



Withers sent a wild shot after Cadder to urge him to utmost speed

Undercover Santa Claus

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Riding the sunset trails to Stony Ridge, Joe Withers risks the peril of a hangnoose to accomplish a mission dear to his heart!

IT WAS about an hour after sunset when Joe Withers cautiously left the cave in which he had established his hideout.

Now night had come, a night relieved only by the faint light of the stars and with

the promise of only a thin new moon later. And Joe Withers was finding that the wind of late December had a sting in it as it swept down from the hills.

For several reasons, this was a journey that could not be hurried even to get out of

the cold wind. Death might be waiting ahead for him, or be riding beside or behind him. Joe Withers dared not ride openly and at top speed to reach his destination, nor dare follow the well-traveled trails. Probably he would meet nobody, but he dared not risk the chance.

Friendship for Hiram Bernham had called Joe Withers back to this section of the country. It had been more than a year since that day in the small town of Stony Ridge when, as the climax of a bitter quarrel, he had whipped his gun out of his holster and sent three bullets crashing into the body of Ed Sells, a wealthy ranchman. He had watched Ed Sells fall to the ground with blood gushing from his wounds, then had jumped into his saddle and used his spurs.

Sells was rich and popular and had great influence in the Stony Ridge district. Joe Withers had known that Sells' infuriated friends would use a rope on him without hesitation if they caught him, that they would not stop to consider that Sells had started to draw first.

He had traveled down into Mexico on the wings of fear with only his pony and gun and the few dollars he happened to have in his pocket, leaving his carpenter shop behind without even closing the door.

In Mexico, over-zealous *rurales* had arrested him as a suspicious character, there being political tumult there and the *rurales* becoming nervous over any stranger who carried a gun. For two weeks, Joe Withers had remained in a filthy jail, less than half fed, with the threat of a firing squad hanging over him. One stormy night he had managed to escape, get his horse and gun and ride on.

HE WORKED at such odd jobs as he could find, and finally re-entered the States in a mining district. Good fortune came to him, and he was able to put some

money aside. Through cautious inquiries, he had learned that Ed Sells had not died of his wounds and that there was no murder charge against him. But Sells' friends had declared that if Withers ever returned, he would promptly be strung up.

Homesickness came to him. Stony Ridge, only an inconspicuous little town, was the only home he ever had known. And Hiram Bernham, owner of a small tumbledown ranch, was the only man he ever had called friend.

So Joe Withers had decided to slip back, run the risk of being caught and hanged by Sells' friends, visit Bernham, and then perhaps disappear again to continue a lonely life.

Getting to a hideout of comparative safety near Stony Ridge without being seen had been a difficult task, but Withers had accomplished it. He knew the country well, especially the rock hills that rimmed one side of the wide Stony Ridge valley.

He went to a cave with a spring of sweet water near it, where he could be comfortable. In a distant town, he had bought an old pack mare and supplies, and had traveled nights and hidden by day to reach the cave safely. He had unloaded the supplies there, then had led the pack mare down into the valley on a dark night and turned her loose.

Now, on this cold night in late December, Withers was traveling cautiously toward Hiram Bernham's little ranch, where for years Bernham had scratched out a scanty living for himself and his motherless son and daughter.

Withers wanted to talk with Bernham and learn how things stood, whether it would be safe for him to remain in this country or be risking the rope at the hands of Ed Sells and his friends.

He was eager to see Bernham and the children. Ella, the daughter, would be eighteen now, and might even be married.

Hal, the boy, would be sixteen, probably shooting up like a rank weed. Withers remembered that the Bernham children had called him Uncle Joe from the day they could talk.

It was about eight o'clock when Withers came to a fence and located an opening through which he passed onto Bernham's land. The sky remained cloudless, but the biting wind was strong. The first real snow of the season might come at any hour.

Presently he saw in the distance a pinpoint of light, and knew it came from the Bernham house. Riding cautiously, watching the shadows and stopping his horse to listen at times, he neared the ranch buildings. The out-buildings were dark. No mount was in the little corral near the house, but he could hear a horse stamping in the barn.

Behind the barn, where the building cut off the light of the stars, Joe Withers dismounted and ground-hitched his horse. Walking along the side of the barn, he got to where he could observe the rear of the house. The lamp was burning in the kitchen, and on the window was a tattered shade only half pulled down.

He went to the window on tiptoe and peered through it cautiously. Sitting at a littered table, as if they had just finished a meal, were a boy and girl, Ella and Hal Bernham.

Withers saw no sign of Hiram Bernham. He began to fear that his old friend had gone to the distant town of Stony Ridge on business and would not be back until late or until the following day.

He did not want to disclose his presence to Ella or Hal until he was fully acquainted with the situation. There might be danger for Bernham in this; if his enemies discovered he was in the locality and visiting Bernham, Bernham might be made to suffer for shielding him.

On this side of the house the force of the biting wind was broken, and its wild rush did not drown the sound of voices that came from inside. Withers could overhear what was being said.

"Ella, I don't know what we're goin' to do," the boy Hal was saying. "Things have been gettin' worse and worse."

"We can hold on until spring, Hal," the girl told him.

"And what good will that do, Ella? Half starve through a long hard winter and be as bad or worse off when spring comes! We've got only six dollars cash, and not much more we can take to Stony Ridge to trade."

THE girl gave a sigh. "I'm as tired of eating chicken as you are, Hal. There are a lot of other things I'd rather cook and eat. But we'll get by somehow. Our luck's sure to change for the better."

"Let the old ranch go for the mortgage that's on it," Hal suggested. "We could move into Stony Ridge or even go to the county seat. I could get a job."

"Hal! Don't talk like a quitter. Just before he died six months ago, Pa told us to hold on to the ranch whatever we did. We'd get along somehow if we did that, he said. Always have a roof over our heads, even if it does leak sometimes."

Outside the window, Joe Withers heard the words and felt a sudden surge of emotion go through him. So his friend, Hiram Bernham, had been dead for six months. And Bernham's children seemed to be in trouble.

Hal was speaking again. "Yea, I know, Ella," he said. "Pa worked hard, and he could only make a skimpin' livin' on this place. So what can we expect to do? I can get a job somewhere, maybe on the railroad. I'd like that. And you—there's a way out for you."

"A way out for me?" the girl asked.

"Are you hinting at Frank Cadder?"

"Reckon so."

"Hal! You'd want me to marry him?"

"Well, he's a bachelor, middle-aged and all, but he's got a good ranch."

"Yes. And he's a heavy drinker and a gambler, and there have been some bad stories about him, Hal. He'd mistreat a wife, make a work horse out of her."

"Well, I just mentioned it. He'll be ridin' out here almost any evenin', now, wantin' your answer. When I saw him in town two weeks ago, he said he'd be droppin' over some evenin' before Christmas. That means any night now. Christmas is only four days off. A fine Christmas it'll be for us!"

"Oh, I'll cook some kind of a Christmas dinner, Hal," Ella said, in an effort to brighten him up. "And I have a present for you, something I knitted myself. I'll consider it present enough for me if you'll only not be so blue all the time."

"Christmas dinner—more chicken, I reckon," Hal said. "I wish I could go up into the hills and shoot a deer."

"Let's forget about it tonight," the girl begged. "Let's go into the front room and read for a time, and then get to bed. It's growing colder. No sense in wasting wood."

Joe Withers watched through the window as they got up from the table, piled the soiled dishes in the sink and went into the front room, Hal carrying the lamp.

They needed help, and Joe Withers wanted to give it to them, but he did not dare appear openly yet. He had to learn the situation regarding himself, even if it meant he had to descend to eavesdropping to do so. He didn't want to have the children of his old friend put in peril through association with him. If he revealed himself to them now, they might through carelessness let it be known he

had visited them.

He knew the Frank Cadder they had mentioned, an unsavory character who once had been suspected of cattle rustling and who was disliked cordially by both men and women. These children of Withers' old friend needed help, a counselor. He felt it his duty to act in their father's place.

It was something he would have to think out. He decided to get away now and return the following night. He wanted to be there if Frank Cadder visited the place and thrust his attentions upon an unwilling girl.

From a pocket, Withers took a scrap of soiled paper and the stub of a pencil. In the faint starlight, he scrawled a few words:

A friend is watching over you. I was your father's friend, too, and I owed him some money. Take this and use it for grub and anything else you need to make you comfortable for the winter.

Joe Withers got into his money belt after getting through several layers of clothing, and extracted some currency. The bills he folded into the piece of paper totaled fifty dollars. He went cautiously to the kitchen door and carefully slipped the note and currency under it and into the kitchen. They would be sure to find it there early in the morning.

THE following night, Joe Withers was riding beneath the stars again on his way to the Bernham ranch. During the afternoon, he had shot and dressed a buck, and now was carrying it behind his saddle.

There had been some risk in shooting the buck, for the crack of a rifle carried far in that crisp air, and some wanderer might have heard the shot and investigated. But he had dared the danger to provide a suitable Christmas dinner for the Bernham boy and girl. It was only three days until Christmas, and though they had money

now they might not have an opportunity to travel to Stony Ridge and make purchases before the holiday.

Withers was eager to get to the ranch tonight, to listen to their talk and hear their speculations regarding the money he had left for them. And he hoped they would mention him, and give him an inkling of the situation in the neighborhood as far as he was concerned. He wanted to be on hand if Frank Cadder put in an appearance, too.

When he came to the ranch a little earlier than he had arrived the night before, he dismounted behind the barn, got the carcass of the buck off the saddle, and went along the side of the barn toward the house.

The light was burning in the kitchen again, and he could see moving shadows on the tattered shade as Ella passed between the stove and the table. It was warmer tonight, and Withers feared a heavy snowfall. There had been only one light fall of snow so far this season.

As he had done the night before, he got close to the kitchen window and listened. He had to know how things stood if he was going to aid them.

"But we don't know who left the money, Hal, so we can't spend it," he heard Ella telling her brother. "Suppose Frank Cadder left it? I wouldn't ever spend a cent of his money and give him a chance to say he was helping me."

"But he wouldn't have left that much," Hal protested. "Not if I know him."

"Who could have left it, then?"

"Oh, maybe it was some man from Stony Ridge who knew and liked Pa and guessed that we needed help. Maybe he was afraid pride wouldn't let us take it if he rode up openly and offered it."

"It's twenty miles to Stony Ridge, and over a bad road," Ella reminded him. "And anybody who would have done a thing like

that probably would have left groceries instead of money."

"Maybe he guessed that we're out of money and wanted to have us buy what we needed most. I reckon everybody in Stony Ridge knows we're broke."

"We won't spend a cent of it until we know more about it," Ella declared firmly. "Anyhow, we couldn't get to Stony Ridge and back now before Christmas. We have a little stock left, and it has to have care. You'd better hitch up the old wagon in the morning and scatter some hay. It may come on a big snow any time now."

Hal was wolfing down his supper, and now Ella sat at the opposite end of the table and began eating also as Joe Withers watched through the window. He was eager to knock and enter and let them know of his presence. But he had a feeling that he should wait. He wasn't thoroughly acquainted with the situation yet.

He remained about the house for about an hour, until he judged that Frank Cadder would not appear that night. Once, when Ella had opened the kitchen door to throw out dishwater, Withers had hidden himself quickly around the corner of the house. And finally he had put the carcass of the buck on the back steps, mounted his horse and ridden back to the cave, reaching it an hour before dawn.

He slept the greater part of the day and let his horse have a rest. At sunset, he surveyed the floor of the valley and started down the hills again, loping along with every sense alert.

SNOW had not come. When it did, it would make a change in the situation, for after the fall stopped his horse would leave a plain trail far up into the hills, which might be seen and arouse unwelcome curiosity.

For the third time, he ground-hitched his horse behind the barn. The light was

burning in the kitchen as usual, and he went up as close to the window as he dared and listened to the conversation again.

"Anyhow, we'll have roast venison for our Christmas dinner," Ella was saying to Hal. "Hanging it in the shed as we did, it'll be frozen and tender and sweet. I'll make dumplings and a corn meal pudding—"

"But who left that deer?" her brother broke in. "First the fifty dollars in cash, and then the deer. Who's tryin' to play Santa Claus around here? What's it all mean?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Hal. Somebody is trying to be kind to us and help us, somebody who seems to not mind traveling for miles to do it. Frank Cadder is our nearest neighbor, and his ranch house is eight miles away."

"Yuh think that Frank Cadder left the money and the deer?" Hal asked.

"No, I really don't. And if he should come pestering around here, Hal, don't you mention the money or deer to him. Maybe whoever left them doesn't want it known except by us."

"It's a mystery that I'm sure goin' to solve!" Hal declared. "If he shows up around here tonight—"

"Listen!" his sister interrupted.

Outside in the open, Joe Withers heard it too. A man's coarse voice was being lifted in song in the near distance, and a mount's hoofs could be heard pounding the frozen ground. Frank Cadder was coming to the Bernham ranch to make his promised visit.

Withers ran back to his horse behind the barn, mounted and waited. He heard Frank Cadder at the front of the house calling to those inside. Sure that Cadder was not coming to the barn, Withers dismounted and trailed his reins again, got his rifle from the saddle boot, and went back to the house.

The lamp had been carried from the kitchen to the front room, at one window of which was another tattered shade. Withers hurried there and crouched outside the window, peering through a crack in the shade and listening.

Frank Cadder was tall, almost skinny, with a prominent Adam's apple, little eyes too close together, a scraggy sandy-colored mustache badly tobacco-stained, and sandy hair that had been "slicked down" for this special occasion. He was sprawling in a chair, grinning at Ella, who sat stiffly and prim in another chair across the room from him. Hal was leaning against the wall near the kitchen door.

"Ella, how long are yuh goin' to keep me waitin'?" Cadder asked. "If yuh say the word, we can go to the county seat right after Christmas and get married before New Year's. We can have a holiday party over at my place and invite a lot of the folks. I'll fetch yuh a new dress and a lot of ribbons and sich from Stony Ridge, and anything else yuh want."

"I haven't said I'd marry you," Ella told him. "And I'm telling you right now that you're wasting your time coming here, Frank Cadder. I'll never marry you!"

Cadder laughed. "I've heard tell that it's the reg'lar thing for a girl to say she won't and then change her mind. Yuh've been sayin' yuh won't for quite a spell, and it's time for yuh to stop talkin' nonsense. I've got a good ranch and can I give yuh a good livin' and a good home. I'll stock up this tumbledown outfit and let Hal run it for a split in the profits, even lendin' him a man or two to help. Where else can yuh git a deal like that?"

"You're only wasting your time, I say, talking to me like this, Frank Cadder," Ella replied. "My mind's made up. I'll get you some hot coffee now, then you can ride home."

CADDER'S face reddened.

"Yeah? Do yuh think that I'll let Hi Bernham's ragged, starvin' girl treat me like this?" Cadder got to his feet, his eyes blazing with anger. "I don't want any more of yore nonsense now! It's time yuh came to yore senses and learned what's best for yuh."

"Yuh stop talkin' to my sister like that!" Hal cried at him. "Yuh get right out of here, and never come back! Yuh'd better get goin'!"

"For a thin dime, button, I'd smack yuh back against the wall and smack yuh hard!" Cadder warned him. "Yuh keep out of this affair."

Hal flattened himself back against the wall, looking around as if in search of a weapon. Cadder started toward the girl.

"Keep away from me!" she cried.

Outside the window, Withers caught the note of fear in her voice. Her back was toward the window, so he could not see her face. Hal started toward Cadder again.

"Keep away from me!" Ella was crying at Cadder. "Don't you dare touch me!"

"Who do yuh think yuh are?" Cadder asked, angrily. "A ragged, starvin', skinny little thing like you refusin' to marry me! I'll cure yuh of yore nonsense!"

"Hal, get Pa's gun from the kitchen!" Ella shouted at him. "Make him keep away from me!"

"If yuh make a move, button, I'll blast yuh with my own six-gun," Cadder threatened. "Stand right where yuh are! Don't make a move!"

Joe Withers decided that it was time to draw cards in this game. It was quiet inside the house for a moment as Frank Cadder moved slowly across the room toward the girl. And in that moment Joe Withers broke the silence.

"Cadder!" he shouted, knowing that he could be heard easily inside the house.

"Come out of there! We're watchin' yuh! Yuh've got one chance. Come out pronto, get in yore saddle and ride, and don't ever pester the girl again! If yuh don't, yuh'll get yore fill of hot lead."

Through the crack in the window shade, Joe Withers could see the expression of astonishment that came into Cadder's face, could see also Hal's bulging eyes and hear Ella's cry of relief.

"Who—who?" Cadder muttered.

"Make it quick, Cadder!" Withers yelled at him. "If we have to come in there after yuh, yuh won't be able to walk out. Last chance!"

Cadder hesitated for a moment, his hand straying toward his holster. "Who's that yellin'?" he demanded of Ella.

"I—I don't know," she replied. "Honestly I don't."

"Are yuh goin' to come out of there?" Withers yelled at Cadder again. "We'll give yuh about a minute more!"

Through the crack in the shade, Withers saw Cadder turn and rush toward the door.

"Ella, you and Hal keep inside," Withers called.

Almost silently, he ran around to the front corner of the house. A streak of light shot out as Cadder opened the door and emerged and closed the door quickly behind him. Withers could hear the boots of the unwelcome visitor grinding the frozen gravel in front of the house as he hurried toward his pony.

"Hurry it up!" Withers shouted.

He could imagine Frank Cadder tossing quick looks in every direction, searching for shadows. The uncertainty of the situation was wrecking Cadder's nerves.

Cadder had no clue to the identity of the man who had shouted at him, did not know how many men were outside around the house, and could not guess at their

purpose or what they might do. In a panic, he swung up into his saddle, prodded with his rowels and rode down the lane, bending low in his saddle.

Joe Withers sent a wild rifle shot after him to urge him to utmost speed. Then he ran along the side of the house and back to the barn. He was in his own saddle in a moment, and had ridden a short distance to a dark spot behind a tool shed from where he could watch the house.

THE sound of hoofbeats dwindled rapidly in the distance, and Withers knew there need be no more fear of Frank Cadder. There was silence in the house for a short time, and then light flashed in the kitchen and the rear door was opened, and Ella Bernham stood in the streak of light.

"Who's there?" she called. "Thank you, whoever you are. Won't you come in?"

Hal appeared in the doorway behind his sister, his eyes still bulging.

"I can't come in just now, thanks," Withers called. "I reckon yuh'll be all right after this. I'll see that Cadder doesn't bother yuh again."

"Please come in!"

"There's a reason why I can't just now," Withers called in reply. "Maybe some other time."

He swung his horse around the tool shed and began riding swiftly over the frozen ground in the starlight.

The sky was cloudy when Joe Withers left the cave the next evening, and a flake of snow was drifting earthward now and then.

"The snow's comin'," he muttered. "I've got to do somethin' right away, make some decision. Can't spend the winter in the cave. Wouldn't have feed for my horse."

The journey tonight was slower because he did not have even the faint

light of the stars. But finally he reached the barn and dismounted to ground-hitch his horse as he had before.

The light burned in the kitchen. Withers wondered if he dare knock and disclose his presence. Ella and Hal could tell him whether it would be dangerous for him to remain near Stony Ridge. But, if feeling still ran high against him, and it was known he visited here, it might cause more trouble for Hiram Bernham's boy and girl.

He started to walk along the side of the barn, and finally came to a stop at the corner of the building to look toward the lighted kitchen window.

From a spot of darkness nearby came Hal's boyish voice:

"Stop right there! Get yore hands up, pronto, or I'll shoot! Walk out straight in to that streak of light!"

Joe Withers almost chuckled. Hal's voice was shaking, but Hi Bernham's boy had courage.

"Reckon yuh got me," Withers grumbled. "My hands are up, and I'm walkin' where yuh said."

He strode out into the streak of light that came from the kitchen door.

"I've got him, Ella, whoever he is!" the boy cried. "He's muffled up so I can't see his face."

"Make him come in, Hal."

Joe Withers chuckled again and went on to the door, up the steps and into the lighted kitchen, his hands still held high. Hal followed at his heels and closed the door, but still menaced with the gun.

"Are yuh the man who's been comin' here every night, the man who left that money and the deer and scared Frank Cadder away?" Hal asked.

"I reckon so," Withers confessed.

Ella was watching him intently. "Who are you?" she asked. "And why did you do it? There seems to be something familiar

about you.”

“Your Pa was my friend,” Withers explained. “I came to see him, and learned he’d died. Found his kids in trouble and tried to help ‘em. That’s all.”

“But why didn’t you come right to us instead of acting as you did?” Ella asked.

“I didn’t want anybody to know I was in these parts. Might cause yuh trouble if folks knew I visited yuh.”

“Unwrap yore muffler from over your face,” Hal ordered. “And don’t try to touch that six-gun yuh’re wearing, or I’ll blast yuh.”

WITHERS started to lower his hands and undo the long muffler he had wrapped over his face almost up to his eyes as a guard against the cold. But suddenly he froze. He, as well as Ella and Hal, had heard the creaking of wagon wheels, a loud voice calling “Whoa!” and the sound of a vehicle being brought to a stop in front of the house.

“Listen!” Withers whispered to them. “I’m yore friend. Let me hide in this closet till yuh see who’s come. I promise yuh not to run away. Yuh both act natural, and don’t tell ‘em I’m here, or that anybody’s here. Be quick!”

Somebody pounded on the front door.

“Quick!” Withers repeated. “I’ll be on hand if anybody tries to trouble yuh. Yuh’ve got to trust me. Yore father was my friend, and I’ve tried to help yuh.”

“Get into the closet,” Ella whispered. “It’s all right, Hal, I’m sure. You keep your gun handy, Hal.”

The pounding at the front door was being repeated as Joe Withers slipped into the small closet and closed the door all but a crack. The closet was small and more than half filled with cooking utensils and brooms and mops.

Withers heard Ella and Hal going into the front room. One of them carried the

lamp and left the kitchen dark except for light that came through a crack from the front room. Joe Withers removed his right mitten, worked the fingers of his hand to induce better blood circulation, and got his six-gun out of the holster at his hip.

He heard muffled voices and Ella’s surprised greeting and the gruff voice of a man that seemed familiar. Getting quietly out of the closet, Withers inched carefully toward the door of the front room, avoiding articles of furniture and walking on tiptoe.

“Please sit down right here,” he heard Ella telling somebody. “Take off your things. I’ll get you some hot coffee. It must be cold riding.”

“Turnin’ warmer and maybe goin’ to snow,” a man’s voice answered.

Withers got close to the door and peered through the crack. He could have a good view of the front room from where he stood. A man was standing with his back toward Withers, removing a heavy coat. He straightened and turned—and Joe Withers saw he was Ed Sells, the man he had shot in Stony Ridge a little more than a year before.

The second man turned also, and Withers recognized him as one of Sells’ close friends, a man who had done Sells’ confidential work for years.

The two visitors sat down, and Ed Sells, a heavy man with a florid face, looked at Ella and Hal.

“Thought we’d drive out and see how you kids were getting along,” Ed Sells said. “Got to worryin’ about you. You’ve got to forgive me for not visitin’ you before. But I’ve been mighty busy at my ranch and in the county seat. Had a court case that kept me there for some time.”

“I—we’re glad you came,” Ella stammered.

“I knew your father pretty well, and liked him. He was just one of those men

who don't get along well. But I admired the way he stuck to it. And I admire the way you kids have stuck to it since he died. I've been lookin' into your circumstances."

"Oh, we're all right," Ella said, proudly.

"You can be honest with me," Sells told her. "The thing that brought me out tonight was—well, Frank Cadder was in town early this mornin' with a strange story to tell. After tellin' how he called here last night to see you kids, he said that there was a strange man who shot at him and ran him off the place. Said he thought maybe some outlaw had moved in on you and that you might be in danger."

"That lyin' Cadder!" Hal exclaimed. "He's been pesterin' around Ella. He was here last night, and got fresh. Somebody outside yelled for him to get away quick, and he did. I heard whoever was outside yell and shoot."

"Who did that?" Sells asked.

"We didn't know," Ella replied, quickly.

SELLS clenched his big fists with anger.

"If there's somebody like that in the neighborhood, I'll have some of my men come over here and run him down," he promised. "Don't want you kids to be in danger, or even annoyed. Seen him since, whoever he is?"

Watching through the crack in the door, Withers saw Hal gulp and act embarrassed, and heard Ella stammer as she tried to reply. Their actions were enough to reveal to Sells and his friend that Bernham's boy and girl were hiding something.

Might as well have an end of it, Withers thought. He pulled down his muffler to expose his face, jerked the door open with his left hand, and strode out into

the lighted front room, his weapon held ready.

"Freeze!" he ordered. "Don't move!"

"It's Uncle Joe!" Hal cried.

"Joe Withers!" Ed Sells exclaimed, as he and his friend sprang out of their chairs and put up their hands. "So you've come back!"

"I'm back! Understand, these kids didn't know it! I came back to see my old friend, Hi Bernham, and learned he was dead. I was homesick."

"If you carry on our own quarrel and shoot me down now—" Sells began.

"Steady! I don't go around shootin' people. I didn't shoot yuh that day in Stony Ridge till yuh started to draw, and yuh know it! But I hit my saddle and rode, 'cause yore friends would have strung me up., I heard yuh got well, and that yore friends were promisin' to hang me if I ever came back. So I came sneakin' around like a thief, to learn where I stand."

"Good grief!" Sells exclaimed. "I owe you a lot, Withers. Tried to find you, but couldn't. I told my friends that I deserved what I got that day, that in my rage I started to draw. And I passed word that if you ever came back you weren't to be harmed. I've kept your carpenter shop shipshape for you while you've been gone."

"That's right, Uncle Joe," Ella put in. "Oh, Uncle Joe, I'm so glad you came back! Hal and I—we've been so lonesome and blue."

"Holster your gun, Withers, and shake hands," Ed Sells said, lowering his right hand and extending it. "You know me—I've always tried to be a man of my word. You're welcome back home. And you'll be treated like before you ran away, or somebody will hear from me."

Like a man half stunned, Joe Withers sheathed his gun and took Sells' outstretched hand, then shook hands with

Sells' grinning companion.

"Now, to business," Sells told them, "and then we'll drink some of your hot coffee, Ella, and start back to Stony Ridge. Must get there before the snow comes. I want to help you kids. I bought your mortgage from the bank so you won't be bothered about that. Forget the mortgage and think of other things. I'll get some men out here soon as weather permits and repair the house and barn. Send you some feed, too. Got a wagonload of groceries outside. And forget your pride! I'll keep track of every cent, and you can pay me back some day when you're able."

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Sells!" Ella sobbed. "We don't want to leave the ranch."

"Wait a second!" Withers shouted. "I'm in on this. Hi Bernham was my best

friend, and these kids have always called me Uncle Joe. I've got some money I made minin' the past year. I'll put it into the pot and go pardners with the kids, live here with 'em. They'll be my folks. Ain't got any others."

"Oh, yes, Uncle Joe!" Ella cried. "I'll cook you the best Christmas dinner!"

"Gee, yes!" Hal said.

"Well, everything seems settled happily," Ed Sells declared, laughing. "Ella, you get that coffee making. We'll carry in the groceries and some extra Christmas fixing's we brought. Withers, you come along and help us. Folks say two men are always better friends after they've had a good scrap."