



It was a dubious honor the rootin', shootin' Sagebrush Kid conferred upon Rock Castle; but he made that shivering community take it and like it—until another stranger, also ornamented with notched six-guns, hit town.

IN THE little town of Rock Castle, at the edge of the desert country, the recognized social center was known as Hank's Place, though it was as much Ike's as Hank's, since Ike Cumway and Hank Redlan were partners.

Ike and Hank had come to Rock Castle when there was no indication of a town except a few tents and a mining boom. The boom passed on, but the tents changed into shacks and remained.

It was not much of a town. It was away down in one corner of the country, far from the railroad, and was visited by county officials only at election time and when it was necessary to collect taxes. Citizens of Rock Castle thought that it was a weakness to pay taxes unless the sheriff came in person to collect them.

Rock Castle had a half dozen small buildings that housed business enterprises—a small bank, a blacksmith shop, a livery stable and corral, a restaurant operated by a Chinaman, and a cobbler's shop. And then there was Hank's Place.

The Place was a big frame building with a false second story front. A partition clove the building into two long rooms. There was a wide open doorway in this

partition. On one side was a general store and postoffice, presided over by Ike. On the other side was the bar, gambling room and dance hall combined, under the supervision of Hank.

Inside Hank's Place, a dozen men loafed against the bar. On the other side of the partition, Ike was alone after the stage driver had departed to put up his iron steed. Ike opened the mail sack and removed therefrom three newspapers, two mail order catalogues, and three letters. Two of the latter were bills from wholesale houses, for Ike. The third also was for Ike—it was addressed to the postmaster.

Ike Cumway held the letter up to the light briefly, and then ripped the envelope open. Inside was a single sheet of cheap paper, with pencil scrawls upon it. Ike turned the letter to the light that came through the flyspecked window, and read.

Ike Cumway was docile and slow moving, not given to excitability. So the consternation that fell upon Hank and the dozen idlers who suddenly beheld Ike Cumway rush through the open doorway in the partition up to the bar, gasping for words, was intense.

Hank swore, fearing a stroke of some

sort. The citizens of Rock Castle there foregathered stood amazed. Ike lurched against the bar, and motioned wildly toward a bottle. Hank supplied the bottle and a glass, Ike tossed off a snifter of liquor, choked and sputtered.

"What's the matter with you, Ike?" Hank demanded. "You gone loco? Scarin' my customers thataway!"

"Letter—letter!" Ike gasped. "Gotta letter!"

"Uh-huh!" Hank sneered. "Don't you get half a dozen every year? What you riled about? Somebody left you a million? That old claim of yourn suddenly assayin' fifty thousand to the ton?"

Ike Cumway gulped and looked at those about him. He seemed to calm down somewhat. "It—it's from the Sagebrush Kid!" he said.

THERE was a moment of silence while all the men there glanced at one another in sudden fear and wonder. The Sagebrush Kid! The outlaw who was a countryside terror and who laughed at the sheriff! He worked alone always, helped himself to mine pay rolls and gold shipments, stuck up a bank or a store now and then, and occasionally an entire town by way of a lark. The Sagebrush Kid, who was said to kill wantonly and unnecessarily, and laugh when he did it.

"You—you read it, Hank!" Ike gasped.

His trembling fingers pushed the dirty note across the slippery bar. Hank picked it up gingerly, and read it aloud.

Postmaster, Rock Castle: It's time that the undersigned had a regular home town. I'm sick of livin' out in the hills with the coyotes and snakes and prairie dogs. So I reckon to make Rock Castle my home. A castle needs a king, I reckon. If I make it my home, naturally I won't bother the citizens any, seein' as how they'll be my

neighbors. And I'm expectin' the said citizens to be brothers to me, too. I reckon you jaspers will understand. I'll drop in soon, and I'll call myself Peter Jones.

The Sagebrush Kid.

"Godfrey!" Hank cried. "He's goin' to make this his home town!"

"Maybe we'd better send word to the sheriff," one of the citizens put in.

"Are you aimin' to pass out spectacular?" Hank sneered. "Send word to the sheriff, huh? Think he'll keep a posse here all the time? And after he takes it away this here Sagebrush Kid will come into town and have his re-venge!"

"What's to be done, Hank?" Ike asked.

"Nothin'!"

"Nothin'?"

"You' heard me—nothin'," Hank responded. "We can't stop this Sagebrush Kid from makin' his home here, can we? Reckon that he knows it's pretty safe, away down here in the corner of the county, with the sheriff not knowin' that we're on earth except at tax time. They'd never look for the Kid here."

"Then you're in favor—" Ike commenced.

"I'm in favor of us simply makin' him welcome as a new citizen and 'tendin' to our own business and allowin' him to 'tend to his," Hank said. "Dang you jaspers, ain't you got any sense? Officially, we don't know that the gent is the Sagebrush Kid. We know him as Peter Jones—Pete for short. That's what we'll tell the sheriff if he ever comes snoopin' around. We don't have to go out and help the Sagebrush Kid hold up anybody. He always does his work alone, I've heard tell."

"Yeh, and he does it up brown!" Ike quavered. "He—he's a desperate character. We want to be mighty all-fired careful not to cross him any way."

"Ike, you've said somethin' for oncet," Hank informed him. "Yep, we want to be mighty careful not to offend the jasper. If he wants pie for his breakfast, he can have it. Gosha'mighty! Ever get him started, he might wreck the town. Ike and me have got money invested here, an' I don't aim to be pauperized."

Every dust cloud that appeared on one of the trails that led to Rock Castle was the cause of speculation during the next two days. But each dust cloud resolved itself into some well known cowpuncher coming to town for a frolic, or a rancher after supplies. The Sagebrush Kid was the center of none of them.

BUT a stranger finally did come into town after dusk the third day. He was tall, young, slim, knew how to ride a horse and wore his six-gun in a knowing manner. His jaw looked lean and tough, and his eyes were gray and hard as steel.

He dismounted at the corral behind the livery stable, removed saddle and bridle, and turned his mount inside. Then he faced the stable owner.

"I want these things of mine kept ready and carefully," he said, in a voice that seemed to cut. "Any time I want that saddle and bridle I expect to find 'em right here by the door."

"Yeh!" the stable man said.

"And I'm in the habit of havin' my hoss taken care of a bit extra. Understand?"

"I getcha! You won't have anything to kick about."

"I hope not!" said the new arrival, fondling the butt of his six-gun. "My name's Jones—Peter Jones!"

"Uh-huh! Glad to meetcha!" said the stable owner. "Oh ye-ah, Mister Jones! Hope you like the town."

"I hope so," said Peter Jones. He said it in a tone that seemed to mean he

doubted it.

He strolled out into the street and rolled and lighted a cigarette. Then he walked slowly through the swirling dust and sand until he came to Hank's Place, where he entered.

Hank was on duty with another man behind the bar. A dozen customers were standing in front of it. A dozen more were gambling in a listless manner. The piano player was thumping the keys of his battered instrument, and a couple of dancehall girls were fooling around as though wishing that things would liven up.

Hank glanced toward the door as the stranger entered, gulped, and failed to finish what he had been saying. The newcomer stepped up to the bar, pulling off his gloves, and swept the room and its occupants with a glance that made men quail. Then he faced Hank.

"Some of the stuff!" he commanded. "Let it be the best you've got, which probably 'll be bad enough. My name's Peter Jones!"

His voice carried all over the room, and there was instant silence. Peter Jones! The Sagebrush Kid, latest regular citizen of Rock Castle, had arrived in his adopted home town!

No man had ever seen the face of the Sagebrush Kid knowing him to be such, for he always had worked alone and always masked. But this man had announced that he was Peter Jones. And had that not been enough, his appearance was.

Peter Jones seemed to radiate hostility, and those nearest him shivered and drew away as speedily as possible, but not so swiftly that the stranger could take offense. He snapped his words, and his eyes were rather disconcerting.

"Call up the crowd!" commanded Peter Jones. "Gents, name your poison! I'm figurin' on makin' my home in this

town, and I want to get acquainted. Maybe I'll want a few changes made around here, too."

He saluted them and tossed off his drink, then turned and surveyed the room. "You ought to make that piano player snap up a little," he observed.

The piano player needed no further urging. He bent over the keys, his fingers flew, and there was a horrible fear in his heart. He had remembered of hearing that once the Sagebrush Kid, angered at a piano player, had shot off a few fingers belonging to the musician.

"Them all the dancehall girls you got?" Peter Jones asked.

"We've got another—Juanita, half Mex," Hank explained. "She'll be here in a few minutes, I reckon. You have one on the house now, stranger."

Peter Jones whirled to confront him. "Stranger?" he howled. "Is that the way this here town regards me?"

"I—I mean Mister Jones," Hank sputtered.

"And that don't go either. I'm a regular feller here, one of the boys, or else I don't care a dang for the town and may get plumb hostile! Either way suits me. If we're goin' to get along, you jaspers got to call me Pete."

"All right—Pete," Hank gulped.

"That's a lot better. Now, I want a room to sleep in and a place to eat."

"I've got a dandy room in the back," Hank explained. "I had the Chink sweep it out yesterday. Another Chink runs a restaurant right across the street, and he's a good cook when he's made to be."

"Uh-huh!" growled Peter Jones. "I reckon that he'll be made to be. I'm right darn particular about my vittles."

He swaggered away from the bar and made the rounds of the gambling games, but took no part. Every time he glanced at the piano player, that individual coaxed

added harmony from the old piano. He glanced at the two girls and curled his lip in scorn. And then Juanita came into the big room.

Juanita, half Mexican, eighteen, man wise as ever it was given a woman to be, was an alluring picture. Peter Jones walked toward her, and she stood beside a table waiting, though pretending to ignore his presence. Peter Jones looked her up and down.

"You're not so bad, Juanita," he admitted. "Order a bottle and I'll pay. Then we'll dance."

This was the start of rather a mild evening. Mr. Jones drank a bit, danced a few times, watched the games, yawned, and presently retired.

"He's probably been ridin' far and hard today," Hank said to those assembled. "Wait till he gets rested up. He's a lot easier to get along with than I thought he'd be—calm before the storm, maybe."

ARISING shortly after dawn the following morning, Peter Jones went to the restaurant and ordered his breakfast. It appeared that the eggs were underdone and the hot cakes tough. Whereupon Mr. Peter Jones held speech with the Chinese cook; that is he made the speech and the cook did the listening. Then Mr. Jones perforated the ceiling of the kitchen with a slug from his six-gun. Two citizens overtook the cook a mile down the trail and brought him back.

The morning was spent by the newcomer to Rock Castle in the general store, where a shivering Ike scarcely could take his eyes from the unwelcome guest. Yet Ike really had no complaint. Mr. Jones purchased a couple of shirts and a pair of pants and paid for them with cash.

That night, after supping in state at the Chink's, Peter Jones repaired to Hank's

Place. He entered it with his right hand swinging dangerously near the holster at his side, and his eyes narrow.

Half a dozen cowpunchers had come to town from the range, and Peter Jones located them at once. He looked them over, glared at them, and then turned his back. One of the cowpunchers had moved to dance with the fair Juanita, but he did not do so after meeting Peter Jones' eyes.

Peter Jones played poker, and he won from men who threw down excellent hands and were afraid to quit the game. He played faro, and for some reason he won at that, too. He danced with Juanita and complained that she was old and stiff, and Juanita smiled from a white face and said nothing.

It was patent that Peter Jones did as he pleased and that no man contested his right to do so. He went to his room that night at two in the morning, and Hank and Ike and the others drew deep breaths of relief and took liquor as medicine instead of to be convivial.

"It ain't goin' to be any cinch, havin' this Sagebrush Kid a regular citizen of this here town," Hank opined. "Them boys from the Triple B outfit would have stayed here three days and killed their month's pay, but they got scared and went home again plumb sudden."

"Makes me shiver every time he comes near," Ike admitted. "I get to rememberin' how many men he's potted just for the fun of the thing. Every time he makes a move, I think he's goin' for his gun."

"Half a dozen men wanted to dance with Juanita, and was afraid to do it," Hank complained. "Juanita always makes 'em buy wine. I'm losin' trade."

"And I had to toss down an ace full, fearin' to call him," one of the punchers said.

"Alle same want flesh apple pie for

breakfast," complained the Chinese cook from across the street.

"And I'm feedin' his hoss handpicked oats and shiverin' all the time," declared the owner of the stable and corral.

"He ain't started yet," Hank put in. "He's only just gettin' acquainted, he told me. Tomorrow he'll be livelier!"

Hank's prediction proved true. Peter Jones emerged from his room the following morning like a new man. There was a glitter in his eyes, and he swaggered with a surplus of energy. "Mornin'," he snarled at Hank. "I'm feelin' pretty fit today. Just remembered when I was washin' my face that I ain't had any target practice lately. And I want hot water in the mornin's, after this."

"Sure, Mister Jones," Hank replied.

"What's that?"

"I meant Pete," Hank said.

"I don't like forgetful folks around me," Peter Jones observed. "They make my trigger finger itch! You just remember that my name's Pete."

"Yeh!" Hank said, trying to act naturally.

Peter Jones glared at him and went across the street. Ten minutes later there was a fusillade of shots and the Chinese restaurant man dashed into the thoroughfare and ran toward the corral. He was followed at a short distance by the cook, who headed in the other direction. Peter Jones ate his breakfast alone.

LATER he came forth into the street himself, picking his teeth nonchalantly. Nobody was in the street, but eyes were watching him from behind cover. Absently he drew his trusty six-gun and fired five shots in rapid succession. His first struck an empty tin can and spun it about; the other four sent it bounding headlong down the street.

"Some shootin'!" Hank gasped.

“That ain’t nothin’ to what he can do, if reports are correct,” Ike observed. “He’s about due for a rampage, that hombre! Me, I’m goin’ to watch my words and actions this day.”

Peter Jones reloaded once more and sauntered to Hank’s Place. Observing his advance, the habitues had departed softly, like shadows. Hank remained alone to face the terror.

Mr. Jones drank and made a wry face. “I want some better liquor, and I want it by tomorrow night!” he said. “You’d better send out by the stage and get some. And while we’re talkin’, let me give you a little tip. You’re about the boss of this town, Hank, and what you say goes, so I’m holdin’ you responsible. If news of me bein’ in Rock Castle gets out, and that sheriff comes pesterin’ around, I’ll handle this town rough for betrayin’ me. And I’ll start on you!”

Hank grew pale and struggled for breath. “I—I’ll do all that I can to keep it quiet, Pete,” he explained. “But them cowboys from the Triple B might tell. They was right down sore because you spoiled their fun.”

“They’re right down lucky that I didn’t spoil anything else for them,” Peter Jones informed him. “I never did like cowpunchers much, or miners, or stage drivers, or gamblers, or even storekeepers and bar owners! I don’t like anybody much!”

Peter Jones thereupon departed. A watching population saw him walk to the end of the street and look long and earnestly toward the distant hills.

“That Jasper’s plannin’ somethin’,” said Hank to Ike.

“Uh-huh!” Ike grunted. “Me, I don’t care what he does so long as he don’t do it in Rock Castle. If he’d try a holdup and get plugged for keeps, I wouldn’t grieve none.”

“Get plugged for keeps!” Hank snorted. “Didn’t that mine guard shoot at him pointblank a month ago and never make a dent in him? I’m right down sorry he ever came to this town.”

“What we goin’ to do about it?” Ike implored. “We don’t dare go gunnin’ for him.”

“I reckon not. All he wants is an excuse to start wolfin’.”

“What can we do?” Ike mourned.

“I reckon that the only thing that’d be beneficial,” Hank retorted, “would be prayer. And from the life you’ve led, Ike, I don’t guess your prayers would get immediate attention and action at headquarters.”

The discussion ended abruptly; Peter Jones was indulging in marksmanship again. It appeared that he was coming back along the street, shooting as he came. He never fired the sixth shot, it was noticed—always saved that one to use in case of dire necessity. And he reloaded frequently.

Standing in the middle of the street, he shot out the windows of the store, while Ike growled in horror.

“Dang his hide!” said Ike. “I’ll have to send to the county seat for more glass, and I’ll have to board up the windows while I’m waitin’.”

“You’d better board ‘em all up and keep ‘em boarded,” Hank told him. “My good gosh! He’s comin’ in here again.”

IKE faded through the gap in the partition, and the others did the same, leaving Hank alone again. Mr. Jones came in from the street and walked up to the bar, motioning for the bottle behind it.

“I’ve got to see Ike, Hank, and pay him for them windows,” Peter Jones said. “I don’t do any damage in my own home town without payin’ for it. ‘Twouldn’t be right! But I naturally got to shoot out a

shiny window when I see one. I'm marked thataway, I reckon. Never could help it. A shiny window to me is like a red rag to a bull."

"Ike's winders ain't ever any too shiny, Pete," Hank told him. "If you took a shot at every flyspeck on 'em you'd sure use up some ammunition."

Peter Jones suddenly looked malevolent. "I don't like jokes and funny sayin's," he announced.

"Uh! Uh!" Hank gulped.

Peter Jones remained there for a time and then departed again. He got his horse and rode up toward the hills. He did not return until dusk.

"Plannin' some depredation," Hank declared to Ike. "He's got fire in his eye."

"Reckon any of the boys'll take a chance tryin' to plug him?" Ike asked.

"Would you?" Hank demanded. There could be only one answer to that.

After supper that evening Mr. Jones walked in from the street, picking his teeth again, and sauntered to the bar. "You know where you can get a good cook, Hank?" he asked. "I don't like to deprive my feller citizens of food, or me either; but I'm goin' to shoot that Chink cook day after tomorrow. You'd better get a line on a new cook."

"Uh-huh!" Hank grunted.

"I don't like the way you said that, Hank," Mr. Jones observed. "Don't you go to gettin' me mad at you, Hank. I ain't tasted blood for ten or twelve days, and I'm gettin' thirsty."

He turned his back to the bar and surveyed the room. And at once his gun was out and had spat flame. The bullet whistled past the head of the piano player and buried itself in the wall. The piano player went through the nearest open window.

"Whoopee! I feel a wolfin' spell comin' on!" Peter Jones yelled. "Anybody

want fight a lil' duel?"

There were no takers. Peter Jones shot out a window, smashed a couple of bottles with bullets, and calmly reloaded and purchased a drink. He gambled, and he won. He defied any man there present to dance with one of the girls, especially Juanita, though he would not dance with them himself. He even crossed to the other side of the partition and plagued Ike until that worthy was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Three men of the range wandered in at a late hour, received a hostile reception, and went forth again to ride back to their ranch and spread the news that the Sagebrush Kid had taken up his residence in Rock Castle and was terrorizing the town. That information already had been spread by others, including the stage driver. But the sheriff had not come to make an investigation, nor did he send a deputy.

Peter Jones continued to rule the town until almost dawn, when he barricaded himself in his room and fell into a deep sleep.

The next night, his evening meal consumed, Peter Jones sat down at a table against the wall in Hank's Place. He seemed to be brooding about something.

"I know the signs," Ike whispered to Hank. "Calm before the storm! Me, I'm goin' to shut up the store early and get to my room. I ain't goin' to be present when the fireworks starts."

"Coward!" Hank hissed at him.

A MAN came in from the street, and Hank, who had heard a horse stop in front, turned quickly, expecting to see some puncher from a nearby ranch. Instead, he beheld a stranger.

He was a tall, slim man, but with shoulders like a giant. He was dressed as for hard riding. His face was leather

colored from exposure, his eyes black and piercing, and he had an uneven mustache. Hank mentally catalogued him as a tough customer.

He glanced over the room and then strode to the bar. Peter Jones, sitting with his back against the wall seemed to give him no attention. The newcomer waved a hand, and Hank set forth bottle and glass. The stranger drank, wiped his lips with the back of a hand, and drew out a six-gun slowly and deliberately.

Then he spoke, and his voice shattered the din. "Where's the knockkneed, bowlegged son of a lizard that calls himself the Sagebrush Kid?" he demanded.

"Ssh!" Hank cautioned. "He's sittin' right over there."

"Why should I shush?" the newcomer rasped. "I want to see this here Sagebrush Kid I've been hearin' about."

He whirled and looked around the room. Men had terror in their faces. There could be but one outcome to this—the Sagebrush Kid, alias Peter Jones, would arise from his chair, shoot down this daring one, and then probably start on a rampage because he had been insulted in his own home town.

"Where is he?" the stranger bellowed.

"He—he's sittin' right over there," Hank whispered.

"*You!*" The stranger indicated Peter Jones with a forefinger. "You get up and step right here to the bar! Stand right here on this spot, you worm!"

In that breathless silence, Peter Jones arose and moved forward slowly. Every instant they expected to see his hand come up spitting flame, to see this daring stranger crumple up on the floor, his life blood ebbing away.

Peter Jones moved across to the bar and went slowly along it. He stood on the spot the stranger had indicated.

"Are you," demanded the man who had come out of the night, "the misguided hombre who came to this town posin' as the Sagebrush Kid?"

"Posin'?" Peter Jones asked.

"Posin'—I said it! You the Sagebrush Kid, huh? Why, you knocked down, spavined ape! I'm the Sagebrush Kid, dang your hide! And I'm right here with a gun ready to prove it! I heard rumors about same jasper comin' here and posin' as me."

"Wa-wait a m-minute!" Peter Jones suggested, appearing to tremble.

Indignation surged into the hearts and brains of the citizens of Rock Castle. So they had been sold, had they? This man who had pretended to be the Sagebrush Kid and had made fools of them! They hoped that the real Sagebrush Kid would shoot him down!

"It—it was only in fun," stammered Peter Jones. "Are you really the Sagebrush Kid?"

The breast of the outlaw swelled. "I am!"

"Nobody ever saw his face, they say. Maybe—maybe you're just foolin' these folks, like I did."

"What's that?" the other cried, lifting the gun. "I'm the Sagebrush Kid, all right, and everybody here better believe it!"

Some of the citizens of Rock Castle were creeping furtively toward the door.

"Don't leave, gents!" the Sagebrush Kid warned. "Stay and see the fun."

"Only in fun!" Peter Jones repeated. "You—you should have been here. Just 'cause they thought I was the Sagebrush Kid, they fetched and carried for me like good little boys."

"And I'm prayin' that this real Sagebrush Kid lets us get our hands on you!" Hank exploded.

"It was fun!" Peter Jones told the Sagebrush Kid. "I chased the Chink out of

his own restaurant, and made them give me pie for breakfast, and shot out the windows. Just 'cause they thought I was the Sagebrush Kid."

He touched the outlaw's vanity. The real Sagebrush Kid roared his raucous laughter. "I've a mind to forgive you," he told Peter Jones. "Have a drink on the house while I think about it. I reckon the two of us together could just about run this town."

"Oh, you could do it alone!" assured Peter Jones.

"Hee, hee! What else did you make 'em do?"

"They stepped high and wide and pretty," said Peter Jones, "just 'cause they thought I was the Sagebrush Kid." He emphasized that point like a man talking for his very life. "They quivered every time I come near 'em."

"I'm hopin' this here Sagebrush Kid don't kill you, that's all!" Hank growled. "Kid, you turn this skunk over to us!"

"Why?" the real Sagebrush Kid asked him. "He got away with it, didn't he? Wasn't a man with guts around, I reckon. You take another drink, feller, and then we'll have some fun. I'm feelin' a mite like bustin' up this town."

Peter Jones stepped nearer and filled his glass, being careful to wait until the Sagebrush Kid had taken his amount of liquor.

"Good joke!" the Kid declared. "Here's how!"

And then Peter Jones did a surprising thing. He dropped his glass, his right hand

darted forward—and snatched away the revolver of the Sagebrush Kid, which he had been holding lightly. He sprang backward, covering his man. The Sagebrush Kid choked on his liquor, looked bewildered.

"High up with 'em, and keep 'em there!" Peter Jones commanded. "Sagebrush Kid, are you? All right! I want you, Kid! I'm Peter Jones—real name—new deputy sheriff! You're goin' to jail, Kid."

"You—you—" the Sagebrush Kid was sputtering.

"Only way to get you!" Peter Jones said. He snapped handcuffs on the wrists of the desperado before the Sagebrush Kid could move. "No man ever had seen your face, so you couldn't be identified. But you walked right into the trap, Mr. Sagebrush Kid! Your curiosity got the best of you; you had to come and see what was goin' on."

"You—you—" the bandit mouthed again.

"And so I've got you!" Deputy Sheriff Peter Jones said. "We'll be startin' for the county seat and jail as soon as the moon's up."

Silence for an instant, during which realization came to those in Hank's Place. Then a bedlam of voices and cheers.

Hank turned to Ike. "I suspicioned it all the time," he whispered.

Ike looked at his old partner without batting an eyelash. "I'm a liar too," Ike said, "but not such a good one!"