

*Range Riders Western, January 1948*

# KILLER'S CUE

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

*Dan Souter always claimed Wan Ling was the best cook in the West—but he'd never have taken him for the best detective!*



Wan Ling's regretful sigh was lost in the heavy roar of a gun



HE STOOD LOOKING across the ranch house fence toward the sage-mantled mountains, his naturally-slitted, slanted eyes all but closed in the wrinkled lemon mask of his face.

"One Lung!" came the soft call from the kitchen door. "Er, One Lung—don't take it so hard, man. He never knew what killed him."

Because he was a servant, a properly-trained servant from the old country, he bowed over his sleeve-tucked hands; but without turning. Boss Dan had spoken. Boss Dan was to be answered. But he couldn't face big, kindly, if nail-tough, Dan Souter. Not just yet awhile.

"Me all light, Boss Dan," he murmured. Then, because he couldn't think of any other way to express his grief: "No more fan-tan game, now Bummy dead. No more fan-tan."

Big Dan Souter, proprietor of the Territory's best-known saloon and inn, hard by Gold Creek settlement, moved his dark eyes sympathetically over the diminutive Chinese who was the West's best cook.

Wan Ling wore the old-fashioned queue, which, on dress occasions, he tucked neatly into the collar of his alpaca-jacket of shiny black. He wore an ankle-length skirt, and box-toed, strapless, soft shoes of black, with a wide white band reinforcing them in a neat border.

His wise old eyes picked out the scar in the distant, blue sage that was the track down the mountain where Bummy Rhoades came every two weeks from his secret hideout, to "wet his whistle an' chaw on a clean bite," as the old desert rat put it. But he would come no more.

Bummy Rhoades, bewhiskered, tobacco-chewing, horny-handed son of toil and mirth and the roofless spaces, lay dead in the back room of Sheriff Lormy's office in the frame town of Gold Creek.

"You'll get someone to play fan-tan with you," Big Dan said, clearing his throat awkwardly. "You'll see."

"Missy Boots an' Bummy, them two only ones with brains enough to know to play fan-tan! Bimeby Missy Boots she mally; an' Bummy he dead!"

The sympathy died from Big Dan Souter's eyes. He hitched his heavy gun-belt on his hip and slapped the walnut-handled six-gun that he was never without, night or day.

"By Joe, Boots ain't going to marry, One Lung! You're plumb loco about that! I mean—not yet awhile, she ain't. Bid Lorgan is a good boy, but he's hardly settled out here long enough to rightly take a wife. Smart young lawyer; but—not quite ready for double-yoke, yet."

Wan Ling's queue bobbed against his black alpaca jacket again. "Missy Boots no mally Lawyer-man Lorgan, Missy Boots allee-samee mally Tad Durden."

"Over how many dead bodies?" Big Dan roared, his face red as a setting sun. "My daughter marry that saddle bum?"

WAN LING turned from his sad contemplation of the hills his friend would never again ride. "Over as many dead body as he need," he said sharply. "Wan Ling never mistake yet! Wan Ling not mistake now!"

Big Dan snorted, "Yeah? How 'bout you sayin' Bummy Rhoades wasn't dead? How 'bout that? How 'bout you sayin' Bummy was even somewhere around here? Right here in The Nugget Saloon? An' him deader'n a salted fish whilst you was sayin' it! Huh! You're never wrong!"

The aged Chinaman smiled his patience for his employer's stupidity. "Bummy allee-samee in Nugget Saloon last night, just like he say he would be, when he left two-week ago. Wan Ling know! Wan Ling smellee him!"

Big Dan Souter chuckled and mirth split his mustached lips. "Danged if you ain't close to right, there, One Lung! If he was here, you shore woulda smelled him!"

Wan Ling shrugged his muffed hands and nodded. "All 'Melican men smell alike, just like all 'Melican ladies look alike. Whisky, meat, tobacco, gun-powder, make allee smellee alike. But this diffelent smellee Bummy have. Wan Ling know. Wan Ling can close eyes and know if Bummy is in room, in hiding. Bummy was in Nugget last night. I say to you when he come. Remember? Bummy is in Nugget now. I know. I know Bummy there!"

"But One Lung, man! He's dead! He was shot through the head with a dum dum, last evening, on that very trail yonder! By the mysterious killer who is road-agenting these parts. *If* there is any mysterious about who he is, and there ain't for my poke!"

Wan Ling smiled slightly. "No mystely. No mistake Bummy was here last night, is here now. I—I feel good now, Boss Dan. I go cookee food. I

go inside to be with my fliend, Bummy!”

Big Dan was shivering despite the heat of the sun that was sinking into the west ridges, when he stood aside to let his cook pass into the big frame house that was The Nugget Saloon.

Wan Ling executed his renowned magic with the skillet, his small, wizened frame moving swiftly as he did the work of three ordinary men.

He tried to look displeased when Boots Souter came in, her blue eyes secretly happy and a soft smile playing on her lips. The Chinaman let his wise old eyes touch over the figure she made in her fancy boots, her modestly-cut riding skirt, her frilled waist, and the tight-rolled pompadour she wore her golden hair in.

“You get out to hell and gone!” he snapped, waving a frying-pan over his head menacingly. “Go! Too hot for you in kitchen! Soon, Missy Boots’ face be all lined and clocked like Wan Ling’s, then Tad Durden he no mally you, when you ugly like old squaw!”

The girl colored furiously, and she hissed, “Not so loud, One Lung! Do you think Dad is *deaf*?”

“Naw, him only dumb,” Wan Ling grunted, the ghost of a grin softening his face. “Velly good, you wish to look like old squaw, I no mind! Like him, you dumb too! Tad, he dumb. All dumb but Bummy, an’ Bummy dead. But—Bummy in Nugget tonight, like last night! Bummy in Nugget, with me!” The aged cook deftly spooned some succulent pork onto a dish. “I cookee, you servee. We make Boss Dan fat with money so he no got sense like used to be! I cookee, you servee, Missy Boots!”

The girl, whose eyes had widened in fear at Wan Ling’s assertion that the dead Bummy Rhoades was there in The Nugget with them all, although he knew him to be dead and a few miles away in Gold Creek, brightened.

“I’ll play fan-tan with you, One Lung, I promise! It’s—it’s a shame! Bummy always said he was going to build a palace when he made his strike, and have you to cook just for him. He would have, too, if he’d hit his strike.”

Wan Ling dished some chicken-and-rice up onto three plates. He poured some murderously-black coffee into thick white mugs, and deftly slid them all onto a tray for the girl.

“Bummy hit stlike. Bummy hit rich stlike! That why he killed! Bummy is held-up by bandit to tell, but he no tell! So he kill ‘im! But Bummy lich, lich

man when he die!”

Boots blinked, and stared at the cook over the tray. “Oh, no, One Lung! He maybe mined a small pay-streak now and then. But rich? Not poor Bummy!”

“Bummy lich,” Wan Ling insisted stubbornly. “Wan Ling not yet make mistake, not make any now. Old Bummy in this kitchen with me; Bummy had lich stlike; you going mally Tad Durden. Now you takee dishes an’ beat it! Quick!”

**B**OOT SOUTER blushed deeply and hurried out, hiding her confusion behind the heavy tray. Wan Ling whipped some desserts into shape in dishes, and got them ready for the girl’s return. He sighed heavily and shook his head, his old eyes sad.

“Bummy gone,” he told himself, trying to believe it against his better judgment. These men of the raw, young West knew death. They had seen Bummy. They knew!

Yet, “Bummy was in Nugget Saloon last night, and is here now!” the old Chinaman saw it, jittering his carefully-braided queue as he nodded solemnly to himself. “Wan Ling never wrong!”

The consensus of opinion of the diners inside the combination bar-and-dining-room was that “One Lung” could do no wrong when he got a skillet in one hand and some food in the other.

The Nugget was the stage-stop and the meeting-place for the hardy pioneers who were hewing an empire out of the raw West. It was a huge frame structure with the sleeping-quarters severely cut off from the saloon by a locked door, the key to which reposed in the pocket of hulking Big Dan Souter himself.

Not quite anything went in the saloon; but close to it. . . . Absolutely nothing went in the hotel part of The Nugget except weary citizens of the dusty roads to their beds.

The saloon was crowded now, the bar a solid mass of men in from the hills for a Saturday letdown from the backbreaking toil of wresting gold from the adamant earth.

The gambling tables were already islands of tense humanity ringing in still more tense players.

Some of the younger bucks let their eyes rove to Boots Souter in silent speculation and appraisal, where she was tidying up the eating tables for the breakfast-rush when the daily stage wheeled up. Two young Indian girls were helping her, girls

whom Wan Ling would not allow into his kitchen.

"They not smell good," he had laid down the law flatly, "All folk smell; but Indian biggest ones."

Wan Ling worked in a world of aromas and scents and odors. And—smells. That was the secret of his cooking, his ability to catalog aromas and capture them for his dishes. A violin virtuoso has his hands. A ballerina has her legs and feet. A financier has his uncanny judgment of men and events and crises. In the same manner, Wan Ling had his nose.

Meat for his cooking was approved or discarded after one quick sniff, and no oaths sworn on stacks of Bibles moved him in his judgments. Sauces were merged into delightful and edible perfumes in the same way.

It was his nose that had issued the edict against the young Indians who helped Boots at the tables.

Now, as he looked around the crowded room in much the same manner as an impresario would scan an audience, Wan Ling wrinkled his sensitive proboscis and a puzzled look came into his eyes.

"Bummy!" he thought now, as he stood in the kitchen door. "Bummy may be dead, as they say. But he is somehow here in this room, too. Just as he was last night!"

Sheriff Lormy pushed in through the bat-wings, the hardy miners making a path for him to where Dan Souter stood guarding the door of the sleeping-quarters. The big, redheaded sheriff pushed his broad hat to the back of his redheaded skull and stood looking about him carefully, his eyes picking over forms and faces as he spoke with savagely-working lips to Big Dan.

The Chinese grunted, his eyes sharpening on the look in the sheriff's face, and slowly started to edge along the wall to that far door.

Big Dan listened, his eyes taking a hard cognizance of the young bucks who twisted their heads to stare covertly at his daughter. Wan Ling saw a slight smile soften the man's mouth an instant, and the Chinese didn't have to look to know that smooth, blond, carefully-dressed Bidwell Lorgan, the young attorney, had caught the boss' attention.

Big Dan's eyes moved on, then stopped suddenly in scowling contemplation of a rangy, cynical-eyed, dark youngster who was standing by a card table, still wearing the chaps and the leather wristlets of his cow-punching trade.

Wan Ling chuckled when he saw young Durden meet Big Dan's eyes.

But the Chinese sobered as he made his way with rustling skirts and shuffling shoes, a mere mite of a wrinkled, little old, unarmed man, through the jam-packed throng of the West's toughest characters, and on to where Sheriff Lormy and Big Dan were talking.

WAN LING could have been standing at the open window for fresh air, the way his back was to the two big men by the hotel side door. But he wasn't.

"No real way to pin it on anybody. But we did get a pretty good track of a hoss with a busted shoe on the right fore-hoof. Real distinctive marking."

The sheriff paused in his recital, as if looking around him. Wan Ling stood as still as an idol in some Chinese temple.

"But, of course, while we located a horse out on the rack with a hoof like that, it ain't like no sure thing, Dan, see? We got to go careful."

Big Dan's guarded voice asked, "Whose hoss?"

"Tad Durden's," Lormy said with slow reluctance. "But—well, it don't mean nothin' yet. See? Now, if we was to find some other things—like dust that Tad couldn't well account for, or somethin' like that. So I want the full of how it was yesterday. I already done questioned Tad a bit, casual-like. He says he wasn't nowheres around near Blue Mountain a-tall. He says he was to meet your daughter here yesterday, an' did; though he allows he was late. Says he found his horse had a bad shoe. But it was firm, so he come on, but slow, and he was late."

Big Dan growled, "He was here. Boots was talkin' with Bid Lorgan, and was right nettled that saddle bum was late. She didn't hardly speak to him. For which I ain't sorry. Tad, he finally sat in the corner over yonder, underneath that Indian war-bonnet on that shelf; and when my girl still didn't come near him, he left."

Lormy whistled tunelessly a moment, then asked softly, "Did he pay his drinks or dinner the last two nights with dust?"

"Hard money," Big Dan denied. "I been lookin' at him, and close. More'n once, I seen him follow Bummy out of here. So I've been watchin'. He paid with hard money."

"Still doesn't mean anything this way or that," Lormy said. But if he was to turn up with a cache

of gold dust, now. Get what I mean?"

"How's his bunkhouse?" Big Dan asked flatly. "Looked?"

"I hate that sort o' thing," Lormy said.

"I calculate Bummy hated dyin'," Big Dan said dryly. "I know what you want, Lormy. You get along to his bunkhouse, and I'll see he stays on here. If I gotta buy him free drinks, I'll keep him here!"

"Probably nothing," Lormy said again, uneasily. "But there was talk as how Tad's been seen trailin' Bummy; and also as how Bummy might maybe have had a better thing than anyone suspected. Had a strike of sorts, and kept it to his-self."

Wan Ling heard Big Dan grunt. "The hell you say! Now, what do you know? One Lung allus did say Bummy had a lot o' sense."

Lormy chuckled, "Well, who ever said One Lung had any sense to judge by? A man who wears skirts ain't no proper man, for my poke. And he ain't no fit judge of another man, neither."

"He's a good cook," Big Dan said. "I like him."

"Women are most all good cooks," the sheriff said flatly. "And like One Lung, women wear dresses, and they are no judge of men-folk."

"Amen!" Big Dan said bitterly. "Boots thinks Tad is an all-right hombre. My say is, he's the road agent! And I hope you can prove it. You go ahead, Lormy, I'll keep him here."

Wan Ling's eyes were angered when he made his way back around the wall again. As he skirted the corner table of gamblers, he paused suddenly, his nose out-thrust like a bird-dog on point.

"Bummy's smell!" he thought. "That—that mint-smell that Bummy liked! All his drinks, with mint, which he brought with him! His lamb, when we had it. With mint! He even chewed a sprig of it; while we played fan-tan! And—there it is again! Here! In this room! Just as it was last night!"

The Chinese sniffed again and again, his eyes ranging the corner. They raised, and came to a stop on the Indian war-bonnet that decorated the shelf in that corner, and riveted there on a dark object, a poke, that was hidden from view of any except a man searching for something there.

The old Chinese's heart leaped, and he knew what it was even as he bent his eyes away, forced them away. Then he stiffened involuntarily, let out a small exclamation of surprise.

Tad Durden was staring at him across the heads of the intent gamblers with hard eyes—with hard

and wise eyes.

Silently, without a sign he noticed Tad's eyes dart up to that war-bonnet, Wan Ling shuffled his way along the wall and to the kitchen. Boots looked around from a chore with the tableware, at a cabinet.

"Why, Wan Ling!" she exclaimed, using his correct name in her surprise. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"Is so," the Chinese said gravely. "Bummy's ghost."

He turned his head away slowly, his eyes thoughtful. The poke-bag that was behind that war-bonnet was Bummy's, was the bag that Bummy had always carried with him until the day he had died.

It was that mint-smell that had attracted Wan Ling's attention to it, had focused his keen nostrils on the search until he had located the familiarly pungent aroma of the mint-impregnated poke-bag of his murdered friend.

And he knew, Wan Ling did, that Tad Durden also knew it was there. Tad Durden who had the horse with the split right fore-shoe. Tad Durden who had been late to his tryst with the girl, Boots, and who had sat there under that war-bonnet when he had arrived. Wan Ling felt very tired, suddenly, and saddened.

WAN LING retired to his cubby of a room and lighted some joss sticks before the tiny idol that was the room's only decoration.

He sat long in contemplation of the calm-faced Chinese god, the noise from the great bar below coming up to him in fitful gusts.

"Could it be that Wan Ling has erred in his judgment of men?" he asked himself, after bowing his respect to the idol before he put out the sticks of punk. "Could it be then that those who use force are the better judges than those who use wits?"

He sat in thought for some time more, at length getting to his feet and smiling at a sudden thought. He unbraided his queue thoughtfully, then gave it up to cross resolutely to the upstairs door to the sleeping quarters.

He let himself into the upper hall with a skeleton-key, and padded noiselessly to a door, where he paused and was about to knock. He stiffened in the half-gloom of the lamp-lit hall. The sound of a girl weeping came through the door, Boots' door.

Sadly, Wan Ling went away from there, back through the door to his own side of the house. From a rudely-built chest he unearthed a businesslike sixgun, and silently consulted it with his eyes while he struggled with his thoughts.

"Tad is making her unhappy," he reasoned. "Tad is drinking more than is good for a man. Tad knows that Bummy's own poke is there behind the war-bonnet. How does he know? Why is Missy Boots unhappy. Is he guilty, then? And has she knowledge of it, with woman's intuition?"

He turned his back to the chest and thoughtfully, carefully, rebraided his hair again into the long queue that he wore down the neck of his alpaca jacket. After some silent prayers before his idol, he went below stairs again and into the uproar of the bar.

He went straight across to where Big Dan stood with his back to the hotel's bar door. He ignored the proprietor's surprised look at his, Wan Ling's late hour. Usually, he was in bed long before this.

"Wan Ling stay up to ask favor," he said, softly. "Bummy is good friend to me always. I know much of Bummy's business. It is of this I speakee. Bummy has a poke-bag. In that poke is muchee wealth. In dust, in map."

"Map?" Big Dan asked.

"Map," Wan Ling confirmed. "In lining of poke, so-cleverly hiding, is map of location of Bummy's claim where he getee gold. Boss Dan know, bimeby, if poke is found with body?"

Big Dan licked his lips and blinked. "By Joe, you're a clammy soul, aren't you, One Lung? How long have you known this? But that doesn't matter. I'll ask Sheriff Lormy when I see him, if he— Hey! Here he is now! Something is doing, too! Hold it, One Lung, we'll get him over here and ask him."

The sheriff came straight across and said flatly, "He's got enough dust there to make him the richest murderer in these parts in a long time! Lots of it! And you know something funny? It smells to high-heaven of some sort of weed. Mint, close as I can make it out. Now, what do you suppose that means?"

"What does it have to mean?" Big Dan snorted. "Get your man, Lormy! Who cares what it smells of but murder, which it does! Come on, let's get the skunk now! What's a poor cowpoke like him doing with all that dust, and never showing so much as a grain of it, as he would had he come by it honest!"

IT WAS then that Wan Ling asked softly, "Is not the guilty snake which steals robin's-eggs oft warned from the nest by the screams of the silly robin . . . while the eagle bides his time and strikes with Death in his talons?"

Lormy said, "Chase yourself, Chink! This is man's talk!"

Wan Ling gave the big redhead the scorn of his back. "Boss Dan? Wan Ling have never been wrong. Please to help him be sure of the killer of his friend!"

"Now, One Lung!" Big Dan shrugged his hands apologetically, "wish you'd leave this to us men, One Lung! We know you always liked Tad, and—"

"Liked Tad, loved Bummy," the aged Chinaman said simply. "Bummy, he in this saloon now. Bummy lead us to killer, Boss Dan, if you let him. You let him, yes-ee? Please, yes-ee?"

Lormy said, "Crazy, huh?"

Big Dan flushed for his old cook. "Now, no, Lormy, not like you mean. Ideas he has, yes. But not loco."

Wan Ling spoke fast, to nail down his slim hope. "Dust in cabin of Tad is drink-money, if secret mine is known! Killer do not know of map, but knows where poke is! Wan Ling, too, know where poke is! Post reward for finding of poke with map, and killer comes for poke to get map. We get killer!"

"I've got my killer," Lormy said roughly. "And it strikes me you are pretty friendly with him, Chink! Where is this poke?"

"Me no tell you never!" Wan Ling spat at him venomously.

"Why, you slant-eyed heathen!" Lormy growled. "I'll run you in, too! Like as not, you're in this with Tad, thick as you'n him are."

"Hold it, Lormy," Big Dan said softly, his eyes hard on the Chinese. "Hold it; Wan Ling is a good cook; but lately he has been telling me this an' that about everything. This is a good time to show the old man he ought to stick to his trade, an' leave us handle our'n! And anyway—" He paused.

"Anyway, what?" Lormy asked.

"Well, Boots sets a lot o' store by him. I got to face her tomorrer, an' a lot o' other tomorrers. Let's see what One Lung's idee is, first. Spit it out, One Lung. What's goin' on behind them slant eyes?"

Wan Ling told it simply. They would announce that the map of Bummy's secret mine was in the

lining of the poke. Then they would set up a simple watch on the poke. Just the three of them; Wan Ling, Big Dan, Lormy. The guilty man who had hidden the poke where it was would come back after it.

Lormy snorted. "You are going to help watch? Anyway, more than the killer knows it is there. Unless you are the killer. Because you say you know where it is."

Wan Ling nodded sadly. "I—smell it," he said. "I think I smell Bummy; but it is poke. Hidden poke. I smell it when it was blought yest'day."

"You smelled it?" Lormy exclaimed. He looked at Big Dan. "What is this?"

Big Dan was staring at Wan Ling fixedly. "I think I remember," he said, slowly. "One Lung has a nose on him like a bird dog. He reads scent like you do tracks, Lormy. One Lung, just what was that smell? Mint? I recall Bummy was always chewing on a sprig of mint. And that dust in Tad's shack, that smelled of mint, Sheriff Lormy says! Or—was it mint that Bummy liked?"

Wan Ling shrugged. "Mebbe Wan Ling fo'get. Mebbe Wan Ling 'member tomollow."

Lormy grunted and nodded his recognition of Wan Ling's unspoken deal. He'd talk if they did as he wanted now. The sheriff thought about it, his eyes giving in.

"But you're sure the killer doesn't know you know where the poke is? You see, that would tip him off, if he knew you had seen it."

Wan Ling was suddenly embarrassed. He held very still so he wouldn't show his agitation. "Wan Ling is sure killer did not see him find poke. Wan Ling did not touch poke. Wan Ling only look where it is." He winked quickly at Big Dan and made a motion with his head.

Big Dan Souter grunted and then grinned broadly. "Well, now, it seems to me I recall someone sittin' there yesterday," he murmured. "Let's humor him, Lormy. Anyways, this looks like it might turn out to be right interestin'! A jury might be hard to convince if Tad has a likely story. Should Tad come a-sneakin' back after the poke, like as not there wouldn't be no need of a trial. Anyways, if One Lung's idee don't work, we can always take Tad on what evidence you got."

Lormy's eyes were busy with the thing. "I can put a watch onto his shack, so he don't try a getaway. Hmmm. I admit I would like it a heap better if Tad was to commit hisself. He's a sorta

saddle bum. But take the star off'n me, and so am I. Well, I'll make the talk about the poke, Dan. I'll git right up onto the bar where I can get me some attention."

Sheriff Lormy mounted the bar and shouted, "Quiet, you hombres! Hey, quiet a minute! Quiet!"

Lormy made the thing more than plausible. He made it downright fact.

Bummy had hit it rich, but had cannily kept it quiet. Bummy had been afraid of the road agent who'd been working Gold Creek with his tight-knit band of desperadoes. So he smuggled down the dust to a safe hiding place but kept the mine location a secret.

The secret was in Bummy's poke, which was gone from his body when the killing had been discovered. Like as not it was thrown away by the killer, near the scene of the killing, or in some safe hideaway. A rich reward was promised the finder.

The excited roar of the crowd rocked the place when Lormy had had his say. Bands of men started away immediately, intent on getting the rich prize. Others sat at tables over their drinks to talk it up, to arrive at a logical plan to comb the rugged countryside for the valuable scrap of paper.

Lormy snorted, "It's good, Dan, this is only a blind! How much chance you think we'd have of getting that map back, if we didn't right now know where it was? Huh! Well, the place is clearin' quick! The idee is takin'. With most of 'em. Let's hope it also takes with the right one! Let's lay our plans, now. I'll be here behind the bar with a lamp; you be in that far corner. If and when he comes back, I'll twist the wick o' the bar night lamp high to fix him in it. And if he makes so much as one move—" The sheriff slapped his gun significantly.

Wan Ling asked mildly, "An' Wan Ling, where he hidee?"

"In bed, where all skirts belong at a late hour," Lormy said roughly. "When the killer gets his cue to move in on the discarded poke, we don't want no pigtailed gents in skirts clutterin' up th' premises!"

WAN LING sat in his kitchen through the long hours, his thoughts as dark as the shadows about him as time stretched on and no sound came from that bar beyond his door.

Somewhere close outside, a packrat scurried about its business. Or—was it a packrat?

Wan Ling held his breath when the scratch came again, and then his very own kitchen door

was swinging noiselessly, a cooling draft of air floating into the room.

The only way Wan Ling knew the door was closed again was when the cool air stopped flowing. He felt a tickle in his sensitive nose, and prayed to a hundred gods to prevent his sneezing. One of the hundred heard his prayer.

And then, from the next room, from the bar, a racket started that was like the buzzing of angry hornets, and the cracks of the kitchen door sketched themselves in the light of the lamps that were turned up when the baited trap in that bar had been sprung.

"Just hold it steady, Tad Durden!" came Sheriff Lormy's warning snarl. "By Jupiter, one move and I'll drill you like a sieve! Steady, man! All right, Dan; step around there and relieve him of his iron! By gum, that Chink shore knew his rat when he laid this trap! I was beginnin' t' give up!"

Wan Ling, his heart crying deep under his alpaca-jacket, was just starting to his feet when it happened.

Though Tad and Lormy and Big Dan were beyond that closed and crack-outlined door in the other room, the cracks of the door were blotting out, and coming into line again. And then the truth of the thing smashed him so hard the stoical Chinaman all but screamed his surprise!

"This is another man!" he knew. "No—men! For there are more than one! There are two—three men—in this kitchen with me! Listening to what goes on in the bar! Ah! Ahhhhh! I begin to see it all, clearly! Ahhhhh!"

For the kitchen door had blossomed from cracks outlined by Lormy's and Big Dan's lights to a full-blown opening as the men who had come into the kitchen to stand waiting pushed into the bar, where the lawman and the owner of The Nugget were giving their full attention to Tad Durden!

Wan Ling sat in his chair with composure as he listened to it unfold, that crackling, menacing voice stabbing quiet into the rising racket of the bar with stunning suddenness.

"Reach for the ceiling, all of you!" came the harsh command of the trio that had entered by the kitchen and flanked the sheriff and Big Dan. "Turn your backs. Get their guns, Pancho!"

Pancho stepped to do the leader's bidding briskly, chuckling, "So very sorry, senors! Thank you, Senor Sheriff. Thank you, Senor Beeg Dan! And you, Senor Tad! Bueno. And now for the

poke, yes?"

"Who are you?" Lormy raged. "Tad? This is pretty shrewd, this plant to unspring a trap, if one was sprung. But we'll get you!"

"Aw, shut up, Lormy," Tad Durden drawled, disgustedly. "I ain't party to these rannies here. You done yore act so good you baited me in. Reckon these hombres watched, saw me come in, and just plain jumped you when you was busy with me. But me, I was afraid of this. That's why I come after the poke. Bummy had me ridin' his dust for him, for a cut; but he never did say where his claim was, and nobody never could find out. I thought just maybe yore yarn tonight was right."

"Then who planted the poke?" Big Dan asked. "Not you?"

"Naw. I didn't kill Bummy. I was workin' for him. He had promised to go partners with me, some day, when he'd got enough out so's he didn't care much more. Him an' me an' One Lung hit it off right good. Now, I'd say these rannies who are stickin' us up are the road-agent gang, and the one and same who killed Bummy when he wouldn't talk about his claim."

"All of you shut up!" the leader commanded crisply.

"And mebbe you allee-samee shut-up, too, yes-ee?" came Wan Ling's low, but incisive, speech. "An' reachee for ceiling, allee-samee others? Please, I no like killee men. I— Ahhhhhh!"

Wan Ling's regretful sigh was lost in the heavy roar of a gun. The white-masked leader of the trio cursed, fought wildly to get his gun, and broke at the knees to crash to the floor. Pancho cursed in fluent Spanish and twisted fast, his gun spitting flame as he hunched over in his fast-stepping whirl.

Wan Ling's gun roared again and again, and Pancho pitched face down across his leader's inert form. The third man sobbed and dropped his gun, begging for mercy.

**I**N THE hotel quarters, an uproar was starting. Outside along the street, racing feet along the road, the pound of horses' hoofs, and the yells of men, told of the gathering of the crowd.

Wan Ling smiled thinly back at Big Dan and Lormy, his head ducked awkwardly as he held his gun on the third of the bandits. "My queue," he explained simply. "I tie-ee gun to queue—to pigtail, like you call him—an' hang inside jacket-back. It awkward to shoot-ee, this way. Head must

bend over. So—”

Big Dan said, “My gosh, One Lung bushwhacked our bushwhackers!”

Lormy, with his gun carefully on the two on the floor, leaned over and whipped the masks back from dead features. “Lord! One of ‘em is Bidwell Lorgan! Unh! No wonder they planned so smartly! If it hadn’t of been for you, Chink, they woulda got away with the map!”

Wan Ling wrinkled his nose in disgust. As if that sensitive olfactory organ detected something ripe.

“You believee about mapee?” he asked scornfully. “Bummy he make no mapee. Not for man to see, no mapee! He make mapee for man to

smell. For man like me, with good nose if also with woman’s dressee, to smell out mine where mint she growee! Boss Dan? I go bed now, please, yes? I tired. I got burn joss in front of gods. For a stronger nose to smellee with. Tomollow, I got smellee my way up mountainside, and smeller must be in good condition, yes.”

He paused and smiled slightly at the assembled, heavily armed builders of the raw, rough West, with a lingering look for the sheriff.

“I stayee here longer, my smeller get ruined an’ I not never find mine. Good-nightee, Boss Dan. Tad he make good son. Wan Ling know. Wan Ling him never wrong yet! Good-nightee, Boss Dan.”



## TRIGGERS IN TRAIL DUST

An Exciting Novelet by NELS LEROY JORGENSEN Next Issue!