

Rope Meat

By Ben Conlon

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*It means bullets fer
breakfast if the waddy
doesn't make the right plays.*

FROM the first, Clay Barton didn't like the looks of the ranny. His snaggly teeth were tobacco-stained. He was red-nosed and shifty-eyed. He seemed like an hombre that didn't use much water, either for drinking or washing. But he had loped up just as Clay was pulling the bacon and frijoles off the campfire, and it was the law of the West to ask a stranger to light and line his flue with chuck.

The ranny was mealy-mouthed, too. "Yo're shore a right good feller, pard, ter let a pore saddle tramp dig inter yore grub like this," he said as he scooped up his beans with the blade of his knife and shoveled them into his big, loose mouth.

"Aw, thet's all right," Clay told him. "Yo're plumb welcome, stranger. I'm a saddle-tramp myself. Jest leather it intuh yuh."

He was hoping the hombre would finish his chuck and ride on. Clay aimed to fix his cinch before dark. The leather strap was badly worn and finally had torn at the edge. He had a saddle-maker's needle and a ball of stout twine in his kit.

A half-hour would fix it, if this mangy-looking stranger would only ride on and let an hombre work. But the stranger kept talking.

"Yo're a hull lot like me, pard," he said, "big an' free-handed. Now, I'm a feller thet's generous, myself. Thet java b'iled by now, amigo?"

"Reckon so." Clay bent over to get the coffee pot, and suddenly he was looking into the muzzle of a .45!

"Reach high, pronto!" the stranger ordered. He wasn't mealy-mouthed now. There was a sharp rasp to his voice.

Clay Barton was caught dead to rights. There was nothing to do but obey, for he didn't aim to depart this life at the early age of twenty-two.

The stranger—he had called himself Jake Loney—kept the gun on Clay.

"Don't lower them paws!" he snarled. "Jest one move out o' yuh an' I'll blow thet big smeller offn yore map!"

"I've heerd folks say as how mebbe an inch or so offn it mightn't hurt none," Clay said calmly.

His blue eyes showed no fear. There was contempt in them.

"An' ef yuh squeeze thet trigger, stranger, jest do one little thing fer me. Carve a few words on my headstone sayin' thet heah lays Clay Barton, what died of his own keerlessness in not watchin' a sneaky-eyed gent like yoreself every second."

"I mought jest do yuh thet favor," Loney sneered. "Name's Clay, huh? Waal, it'll be changed ter Mud if yuh don't tie a lass rope round thet long jaw o' yourn."

He stood up, backing away slightly, the gun steady in his dirty right hand.

"Git on yore feet an' turn yore back. It ought ter be a heap purtier'n yore face. An' keep them paws skied!"

Clay was helpless. He stood up and turned his back to the stranger. His square white teeth grated as he felt the six-gun tugged from his holster.

Loney prodded him for a hideout weapon, but found none. "Now," he said, "do jest like I tell yuh. We're changin' duds an' hosses."

"Aw, not thet!" Clay pleaded. "Leastwise, leave me my cayuse. Me an' him's been pards fer—"

"Shut yore trap!" Loney cut in. "I'm runnin' this. Heah I am, a-givin' yuh a fine piece o' hossflesh, all my fancy duds, an' even my hawglaig."

Clay wondered what he meant. Was this hombre plumb loco?

The stranger guffawed again. "But my hawglaig won't have no cartridges in it when I passes it over. Yuh see, I'm bein' Clay Barton, an' yo're bein' me till I hightails it out of Arizony an' over the border. An' I'm sort of in a hurry, as yuh might say. So mosey six paces ahead thar an' peel them duds. Scrape gravel!"

The young waddy felt the two guns poked in his back. He walked ahead.

"Thet's fur enough. Now, off with 'em!" Loney rasped.

Clay gauged the distance between his saddle kit and himself. In the saddle sheath was a Henry rifle he used for shooting game. But it was a good lariat length away. There wasn't a chance in the world to get it without being plugged.

He ripped the gray Stetson from his red head, dropped it to the ground, and started to unbuckle his gun belt.

His heart thumped as he felt the cartridges in the front compartments. His back was to Loney, who

couldn't see his quick-moving fingers slip out a bullet and palm it in his big hand as he dropped the belt to the ground. Loney had said something about giving him his hogleg empty. It was the same caliber, a .45. Might be one long chance here to save his duds and his cayuse.

"Hustle up, thar!" growled Loney. "What yuh so danged slow fur?"

Clay removed his yellow neckerchief, gray shirt, and brown bull-hide chaps.

"An' them boots, too. Them 'pears like a mighty fine pair."

They were. They were cowman's half-boots, with fancy stitching up the sides. Like the rest of Clay's outfit, they were neat and well-kept. Clay prided himself on his cleanliness. He wasn't a saddle tramp through choice; he had been riding through southern Arizona looking for a job as a ranch hand, but it had been a bad season for cattle. He kicked off the boots.

"C'mon! Shuck off them Levis, too," Loney snapped. "Pronto!"

Clay stripped off the blue overalls and stood there in his socks and red flannel underwear. He was fighting mad. Would he have a chance to jump Loney when the big ranny walked over to put on the clothes? It was risky, but he might—

Loney blasted that hope, though. "Now move ahead thar six more paces!"

He was taking no risks; he wasn't aiming to let the tall young waddy be close to him when he removed his duds and put on Clay's. But Clay took a chance anyhow. He whirled, leaped like a cougar.

Bang! A slug that zizzed by his right ear stopped him in his tracks. There was no use of an hombre bucking a thousand-to-one shot like this.

Loney's muddy eyes leered over the two gun sights. "Mebbe thet'll l'arn yuh a lesson. One more move like thet un, an'—waaal, use yore brains, if any, or they'll be out o' yore skull. G'wan! Walk ahead, thar, with yore hands up!"

Again Clay turned, walked ahead, and stopped when Loney told him to. He wasn't licked yet. His heart thumped against his ribs. He had dropped the cartridge before raising his hands again, for Loney might see the pinching together of his fingers. He hoped the shining metal jacket in the grass wouldn't be seen.

Evidently Loney was too much in a hurry to look around for something he didn't expect to see. And all his attention was on Clay. He shuffled up

to the pile of duds, undressed and redressed cautiously, one .45 in his right hand and the other within an inch of his feet.

"Now, keep standin' thar. After I've went, yuh kin git inter these duds o' mine or not, jest like yuh admire ter do. But if yuh don't look out fer bulls! Haw! Haw! Yo're shore as red as an Arizony sunset in thet rig-out."

The young waddy could hear Loney backing toward Chesty. That's what Clay called his cayuse, because the close-coupled little cow-pony had a powerful chest and was solid chestnut in color, except for four white stockings.

Two or three minutes passed. Clay gambled a glance over his shoulder and saw that Loney had reached the ground-anchored cayuse over by the river's edge, where Chesty had been cropping grass. And Chesty was playing the game. He was blowing himself out. Loney couldn't buckle the cinch under him.

"Aw, yuh'll never git nowhar with thet hoss," Clay called. "He's meaner'n a rattler's stepmother. I ain't honin' tuh be standin' hyar like this. I'll cinch thet hull on jest ter git rid o' yuh. Yuh kin keep yore guns on me."

Loney still struggled with the cinch, then kicked Chesty and cursed.

"Aw right," he yelled back. "Since I'm in such a hurry, git over hyar an' do it. An' if yuh want tuh keep an airtight skull on yuh, don't try no trickery!"

"Aw, what chance I got fer tricks?" Clay retorted. With his hands still raised, he walked toward the cayuse as Loney backed away again and kept him under his guns. The young waddy spoke gently to the wild-eyed Chesty and started to buckle the cinch under his belly. Trickery? Well, it was the only chance left.

At least Loney couldn't see through his back. And Clay took the gamble that might mean a bullet if Loney caught him at it. He clutched the strap with both of his big hard hands, one hand on each side of the tear near the edge. And he pulled with all his young strength.

His muscles writhed like snakes beneath the red flannel sleeves. The tear in the cinch ripped deeper. Clay looked it over fast, then buckled up the cinch. At Loney's orders he put up his hands again and walked ten paces away from the horse.

Another cautious glance over his shoulder told him that Loney had topped the chestnut and was all ready to hightail it. The big ranny was as ringy as a

worried steer as he gazed toward the north, then drew the shells from his walnut-butted gun and slipped them into his pocket.

Something flipped through the air and fell close to Clay. It was Loney's empty .45.

"Adios, amigo!" Loney chuckled. "Thanks a heap. I'd admire ter repay yuh some time." Then he sank spurs into the chestnut's flanks and was on his way.

Chesty didn't cotton to his new rider, and was doing his best to throw him. He reared and bucked and sunfished. But whatever else Loney was, he was a master of horseflesh; he didn't even grab leather as he put the cayuse into a gallop.

Clay had turned and picked up the empty .45. He was scrambling about in the grass. Loney was getting out of good six-gun range. Clay spotted the cartridge he had dropped, thumbed it into the chamber of the big, walnut-butted .45. He dropped to one knee and took aim. His one chance, a mighty long one.

Bang!

"Hang it!" he grated. "He was jest 'bout half a rope length too fur!"

Loney turned in the saddle. Clay could catch the look of surprise on his ugly face. He saw Loney reach for the rifle in the scabbard and shoulder it.

Boom! Whee-ee-eee! The shot screamed over Clay as he flopped to the ground.

Loney had turned the chestnut now and was tearing back. The rifle was still at his shoulder. It was sure death for Clay Barton, unless he could bluff the ranny.

He raced toward Loney and aimed the empty .45. And Loney showed just how yellow he was. He whirled the chestnut again, drove in steel and roweled every last inch of speed out of the spirited Chesty.

A good three hundred yards away he sent another shot at Clay. But he was burning the wind to the south, and the slug went wild. Then horse and rider disappeared behind a hogback.

Clay Barton stood there in his red flannel underwear. "He ain't much of a shot," he ruminated. "I'd judge as how thet rattler needs an hombre's back right close as a target!"

He walked over to the fire. Loney had cleaned up all the frijoles and the last rasher of bacon. The coffee pot had burned dry. There was a hole in the bottom of it. A mirthless grin twisted the big face of Clay Barton.

"Plumb ungrateful, yaller-bellied coyote!" he muttered. "Said as how he'd like tuh repay me some time. Waal, I might say the same 'bout hisself!"

He walked over to the clothes Loney had left—a black slouch hat, sweaty gray flannel shirt, stained blue jeans, empty cartridge belt, and shabby boots.

"Hardly enough tuh dust a fiddle with! An' they'd only dirty a fiddle, anyhow!"

He dressed himself in Loney's duds, did so with disgust. He could have stood them shabby, but he hated dirt. Yet an hombre couldn't go moseying around the country in a suit of red flannel underwear. He hooked on the gun belt and shoved the empty .45 into the right holster.

The young waddy took stock. There was no dinero left. Loney had stolen the gold double-eagle, three silver cartwheels and some change, the Mexican peso luckpiece—which hadn't brought Clay much luck this time, and all his clean outside duds.

He had taken Chesty, his cayuse pard, his hogleg, Henry rifle, all his ammunition, saddle, bridle, reata, braided stake rope, his soogans and tarp, the blankets with the big sunset rowels rolled in them, his war bag with all the do-funnies he had picked up trailing through cow country, his chuck—everything.

"Says as how he's a feller thet's generous," Clay mumbled. "Yep, he shore is right generous—tuh himself!"

He grinned again. "Anyhow, I'd ought tuh be thankful thet nothin' else kin happen tuh me now. Thar jest couldn't be nothin' worse!"

That's what Clay Barton reckoned. And he was as wrong as a six-foot, big-nosed, carrot-topped saddle tramp could ever be.

II.

Then his big face sobered. He had caught the thud of hoofs. His heart beat fast. "Dawg-gone! Could Chesty—"

He put his ear to the ground. Yes, that was a cayuse pounding along, burning the wind. But no, there was more than one horse, and they were coming from the north!

Clay long-legged it to the cliff that overlooked Rusty River. He could get a good view from this high point. He saw five or six horsemen riding hard down Rusty River Trail. The strung-out line curled

around the river bend like a big, squirming snake. One rider shot ahead of the rest.

"Dawg-gone! A posse! They'll be in time tuh git thet rattler, an' I'll git my duds back—an' Chesty!" he murmured.

Once the posse men saw him up close, even if they recognized Loney's clothes and crowbait cayuse, everything'd be all right. Except for his size, he didn't look like Loney; at least, he hoped not. He realized he was no beauty, and wasn't worried about it. His nose was big, but somehow it fitted his long, gaunt face.

Clay stood there as the riders fairly exploded around the bend. The rider out front was heading straight for him. Shucks! As soon as he got a good look at him—

Bang! It happened so fast that Clay hadn't even ducked as the foremost rider sent a slug whistling past his right ear. Instinctively he unholstered his gun, even though it was empty.

"Hey!" he yelled. "What in tarnashun's the—"

"Drap thet hawglaig! None o' yo' all-fiahed rattlah tricks! Drap it—else Ah'll blast yuh tuh Kingdom Come!"

Clay stared. He saw that the rider had hauled up his cayuse and was aiming his .45 right at his heart. Something was mighty odd here. But there was no time for explaining, until after he did as he was ordered. He dropped the empty gun.

"I'm tellin' yuh, hombre," he started, "thet—"

But the horseman had now slid to the ground and was rushing at him.

Smack! His fist cracked against the young waddy's jaw. And as Clay's knees buckled, the hombre tore into him.

The waddy knew he could lick him; the hombre was a lot smaller than he was, and a lot older; his hair was a gun-metal gray. So Clay backed almost to the edge of the cliff—until another smashing right cracked against his left cheek bone, almost toppling him into the reddish-brown water.

Then Clay Barton reckoned he had been picked on enough for one day. His fist struck out like a rattler, and caught the gray-haired man flush on the jaw. The spunky little hombre sat down suddenly. But he was up almost before he touched the ground. And this time he tore in like a mad bull.

Smack! Thud! Lefts and rights flailed against flesh and bone.

Clay had a fight on his hands, and he knew it. He saw the rest of the horsemen riding up. They'd

probably break up this battle, but he had to keep this wildcat hombre away; he chopped down with his right, caught the gray-haired man on the point of the jaw. The fiery little ranny fell backward, but his hand darted out, grabbed Clay, and took the waddy with him. The pair hit the ground, lashed around like a teased snake.

Clay was on top. He knew he could stop this little weasel now. But a big hand closed about his neck and yanked him to his feet. Clay whirled, saw that the rest of the posse had come up and most of them had swung from their saddles.

The hombre who had pulled Clay to his feet was a big buckaroo with a shock of yellow hair. He held part of a grain sack in his left hand. His nostrils dilated and contracted with rage.

"Don't tangle with this sidewinder, Trig," he snapped at the gray-haired hombre who had bounded to his feet. "Thet'd be givin' him too much of a chance. An' he ain't havin' no chance. He didn't give pore Pop no chance, did he?"

"What-all's this hyar about?" Clay demanded. "Hyar I am jest a—"

"Ah'm telling yuh tuh shut up!" The hombre called Trig whipped out his .45 again. "Yuh talked yo' mealy-mouthed way intuh muh po' brothah's confidence. An' now Ah'm tellin' yuh one thing, an' thet ain't two! If yuh open thet trap once mo'—if yuh as much as says 'Boo'—yo' talkin' days is ovah right heah!"

He meant it, too. Clay could see that straight enough. He studied the little gray-haired hombre, who was scarcely five feet seven, and as lean as a critter on short grass. He had steel-gray eyes from which rage had smeltered all kindness, a mustache that was just a smear of gray bristle over a hard upper lip, a nose like a defiant eagle.

Trig turned to the rest of the posse men. "Boys, Ah'm sayin' as how this is mah own personal party. Ah'm doin' things mah own way, else Ah's fightin' every hombre heah. Us Sledgers come heah from Texas four years ago. We kept the law an' fought fo' it. Me, mebbe Ah ain't so all-fiahed perfect, but mah brothah Pop—what may now be daid—was the squarest man in three States, an'—"

"Yo're blamed whistlin' he was, Trig!" another posse men cut in.

"An' this heah mangy saddle bum comes along an' drills him," Trig went on. "If he says one mo' word, Ah'll plug him wheah he stands, if Ah got tuh swing fo' it, right heah an' now!"

Clay stood there quietly. Talking would mean a bullet sure. He knew a man when he saw one. This Trig was a man. He saw him dominate the rest of the posse. He got an inkling, as they talked, of what had happened. The hombre they called "Pop" Sledger, evidently Trig's older brother, was storekeeper in the cowtown of Rusty River, a few miles upstream. Someone—Jake Loney, of course—had come into the store, got old Pop engaged in talk, then had shot him down in cold blood, robbed his cash drawer, and highailed it out of town.

Pop's elderly wife had heard the shot and had run after the gunny, escaping a wild bullet. She had got a look at him, but the gunny had got a head start, for the sheriff and his deputies had been out north of town after cattle thieves. The sheriff and his deputies were still out after the rustlers, although the news had brought these posse men back.

"An' thet's mighty bad, too," Clay thought to himself. "No law hyar." For if ever there was lynch in a mob's eyes, he saw it in the eyes of these hombres.

And he knew now why he didn't have a chance. He'd got a good look at the piece of grain bag that the big yellow-haired puncher carried. He saw the eye slits cut into it, knew that Loney must have worn it as a mask and dropped it some place along the trail. It must have covered his hair, his chin, nose, everything above his shoulders.

Clay Barton's big nose, lantern jaw, and red hair wouldn't do him any good now. In fact, nothing would do him any good. Pop's wife couldn't have known whether the gunny wore a mustache or whiskers, or what. All she knew was that he was big, and, being a woman, she had spotted the duds he wore.

Now all of Loney's actions became clear to Clay. He knew why Loney hadn't drilled him right off, why he hadn't fired till he reckoned his own life was in danger from Clay's .45. It wasn't that Loney wouldn't kill at the drop of the hat. He was sure a killer. It was in his face, in his eyes.

But Loney would rather have him alive—with Loney's clothes on, Loney's gun, with Loney's crowbait cayuse. He'd worked all this to get a good head start, maybe escape entirely. When the enraged posse men found Clay in this spot, they wouldn't believe any saddle tramp that fit the description. If he spoke now, Trig, the Texan,

would drill him where he stood; if he didn't speak—didn't get a chance to explain, he'd swing.

They were out for vengeance, these hard-faced hombres. They didn't even ask Clay about the stolen dinero. They were not interested in dinero now. They were interested in slinging a rope necktie on the gunny that had wounded old Pop.

The big yellow-haired puncher—the men called him “Goldy”—was uncoiling a lariat from his saddle horn. The other hombres were looking with businesslike intentness at a tall tree growing on the edge of the riverbank. Some walked toward the tree. Others drew a ring closer about Clay.

Clay decided to speak, to yell out that he wasn't the man. All right, he'd be drilled pronto. But better be shot than die like a sheep-killin' dog. He moistened his dry lips.

Again he heard the fast pelt of hoofs—one horse this time, maybe Chesty!

His ears told him that this horse, too, was coming from the north. But maybe Chesty had circled around somehow, might have got on the river trail. If Chesty would only come back, he might be able to prove that Loney's crowbait wasn't his. Someone in the crowd might believe him.

It wasn't Chesty, though; he saw that much as the lone horseman came around the bend. The horse was a big white cinnamon tail. The rider was an old man. His yellowish-white hair, worn a little long, stuck out from under his sugar-loaf sombrero and curled against the back of his neck.

“It's Lute McDaniels!” Trig yelled. He cupped his hands. “Hey, Lute! Yo' in right good time. We got the rattlah!”

The newcomer rode up, yanked his mount to a sliding stop and leaped from the saddle like a young horse wrangler. His wrinkled face was grim.

“Waal, I see yuh ain't let no grama grass grow under yore hoofs, boys,” he said with satisfaction. “When I got in from the north, I skedaddles right up ter Doc Holden's ter ask about pore Pop. Reckoned he might have a chance, but—”

“But what?” Trig's voice cut in like a pistol shot. “Lute, don't tell me—”

Old Lute McDaniels nodded. “I shore don't like ter, Trig. But it's so, shore nuff! Pore old Pop, thet never hurted no un in his hull life, has loped on ahead thar! All we kin do now is cry our eyes out an' give him a big funeral, an' say a prayer fer him—us that ain't fergot how. That is, after we

string up this hyar package o' pizen thet kilt him!”

III.

There was silence for perhaps six seconds. Big Goldy put a hand up to his eyes and rubbed them. Others shook their heads and stared at the ground. Trig swallowed hard, then his face looked like something hacked out of granite.

Clay could hear the gurgle of the river below—until a roar of anger drowned out the sound. He knew he'd be helpless within seconds, unless—

He took the only chance, a mighty long chance. He whirled, dropped two hombres with a right and a left and made two long-legged leaps to the edge of the cliff.

Bang! With the sound of the gun he felt a wasp-like sting in the edge of his shoulder.

Clay didn't know how badly he was hurt as he plunged head-first over the cliff. A moment's delay would have meant death. He just missed crashing against a floating tree trunk as he plunked into the red-brown water, sank very deep, and held his breath as the current carried him downstream.

With his lungs almost bursting, the young waddy broke surface, saw that the floating tree trunk was a little below him. He swam under it, made it a screen between himself and the posse men up the bank.

But the posse men had spotted him. Rifles boomed and six-guns spat. Bullets peppered the water about him like sharp hail. One slug kicked a little geyser of water into his face.

“Them guns has shore got their ears laid back fer me,” he gurgled as he kept low in the water.

He peered over the log to see the posse men galloping down the bank. A bullet sheared a big sliver from the log, a sliver that slammed into his temple. He felt as if he'd been almost bullet-creased, but he had to sink below the surface now; he could never live through that pelting sleet of death.

It would soon be dark, and his one small chance was to stay under as long as he could, point downstream, and swim hard. But his head was buzzing, he was floundering around, almost choking. He had to come up for one sweet breath of air. He blinked his eyes; he could hardly see.

Swish! He had heard that sound too often to mistake it. But before he could jerk his head to one side he felt the noose flop over his head. He

coughed and almost choked as the noose was pulled taut. Then he was yanked through the water like a fish on the end of the line.

A few seconds later, dripping and bedraggled, he was pulled up the bank, almost strangled. He just had strength enough left to put up both hands and loosen the noose that was coiled around his neck like a snake. But the hombre who had roped him—Goldy, the big puncher—flattened him with a blow and sat on him.

“All right, boys!” Goldy yelled. “He’s hawgtied! Rope’s round his neck. He’s all ready ter swing. He’s a dead un right now fer shore!”

The young waddy felt like a quirt-stung, hobbled horse as he half staggered and was half dragged up the path to the cliff and under the big tree. The bullet tick in his left shoulder was little more than a scratch, yet he was thinking that it might have been better if that bullet had got him good.

He could see that several town roustabouts had ridden out and joined the small posse. And a pair of sun-shriveled prospectors, evidently attracted by the posse men’s shots, had come up with a pack burro.

Clay was going to talk now, whatever happened. He tried to catch his breath as a noose was put over his head. He knew denials would mean nothing now. He’d have to get this mob’s attention by some other means.

“Want tuh know whar the dinero’s been hid?” he yelled out. Anything to gain time—anything.

A skinny young Mexican ranny slipped from the back of a snaky-eyed cayuse and slapped the waddy across the face.

“We want to know not the theeng,” he snapped. “Hanging ees too good for you. You should be keeched in the estomach unteel you die the death like the dog!”

“Ready on thet rope, thar!” someone yelled. “We’ll swing ‘im higher’n—”

“Wait!” Clay yelled. “Leastwise let a dyin’ hombre see his grave dug. Them desert rats has got a shovel in thet pack. Lemme dig my own grave!” He was trying everything to gain time. “Yuh kin still swing me.”

Again it seemed as if the waters of Rusty River had closed over him as someone pulled the grain sack over his head.

“We’ll use it jest like a hangman’s cap,” Clay heard him say. “Might sort o’ square things with

the sheriff. Dawg-gone! It’ll make this hangin’ danged near legal-like! An’ he kilt in this hood, so it’s right fittin’ thet—”

But Clay heard no more of the words. For he was listening to something else—the muffled beat of hoofs. He was within seconds of eternity, but he shook his head so that he could see through the slits of the grain bag. Chesty! The close-coupled little cayuse was racing around the hogback to the south, white stockings flashing, bridle reins flying loose.

“My hoss!” Clay choked out in muffled tones. “Hyar comes my hoss!”

It was enough to grant him a moment’s stay of execution. Some of the posse men had turned and were watching the straining chestnut. “What’s he mean—his hoss?” an hombre scoffed. “But thet piece o’ hossflesh is shore goin’ it, like a skeered jack rabbit!”

The hoof beats became louder. Chesty was streaking across the even stretch of ground now, headed right toward the tree. His chestnut coat was roughened and in a lather. He was blowing and heaving. He let out a high whinny as he stampeded through the crowd, reached the young waddy with the rope around his neck.

“Chesty!” Clay panted as his cayuse nuzzled him. “I knowed yuh’d git hyar! My ol’ pard—the best pard an hombre ever had! Cain’t yuh see, gents, thet it’s my hoss? Cain’t yuh see he’s tellin’ yuh I’m innocent? This hyar cayuse was stole from me by thet killer, thet left his crowbait hyar an’—”

He felt the grain sack yanked from his head. The posse men were grouped around him. Clay could see that they reckoned something was mighty odd here. And it didn’t surprise him when it was Trig Sledger himself who bowlegged up to him and spoke.

“Wheah yo’ all git to know this hoss?”

“He’s my pard,” Clay wheezed. “Aw, give me a chance tuh explain. Yuh kin swing me later if yuh reckon I’m lyin’. I ain’t no mangy coyote. This is what I been awaitin’ fer—my cayuse tuh come back. Thet’s why I leapt down intuh thet water. Thet’s why I talked about the stolen dinero. Thet’s why I wanted tuh dig my own grave. I was gamblin’ fer time.”

There was some mumbling in the crowd, but old Lute McDaniels and Big Goldy were talking low with Trig Sledger. They seemed as though they’d be willing to listen.

Breathing hard, swallowing gulps in his throat,

stopping to catch his breath, Clay told them about Jake Loney.

He took another deep breath. "Don't yuh see what's happened? This hyar Loney had his gun on me. I only had one chance. Thet cinch strap o' mine was tore, fer it was hard ridin' over thet big hill in Mex Pass, whar I come through this mornin'. An' when Loney let me cinch the hull on Chesty, I tore thet cinch strap o' mine near in two."

"Yeah! Yeah!" some of the roustabouts yelled.

But old Lute silenced them with a look as Clay went on: "Loney was too much in a hurry tuh notice it. I knowed thet cinch'd snap sooner or later, thet Loney'd slide off with the hull, an' thet Chesty'd come back hyar if his heart had a beat left in it."

Trig Sledger and big Goldy looked at each other. The sharp eyes of old Lute McDaniels seemed to be boring through Clay.

"If yo're tellin' the truth," old Lute said, "why—"

"It's the truth," Clay cut in. "An' I'd even stake my life thet the cinch let go when Loney spurred this hoss up thet steep hill through Mex Pass. I'm bettin' thet's whar he is this minute."

Clay had his breath now. He was talking fast for his life.

"Thet's lonesome country, gents. Thar's no spread anywhere near thar. So thet blamed hoss thief cain't steal another cayuse. He's right thar cussin' this minute, mebbe aimin' tuh hoof the rest o' the way over the border. Go git him, gents. Shoot me or string me up, if yuh want more murder done tuh-day, but git after thet blood-suckin' weasel."

Old Lute spoke. "This younker's tellin' the truth, is my guess, men. An' if he's lyin', we kin hang him as high in Mex Pass as we kin hyar."

Old Lute seemed to be a big hombre in the community. Several posse men nodded.

"Git ridin', men," Lute ordered. "It's too much fer an ol' feller like me, the gait yuh'll set. Take this younker along. His cayuse is winded, but he'll ride my hoss an' I'll foller. Top them hosses, pronto!"

Clay Barton had ridden hard in his time, but never harder than that night. The posse men's horses were blowing as they clicked their steel shoes against the rocky bed of Lower Mex Pass that night. Overhead the big, bright Arizona stars burned steadily, and moonlight made a shaft of

yellow along the trail ahead.

Clay Barton was up front, riding as he had often ridden at point in trail-herding beeves up to Abilene. And the deeper the posse rode into the pass, the more Clay Barton realized that he wasn't out of the woods yet. Loney might have made it over the border; it was according to how near the line he was when the cinch broke.

If he was gone, and if he had chucked Clay's saddle down into one of the gulches where it couldn't be found, the posse might still reckon that Clay had told a cock-and-bull story. And if he got trapped, this Loney, he was right desperate. He'd hear the posse coming, could make them out in the moonlight. With Clay's rifle and plenty of ammunition, he could hold off a passell of folks, sure could kill a right smart bunch of them.

Big Goldy neck-reined his steel-dust close to the cinnamon tail that Clay was forking up the narrow pass.

"I been gabbin' with Trig Sledger," said the yellow-haired puncher. "Trig allows as how he might be owin' yuh a heap of an apology after all this is over."

Flame winked out of the shadows up on the rim rock.

Big Goldy gasped, sagged in the saddle, and would have toppled if Clay hadn't lunged out and caught him.

A harsh voice—Jake Loney's voice—cut through the gloom.

"Thet's ter show yuh I got the whip hand, gents! An' if yuh don't turn tail an' ride back north, thar'll shore be several funerals 'fore mornin'!"

The posse men hauled up their mounts. Clay Barton slid from the saddle and led the cinnamon tail and big Goldy's steel just over into the shadows at the side of the trail. Men neck-reined their horses close to him.

"Don't git excited, boys, I'm all right," big Goldy grated out. "Jest got me in the shoulder. Don't let thet stop yuh. We got ter git this coyote, thet's all."

But getting him would be a tough job, and every hombre in that posse knew it. The canyon walls could not be sealed. The only way to get to Loney was to ride straight up that rocky pass. And to ride on against that desperate gunny, screened as he was by darkness, would mean death to many. But to wait till dawn might mean that Loney had gradually edged back over the border.

The border wouldn't stop these grim man hunters. But once Loney got over the line, he'd probably be safe, or if caught up with down there, the posse would have to buck Mexican law.

One thing—Clay Barton was trusted by the posse men now. That rifle shot from the darkness and Loney's brassy challenge had proved the young waddy's story. And Clay walked over to Trig Sledger. The latter grabbed the waddy's hand.

"Yo' all kin figah 'bout how Ah feels, pahd," Trig said. "The way Ah treated yuh back theah."

"Aw, thet's all right," Clay said.

"If Ah kin evah do yuh any kind o' favah—"

"Yuh kin do me one right now. Back thar near Rusty River, yuh said this was yore party. Now I'm askin' if yuh'll let this be *my* party. I shore owes this rattler plenty. He had his fun this afternoon. Now I'd admire to have mine."

"What-all yuh aim to do, younkah?"

"Listen hyar, Trig. We cain't take thet coyote 'fore dawn. We'd lose too many men. Thet coyote's already kilt yore brother an' hurted big Goldy. We cain't waste more good hombres on the likes o' him. I nooned in this pass today; reckon I know how to scale thet canyon wall an' git him."

"But if thet wall kin be scaled, theah's othah men heah thet—"

"Yuh said yuh'd do me a favor, pard," Clay reminded the little Texan.

Trig Sledger nodded. "Ah ain't got no mo' tuh say. Go to it, younkah."

IV.

Clay found that the reata coiled about old Lute McDaniel's saddlehorn was a good sixty feet in length. The young waddy took it, slipped across the west wall of the pass. In an hour or so, he figured, he could labor on hands and knees up the long slope.

But he knew that when he reached the first ledge, the almost perpendicular wall of rock would tower above him. He'd have to figure things out from that point when he got there. The main thing was to reach the rocky mesa before dawn, for he'd be an easy target for Loney if daylight came.

His crawl up the sloping section took him not one hour, but more than two. The air was cold, but sweat was spurting from every pore. Clay peered up the wall. Outlined against the stars, looking like an hombre's head in that light, a big boulder jutted

out, far above.

From the ledge, Clay tried to loop it. It was a hard cast. He missed it the first time. He tried again, and missed again. He tried a third time. The loop settled over the boulder. Clay drew the noose tight, tested the rock's foundation with part of his weight, then all his weight. The boulder remained solid.

Hand over hand, the young waddy climbed the rope. It wouldn't have been such a hard job for him that morning. But he had been through a lot.

Once or twice he almost had to give up. Then he thought of Jake Loney sitting up there at the head of the pass, a Henry cradled in his lap. He thought of Big Goldy down there on the trail with a broken shoulder. He thought of Pop Sledger. And he kept on.

The young waddy ached in every muscle as he reached the boulder, hugged it like a grizzly, and pulled himself up to the ledge. Then he unloosened the loop from the big rock, and flopped down to rest and get his breath.

He felt as weak as a day-old calf. But he had to get to the rocky mesa before dawn. He got up, dragged one foot after the other up the rocky slope. The hours slipped by. The young waddy almost dropped from fatigue.

A short cast with his rope looped another boulder. He hauled himself up, lay there panting. He could walk the rest of the way now to where he judged Loney was.

He had finished the first half of his job. The second and more dangerous half was ahead of him.

Boom!

Clay heard the report and saw a flash of flame a few rope-lengths ahead of him, and flopped to the ground. Loney wasn't shooting at the waddy, he was shooting at someone down on the trail, aiming to show the posse men that he was still top rooster in this battle of life and death.

He was nearer than Clay had reckoned. Crawling on his belly, inching along like a snake, Clay drew closer, closer. Trig Sledge's loaded .45 was in his big right hand.

There were signs of false dawn in the east. Clay could see the blurry form of Loney. Loney's back was to him. The waddy edged up slowly, quietly. He knew what that Henry rifle could do.

"It'll shore be bullets fer breakfast if thet ranny turns around 'fore I git within good six-gun range," he said to himself.

But that ranny didn't turn around. He was watching the only quarter from which he expected danger—down the trail. Clay crawled to within twenty feet of him. He brought up Trig's .45.

"Drop thet rifle, Loney!" he clipped. "Drop it, or yo're a dead coyote! I got yuh covered!"

The yellow in Loney came out again. He dropped the Henry rifle, shoved his hands into the air.

Clay walked up, plucked the loaded hogleg from the ranny's holster, then yelled: "Trig! All o'yuh down thar! C'mon up the trail. I got the blasted varmint!"

The dawn sun was gilding the buttes of Mex Pass as the posse men filed up the rocky trail and saw the waddy with the killer under his gun. Clay heard a high whinny. Chesty was in the group of horses. Old Lute had made it to the Pass while Clay had been scaling the rocky walls.

The old rancher slid from the saddle, ran over and shook Clay by the hand. "Yuh shore didn't let no grama grass grow under yore hoofs, younker," he said.

Trig Sledger, too, wrung the hand of the young waddy. "Pahd, yo' sho' ain't ridin' away from this heah country," he said. "Theah'll be mo' jobs fo' yo' than—"

"Thet favor we was talkin' about, Trig," Clay cut in. "I got a hankerin' tuh spare the county expense an' shoot it out with this hyar rattler, an'—"

"But, pahd, we don't aim tuh have an hombre like yo' risk—"

"Risk? Shucks! I been livin' on risks all my life."

The young waddy turned and faced Jake Loney. "Keep them paws skied, Loney. Jest mosey ahead thar six paces, an' peel them duds off. Scrape gravel!"

Under the waddy's gun, Loney walked ahead, then stopped at Clay's sharp command.

"Off with 'em, Loney! Start with the sky-piece."

Loney dropped the gray Stetson to the ground, unbuckled the gun belt and let it fall, then removed the yellow necklash, gray shirt, and brown bullhide chaps.

"An' them boots, too," Clay snapped.

Loney kicked off the boots.

"C'mon, shuck off them Levis, pronto!"

Loney stripped off the blue overalls, and stood there in his dirty gray underwear.

"Now, turn thet ugly face 'round hyar," Clay yelled.

Loney followed orders. He expected a quick bullet. "Give me a chance tuh—"

"I'll give yuh a better chance than yuh give me. Strap on thet gun belt ag'in."

Loney strapped on the gun belt,

"I'm returnin' yore hawglaig, Loney, an' I'm givin' it to yuh loaded. Shove it in yore holster. If yuh try tuh bring it up, I'll drill yuh whar yuh stand."

He tossed the gun to Loney, who put it into his right holster. There was nothing to do but obey. A tricky light gleamed in his muddy eyes.

Clay Barton bolstered Trig's loaded .45. "Now, yuh yaller-bellied varmint," he yelled, "unleather thet gun any time yuh want. Draw yore hardware, yuh polecat, an' shoot it out like a man!"

Loney stared for a few seconds. Clay stood there, his hands at his sides. Then Loney's right hand swooped to his holster. His gun was up. There were two flashes.

Bang! Bang! Clay heard a bullet hum past, wide. For Clay's slug had hit the killer, and spun him around just as he squeezed trigger. Loney's gun dropped from his hand. A spot of crimson leaped out on the left side of his dirty gray shirt. He pitched to the ground.

"Dawg-gone!" Trig Sledger gasped. "Sho' a perfect centah shot!"

Old Lute McDaniels bowlegged over to Loney's prone form, turned it over with his boot. "Waal," he said, "if yuh'll put on the duds this rattler stole—"

"Them duds?" Clay rasped. "No, sir! I wouldn't wear nothin' thet's been close tuh thet mangy hide. I'll take my rig-out an' the double-eagle he stole from me, an' buy me a hull cheap new outfit, an'—"

"No, yuh won't, kid!" old Lute cut in. "Thar's a bounty in this hyar county fer killin' coyotes. Ever hear o' the Bar M Bar spread?"

"Since I been knee-high tuh a chuckwalla."

"Waal, I own it. Yuh said yuh'd been lookin' fer a job. Yuh got one."

The grim old hombre turned and crooked a gnarled finger at the skinny young Mexican on the snaky-eyed cayuse. "Pancho, yore cayuse is right fresh, ain't he?"

"*Si, señor.* Always thees *caballo* ees fresh like the daisy."

"Then skedaddle over tuh Charley Haskin's store in Rusty River. He'll be opened up time yuh

git thar. Tote along a hull new outfit—the best—fer a six-foot younker thet's skinny like yoreself. Understand, Pancho?"

"*Si, señor*. Eet ees as plain as the day."

"Then git goin'. Stop at the spread. Tell, Ah Ling tuh rustle up the best he's got fer a passell o' hungry hombres.' Now, vamoze, Pancho! Don't let no grama grass grow under yore hoofs!"