



Author of "The Mascot of the Three Star," "Dead Man's Gold," "The Secret Survey," etc.

Ominous sound to that title—mystery, eerie shadows, a shot—but J. Allan Dunn has, with his unfailing touch, given all this a different turn

THE sorrel mare was hitched third from the far end of the rail. Evidence as to her disposition was plain. The pinto to her left and the white stockinged bay on her right had crowded against their opposite neighbors, giving the mare all the spare room possible. As Jimmy Pringle came toward her she laid back her ears and showed a white rim to her nigh eye, twisting a snaky neck as far as her bridle hitch would allow. This was her average greeting, ending in a vicious nip for Jimmy's knee as he swung down into the saddle. Usually he greeted her with an amiable, if vigorous, cussword. Tonight his own mood too nearly matched that of the mare. He was sore at the world.

Chaps and spurs were fastened to his saddlehorn by a latigo thong and he untied them, stepping into the former one leg at a time, balanced on a high heel as he stood stork-fashion. He had parked his gun at the Gopher Saloon with the rest of the bucks who had come to the dance, according to long established custom. This he had already retrieved and he adjusted the chaparejos strap and his cartridge belt with deft, accustomed fingers before he backed the sulky sorrel away from the well cribbed rail.

The blaring music of the jazz orchestra,

imported for the occasion, came out of the open windows of the lodge hall above the general store; mingled with the light laughter of dancing couples. Jimmy Pringle scowled over his shoulder at the silhouettes that flitted across the blinded windows, set his left foot in the twisted stirrup, twined his left hand in the mare's mane, clutched the horn with his right, and, out of long experience, pulled himself, not to the saddle but flat against the sorrel's withers as she whirled in a half circle and ended her geometrical exhibition with a buck.

The instant her four feet reached the ground Jimmy's right leg was across the cantle. His knees gripped in as he settled to leather, his spurs roweled the mare's flanks and she shot forward snorting and protesting, her gait more like that of a jackrabbit than the fastest pony in Mesquite County, sending up smoky spurts of dust in the starlight until she reached the sage. There Jimmy gave her a taste of the quirt to show he meant business and she settled down, traveling fast, drumming softly over the open ground.

Jimmy ignored the road that led toward his own holding, the U—U. He didn't give a damn where he was going, he told himself, and the mare seemed to sense it. Weary of the long stand at the

rail, she stretched her dainty, but sinewy limbs in full gallop, making for the mesa, her petulant mind fixed upon a spring and certain succulent grass surrounding it.

That she made for instinctively as, later, the bucks would lead their partners to the ice cream counter; or with each other, to flask and glass. Jimmy let her roll, his Stetson jammed down, chin on chest, wishing he'd thought to get him a chaw before he started, condemning all pleasures as hollow, all women as fickle jades and Helen Faulkner the most deceitful of all women. That, to his mind, she was also the most attractive, was no palliation. He summed up his bitterness in one syllable as a last burst of jangled drum and cymbal syncopation came faintly to him down the wind; like the bray of a burro, Jimmy told himself, giving a parting salute to a brother ass.

She had let him take her to the dance—in the first place. She had even hinted for his escort, in the second, though at the time he had been too thrilled with triumph to analyze the method of its accomplishment.

Then she had danced with him with no more animation that if he had been a dummy—and Jimmy knew he was a good dancer. He had done his durndest to entertain her, and she had come back with a vague smile or two and an occasional answer which showed she had not been listening to what he was saying. The third dance she had wanted to sit out. Flattered, thinking she was going to reveal to him the reason for her manner, perhaps ask his advice, he had gone with her to the open gallery that looked out over the sage toward Bitter Creek. And she had spent the entire time gazing into the night with an anxiety that he could not but fail to read—looking for another hombre than Jimmy Pringle.

WHEN Buck Stetson had arrived—Buck lived beyond Bitter Creek on the Lazy Y—it was plain. She transferred her attentions to Buck. Their first greeting unlocked her tongue and their dance conversation brought smiles to her face and a light to her eyes that all of Jimmy's sallies had failed to evoke. Then Buck and Helen had gone to the gallery, and Jimmy could well fancy that she did not spend her time looking beyond Bitter Creek. The Bitter Creek interest was present.

If it had been anybody else but Buck Stetson! All the county knew that Pringle and Stetson had been partners together on the Lazy Y and that they had split up—not altogether on Helen's account, but she had started it. Since then Buck had been lucky on the Lazy Y, and Jimmy had been afflicted with Old Man Misfortune as active, uninvited partner on the U—U.

The truth of the matter was that they needed each other. They made a natural team. Jimmy was a wonder with cattle, and Buck was a first class business man. But Jimmy was too sore for that retrospect at present though it had often occurred to him since their split.

A jackrabbit showed its ears behind a clump of sage, big as a doe in the starlight, and went leaping away. The mare snorted. Jimmy pulled his gun and blazed at the flying hare as it bounded over a bush. He thought he hit it. He didn't want the blame thing. It was out of season, the meat would be no tenderer nor more palatable than a meal of solid rubber tire. Jimmy didn't care for jackrabbit at any time. But he felt like shooting.

After her snort the sorrel stood on her hind legs until Jimmy was vertical. She waltzed and whirled, then, coming down jarringly hard on her forelegs, she started to buck, to weave, to sunfish, to do everything in her repertoire of mean tricks but roll over. That she left out because she did not happen to feel like it. It was as fine an unwitnessed exhibition of a bucking bronco as the country, if not the state, had ever known.

The mare acted more like a locoed slicear than a broken pony. No unslit, unbranded colt ever lunged more viciously, tried harder to show how mean a manhater it was. A few minutes saw the sorrel coat stained with sweat, lathering at the cinches, and foam at the curb. Jimmy was sweating, too, in the hot night as he stayed like a burr to a coyote's tail, never touching leather save in his seat, riding her whichever way she snaked or swerved.

Because the sorrel had brains, she stopped before she had utterly exhausted herself. Suddenly she shot out, belly to ground, racing for the foothills and the spring. Jimmy gave her a taste of spur, a touch of quirt and, when she flagged at the first rise of the foothills, he whaled her for her own good. For her own good also he checked her drinking at the spring where she stood at last with

heaving flanks and drooping neck.

“Course you’re hot,” he said. “So’m I. Me, I can take and drink all the water I want though I ain’t stuck much on it as a beverage. But you’ll founder yo’s’e’f. Right now I ain’t much use for you, you catamountin’, side-jumpin’, frawg hoppin’ acrobat, but you’re wo’th somethin’ an’ I can’t afford to lose nothin’ the way things are goin’. So you’ll finish yo’ drink afteh you’ve cooled down a bit.

“If you an’ me had give thet exhibition of plain an’ fancy, grand an’ lofty ridin’ at the Fair over to Cheyenne they’d sure have handed us the champeenship belt an’ purse. You’re the original shimmyin’ sorrel, I’ll say. Doggone it, I wish I had a chaw.”

He consoled himself with a cigarette as he looked about to get his bearings. He wanted something to bite down on hard whenever he thought of how the girl had treated him. Not jilted exactly, because there was nothing really definite between them, nothing to announce, but to throw down a dance escort as she had was to make the man a fool. Jimmy had cooled down a bit, for all his buckriding. The rush of the wind against their speed, the pure ozone of it in his lungs, had brought his blood close to normal though he was still sore of spirit.

He looked out across the sage, silver gray across the mesquite, waving dark under the breeze, to where Bitter Creek gleamed like a silver wire before the cottonwoods closed in upon its banks. There the dance was still going on—Helen Faulkner one-stepping with Buck or sitting it out on the gallery. Up here on the mesa it was calm and cool and the air was sweet with herbs. It seemed a long, long way that he had come. Jimmy looked up at the Arizona stars, serene and silver, so quiet that they looked like stars of silver paper stuck upon the field of deep blue.

“It’s sure a pretty night,” he soliloquized, and his resentment ebbed still further. “Pretty an’ peaceful,” he said as he ground the butt of his cigarette beneath one heel preparatory to mounting. “If it hadn’t been Buck! Ever sence they ‘lected him sheriff he reckons he owns the county.”

The fact that Jimmy had run against Buck Stetson and lost by a wider margin than he had figured on winning with had something to do with

that sore spot. It had rankled against his old-time partner; it had left him quick and tender to Buck’s latest victory. Up to the present, while Helen Faulkner had shown no signs of actual surrender to any one man in Mesquite County—and all its bachelors were suitors for her hand—she had seemingly favored him, so far as he and many others could see.

It wasn’t easy to woo Helen Faulkner. Old man Faulkner was as standoffish as a barrel cactus. He openly vowed that there was no man in the county good enough to catch a hawss fo’ Helen and that he would open negotiations with any who came courting without his consent with a shotgun. Which made the Faulkner ranch far from a popular place of call, despite the charms of the girl. If Jimmy saw her twice a month he figured he was doing well. Equally he did not know who else she saw, nor how often. He had held the idea that he had far outdistanced Buck in this contest, and now Helen had given him the mitten in the plain sight of the dancehall! Other girls had seen the way she acted. Two of them—darn ‘em—had tittered when Jimmy left after Buck’s triumphant entrance.

“Shucks.” Jimmy attempted to dismiss the matter in the word. He swung to the saddle with the sorrel acting mildly, all the superfluous steam out of her. He was quite a ways from the U—U, and the shortest cut led through the holding of old Titus Williams—T. W. standing for Tight Wad mortgage holder and stock and land banker to the county. Jimmy was a debtor of Titus, the note was due within none too many days and it was a toss up whether he could meet it, a sure cinch that Williams would not renew it. Jimmy’s security had been too good. Against one thousand dollars gone for fencing and labor, he had put up fifty three-year-old shorthorn steers in prime condition. They had been only two-year-olds when the deal was made. Money was tight and he had to go to Titus Williams. Old Tight Wad was as tender in a bargain as nut-crackers are in the hands of a man who wants to get at the meat in the kernel. Whenever a new settler appeared in Mesquite County Williams would visit them. If they needed a team, as was often the case, Williams supplied them and took a mortgage on everything but their souls—and usually blighted them before he got through with them. Did they want to build a

house? He accommodated them and owned them unless they paid him up. Some did and hated him. More did not and hated him correspondingly harder.

When things were sold up, as they often were, Titus would bid them in at his own rate, bulldozing any attempts to lift the price to market rates by his grip on the community at large. If he was not let alone somebody suffered. He was the most generally disliked and hated man in a radius of a hundred and fifty miles. "There must be a separate hell for Tight Wad and men of his caliber," one evicted rancher had said bitterly. "Put him and his like in the reg'lar place and Satan 'ud vacate. If they put him on the grill he'd stink the place out."

Jimmy had those three-year-olds as good as sold to the Fort, but the military authorities moved slowly and inspection had twice been put off. A date had been set tentatively. If they passed on that day it left him only three for the vouchers to go through and the check to pass. That was not enough but, if the deal was closed, he might be able to borrow from someone else and pay off Titus Williams. Otherwise there would be protest and foreclosure and Titus triumphantly bidding the cattle in for a fifth of what they were worth. And that would be about the wind-up of the U—U. You simply could not run a ranch without working capital. Jimmy had tried and he had come close to running it into the ground.

All this was reason why he had not pressed his suit with Helen to the proposal point. Her father knew, all the county knew for that matter, that Williams held his note. Such things were public record and current gossip. And Buck, with his capacity for making money, was more acceptable in her eyes than the financially embarrassed Jimmy. A wave of anger came back. His ears got hot and his fists balled.

"Darn his ornery hide!" he muttered, as the sorrel stopped at the Williams line fence.

Owing Titus money did not mean that Jimmy Pringle could not or would not crosscut over the T. W. holding. He rode along the fence, found an opening, manipulated it and readjusted the wire after he had passed through. The T. W. range, atop the mesa, was good grazing land, rolling but fairly level, though deep gullied here and there. The ranch-house and buildings were in a natural

basin where a small creek ran down into a cement tank. There were trees about the place, but the orange light of a window in the ranch-house shone brightly through a gap.

"Must be all of midnight," said Jimmy, glancing up at the Big Dipper, and speaking half to himself, half to his horse, rider fashion. "Reckon the old miser is castin' up his profits, the scaly old hell dodger. I s'pose he counts me in as—"

THERE came the sharp, staccato cough of a rifle shot, broadening as it echoed in the little basin and back from the farther hills. It suddenly seemed to fill the night with sound and menace. Through the report came the faint tinkle of breaking glass, the sharp cry of a man. And the light in the window disappeared.

The cry had been unmistakably in Williams' naturally harsh voice. Jimmy, setting spurs to the sorrel, racing down toward the house, had not the slightest doubt that someone had shot the usurer from ambush, aiming at his figure as it showed through the window. Jimmy knew the room and its furnishings only too well; no blind to the window—blinds are not needed where the nearest neighbor is a mile away—a table close up to the casement, the lamp on it. Back of the lamp the old man footing up his figures. He pictured it all as the sorrel flew and his eyes searched the sides of the basin for some evidence of the assassin. The shot had come from ahead. He had not seen the flash, but he fancied it had come from the rim of the basin to his right. The flush of a rising moon, not yet above distant peaks, showed in the cast, but in the starlight it was hard to distinguish motionless shapes.

The bullet must have gone straight through window and lamp. The flame might have been the thing the murderer sighted on, seeing the old man back of it.

"Probably got him through the head," said Jimmy, all his sympathies changing swiftly toward the man. Yet there were a dozen men who might have done it and considered themselves justified. Which they were not, to Jimmy's mind. Only a man sent crazy by misfortune could find any excuse. There was one such, who——

His night-used eyes saw—or thought they saw—a dark figure streaking between brush and

trees on the slope whence the shot had been fired. He was not sure, and it was too long range for any hope of a pistol bullet finding target.

The first thing to do was to see how badly the old man was hurt. He might not have been killed outright. Time enough after that to trail the shooter.

As he flung himself from the saddle, leaving the sorrel anchored by trailing reins, the golden light in the east strengthened. If the shot had been held off for five minutes Jimmy must infallibly have had a good view of the man running off. But that might have been calculated upon though the assassin could not have reckoned upon any one riding across the holding at that time of night.

In the starlight Jimmy could see the splintered pane where the bullet had gone through, a round hole showing black, starred about with cracks that glinted like the rays of a jewel. A veranda, three steps high, ran along the front of the house. Gun in hand, Jimmy mounted to this and tried the door. It was closed tight. It had a spring latch and a patent key, an unusual lock for a ranch-house, but not for a man like Titus Williams. Running along the veranda to the window Jimmy smashed in panes and frame with the butt of his gun, then reaching up, released the catch and opened up. He crawled in over the table, careful of the splintered glass of window and lamp. His hand came into contact with a puddle of warm liquid that dripped darkly from his fingers as he lifted them. The air reeked with kerosene.

Swiftly he found the chair where Williams must have sat and slid to the floor, alert, listening, feeling for a match. Dressed in his best for the dance, he had neglected to carry his usual supply. He had taken a few from the bar at the Gopher Saloon but they were all gone except half a one. He had shifted his gun to his left hand as he made the search. Now he dubiously started to light the broken match. Through the window he could see the moon struggling through a screen of trees. The interior of the house was black and silent, ominous. Somewhere a clock was ticking and there was the steady drip of something from table to floor. On that floor the match would show him Williams—unless the old man had not been killed outright and had crawled away. There was a telephone in the next room, also Williams' bedroom. The money lender was on the Ranchers'

Automatic System, to keep in touch with his affairs. And he kept the phone in his inner room so that he could talk without visitors overhearing.

Jimmy had felt about gingerly with his foot on the floor near the table before the match sputtered up. But he had touched nothing and he saw little. The match was faulty and went out almost immediately. But not before he saw his left hand streaming with scarlet.

Jimmy softly cursed his luck, his lack of foresight in not providing matches. Now he must either grope about for some, or wait for the moon to help him locate another lamp and find the body. All this time the murderer was getting farther away from the scene of his crime. If Williams was still alive he was unable to groan. If he was conscious he must have heard the forced entrance.

But the murderer would leave a trail. With the swift vision of the warm crimson stuff he had glimpsed on his hand strong upon him, Jimmy hardened into resolve to follow that trail and hunt the man down as if he had been a sheep-killing dog. In the meantime where had Williams kept his matches? Likely by the stove. The old man did not smoke, even at the expense of others.

The room lightened. A ray of light came from the moon, rising free of the trees. It beamed through the room and struck the pad of a calendar hanging on the wall. The big figures showed plainly 13, as if the lamp of the heavens sought to mutely testify to the date of so foul a crime. Jimmy was not superstitious, but the effect was startling. Involuntarily he glanced at the window. A man stood outside on the veranda, one hand on the frame. Face and figure were in the shadow that projected across the table. Jimmy could not see what was held in the right hand but he guessed. And he knew the voice. It was that of Buck Stetson, sheriff of Mesquite County.

"Put up yore hands, Pringle! Drop yore gun on the table. Hurry now!"

Jimmy reacted swiftly. Even in the shock of surprise he noted the "Pringle." It was official. Never before had Buck called him anything but Jimmy. He knew the quality of tone in that command as he knew the man back of the gun. It was not to be monkeyed with. Resentment flaring high, he let his gun fall to the table and put his hands, palms even with his shoulders.

"A little higher, Pringle. I'm comin' in. Stand

away from that chair.”

Stetson was taking no chances and he was a good mind reader. Jimmy had intended to smash him with the chair if there was the slightest chance as he came through the window. Now he stood back and laughed.

“What’s the idea, Buck Stetson? Tryin’ to make a repytation? I left you to the dance. You damned fool,” he broke out, “don’t act like a movie sheriff! There’s murder been done here. Someone shot old man Williams through the window.”

“So I guessed,” said Stetson dryly. He had negotiated the window and now stood with his back to it against the edge of the table. The moonlight was fair in Jimmy’s face and on his body from the waist up. Stetson had retrieved his gun. “I heard the shot, or rather, the echoes of it,” Buck went on, “as I rode up toward the ranch. Yore hawss nickered to mine as I topped the rise. The moon come up an’ I saw the busted window. You know the rest.”

“I know as much as you do,” said Jimmy hotly. Buck must have trailed him from the dance, he figured hastily. But why? “I was crossin’ the holding and I heard the shot same as you. I found a hole in the window where I saw the light go out from the creek-head. I busted it in, findin’ the door locked. I had ha’f a match and I was lookin’ to find Williams an’ fix him, if I c’ud, befo’ I chased after the man you’re lettin’ git away from you.”

“I reckon you fixed Williams,” said Stetson. “Look at yore bloody fingers.”

“Don’t be a bigger jackass than God made you, Stetson! You don’t think I murdered him, do you? Why man, it was a rifle shot. You must know that! I haven’t got a rifle, ‘cept the one back to the ranch.”

“I cudn’t tell what kind of a shot it was with the echoes mussin’ it up.” Stetson broke Jimmy’s gun swiftly across his knee, sending the ejected shells on the table. He picked up an emptied cartridge.

“What’d you fire this at?” he asked and sniffed at the barrel that still held the acrid scent of discharged powder. All the time he kept Jimmy covered.”

“I fired at a jack on the road out,” said Jimmy. But his voice faltered as he spoke with the

swift tremor of his mind as he realized the net of circumstances that trammed him.

“Kill it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I reckon you’d better not talk any, Pringle. You leave the dancehall, sneak off soon as I arrive. It’s known you owed Williams a note chances are you can’t meet, and which’ll break you up ranching. It’s known you’ve spoken strong things against him. I find you red-handed, yore gun fired off recent and—I find you *here*. What did you do with the body?”

Jimmy went wild with helpless rage.

“Hell!” he cried. “You and yore star! You and yore gun! You’re so damned smart and so damned eager to get something on me. Did she turn *you* down? And what brought you kitin’ out here? Williams voted against you. You and him have bad words more’n once. How do I know *you* didn’t pull this thing yorese’f an’ come back to turn the tables on the man who showed up befo’ yore trail was cold on the getaway? How do I know *yore* gun ain’t fired or that you ain’t got a rifle hid up on the hill? You got the drop on me, that’s all. Go an’ find Williams yorese’f. He ain’t in this room, that’s certain. He may have passed over the range while you’ve been gabbin’ here. If he has, he’s bled to death, mebbe, fo’ lack of help, it’s up to you, Buck Stetson! You an’ yore li’l star and yore gun! *Hell!*”

Pringle’s voice held such a measure of conviction that it startled Stetson into a moment’s slackness as he looked in puzzled fashion at his late partner with narrowed eyes. In that split second Jimmy leaped, clutching at Stetson’s wrist with both hands and cruelly twisting flesh, tendons, and small bones in his effort to make him drop the gun.

There was a loud report, then another, resounding in the low ceilinged room as Stetson struck furiously at Pringle’s jaw, then clinched with him, tripped him and the two went rolling over the floor, fighting for the possession of the weapon that Stetson still managed to retain.

There was a double sound of footsteps on the veranda, the click of a key in the lock, and added moonlight flooding the room as the door opened. Neither of them heard or noticed this. The gun went off once again, to be topped by a raucous voice.

“You couple of housebreakin’ fools, what in Time are you doin’ in here? Git up afore I plug the both of ye.”

They sat up, gasping for lack of breath and with astonishment. Titus Williams stood before them in the flesh. One hand held a rifle, the other grasped a shrinking figure, tall and lanky, vaguely suggestive in the moonlight of being in some way misshapen. Both Jimmy and Buck knew who it was, the gangling, nineteen-year-old son of Williams’ neighbor, Hansen, a youth with almost the growth of a man and the mind of a child of ten.

“We thought you’d been murdered.” The exclamation was mutual, simultaneous.

“Did you? Wal, I ain’t, though I come nigh to it. An’ what was you two a-fightin’ about? Privilege of bein’ pall bearers? Hank,” he said to the gangling youth, “you go in the kitchen an’ git me the lamp on the windysill. Don’t you try to light it.”

“I wan’ my gun. Gimme back my gun.”

“I’ll tan yore hide some more if you don’t do as I tell you.” The lad left and came back with the lamp which Titus lit, surveying the room with a face that crinkled in disapproval and eyes that held a sardonic twinkle.

“Run up a fine bill of damages ag’en yoreselves, didn’t you?” he went on. “When I left here there was one lamp smashed and one windy pane. Now looky thet windy, aside from breakin’ and enterin’. Mebbe you’ll explain how you happened to be breakin’ the law, Sheriff Stetson?”

“I came up to see you on—on a matter of business,” said Stetson with some hesitation. “Knew you was li’ble to be up late. Heard a shot as I topped the rise. Heard a hawss nicker. Saw the light was out. The moon came up an’ I saw Pringle here with his’ gun in his hand. I struck him up and found they was a cartridge fired recent. I knew he’d had some trouble with you. His fingers was all bloody. I didn’t ‘low he’d shoot no one in cold blood, but it looked bad.”

Titus had broken into cackling laughter.

“It sure looked bad. ‘Specially the blood,” he said. “How about you, Pringle?”

Jimmy told his tale, Titus Williams listening with his leathery old face puckered up, his eyes now suspicious, now ironical.

“I reckon you’re tellin’ the truth,” he

pronounced finally, “but yore tryin’ to rescue me ain’t goin’ to make enny difference about thet note of yore’s, Pringle. When it’s due I expect my money—or the security.”

“I ain’t tryin’ to save even yore life at a bargain,” answered Jimmy. “You’ll get yore sixteen ounces of manflesh, Shylock. Ten cents ‘ud cover yore personal value to me, but I don’t aim to see even a dawg killed ‘thout a show, if some folks do think I’m inclined thet way.” He looked resentfully at Stetson.

“I had to do my duty as I saw it,” said Buck. “You’d have done it yorese’f, Jimmy, if it had been the other way around.”

That was true enough, Pringle reflected. And the “Jimmy” softened him. But Titus cackled and broke in.

“Do yore dooty even to a rival, eh?” he inquired. “Both after the same office and Stetson won. Who’s goin’ to win the girl? Both over to the dance ternight, wasn’t ye? How’d you happen to leave so early. She give both of ye the slip?” He laughed maliciously as he met their angry glances.

“Seein’ I’m sheriff,” said Stetson, “s’pose you tell me jest what did happen. Thet’s my duty, too, Titus.”

“Glad to—glad to. Part my own fault, in a way. This lunkhead”—he indicated Henry Hensen, shuffling one foot against the other—“came to me yestiddy an’ tells me he’s seen a coyote hangin’ around my barns. As if I hadn’t heard the mangy brute. ‘If I kill it,’ he ses, ‘will you give me the bounty on it so’s I won’t have to collect it to the county seat.’ ‘If you kill it,’ I ses, ‘sure I will.’ Knowin’ he had no gun.

“What does the young fool do but swipe his father’s an’ go coyote huntin’—”

“I *saw* him, too,” said young Hansen. “Downhill, goin’ to the barns. I saw him, I tell ye. An’ I drew down on him. He starts to run an’ I follers him with the bead. I held ahead, I did, an’ I fired—”

“Plumb through my windy,” said Titus composedly. “Where I was rulin’ up my profit an’ loss account. Rulin’ it in red ink. The bullet goes whang through the burner of the lamp. If it had hit the container it w’ud have blowed up. The bullet might have deflected some but it didn’t miss me by an inch. Went by me like a bee after it knocked over the lamp an’ the bottle of red ink. That’s

what you've got on yore hand, Pringle. Red ink an' the ile thet flowed out of the busted burner." He stopped to cackle again as Jimmy turned all colors of the rainbow. In the excitement and the rush he had not noticed that the stain on his hand had sunk into the skin.

"I guessed what it was, right off," went on Titus. "I jumps for the door and there is Hank here on the skyline. I went after him, hotfoot.

"Usual I ain't over an' above spry, but I don't allow no one takin' potshots at me in mistake for a coyote. Hank tangles up in the brush. He runs cooky-footed when he's excited, ennyhow. I drops on top of him, wallops him where he's tenderest an' took away his gun."

"It ain't my gun," wailed Hank. "It's paw's. If he finds I've took it, he'll skin me alive an' he'll raise hell with you, too," he added defiantly.

"Will he? I'll sue him for permittin' his firearms to come within reach of an irresponsible minor child, if he does. You fire thet gun off ag'en within a mile of me an' I'll take it away sure."

"I wanted the bounty."

"Bounty enough the sheriff ain't arrestin' you an' hangin' you. Now take yore gun an' git. The boy sprang out into the night

"Now, who's goin' to pay fo' my windy? You've spilled the table an' lamed a chair besides."

"We'll settle that," said Stetson. "I'll hand it to you, Williams, you've got nerve. I doubt if I'd take it coolly as that."

"Can't no one hurt me on my lucky day," chuckled Titus. "The thirteenth. Born on that day. Mos' folks thinks it unlucky. I don't. It's the fourteenth now," he said, looking at the clock on a shelf. "Twenty after twelve." He walked over to the pad to tear off the sheet.

"Looky here," he said. "Say this ain't a lucky day!" He pointed to the score of the bullet where it had ploughed through the fat curve of the upper half of the 3, penetrating the thick pad, lodging in the wall. "Buzzed by me like a bee," he cried, then, with a change of voice, "You said you had some business with me, Sheriff. Will it keep? Till termorrer? I'm a bit tired after my run."

"It will keep," answered Stetson.

"Then you can come see me about it an' bring over the money for the windy at the same time. Good-night to both of ye. And many

thanks," he added sarcastically. "Don't forgit the date, Pringle. Jest ten days more to when yore note comes due."

He went to the door, holding it open for them as they went out. Then he closed it behind them. For a moment they stood silent.

"You've got an apology comin' to you, Jimmy," said Buck.

"I told you I'd do the same thing in yore place. I'll call it squar' if you'll keep quiet about the red ink."

"I thought it was blood myself, Jimmy." He held out his hand and Pringle, moved by the same impulse, gripped it.

"He's sure a nervy cuss," he said. "Ridin' a spell with me?"

"Sure."

THEY mounted. Both had the dance in mind, both fought shy of the subject in their new reconciliation. Somehow the girl didn't seem to matter so much. Jimmy realized that Buck must have left the dance soon after he did.

"About thet note, Jimmy? You can't meet it?"

"The inspection was put off again. Before they pass the steers and the check gets through he'll have time to foreclose. I figgered I might borry if I got a line from the inspection outfit, but they may shunt the date ag'en."

"Uh-huh. Jimmy, you've had tough luck. You need me for a mascot. I've done well an' I've got a good offer fo' the Lazy Y. Cash. Can close it termorrer if I want. I don't want you to think I was hornin' in, Jimmy, but I rode over here ternight to see if I cudn't fix it up fo' you with Williams. Then I was goin' to see you about goin' in tergether on the U—U. I expected to talk with you at the dance, but you sasshayed off befo' I had a chance."

Jimmy reined up dumbfounded.

"You want—I—what about Helen?" he blurted out.

"Helen. She's nothin' to me, Jimmy. I heard you an' her weren't over thick ternight. I'm figgerin' she's been jollyin' both of us along as a gal will."

"She shook me like a dawg shakes water soon as you showed," said Jimmy, a little cloudily.

“She shed me like a snake sheds an old skin soon’s as Pete Raymond showed,” said Buck. “All she wanted ter know was where he was an’ had I seen him.”

“I’ll be hornswoggled! Buck, I—listen!”

They had reached the edge of the mesa. Up from the plains came a confused sound of shouting. They could make out a bunch of horsemen riding fast.

“Sounds like a shivaree crowd, or a lynchin’,” said Buck. “Too happy fo’ lynchin’ I fancy. Let’s ride down.” They set their ponies to the lope, cutting through the sage to meet the bunch. A man streaked out to meet them.

“What’s the idee?” asked Buck. The rider was rocking in his saddle with laughter.

“We’re helpin’ old man Faulkner find his daughter and Pete Raymond,” he managed to say at last. “He come home unexpected an’ found a note that said she was goin’ to ‘lope with Pete. He comes hotfoot to the dance, twenty minnits after they’d gone in Pete’s car. Of course we helped him—like hell we did! We’re helpin’ him now. Pete an’ Helen’s ha’f to Phoenix by now. Someone made a mistake an’ thought they lit out thisaway. Faulkner’s steamin’. He’s got a shotgun. Want to come along? We aim to stay with him till daylight.”

“Jimmy here an’ me’s got a date,” said Buck. “Over to the U—U. But you might tell Faulkner we saw a couple chasin’ erlong by Titus Williams’ a while back. Might have bin them—or it might have been Jimmy an’ me. Use yore judgment.”

“Sure will. Ye-yippee! Trail’s hot, boys.” And he galloped back to the crowd.

The reunited partners rode on in silence together, jogging happily along. Presently Buck Stetson started to sing a cowboy chant.

*Some love to roll in riches,
Some love to lie abed;
Some spend their time in drinkin’
Or waitin’ to be fed.
Give me life in the open
Upon the broad prairie;
To live an’ die a cowboy,
Light-hearted, gay an’ free.*

*Yippity-yi-yippity-yee!
With my yip-yip-yip-yippity yee!
Yip! Yip!*

Jimmy joined in the refrain, and it was he who sang the next verse.

*I wouldn’t trade my callin’
To be a millyunaire;
To find a gold mine full of gold,
Or wed a maiden fair.
A six-gun in my holster,
A lasso at my side,
My saddle fo’ a bolster
My cattle-hawss fo’ bride.*

*Yippity-yi-yippity-yee!
With my yip-yip-yip-yippity yee!
Yip! Yip!*

“Buck,” he said presently, “I reckon Tight Wad Williams was right. The thirteenth is a luck day.”

“Lucky night,” amended Buck, “fo’ him, fo’ you an’ me, Jimmy, an’ fo’ Pete an’ Helen.”

“Here’s hopin’,” said Jimmy. “The world’s full of gals fo’ them that want ‘em. Meantime, here’s the U—U.”