



Wedge's right crashed through again and the red-faced man hit the ground

RANGE ROOKERS

By CLIFF WALTERS

Wedge Wilson runs up against some gold-mine swindlers!

IT WASN'T because silent, unhappy old Mac McNeil, owner of the Riffle Creek spread, had a grudge against him that Wedge Wilson fell heir to most of the heavy work around the outfit. It was just because the big brown-haired lad with massive shoulders tapering wedgelike down to a narrow waist could do the heavy work more easily, thoroughly—and without beefing about it.

Having been reared in the poverty of that unfertile piece of range known as Gumbo Flats, where families were large,

grub scarce and overalls usually patched, Wedge wasn't one to rise in his wrath and say, "Get somebody else to shoe work horses and haul rock salt, or pitch hay or haul logs. I hired out to punch cows!"

Of course, this agreeableness had its penalties. Old Mac McNeil became more and more willing to let Wedge do more and more heavy work, while the other hands, usually a couple of them, sat in their saddles and let their feet hang down.

Wedge, who had had only one year of "readin' and writin'" in the shack

schoolhouse on Gumbo Flats, voiced no protest. He saved his wages, putting them in the new bank that had opened a year ago in Arrow City, the growing town ten miles off to the south. But he didn't wear patched overalls any more. And; because old Charley Ling, the Chinese cook, was skilful and generous, the big lad enjoyed bountiful grub.

Stocky, red-faced Pete Garmanch, one of the two other hired men, said one pay day, "What are you goin' to do with all this worldly wealth you're hordin' up, Wedge? Buy a cattle spread of your own some day, or take over one of them banks in Arrow City?"

"He ain't hordin' all his money," said gangling, wiry Chris Smith, the other puncher. "I seen him spend a dime for a sack of candy in the store last month—and while I was buyin' a Navajo saddle blanket, a new lariat and a pair of boots."

"More reckless still, he give the candy away after he bought it," bandied Garmanch, who had been with the Riffle Creek outfit for three months now.

"Not to one of them spangled belles down at the Big Lamp dance hall, I hope!" said dark, shaggy-haired Chris Smith, who had been at Riffle Creek for nearly a year now, and who was an expert hand around cattle. He was a fine rider and roper, and endowed with plenty of cow savvy. "Maybe that's who'll get Wedge's fortune some day—some beguilin' dame with eyes like stars, and a smile that'd make any bank account melt."

Wedge colored and grinned affably. He was accustomed to being a target for jibes. He remembered the sack of candy. He had bought it for a little freckle-faced, shabbily-clothed kid. Wedge had remembered when he too had gazed longingly at the candy case in the store.

THE three men were saddling horses, preparatory to riding out in the hills and rounding up a bunch of broncs to break, when this conversation took place. Wedge was threading his latigo through the cinch ring when old Mac McNeil, boss of the K5, came walking down from the house. A small, gray man who suffered from stomach trouble, Mac looked at tall Chris Smith and said:

"How's the drift fence between Timber Ridge and the canyon, Chris?"

"I was just goin' to tell you that some of them pine posts are rotted off," Smith answered. "Ought to be some new ones set, and some new stays put in. I toggled it up as best I could yesterday, but—"

Mac looked at Wedge. "You better unsaddle your horse, Wedge, and hook up the team," he said. "Take a few cedar posts up there. Know where you can cut a few?"

"Out by Cedar Butte, where I cut the last ones," Wedge answered, and pulled the latigo out of the cinch ring. "Can't drive right to 'em, but I can snake 'em—or pack 'em on my back."

"Pack 'em on your back and save the work horses," Pete Garmanch said, grinning.

"How would you like to go and fix that fence while Wedge rides for horses with Chris?" old Mac said a little sharply to his stocky puncher.

"I'm not a fence builder," Garmanch answered flatly.

"I'll fix 'er," Wedge put in mildly.

"Yeah," old Mac replied, "and probably a dang sight better'n some others would. You ain't scared of a little rock in a post hole. Huh! There'd be a lot more and deeper post holes dug if some people wasn't afraid of bellyin' up to crowbars like they do other kind of bars! Come on, Wedge. I'll help you put the tools in the wagon."

Wedge saw anger sweep across Pete Garmanch's red face. Probably because Pete liked to belly up to the bars in Arrow City when he got the chance. Garmanch started to make some retort, but Chris Smith said brusquely: "Come on, Pete. We've got some tall ridin' ahead of us."

As the two punchers rode off, Mac said to Wedge, "If you happen to see a cowpuncher lookin' for a job when you're in town next time, fetch him home with you. Especially if he looks like the kind that wouldn't be insulted if you asked him to dig a post hole."

Wedge tried to change the subject. He knew that old Mac's stomach always acted up when he got a little upset about something. Wedge felt sorry for old Mac whose life had been shadowed by the death of his wife three years ago, and, a year later, the death of his son, Larry McNeil.

Larry had been a fine ambitious lad—from all reports that Wedge had heard. He had been sent across the Steep Rock Mountains to buy some bulls out of a shipment due to arrive at the town of Sheridan. Old Mac had been too ill to go at the time. He had given his son a twelve-hundred-dollar check, drawn on the Stockgrower's National Bank at Arrow City, and made payable to Donahue & Clark, livestock dealers with whom he had dealt before. Young Larry was to hire a rider in Sheridan to help drive the bulls over the mountains to home range.

But tragedy had struck Larry McNeil at Wolf Point Pass, on the summit of the Steep Rocks. He was ambushed by someone who had probably thought he would be carrying cash. He was killed and the twelve-hundred-dollar check, the endorsement forged, was cashed by a renegade gambler who skipped the country before the law started closing in. And the bank who had cashed the check with the

forged endorsement, was still holding the sack.

Sometimes, Wedge noticed, old Mac still gazed off in the direction of Wolf Point Pass. And the cowman's hands would clench and unclench slowly.

Old Mac had offered a thousand dollars to anyone who could identify his son's murderer. But nothing happened. The tragedy was receding into oblivion as far as the general public was concerned. But the dark bitterness, the sharp talons, still held their grip on the heart of an old man who had lost something far more precious to him than ranch, range or cattle.

One noon, while Mac had been up to the cow camp on the mountain slope, old Charley Ling, the cook, had shown Wedge young Larry's collection of arrowheads, relics he had picked up on the range. The trinkets, all sizes and colors, were tacked up with pins on the log wall in the room that had been Larry's.

"He sure must've had sharp eyes," Wedge remarked. "Findin' all them. Ain't there one missin'—in that little space there?"

"The little green one," Charley Ling said in his sing-song voice. "I tell it jade—green jade. I know. I see lots long time ago. He say ain't no jade in these hills. I say must be—somewhere. He say he take it to jewelry store sometime, find out maybe."

WEDGE was repairing a couple of pack saddles in the ranch shop that warm July morning a visitor called at the K5. A tall, nice-looking man with a thick mane of gray hair and blue eyes as placid as mountain lakes, stuck his head in the shop door. "Is there any chance of a grubline rider bein' invited to dinner at this outfit, Big Fellow?" he asked in a booming voice.

"Sure," Wedge answered, grinning.

“Best cook on the range.”

“Lucky Layne’s the name.”

“The lucky prospector, eh?” Wedge answered. “I’ve heard of you. Heard my dad tell about you when I was just a kid over on the Gumbo Flats range. He said you was throwin’ wealth one day—and ridin’ grubline the next. But never ridin’ grubline for long. He said you could smell gold.”

Layne chuckled softly. He looked toward the corrals. “Say, ain’t that Chris Smith and some other feller halter breakin’ broncs down there?” he said.

“Yep,” Wedge said. “You know Chris?”

“Had many a meal with him in cow camps,” the older man replied. “I thought I recognized his elongated form when I saw a couple of riders cashin’ horses on the mountain slope yesterday.” He turned and called, “Howdy, Chris!”

There was a pause. Then Smith yelled, “Well, Lucky Layne! Come on down here, you old nugget picker!”

Layne occupied old Mac’s place at the dinner table that noon. Mac was feeling too sick to eat today. He was lying down in his room. Charley Ling beckoned Wedge into the kitchen. “Boss pletty sick,” the Chinese said. “Maybe we better take him to town and see Doc Taylor, eh? I want buy glub, too.”

“If you can talk him into goin’—which he should—I’ll be glad to take you,” Wedge said. “I’ll go in and talk to him now.”

As Wedge walked back through the dining room, he said to Chris Smith and Pete Garmanch, “Either one you gents been pack-rattin’ the shoein’ hammer away from the shop? I’ve got to rivet some pack saddle straps, and it’s gone.”

“Maybe I left it in the barn,” Garmanch replied. “In the currycomb box.”

Wedge went in to see Mac. The latter thought he might go to town and see the doctor. He would let Wedge know.

Later, Wedge went to the barn in search of the shoeing hammer. He found it in the currycomb box, all right—but he didn’t take it out—not right away. He heard talk coming from outside the barn. Layne and Garmanch and Chris Smith were talking out there.

“I don’t think it’s any big strike, gents,” Layne was saying. “I think it’s just a rich little pocket. But if I could get the stuff out, and haul it over to the stamp mill at Flagrock— But there’s the hitch. Gettin’ it up out of that awful canyon. I’ve got to have an engine, and pull it up in buckets on a long cable, like I had to do in another place once. It’ll cost me six-seven hundred dollars for that equipment.”

“Why don’t you go to town and get the money?” Chris Smith asked. “Anybody with the money would fall over hisself stakin’ you! They know you’re straight as a string, Lucky!” Smith’s voice was tense.

“Yeah, go to town!” Wedge heard Layne answer. “It’d be like throwin’ a juicy bone among a pack of starvin’ dogs. Just say ‘gold!’ and everybody goes crazy. The whole town of Arrow City’d be swarmin’ over my claim. They’d be fightin’ and clawin’ and maybe .shootin’ one another. Nope! I’ve seen that business before. I’m keepin’ my mouth shut. You two gents are the only ones I’ve told, and—”

“But I’ve only got a hundred dollars!” Chris Smith interrupted. “And Pete’s only got about forty. Golly! I wish we had more! Enough to put that cable business in and—”

“What about Mac McNeil?” Layne asked. “He’s got money. Why don’t we let him in on the deal?”

“He wouldn’t risk a nickel on gold minin’—and he’s told me so!” Chris

Smith said.

"But I'll take him up there in the mountains with me and show him what I've got, if he won't take Lucky Layne's word for it," argued the prospector.

"He wouldn't go way up there, Lucky," Pete Garmanch said tensely. "Besides, he ain't able to! And, another thing, he don't need no more money! Give somebody a chance that— How much would somebody stand to make, say that put up four or five hundred?"

"A thousand, maybe. Maybe a couple thousand. Out of what I know I've got up there. And maybe a lot more. But I'm not dreamin' about big wealth this time. If I strike more, all right. Say, how about the other hired hand? The big fellow you call Wedge? Has he got any money saved up?"

"Yeah, he's got five hundred or so in the bank," Garmanch replied. "But he's just a big, dumb ape that—"

"Hold on now, Pete," Chris Smith cut in. "He's a square shooter, Wedge Wilson is. He's worked danged hard here. And he had a plenty tough time of it when he was a kid—starvin' on Gumbo Flats. I'd rather see him reap a harvest than—"

PICKING up the shoeing hammer, Wedge quietly withdrew from the barn. He didn't want to go. He wanted to listen some more. His interest was keenly whetted. He had heard his father talk about Lucky Layne. A dozen times Wedge had heard old Dan Wilson tell the story about Lucky Layne borrowing a hundred dollars from a drunken shepherd, and how that thirsty shepherd had reaped a ten thousand dollar harvest from his investment and all because Lucky Layne was a square shooter.

Wedge went back to the shop and the pack saddles. But his mind wasn't on his work. He kept glancing off toward the barn, kept waiting to see three men appear

and come walking toward the shop. The minutes dragged interminably. Then, at last, the trio appeared. They walked slowly, hesitantly toward Wedge.

It was Chris Smith who spoke first. "Wedge, I s'pose if I asked you to invest your hard-earned savin's in a gold mine one you'd never even heard about, you'd bounce a sledgehammer off'n my head. Is that right?"

Flushing a bit guiltily, Wedge answered, "Oh, I don't know. I've heard about Lucky Layne. Maybe, if I got the chance—"

Ten minutes later Wedge, who had never withdrawn a penny of the money he had deposited, went up to the ranchhouse and borrowed a check blank. Then he laboriously made out a check for five hundred dollars, payable to John F. Layne. Chris Smith forked a hundred dollars cash over to the prospector. And Pete Garmanch did likewise with his capital of forty dollars.

"We'd better get back to our bronc-breakin', Chris," said Pete Garmanch in a low voice. "I see old Mac out on the porch of the house. And I don't think he'd hesitate to fire me, the way he's been actin' lately."

"Maybe you'll be quittin' your job, anyhow, one of these days, Pete," said Layne. "You and Chris both."

"Not Chris," Garmanch answered. "He's in line to ramrod this outfit after old Mac gets so sick he has to move to town and let the doc keep an eye on him. Ain't that right, Wedge?"

"As far as I can tell, it is," said the big lad as he took the receipt that Layne was handing him.

Layne rode away while Wedge resumed his work. He was glad that he had plugged along here at the K5, heavy work or not. Otherwise he wouldn't have been here when Lady Fortune came his way at

last.

Charley Ling came down to the shop and said that the boss would go to town and see the doc. Would Wedge hook the light team up to the buckboard?

"Too bad you had that runaway that time and had the wits scared out of you, Charley," Wedge said, grinning. "Then you could drive a team."

"Me go, but you drive," Charley said. "Hurry fast, Wedge. Boss sick plenty bad!"

The team of bays were young and fast. By mid-afternoon the buckboard was whisking into Arrow City. But Doc Taylor was out of town. Mrs. Taylor said he should return within an hour. She suggested Mac and his two companions could come in the house and wait.

"We'll go over to the store, Mrs. Taylor," Mac said. "Charley's got to buy some grub. And Wedge ought to buy a new pair of overalls, whether he wants to squander that much money or not."

Wedge flushed as the lady laughed. But he told himself that old Mac might grin on the other side of his face some day before too long.

Meantime the buckboard had pulled up to the hitching rack in front of Parmalee's General Emporium, when Wedge, tying the off horse to the smooth-worn pole, suddenly froze in his tracks. Layne was backing out of the bank next door, one of the town's two banks. And he was holding a gun.

"Don't let that man get away!" barked the bank cashier from the door. "He's trying to cash a no-good check for five hundred dollars! And when I called him on it—"

"Nobody'd better try stoppin' me!" Layne shouted. "If they do—" He waved his forty-five menacingly.

Dumbfounded for a moment, Wedge finally came to life. He moved toward

Layne slowly. "Easy now, Lucky," he said. "There's some misunderstandin' somehow."

"Keep away from me, you big, dumb ox!" Layne snarled.

Those harsh words were a whip cracking in Wedge's face. Layne kept making toward his buckskin horse which was tied to the store hitching rack, a fleet, rangy horse, Wedge had noticed earlier today.

Suddenly Layne whirled to untie the reins looped around the pole. As he did so, Wedge made a flying leap. A gun roared. A leaden slug ripped the collar on the big man's cotton shirt. Then Wedge thwarted another shot, one that might have ended his life, by smashing out with a right which lifted Layne off the ground and sent him crashing into the hitching rack.

As Wedge grabbed up a fallen gun, old Mac yelled, "Look out, Wedge! Chris Smith and Garmanch—"

Hoofbeats were echoing across a vacant lot across the street, the weed-grown lot between the saddle shop and the Roundup Saloon. Wedge heard a gun roar. He heard a bullet scream past him. He pulled the trigger of Layne's gun. His too-fast shot ticked through the tip of the right ear on Chris Smith's gray horse. The horse, a snuffy one, wheeled. And Pete Garmanch's roan crashed into him broadside. Both horses fell. Riders leaped free of the melee. Wedge dropped Layne's gun.

Wedge now ran over to the porch of the saloon to reach the closest one, Garmanch. Wedge smashed out with another uppercut. Garmanch, stocky and stout, didn't go down. He only reeled back. Then lank, wiry Chris Smith was leaping at Wedge, smashing him with a blow to the side of the head.

FLOUNDERING for an instant under the impact of that vicious punch, the big man finally straightened up, ducked another punch coming at him, and nearly tore Chris Smith apart with a body smash. Smith went sprawling, but Pete Garmanch was coming in. Wedge met him toe to toe. Knuckles thudded as men yelled. Then Wedge's right crashed through again. It cracked to Garmanch's face. The red-faced man hit the ground.

"What's goin' on here?" bellowed Tom Garrett, the deputy sheriff, who was hotfooting it up the now-busy street. "Ain't that Lucky— No! It ain't! It's Lucky's coyote brother—Badger Layne!"

"Badger Layne?" blurted Wedge; his head swimming a little.

"He said he was Lucky Layne!" said the excited bank cashier. "He tried to cash a five hundred dollar check, signed by some man named Richard Wilson and nobody by that name has an account in the Stockgrower's National Bank! He called me a liar!"

"Richard Wilson?" old Mac piped up. "Why, that's my man Wedge here! Wedge, did you give this coyote"—Mac pointed—"a check for—"

"Yeah," Wedge answered, still in a daze. "But it was a dirty frame-up. These two skunks, Smith and Garmanch, pulled a trick on me. They forked what money they had over to 'Lucky' Layne in front of me, on a gold mine investment. I know now why they ain't at home breakin' broncs. They sneaked into town, on a high lope, to split my five hundred with Layne. I'll show you the check I give him!"

Wedge reached down and ripped the pockets off Layne's overalls. He revealed the check, all right. But he revealed something else—a little green arrowhead that brought an alarmed cry from old Charley Ling.

"Larry's jade arrowhead, Mac!" the

old Chinese cried, trembling.. "I tell you he take it maybe to jewelry shop over in Sheridan when he go after bulls! I tell you!"

Mac McNeil was no longer a statue. Slowly, deliberately, he picked up a fallen six-shooter and said, "You let me alone for the next few minutes, Deputy Garrett! I'm goin' to make Lucky Layne's coyote brother wake up and talk! Talk straight! And nobody's stoppin' me!"

Badger Layne talked, all right. He knew that he was tottering on the brink of death, swift and violent. He could see it in the blazing eyes of Mac McNeil, could hear it in the cowman's sharp, metallic questions. Yes, Badger Layne had killed Larry McNeil. And Pete Garmanch's brother, a tinhorn gambler, had cashed the twelve hundred dollar check drawn on the Stockgrower's National Bank. And Chris Smith knew all about it. Smith and Garmanch had been pals long before they had gone to work at the K5.

Excitement was running rife in the town when Garrett, with Wedge's aid, dragged three men toward jail. Garrett said to his helper, "I'm sure glad you was in town today! Dang! The way you knocked them three coyotes cold—"

"I kinda hate bein' shot at," was all that Wedge said.

Old Mac was waiting for Wedge by the hitching rack. He said, "That was a pretty slick trick you pulled, lad—baitin' Badger Layne into trouble. Givin' him your check on the Stockgrower's National Bank, when you've got your account in the Stockman's State Bank."

Wedge blinked.

"You're smarter than I thought you was, Wedge," Mac resumed. "Of course, you know I've got a standin' offer for the man that turned up my son's murderer. But it's worth a thousand to me. Now I can quit layin' in bed, wonderin',

wonderin'. Larry'd appreciate what you done today. So do I. And when I leave the K5 and move to town, where the doc can tend to me, you're goin' to ramrod the K5. Maybe you're goin' to be a pard in it pretty soon. Why not? I've got no relatives."

The town of Arrow City was swirling around Wedge. And there seemed to be three or four Charley Ling's standing there grinning at him. But Wedge finally found his tongue. He swallowed hard.

"Hold on, Mac," he said. "I'd like to be deservin' of all the praise you're heapin' on my dumb head, but I ain't. I can just barely read and write, you know. And, when I borrowed one of your check blanks, I didn't notice it was for the Stockgrower's National Bank. I was just a dumb ox, bein' rooked by Badger Layne and his two old pals, Garmanch and Smith. And if you hadn't been so sick we had to fetch you to town, Charley and me—well, maybe Layne would've cashed my check. And I'd been broke, but wiser!"

Old Mac smiled at his Chinese cook. "I told you how it'd be, Charley," he said. "I told you Wedge Wilson wouldn't make a grab for what he thought he didn't have comin'. But I didn't have to argue with you, Charley. You thought the same as I

did, and he'd tell the truth at the showdown."

"What do you mean?" Wedge wanted to know.

"I mean you're not only work brittle, lad," said old Mac huskily, "but you've got a heart as clean as the hills after a rainstorm. And you're goin' to run the K5, Yeah, and because you did show up the skunk that killed Larry—whether you did it accidentally or not—you're goin' to have a thousand cash, a gift from me. I don't care about havin' an undeservin' hero for a pard, Wedge Wilson. I'll be satisfied with one like you."

"Good. Plenty good!" said old Charley Ling, beaming and clutching tightly in his hand a small arrowhead made of the semiprecious stone which the Indians had discovered, long before the white men, in the sage-covered hills of Wyoming. Jade as green as that which, more than likely, some of Charley Ling's venerable ancestors had carved in a land far across the Pacific, and in years long buried beneath the dust of Time.

Wedge smiled as he gripped Mac McNeil's proffered hand. He said sheepishly, "I'd better watch out, after this, what bank I'm writin' checks on. I didn't cotton to the looks of that jail house!"