

"Everything all right with you. Keller?" inquired Curt.

"No—" Art Keller said in a choked voice, staring wide-eyed at the spot where his head had lain. A thickset man of fifty, he was, florid, a little bald, hard of countenance, dressed well. He went to his feet and jerked out, "I've been robbed of thirty thousand dollars, Curt, and if you don't get it back for me—"

"I'll lose my job; yeah, I know," the young sheriff cut in sharply. "I see the strongbox is safe. Why didn't you carry your money in that, and make the stage line responsible?"

"Because I happened to know that the owners of the line are about broke," flared Keller, "and because of the fact that if there was a stickup the strongbox was sure to be carried off—that's why! Well, why don't you get to work? What's the county paying you for?"

Slyly but meaningly he looked across to the other two passengers, who were still sitting on their blankets. One of these was a bony, sour-visaged man of forty or past, in gambler black. The other, much younger, wirily-built, in nondescript clothing, watched Brennan out of slitted, mean eyes.

"You two are suspects. Put your guns on the floor," ordered Curt, his own six-shooter out and ready, "and slide 'em here to me. No tricks!"

HE SPOKE in a voice that carried to his deputy outside. It was Ahasuerus Mosby who picked up the gambler's double-action .41 hookbill and the other man's heavier, single-action .45.

"I know that pair," the long-experienced old Mosby said. "Tinhorn card sharp who calls hisself John Doe, and is a bad 'un. The jigger there with the sidwinder eyes, he's knowed as Hungry Shackleton, and is also a bad 'un."

"I'm allus hongry," said the man who was known as Hungry Shackleton, "Hongry right now."

Brennan turned back to Keller. "Tell me things, Art. How and when did you lose the dinero?"

"Missed it," said the president of the Gold Rock City bank, "when I woke up a few minutes ago. Had it wrapped in a shirt in my brown-leather grip; was using the

grip for a pillow. Didn't expect I'd have to sleep out like this! I kept awake for hours and hours, then got so sleepy I dropped off in spite of myself. And I dreamt of being stuck up; seemed that somebody was saying, 'Move a finger and I'll blow your head off.' I—"

"Probably it wasn't any dream, Art," interrupted Curt Brennan. "It sort of registered in your sleep, is my guess. You paid too much attention to the grip, Art, and that's what tipped the stickup off that you was carryin' his money."

John Doe and Hungry Shackleton swapped glances, and out of the tail of his eye Curt saw Shackleton wink. Keller said:

"Old Stafford was a tough stick before he got into the ranching business here and lost out, Sheriff. He's a suspect too."

A scraggly-bearded face had appeared at an open window, and now an angry voice came through:

"So I'm a suspect too, am I? After I loaned you folks all my blankets and cooked the little grub I had fer yore suppers; I'm a damn thief. Long time ago, Art Keller, you could save this range fer me by jest loanin' me money enough to put in wells and tanks. But no. You wanted my cows fer a cheap song, and got 'em by usin' a third party!"



Old Stafford swallowed, and hurried on. "In this here hawspitality I returned good fer evil, as the Book says, and yit I'm a damn thief. I ain't goin' to shoot you, Art, but I shore as hell would like to!"

"Easy, old-timer," said Brennan. To Keller, "The robber, whoever he is, ain't fool enough to have any o' the dinero on

him. He's hid the whole thirty thousand with the idea of comin' back after it later. Belonged to the bank, of course?"

"Sure."

Next to speak was the sombrely-clad, bony man who called himself, whimsically or otherwise, John Doe. "Sheriff, both Shack here and me would be glad to help you make a search, so's to get going sooner. Hey, Shack?"

"Yup," said the mean-eyed man. "I'm hongry."

"So you two know each other," observed Brennan.

"Met on the stage," blandly said Doe.

"Okay," Curt Brennan said. "The stick-up—or stickups—are not likely to give themselves away by running just now. All the same, Deputy Hash Mosby keeps an eye on the horses, and he's a plumb fine, dead shot—"

"I'd tell a man," quickly said Mosby. "Let's get at it."

"Right," Art Keller approved at once. "We'll go over the house first."

"Wrong!" spat old Stafford at the window. "You ain't goin' to tear up what little stuff I got here lookin' fer that dinero. I'll search the house myself. *Bueno, Sheriff?*"

"*Bueno, Stafford,*" Curt answered, and Keller scowled.

Brennan proffered the gambler's .41 hookbill to the banker, who had a .38 that he fiked better, so the hookbill went to old Ahasuerus Mosby as a second weapon. The five men left the house. Curt went first to the stage, and took charge of driver Gilson Henry's six-shooter.

The driver wanted to know what for. Curt told him; he, too, was a suspect. Henry twirled one side of his long mustaches, swore, then laughed. John Doe and Shackleton were moving toward the ramshackle old Slash S bunkhouse. Brennan muttered "Watch that pair, Art," and Keller nodded and walked off. Brennan motioned his deputy to a point a little way from the stage, and spoke in a low voice:

"Any ideas, Hasherous?"

Also in a low voice, Mosby answered:

"I hope it wasn't Stafford, Curt, but I'm afear'd it was, dog bite my buttons if I ain't. Only chanst he's ever had to git even with Keller, and the old coot is slicker'n owl grease! Shame, if we hafta arrest him,

after Keller treated him so mean. Though you're on a spot, Curt, if we do find Stafford is guilty I shore hope he gits away, dog bite my buttons if I don't!"

ALTHOUGH Stafford's search for the bank's thirty thousand appeared to be both genuine and thorough, he did not turn it up.

"I'll look through the house myself, if the money's not round anywhere else," the younger lawman told himself—and he had a long hunch to the effect that the money wouldn't be found anywhere else.

Keller, John Doe and Shackleton had gone over the bunkhouse as with a fine-toothed comb, with no luck at all. Keller began eyeing a low line of cliffs beyond the dry Clash S creek bed, a hundred yards away. He had just talked with Brennan.

"And so, kid sheriff," he said, "you refuse to search the ranch house except as a last resort. What a hell of a lawman—your dad had you skinned a mile! Well, let's try the cliffs. A rock cranny there might be a good place for a cache. Come on."

"Aw, shucks," grumbled Shackleton. "That'll take all day, and I'm hongry."

"Look, you," Art Keller flung at him. "I'll give a nice reward to anybody who finds that cash, and I won't prosecute. If it wasn't Stafford it was you, Shackleton, or the gambler there, or both of you working together. Better take me up!"

"Yeah?" hooted the gambler. "Say, mister, listen. Who was it figured this so's we'd spend the night in that goshforsaken old house, anyhow?"

"Tough luck figured it," Gold Rock City's big man answered quickly. "The wheel was dangerous. The driver wouldn't listen when I asked to be taken on to town regardless, you'll remember. He said we'd be crippled or killed if the stage went over a bluff. You'll remember that, too."

"Looks like the stickup simply took advantage of the situation, Doe, Curt Brennan drawled.

Moving toward the cliff line, they fanned out. Hungry Shackleton was farthest on the left. Brennan, watching Shackleton speculatively, saw action that seemed decidedly queer. The man halted for the time of a breath, bent over, then vanished behind a thick clump of greasewood. After half a

minute he rose into sight and again started for the cliffs.

"Wait right there, hombre!" Curt exclaimed, and hurried toward the greasewood clump.

Just beyond it lay a short gully. In this gully there was a little mound of sand and loose rock. He sprang down, and almost in that same instant was back on level ground with a brown-leather handbag in one hand.

"Didn't hide it well enough in the dark last night, and finished the job just now!" Curt barked at Shackleton, who stood facing him. Keller and John Doe also had halted and were looking at him. "Here it is, Art."

"And so now," the mean-eyed suspect said, "I reckon we can go on to town and get somethin' to eat. You feed purty well in jail, Sheriff?"

"Shack, you locoed fool!" rapped the gambler.

Brennan had been so busy watching Shackleton that he had not given much attention to the grip. Keller took it eagerly, then began swearing a streak. "Look at this, law dog," he said, and swore yet again.

In the leather of the bag, which was locked, there was a ten-inch knife slash. The thirty thousand dollars was not inside.

"I get it," Curt said. "Easier to hide the money than the grip. Let's figure a little, Art. Why was Shack coverin' up a grip that had only a shirt in it? Was it left in the gully to sorta throw us off the trail, or just discarded there? And why did Doe call Shack a locoed fool?"

"Suppose you answer that yourself, Doe," Keller said hotly.

The gambler looked mad, didn't speak. But Shackleton did.

"I'll tell you, big fella. Johnny Doe called me that for gettin' caught tryin' to hide evidence that could easy go ag'inst me, innocent or guilty. I couldn't help findin' the thing."

"Slick!" spat Keller. To Curt Brennan, he said, "Shackleton was right on one count, anyway: it sure will take all day to search the cliffs. Before we start that, I want to see how old Stafford looks, and what he has to say, when I show him this grip. Guess you don't mind."

THE four of them went to the ranch house. Stafford was in the front room. At sight of the bag he grimaced as though lazily, and drawled, "Well, Art, I reckon you're terrible pain is eased now."

Keller seemed much taken down. He blurted, "What's the amount you claim I beat you out of in that cattle deal?"

The old cowman sobered. "Forty-five . . . hundred . . . even," was his spaced, calm answer. "Why? Don't aim to pay me, shorely."

"In one way, Staff, I will. The sheriff here can be a witness to my promise. The cash was taken out of this grip and hidden somewhere; you find it for me, and you may keep forty-five hundred of it. Eh?"

Stafford cackled out tantalizing laughter. "Now wouldn't that be somepin'. Sheriff, he still thinks I'm a thief."

John Doe and Shackleton laughed too. The mean-eyed man said, "Oh, Johnny, this is better'n a medicine show. How them rich



folks squeals when anybody monkeys with their pocketbooks!"

They walked out to the gallery. Brennan sent the two suspects to the watchful care of old Deputy Ahasuerus Mosby, and spoke in undertones to Keller.

"There's one angle to this thing that we've not worked. I'm goin' to sorta play a card outa my sleeve now, Art. Let me have that grip."

He carried the bag toward the stagecoach, Keller following. Driver Gilson Henry was lounging inside the vehicle; he was dozing, or acting it very well. Curt tossed the bag through the doorway and to the seat near the long-mustached man, and said in a brittle low voice:

"See what you can find in that, hombre."

Henry sat up blinking his pale eyes. He saw the grip, after a few seconds noted the long cut in the leather. Still blinking, he put a hand through the cut and brought to light a shining pair of manacles.

"Put 'em on!" ordered Brennan.

He watched Gilson Henry's countenance closely for giveaway sign. This sleeve card of his could be a trump, or might not be. The driver's face lost color. But it was anger, more than fear. He threw the cuffs from him and ripped out:

"What the hell!"

Keller, at Brennan's elbow, shook his head gloomily. "Back where we were, Curt. You've messed this pretty bad."

"Maybe so," Curt said. "My daddy used to tell us that it was all right to mess things if in the end you got your man, and I aim to. Let's see Stafford once more."

As he turned with Keller toward the house, he caught the eye of Deputy Mosby and called, "I reckon I don't need to remind you that it's a good time to keep on your toes, Hasherous."

"I'd tell a man, you don't," Mosby replied, and got the idea that a break was imminent.

BRENNAN and Keller walked into the Stafford living-room and Curt closed the door behind him. The sound of their footsteps brought the rancher from somewhere at the back. He halted just inside the

inner living-room doorway, didn't speak, only stared.

"Old-timer," began the law's representative, "Art here offered to pay you that forty-five hundred if you'd find the big dinero, as you know. But first—you, Art: comin' down to cold business, I've understood you own a fourth o' the bank stock, which'd make it okay for you to pay that out. Correct?"

"Correct," echoed Keller.

"Now, Stafford," Brennan said, an odd ring of triumph in his voice, "you're goin' to find the big dinero. Maybe it's not such a sizeable wad. In bills of heavy denomination, like \$500 or \$1,000, a man could carry it on him and nobody'd ever know. Get busy, Stafford, and search Keller!"

The Gold Rock City bank president went chalk white and made a wild grab for his gun. Brennan also stabbed a hand toward the .38, and it was the law man who got the weapon. He clipped:

"Art, you're under arrest for stickin' up your own bank—don't make me drill you!"

The gun muzzle thrust against Keller's midriff took his nerve down fast. Stafford busied himself gleefully. The money was in big bills, half of it around Keller's ankles, inside his boots and trousers; the other half was in flat sheaves inside his shirt, vest and coat. The old rancher counted off the amount promised him, and gave the rest to young Sheriff Curt Brennan. Keller, now all wilted down, was blating:

"How the devil did you figure that?"

"Real cute," said Curt; "pretendin' you'd been stuck up so as to salt away a heavy stake for yourself. Gilson Henry was a heap upset, y'know. But more mad than afraid. When he bellers, 'What the hell,' I noticed that he wasn't talkin' to me, but to you! Right then I knew that he was your man, and that you'd agreed to protect him, and that he thought you'd let him down. All right, Art, let's you and Henry go right to jail!"

Old Deputy Hasherous laughed when Brennan told him. He said, "Why, Curt, dog bite my buttons if you ain't as smart a sheriff as yer daddy, and that shore is somepin' to tell a man."

MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell

Silver Blood

ROGER DI FLOR was an oak-muscled Brindisian who by the time he was fifteen had hacked his way to top command of the Catalan Grand Company of Sicilians who fought for Frederick of Aragon. Having put Sicily in order, he led his wild-faced mercenaries to Constantinople, holding them in line with tales that his blood flowed silver and, hence, they would always be paid. In 1295, Andronicus II hired this daring liar to beat back the Turkish invasion from Asia; Roger wrapped up the enemy in record time, almost losing a leg—and a leg—*in the process*. A cross-bowman took aim and let go, and the flying lance sped at Roger. In that moment, unaware of the weapon, he raised a leg to rest it on a broken beam. The lance cracked into the beam, point pressing against the bent knee behind it. No blood—silver or otherwise—was spilled.

Looking around for new work, he decided to roll up the grandson of Andronicus (who had abdicated because of the Turkish menace). Roger fought a personal duel with the new emperor, killed two bodyguards, sabered his way free to the streets, proclaimed the death of the king, and proceeded to sack the Byzantine Empire. Having done this, he looked east toward Asia. It appealed to him; invaded it, he almost won it. Twenty-four years old, he fought fifty-four battles in eighteen months, conducted one retreat, besieged and sacked seven Turkish cities, and at the age of twenty-five announced himself king of the world. That was too much for the loot-glutted mercenaries; they wanted their pay in silver blood. So the only fight he ever lost was against the legend of his own creation—the blood came out red, and they left him to die.

