acting manager off the range!"

"Spur Brownie Shane off the range?" Buck echoed. Then, his eyes twinkling, he went on: "A'right. You spook out anything that calls for that, I'll give yuh lief to go right ahead an' spur."

Satisfied, Rusty failed to notice old Buck's sly smile. . . .

BUILT around a square wherein poplar trees towered, the board sidewalks and false-fronted buildings of Lombardy, Idaho, followed a pattern old to Rusty Quest. So his interest, when he got off the stage, lay in the few people who greeted its arrival and, eying them, his gaze came to rest on a girl. Slender, attention-arresting in a divided skirt and buckskin jacket, a man's Stetson hat pulled partially over her wealth of dark brown hair, she ignored Rusty's scrutiny. Staring past him at the stagecoach, she frowned, turned to a tall, towheaded, pistol-toting man beside her and said, loudly enough for Rusty to hear, "Bart, Lee Quest didn't arrive."

"Backed out, mebbe." The man shrugged his indifference.

So he was Bart Clune, QLL's foreman, Rusty thought, disliking him pronto. Then, wondering who the girl was and what her interest might be, he stepped up to them and announced, "I'm Lee Quest."

The girl gasped, “You?” and her expression became a puzzle of disappointment and angry frustration. Bart Clune, his twisted grin mocking, said, “We never figgered Buck’s nephew’d be a dude thut’d need dry-nursin’ while pokin’ into trouble he’d be tenderfoot to.”

Riled, Rusty held onto his temper. Clune thought he was a tenderfoot, yet seemed suspiciously unconcerned—even pleased. The girl also thought him a dude. If he didn’t disillusion them, others would believe the same and his work here might be made easier. More fun, too, to rub it in when time for payoffs came.

“My uncle believes that brains might solve QLL losses, since lack of them seem to’ve failed,” Rusty rudely informed the pair, and was pleased to see the rush of angry color in the girl’s face. “But before we go into that,” he added, “suppose you tell me who yuh are and why yuh’re so concerned about my being a tenderfoot?”

“I’m Bart Clune, QLL foreman,” Clune supplied.

“I’m Brownie Shane, acting ranch manager,” the girl snapped.

“B-Brownie Shane?” It was Rusty’s turn to be flabbergasted, and now he savvied Buck’s easily given permission to spur Brownie Shane off the range, not revealing Brownie as a girl. Mentally cussing the old trickster, Rusty resolved to get even with him.

“You didn’t know a woman was managing ranch affairs?” Mocking triumph tinged Brownie’s voice. “Well, my dad, Mike Shane, is the real manager, but confined with rheumatism. He advises me. But Bart and I, Mr. Quest, give the orders!”

“Not to me, you don’t,” Rusty jeered, and again he and the girl bristled unspoken challenges and opposition at one another.

“It’s only twelve miles to ranch headquarters,” Clune said, breaking the silent clash of wills. “Can you ride, Quest?”

“Not expertly, but well enough,” Rusty replied.

With Rusty imitating the seat of a man who rode only occasionally, the trio headed for the ranch, with Brownie Shane, her slim shoulders stiffly squared, always a bit ahead. She didn’t speak as the miles of rolling, timber-patched range were put behind them, but Bart Clune did. With a tolerance amounting to illy-concealed contempt, he pointed out small ranch buildings that were leased on share

by QLL. He pointed ahead, where hills poked skyward, and told Rusty they were the Squawcall Hills.

“Nothin’ much in them between QLL headquarters an’ Paint Madden’s Diamond 2 which is another share ranch up in the hills. Best to stay away up there. Paint’s honest enough, but he’s nasty an’ his crew’s salty,” Clune warned, and Rusty, nodding, decided to visit Mr. ‘Paint’ Madden and his salty spread at the first opportunity.

The QLL’s wide spread of buildings came into view, then, and Brownie, spurring her pony, split the breeze and left them. Later, Rusty and Clune rode up the poplar-lined road leading to the huge, log bull’s manse and were met by an Indian youth. Taking Rusty’s valise when Clune unstrapped it from his cante, he showed Rusty to a spacious room halfway down a long hallway, then withdrew.

That Eastern syndicate had done a job when they built this pile, Rusty decided, making use of his private bath a little later. Cleaned up, then, he donned the new woolen pants and shirt and the new boots he’d bought to replace the stuff ruined—with the exception of his single action Colt .45—in the muddy Rio Grande. The new henskins, along with his fading hospital “tan,” fitted right into the part he’d decided to play. The six-gun, in a cut-out holster, he tossed back into his valise when the Indian returned.

“You see Mike Shane now,” the war-whoop said, and led the way up the hall to a large, neat office that had windows overlooking the bunkhouses, corrals and saddle stable. Sitting in a wheelchair beside the window, a blanket over his knees, Mike Shane looked up when Rusty paused in the office doorway.

White hair and deep lines in a strong face told a story of pain. But Mike Shane’s blue eyes were clear and mighty wise. For a spell, those eyes studied Rusty intently. Then, smiling a little crookedly, Shane said, “Come on in, Rusty, an’ close the door.”

At Shane’s invitation, Rusty took a chair facing him. Again Shane studied Rusty—face, hands, posture, every detail—and then chuckled, “Yuh’ve sure rubbed Brownie the wrong way, Rusty. I never saw her so mad at a man as she is at you, or so fearful that a man’d get hurt. I reckon that’s because she’s taken a shine to you.”

“She’s concerned because I’m a tenderfoot,”

Rusty reasoned.

"Only, yuh ain't," Shane stated. "I know sign an' I read yores as pure quill rawhide. Natcherly, I won't tell even Brownie that."

Grinning wryly, Rusty changed the subject by asking questions, and found that Shane, confined as he'd been, could tell him no more than Buck had: QLL's yearling tally was far short and Clune had been unable to find a leak.

"An' Clune makes out honest," Shane said. "He was made foreman after good work against the syndicate. He works hard, spends slack seasons provin' up a homestead in the Squawcall Hills, an' he's buildin' up his own iron there an' on QLL range."

"Is Clune losing any yearlings?" Rusty inquired.

"Nope. But neither is anybody else, exceptin' QLL."

"Clune says Paint Madden's honest. That right, Shane?"

"I don't like Madden's sort," Shane admitted. "But if Clune's satisfied he's honest, then he must be. Y'see, them two just plain hate each other, an' it ain't just pretendin', to cover dirty work. They keep from tanglin' by keepin' apart as much as is possible."

"Well, I'll ride and nose." Rusty grinned. "I shouldn't be in much danger, either, because nobody'd think a tenderfoot would know snake tracks and rustler signs, even if he come onto them."

"Somethin' to that. Besides, I'm bettin' yuh'll have comp'ny that'll guarantee yuh more safety," Shane chuckled as the Indian youth came to wheel him away to get ready for supper.

AFTER breakfast, the next morning, Rusty found out what the ranch manager had meant by that. Leaving the table, at which Brownie had spoken to him coolly and only when necessary, Rusty went down to the saddle corral, found Clune and told him he wanted a mount.

"You, Rufe Hickey, saddle a hoss for Mister Quest," Clune yelled at a big jasper with a tobacco-stained chin. Then he told Rusty he'd send along a man to guide him over the range.

"No." Rusty refused. "Mike Shane drew me a map. That'll do."

"Suit yorese'f." Shrugging indifferently, Clune walked away.

When Clune was out of sight, Hickey led up a

rangy dun bronc, and one look told Rusty that it was a *caballo malo!* Damning Hickey, Rusty was wondering if he should risk his neck by climbing on and letting himself be stacked, or chance revealing that he knew horses by refusing, when Brownie rushed up and saved his hash.

"Hickey," she raged, "who ordered you to saddle Butcher for Mr. Quest?"

"Nobuddy," Hickey sneered. "I jist figgered that Mister Quest ain't too good to hit the dirt like the real men who hire on here."

"Bart," Brownie rapped out as Clune arrived hastily on the scene, "hit Hickey with his time."

Sizing up the situation, Clune said calmly, "It's one thing to run Butcher in on come-lately cowhands. It's another, when yuh risk killin' Mister Quest. Hickey, go spool yore possibles."

Maybe, Rusty thought, Clune hadn't figured in Hickey's giving him the Butcher bronc, yet Rusty didn't think that Hickey had done it on his own and without purpose. So, aiming to get to the bottom of it, come time, he had reason to say, "No, Clune, don't fire him."

"Yuh mulish greenhorn, Hickey stays fired!" Brownie snapped.

"I can go over yore head," Rusty belligerently reminded her.

"I'd like to break yours!" she cried, walking rapidly away.

"Hickey," Clune sighed, "get Mister Quest a gentle hoss."

Shortly thereafter, when Brownie rode up alongside him as he was leaving the ranchyard, Rusty understood what Mike Shane meant by saying he'd have company riding out. Suddenly, he wondered if Shane could be behind QLL's losses and making a fool of him—but the idea died a-borning. Rusty instinctively knew Shane as honest beyond doubt, and that nurse-maiding him must be Brownie's own idea.

Eying her, Rusty wondered how it would be if they put aside their first-formed antagonism and made up. Later, perhaps he'd find out; but now he made a sour face and growled, "Where're you going?"

"Wherever you are," she matter-of-factly informed him.

"No!" Rusty was positive. "I don't want yuh with me."

"But I'm going," she persisted, her present calmness griping him. "So where to, Mr. Quest?"

Temporarily forced to give in, Rusty grunted, "I'm going to see the homesteaders first—and stop calling me 'Mr. Quest!'"

"Come on, Mr. Quest. We'll see Ed Silas, the leader of the Hoeman's Pool," Brownie answered, spurring her pony into a lope.

"What's yore rush?" Rusty barked, taking out after her.

"The quicker you learn that you're wasting time here, the sooner you'll leave and get out of harm's way," she called back. That answer held Rusty silent while they covered eight miles of broken range and finally drew up in front of a small log cabin.

"Howdy, neighbor," Brownie greeted the gray-haired man who came out to welcome them. "Ed Silas, this's Lee Quest—Buck's nephew. I brought him over to call on you."

"Right nice of yuh to visit me." Ed Silas thrust a horny hand up to shake with Rusty. "Won't you folks light an' sit a spell?"

"Not today," Rusty declined. "Yuh see, Silas, this call isn't exactly a social one. I'm sort of checking the range, with an eye to finding out about the QLL's missing yearling stock."

"Wa-all, son, yuh're lief to ride anywhere on us homesteaders' pooled range at any time. I'll go along if yuh like. But yuh won't find no thieves amongst us. Y'see, the syndicate was cuttin' our wire, runnin' our beef, burnin' our hay to run us out. QLL stopped that an' helped us out. So, even was there a snake among us, he'd be skeert to rus'le from QLL. The rest of us'd be bound to find it out, an' we'd string the mis'erable cuss from the nearest tree!"

"I believe yuh," Rusty said. "I'll take yore word for it."

With that, he rode away, leaving Silas speechless. But not so, Brownie, who sarcastically erupted, "What a system! You just go around asking folks if they know who's doing the rustling, and those who don't deny they are, are guilty. You're a genius!"

"Of course I am," Rusty readily concurred.

"Ohhh," Brownie despaired, "let's get this farce over with."

Whatever else they hadn't done, they'd ridden a lot of miles by the time they got back to the QLL that evening. There, after supper, Brownie went wearily to her room, while Rusty and Mike Shane settled down to smoke and make medicine in

Shane's office.

"An' how'd it go today?" Shane inquired, lighting a cigar.

"Well enough—though I doubt Brownie'd say so," Rusty said.

"Before supper, she did tell me that yore way of smokin' out rustlers wasn't likely to bag yuh many," Shane chuckled.

"No." Rusty grinned. "But it cleared the homesteaders and ranchers I saw. Since the QLL is between them and the hills, their range doesn't lay so they could get by with running shopmade beef, even if there was a single brand hereabouts that'd cover the QLL iron—which there isn't. So, Shane, the bottom of our trouble must be up there in the Squawcall Hills!"

"Which puts it on Clune or Paint Madden, unless somebody from beyond the hills is comin' in an' runnin' stock out in bunches—an' there ain't been no sign of that," Shane muttered. "But Clune ain't got no great deal of stock on his homestead, an' Paint Madden was in the clear this Spring. Y'see, he runs his own roundup an' we send reps at brandin' time an' beef gather, an' to tally the share of Diamond 2 stuff comin' to QLL. So we know how many head Madden's runnin'. Besides, he ships from Pengo Sidin', on the railroad some sixty miles beyond the Squawcalls, in the same trains with us."

"Yet those yearlings didn't fly away," Rusty allowed.

"If they never, what's the answer?" Mike Shane countered.

"I don't know," Rusty replied. "But if yuh'll send for Rufe Hickey to come up here, maybe we can start getting answers now."

Puzzled, but asking no questions, Shane called the Indian and sent him after Hickey. Arriving shortly thereafter, when he saw Rusty in the office, Hickey snarled, "So yuh're gettin' me fired, after all? Wa-all, when it's done, I'm beatin' the blazes outta yuh!"

Cobra-quick and fearsomely silent, Rusty uncoiled from his chair. He slugged Hickey in the stomach, tapped him lightly on the jaw to bring his hands back up, then ripped in another right that seemed to tear Hickey's insides to pieces. His face the color of wet ashes, Hickey reeled back against the wall and would have gone to the floor if Rusty hadn't planted a palm against his chest and pinned him upright.

“That’s how yuh’ll beat blazes out of me,” Rusty hooted harshly. “And it’s just a sample of what yuh’ll get if yuh don’t tell me who put yuh up to giving me an outlaw bronc to ride this morning.”

This was no time for stalling. Hickey knew it. Sounding sick he gasped, “‘Twas Paint Madden. I saw ‘im at the bar in town, an’ he gin-line ten dollars to slip Butcher in on yuh if I got a chance.”

“Figuring that Buck Quest’s nephew’d be more than a tenderfoot, Madden was afraid he’d learn things, an’ wanted him crippled an’ laid up, huh? Is that it, Hickey?” Rusty cocked his right fist.

“I swear, I dunno!” Hickey croaked. “I told yuh all I know.”

Obviously, Hickey was telling the truth. Releasing him, Rusty advised, “Yuh’d better get your pay in the morning, then hightail.”

“Blast it, I’ll get even with yuh fer this!” Hickey swore.

“Well, now?” Rusty turned to Shane when Hickey, beating a swift retreat after making his threat, slammed the outer door.

“Looks like Paint Madden’s got more up his sleeve than his arm,” Shane admitted. “But what? That’s what I’d admire to know.”

“Me, too,” Rusty said. “So tomorrow, I’ll ride up in the hills, and maybe pay Madden a visit. And,” he added, “I’m going alone, even if I have to hogtie Brownie to keep her here!”

“I’ll take care of her,” Shane promised. The next morning, feigning an extra-severe attack of rheumatism, his moans kept Brownie at his bedside while Rusty got away from the ranch.

FEARING that Brownie might get wise to Mike’s faking and come after him, Rusty made tracks. Slowing up, then, when he was in the lower reaches of the Squawcall Hills, he looked back and saw that he was being followed. Not by Brownie, however, but by Bart Clune.

Making no attempt to lose Clune, Rusty rode on along a dim cattle trail that wound over a steep hill and down into a brushy draw, and ended in a grassy clearing where a number of calves were grazing. Some of them, Rusty saw, belonged to QLL, some were Paint Madden’s, and a few seemed to be unbranded. Riding nearer, then, Rusty could see the very faint QLL brands on those dogies, and knew why the QLL had come up short on yearling stock!

Hair branding was the answer. Hair branding, done by applying the branding iron to a calf

through a piece of wet sacking, thereby burning the brand into the hair but not the hide. Later, as the calves grew up and their hair grew out, their brands would disappear and the hair branders, rustling them up again, could run their own brands on them without leaving any traces of blotting or altering.

In view of his own discovery, Rusty was wondering how it had escaped Clune—if it had!—when the latter rode into the clearing. Reigning up, he glanced at the calves, then eyed Rusty narrowly and growled, “Quest, I told yuh it was tough in these hills. Besides, there ain’t nothin’ wrong to be found up here, nohow.”

“Yuh’re a liar,” Rusty calmly stated. “Yuh see, I’m not such a shorthorn I don’t know what a hair brand is, Clune. So don’t tell me there’s nothing wrong, or that yuh’re not in with Paint Madden.”

“I ain’t in with that huddem Madden!” Clune roared denial. “An’ I’ll take a dyin’ oath I never hair-branded no QLL dogies!”

“But yuh couldn’t help knowing it was being done,” Rusty reasoned. “So if yuh’re not in on it, how come yuh’ve let it ride?”

“I—I been waitin’, tryin’ to get sure enough proof to land Madden and his outfit in the calaboose,” Clune muttered.

“That’s another lie—but I’ll bet I can name yore real reason,” Rusty grunted. “Two-to-one, yuh’ve been running your B-Bar-C iron on some of the hair-branded stuff. And for the few head yuh could run without yore increase being found out, yuh let the QLL go on taking big losses, you penny-ante polecat!”

Shaken by Rusty’s bull’s-eye conclusion, Clune croaked, “Yuh can’t prove that so any judge’d ever convict me, you tricky son!”

“I’m judging this,” Rusty said quietly. “And my sentence is that yuh settle yore affairs in a hurry, then get out of Idaho.”

“I’ll leave QLL, but not my homestead,” Clune snarled, his right hand drifting toward the six-gun at his thigh.

Rising in his stirrups, Rusty leaned out of his saddle and smashed Clune savagely on the nose. As Clune clung to his saddlehorn to keep himself on his horse, Rusty snatched the Colt from his holster and tossed it away.

“You can get it later,” he tersely remarked, adding, “though it won’t do you any good if I have to run yuh yonderly.”

Sleeving his bloody face, Clune squalled, “I

ain't runnin', or lettin' this stand. So have yorese'f a gun next time we meet!"

Rusty's reply was a shrug. But as he rode away toward Paint Madden's place, he told himself, "Hickey and Clune make two cusses who've sworn to perforate my pelt. I wonder who'll be the next to?"

He got an answer to that when he reached the Diamond 2 and pulled up where a huge hellion of a man sprawled on a bench beside the blacksmith shop. Looking down at him, identifying him by the mulberry-colored birthmarks that splotched his mean face, Rusty nodded and said, "Paint Madden? I'm Lee Quest—Buck's nephew."

"Y'are, huh?" Yawning, Madden towered to his feet. "Well, whadda y'want here, sonny? Come on, get to the point!"

"I will," Rusty snapped, "by stating I don't like a jasper who tries to have a man injured by an outlaw bronc."

"T'ell with what y'like," Madden sneered. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. I don't like to find QLL calves that were branded in yore roundup, outgrowing the brands, same as last year's crop did!"

The ugly pull of his lips indicated how Rusty's accusation hit him. Madden ground out, "Y'figger to plaster me with any such charge, y'careless-mouthed son, y'better come here with proof an' the law an' all of QLL to make 'er stick. Meantime, stay off this spread 'til the day y'can do that—which day y'll never live to see if y'ain't streakin' tail by the time I count up to five."

Starting toward Rusty, Madden measured his steps in time as he slowly counted, "One—two—three—four—"

"Five!" Rusty yelled and, shaking one foot out of the stirrup, kicked Madden in the jaw as the big cuss lunged and grabbed at him.

Paint Madden dropped in his tracks, and Rusty, unarmed as he was, wisely split the breeze. Behind him, merely stunned by a kick that might have killed an average man, Madden got up, drew his six-shooter and threw lead at Rusty as he raced away down the trail.

Cold anger gripped Rusty as he rode out of the hills with the whine of bullets echoing in his ears. He was determined to get proof that Madden had hair-branded and sold QLL dogies, and told himself, "When I do, I'll take it to him with my shooting iron, and I hope the big son bows his neck

at me!"

Knowing the stock must have been disposed of somewhere beyond the Squawcalls, Rusty considered going directly there, but couldn't. The Shanes, not knowing where he'd gone, would be in a sweat. So, regretting the time lost, he was riding on toward the QLL when one of the outfit's riders came angling into sight over a nearby rise.

His loud whoop, halting the cowhand, Rusty rode up to him and said, "I want yuh to tell Mike Shane—and nobody else!—that I'm going over around Pengo Siding, and might be gone several days."

IT was past noon, four days later, when Rusty returned to the QLL. Walking into the office, he found Mike Shane dozing in his wheelchair and Brownie at work on some books. Looking up, she dropped her pen and cried, "Oh, Rusty, I'm glad you're back!"

"Me, too," Shane sighed. "Y'see, to keep her from runnin' me loco, I had to tell her yuh wasn't a tenderfoot an' could take care of yoreself. But she still kept frettin' an' a-worritin', anyhow."

Crimsoning, Brownie tried to offset Mike's disclosure. "I just wanted to see you so I could bawl you out for letting me think you were green and might get into trouble, you despicable Ananias!"

To forestall a probable argument between Brownie and Rusty, Shane asked, "How come yuh to tail to Pengo Sidin', Rusty?"

Settling in a chair, Rusty told of finding the hair-branded dogies. When he mentioned Clune's part in the picture, Shane spat, "That sneakin' coyote! He told me yuh'd accused him of bein' in with Madden, an' that yuh hit him without any cause or warnin'."

"Did he leave this range, like I told him to?" Rusty asked.

"When he left here, he was headed to town to see the doctor about his busted nose," Shane replied. "I ain't heard of him since."

Resuming his story, Rusty told of his encounter with Madden, then said, "For a little money, the station agent in Pengo Siding dug up his old car billings. Checking them, I saw where a jasper named Lew Cranse had shipped two cars of calves to Grassy, about two hundred miles from Pengo Sidin', some four months after QLL's calf roundup last year. That was time enough for hair brands

to've grown out, but the station agent remembered that a few dogies had faint markings on them that could've once been the QLL iron."

"But couldn't be identified as such now," Shane commented.

"That's what Lew Cranse told me, after I hopped a train to Grassy and looked him up," Rusty said. "Then I told him that Madden had confessed, and he claimed he didn't know the stuff he'd bought from Madden was hair-branded, stolen veal. So I used stronger 'arguments' to make him give up head, and now the Grassy law is riding herd on him. And if we go easy on Cranse, he's eager to pay us for what he bought, and testify against Madden in court."

"If we ever get Madden into court," Shane muttered.

"I'm going in now and get the sheriff, and I'll be backing him up when he goes after Madden," Rusty said as he rose and went to the door. "If Madden's minded to resist arrest," he added, "why that'll be just fine with me!"

"Rusty," Brownie spoke up quickly, "why don't you rest today and go in after the sheriff tomorrow?"

Suspicious of her solicitude, Rusty demanded, "Why wait?"

Ignoring Brownie's hushing gestures, Shane explained, "She's afraid you'll meet Madden in town. Y'see, he stopped here on his way in today, to tell me he'd heard yuh quit the country, an' that he'd tear you bodaciously apart if you ever dared come back."

"So he's in town, huh? Good. That saves me the ride up to his spread," Rusty said, and headed down the hall toward his room.

"Wait," Brownie cried. "I'm going with you. Wait for me."

Rusty wasn't waiting. Coming out of his room a few seconds later, his forty-five holstered low on his right thigh, he hastened down to the corral. Saddling a fresh mount, he lit out for town before Brownie had time to even change into her riding garb.

Lombardy, that near-Summer afternoon, was a scene of utmost tranquillity. In the poplar-grown square, where Rufe Hickey sat, sullen and mean from the effects of a prolonged drunk, two men pitched horseshoes. Lazy voices, Bart Clune's among them, issued from a nearby saloon, while Paint Madden and a few others drowsed in chairs

tilted back under the hotel's wooden awning.

Then Rusty Quest rode up the street, and like a strawstack in a Kansas cyclone, Lombardy's serenity was blown to bits.

As Rusty dismounted at the hotel hitch-rail, Madden banged the front legs of his chair against the walk and sprang up, snarling, "So y'never had no more sense than to come back—an' packin' a gun!"

"I'm back from talking to Lew Cranse, in Grassy, Madden," Rusty replied, stepping clear of the hitchrail. "And if yuh don't want to come along and see the Sheriff, yuh'll see why I'm heeled."

Mention of the sheriff and Cranse, and Rusty's cool assurance caused Madden to hesitate, and his gaze, shifting warily, came to rest on Rufe Hickey who stood across the street, his hand on the butt of his gun. Sinc'd he'd botched the Butcher bronc deal, Hickey had avoided Madden, so Madden didn't know Hickey had been fired off QLL, or that it was Rusty he'd made up his booze-inflamed mind to kill. In fact, Madden thought that Hickey was backing Rusty up!

"It looks like I gotta cave, Quest," Madden growled, resting one hand on the back of the chair beside him. "Either that, or *this!*"

Lifting the chair, Madden hurled it at Rusty, then pulled his hogleg and slammed a slug at Hickey as Rusty flung himself flat to escape being brained. The bullet nipping his sleeve, Hickey reacted blindly and sent a slug smashing into Madden's chest. Rocked by the impact but refusing to fall, Madden thumbed another shot at Hickey, and Hickey went down with the bullet in his heart.

Sensing that his own life was ebbing, Madden made terrible, burbling sounds through the blood in his throat, and turned his gun and his hatred on Rusty. Now on his feet, his forty-five fisted, Rusty realized there was no avoiding what must be done. Smoke made a blossom on his Colt's muzzle, another one bloomed as he fired a second shot into Madden's big body. Those were all the gunfire flowers Madden needed as he sprawled lifeless out into the street.

Sickened, staring down at Madden's hulk, Rusty was aware of nothing around him until Brownie, racing up the street on a lathered horse, shrieked, "Rusty, look out for Clune!"

Wheeling, Rusty's shuttling glance pinned on Bart Clune, who was standing in front of the saloon a few paces away. His face taut, the muzzle of his

drawn six-gun sagging toward the ground, Clune's intention to mix with Rusty had died with Hickey and Madden.

"Fool!" Rusty snarled, holding his gun on Clune as he moved swiftly toward him. "Fool, do yuh want killing, too?"

Clune didn't, and showed it by hurling away his six-gun as he broke and ran toward his horse, standing at a nearby tie rail. Rusty, leaping after Clune, kicked him and sped him stumbling. He was going after Clune again, meaning to kick him once more, when Buck Quest's voice, booming, "You wild devil, stop!" halted him. Clune, clawing his way into his saddle, pulled out and raced past the stage halted up the street. He didn't know where he was headed and didn't care—as long as it was far away from Idaho and Rusty Quest!

HIS mad tension ebbing, Rusty turned and squinted one eye at his uncle as old Buck walked away from the stage and came toward him. At the same time, he was pleasantly aware that Brownie had shucked out of her saddle and had come up to stand at his side.

Eying his nephew sadly as he halted in front of him, Buck Quest sighed.

"Rusty, I figgered I'd best follow yuh an' see how you was keepin' the peace over here. An' what do I find, before I even get off of the stage? Two men dead, an' you tryin' to kick the QLL foreman to death! That's the limit, even for you."

"You'd better get the straight of things before you condemn me to a line camp, like yuh threatened to," Rusty grunted as they moved down the street, away from Paint Madden's lifeless bulk.

Nodding at the sheriff as the lawman came running toward the scene of slaughter, Buck waved him on by, then said, "All right. Brownie, you tell

me what reason Rusty had for startin' this mess."

"Oh-oh," Rusty thought. "Here's where she fixes me!"

But Brownie, as usual, did the opposite of what he thought she would. Pressing closely, protectively against him, her voice stressed her indignation.

"Buck Quest," she declared, "Rusty was just giving those men some hair of the dogies this trouble was about."

"Huh?" Buck blinked at her. "Says which ag'in?"

"Oh, it's too much of a story to tell here and now," Brownie answered. "Besides, what really counts is that Rusty was just ending trouble others began. The only trouble he *started* was with me."

"That so?" Buck's eyes began twinkling. "You don't mean to tell me he tried kickin' you off the range? In Helena, he said—"

"You cussed, double-crossing old cupid," Rusty cut in, "never mind repeating what I said. Yuh got me off to a bad enough start as it was—not telling me that Brownie Shane wasn't a man, but a pretty girl with a stubborn disposition and a contrary tongue."

"Liar," Brownie sniffed and started to move away from him.

Curving one arm around Brownie's trim waist, Rusty hugged her against him so tightly she gasped, "Oh Rusty, you're so tender—my foot!"

"Unc," Rusty chuckled, hanging onto her, "if yuh don't let me ramrod QLL, like I'm figuring to do, then that line camp'd better have a cabin big enough for two."

"Three or four, you mean!" Brownie blurted without thinking, but just remaining a stubborn little filly to the end.