



HERMIT HOUSE

By Theodore A. Tinsley

Tommy Glynn waded into a ghostly mystery of hidden gold and missing men when six-guns blazed the trail!



VIVID flash leaped crookedly through the murk overhead, and the rolling thunder echoed and re-echoed among the mountain pine and spruce, spilling out into the rain-swept valley far below and dying in a hollow, curling mutter like a breaking wave.

For the last hour or so it had been raining steadily and sullenly, slanting in long silver lances from the north and cascading down the flinty mountain-trail. A great wind was rising, tearing and shaking at the scrubby pines; and with the wind came more rain—rain that swept southward in gusty sheets and blotted out the valley from sight.

Tommy Glynn raised his streaming face and surveyed the storm with a humorous chuckle. In spite of his poncho and broad-brimmed Stetson, Tommy was very wet. So was Baldy, for that matter. The patient pony moved doggedly down the rocky trail with drooping head and soaked flanks, his haunches taut and nervous.

"Some rain," murmured Glynn. "Yes-sir, Baldy, old timer; sure is rainin', hey?"

At sound of the lazy voice Baldy's wet muzzle swung around and his smoky eyes blinked reproachfully at the man on his back.

Glynn chuckled again and slapped the arched neck affectionately.

"Never mind, Baldy," he grunted. "I'm aimin' fer a dry spot right now. I don't love water no more'n you do. Old Man Carver's diggin's oughta be about here somewhere, I reckon. Sounds good, hey? Carver's Gold Mine fer us—if I kin find it in this rain."

His eyes narrowed and he added musingly: "We'd sure be outa luck—rain or no rain—if ole Carver was alive. The mean-sperrited ole lunatic! Him an' his pay-streak! Fer once we'll stop, Baldy; an' bein' daid an' gone, why I reckon the ole feller won't object none. Huh!"

He halted the pony and turned in his saddle, staring at the landmarks through the driving rain. "Let's see," he

thought, "they oughta be a big clump o' alders—Hmn . . . "

Carver's Gold Mine existed as a legend and a laughing-stock. The old man had prospected for years in a dumb and dogged fashion, supported by the good-natured bounty of a nephew in Frawley. He accepted this support, as he did everything else, with a snarl and a grunt expressive of his contempt for the world in general and his nephew in particular. A mean, cantankerous and wrong-headed pessimist was Old Man Carver.

The lure of gold—gold in the earth—possessed the old man's heart and brain and gave him no rest. But he found no gold nor was his failure to do so surprising. For twenty years his pick and shovel scraped in barren places where even a tenderfoot would scoff at the presence of ore. He ignored ridicule and spurned advice. The crazy hunches that whispered in his brain were meat and drink and life itself to him.

In the end he crowned a life of folly on the shaggy shoulder of Blunt Mountain. There he sank his last shaft and built his last home—a two-story, rambling frame structure, fashioned of rough, unpainted clapboards. Carver's Gold Mine they called it thereabouts. It was a bitter joke with folks in the valley, for Carver had no friends except for his nephew—Joe Hall—who worked as a blacksmith in Frawley across the valley.

The nephew it was who wrote finis to the old man's story. He climbed the mountain one day and found Carver stone dead, huddled on his knees at the edge of the mine-shaft. Starvation it was; literally that. Joe Hall buried the old man and cleared out again, leaving the mine and the ramshackle house to slow decay.

TOMMY GLYNN'S cheerful face had darkened at the thought of Carver and his crazy lust for gold. As of habit he spoke aloud soberly to his horse.

"Wonder if they's any chipmunks an' red squirrels an' raindrops where he is now? Shucks! How anybuddy kin. . . ."

A clap of thunder cut short his slow drawl. He could feel the nervous leap of the animal beneath him, and Tommy's grin returned as he bent over for a reassuring pat.

"Sure wet! Can't help it, pardner; jest as soon—Hello! Thought so! There's our bunch o' alders, Baldy."

Above and below the trail the mountain was a groaning wilderness of waving green and ruffled silver; but Glynn knew the way, and Baldy turned obediently at his touch. Past the alder clump, over snaky vines and knotted roots—and presently a stony path showed dimly underfoot.

Glynn gave a wet chuckle of relief and touched his heels lightly to the roan flanks. "Come on, boy!"

The climbing path wound and twisted so that the house remained hidden almost to the last. It lay in a hollow slope, set back against the trees; a wobbly, two-story structure of unpainted clapboards and tottering chimney. At the far side of the clearing a pile of rock-rubbish and a gaping hole and rotting windlass marked the site of Carver's last Gold Mine. It looked ugly and forlorn under the pelting rain.

"Some legacy to leave a nephew," muttered Glynn. "No wonder Joe Hall pulled out fer Denver after he seen it. Don't blame him. Wonder if they's a shed here?"

There was; and Tommy's jaw sagged in astonishment as he noted the open shed and the horse beneath it, tied up out of the rain. He threw a startled look toward the silent house and, dismounting quietly, led his own mount toward the shelter.

"Visitors, hey?" he thought. "That's kinda queer fer this place. Huh!"

He tied up Baldy and, jerking off his Stetson, shook the water from its brim with a sudden sweep, so that the other animal shied slightly and stumbled; and

Glynn saw at once that he was lamed—badly lamed, too.

"Ain't payin' much attention to you, is he, ole feller? Who's yer boss; hey, boy?"

The animal nuzzled Tommy's arm at the caressing touch, while Glynn with a preoccupied frown stared out into the rain and wind, his Stetson flapping idly against his leg. A thunder-peal roused him, and he stepped out from the shed and crossed the clearing through the slanting rain.

At the door of the house he paused a moment. He found a strange impulse within him to wait and listen; but, instead, he thumped the door soundly and raised his voice in a cheerful bellow.

"Hello there, folks! Anybuddy home?"

He waited, listening to the tossing trees beyond the clearing, and glancing back over his shoulder at the open shed and the two horses. From within came the sound of a rasping chair—or it seemed so to Glynn—and he called again impatiently:

"Halloo! Who belongs to that hoss out here?"

No answer. With a mutter of disgust Glynn rattled the knob and stepped inside.

It was dim and shadowy and he blinked uncertainly, growling profanely at the crazy whim of old Carver, who had pierced the upper floor for windows and put none at all below. Tommy stared at a blurred table and chair; then, his sight clearing, he stepped into the adjoining room, windowless like the first. Carver had built his stairway here, in the room, and it led to the upper story.

For a moment Glynn stood there, faintly puzzled and listening intently, but not a sound came to him to indicate the presence of the owner of the lamed horse under the shed outside.

"Queer," muttered Tommy gently, and retraced his steps. There were three rooms on the ground floor and he examined the third one now—the one in

the back—finding it, like the others, deserted and dusty. There was an outer door here, but it was shut tight and fastened firmly on the inside by an oak bar and socket.

"Top floor next," thought Glynn with a dry chuckle. "Wonder if it's Old Carver? Fine weather fer ghosts, an' that's a fac'."

The mournful drumming of the rain outside sounded hollow and dreary in the quiet room and with a scowl of disgust he turned away from the barred back door to search aloft. His eyes had become more accustomed to the half-light of his surroundings, and it was because of this, perhaps, or some unconscious tautening of his attention, that he saw the package.

On the floor it lay, at the foot of the stairway, in the dark shadow of the newel-post.

Hefting it in his hand Tommy repressed a strong inclination to whistle. Phew! Wealth, there was no doubt of that! Some of the bills were green and some yellow, but all had the same magic XX on the corner. Twenty-dollar bills—a packet of them—neatly secured by a gummed paper wrapper!

GLYNN gasped dizzily. Counterfeit? Nix! They were wrinkled and worn. Stolen? Umm! He thumbed them mechanically. Thirty or forty, at least. Eight hundred bucks. But who—old Carver—ghosts? He smiled at that and brushed the butt of his Colt with his palm; and by that brief touch his smile deepened. He went lightly up the stairs.

At the top was no hallway but another room like the one below except for the slanting ceiling and the rough, uncovered beams overhead that creaked dismally under the thrusts of wind and rain. In one corner, near the single window, was a scarred wooden chest.

It was hasped for a lock, but the hasp swung free from its staple; and on the floor beside it was a padlock, as new as

the chest was old, with an opened prong and key still in place.

With a throaty murmur of astonishment Glynn stepped past the window, and, bending, raised the cover of the chest. His thoughts jerked and rebounded at what he saw. Packets—money—wealth piled together—tens, twenties—why—

"Up!" came a hoarse whisper. "Way up, buddie!"

At the sound Glynn stiffened momentarily, then his fingers loosed their grip on the chest so that the lid fell with a bump as Tommy straightened slowly with his hands high. The voice noted and approved hoarsely.

"Wise baby. Toin aroun' now."

He faced about and stared at the ugly intruder. A stranger—he didn't know him: a thick-set, pock-marked fellow with shifty eyes and taut mouth. He looked badly frightened; Glynn could see the muzzle of his automatic jerk and waver.

"Easy! She'll go off on you!" he protested.

"Who the hell are you?"

Glynn was silent and the fellow shuffled close, so close that his wicked automatic brushed Tommy's ribs; and with a vicious jerk he possessed himself of Glynn's Colt.

"Now move quick and keep 'em up."

Glynn would have dived for the gun at the slightest chance, but the stranger was wary. In another moment he had backed Tommy into the adjoining room and slammed and locked the door behind him.

Glynn hesitated. He was unarmed and the pock-marked ruffian had fairly twitched with nervous excitement. A rush at the door might bring a spurt of lead crashing through the panel.

He looked about desperately for a weapon—a billet of wood—anything; but the room was bare. As he cast about aimlessly, cursing himself for his lack of caution, he heard the stumbling rush of the fellow's flight down the stairs, followed by a loud, rasping cry

below and the slamming of a door. Then the house was still.

He hurled himself savagely at the door. Useless! Old Carver had builded well and the sturdy panels resisted stoutly the repeated thrust of Glynn's shoulder. He recoiled from his vain attempt, and his jaw set grimly as a faint tattoo sounded clearly above the noise of the storm: the clatter of hoof-beats!

"Gittin' away, dam' him!" raged Tommy. "Stealin' Baldy! His own hoss is done up. How kin I—"

He raced over to the window and threw it wide, only to growl aloud in disappointment. With his palms resting on the wet sill and his eyes veering about anxiously, his obvious ill-luck forced from him a reluctant chuckle. He was at the rear of the house, and by the very perversity of fate the stony level of the clearing in front sheered away sharply, so that at the back Carver's house was perched on the brink of a rocky gully fully fifty feet below the level of the sill of the upper window.

Glynn stared out wistfully at the dripping pines and spruce that bent deceptively near. Regretfully he abandoned the thought of a leap. Calm reason told him it was futile to risk a mad clutch across space at a slippery, swaying branch. It meant inevitably a broken neck on the rocks below. With a furrowed brow he drew back into the room and pondered the strange situation, unmindful of the rain that slanted through the opened window and pricked out a widening stain on the dusty floor.

He thought dazedly of the pock-marked man with the grim automatic; of the horse that was lamed; of the chest crammed with banknotes. The swift vision of the money recalled the packet he had picked up at the foot of the stairs, and he drew it out from the pocket where he had mechanically thrust it.

It was real wealth—he was just as certain of that as he was certain it was dishonest wealth. How had the twitch-

ing stranger come by it, and who was he, anyway?

Glynn sighed and shrugged his shoulders. He was sorry that Joe Hall had left for Denver. Even though the blacksmith had never used the place, it was his by the gift of his uncle, and, knowing Hall, Tommy felt certain that the news of the disturbing intruder would bring Joe on the jump to find out what was what. Joe was no hand to let a thieving gunman pre-empt his property.

He paced up and down uneasily. Once he thought a door creaked in the silence, and again he stiffened watchfully at the imagined sound of shuffling feet. It was eerie. The dusty house seemed pregnant with the presence of Old Carver.

For the tenth time he went to the window and stared out helplessly into the rain. The spreading pines reached out derisive arms. He followed them down the length of the house. Suddenly his glance halted and he gripped the sill. His eyes narrowed appraisingly.

"Might be done," he decided silently. "Can be done, by gosh!"

At the far corner a tall spruce swept noticeably closer than the rest, with one branch curving near like a gnarled and sprouting scythe-handle. It grazed the soaked clap-boards at the verge of the slanting roof.

Tommy Glynn acted quickly before his resolution could cool. By standing on the sill he found his eyes were level with the dripping eaves.

For one awful instant his clutching fingers slipped; then—somehow—he was safely up, crouched flat against the slant of the roof, with his heart pounding and his face glued to the sopping shingles.

After that it was just a cautious working to the corner, a careful and thoroughly disagreeable tensing of his body for the leap, and then—out!

HIS guess was good; the branch held. In another instant he had wriggled to safety and was clambering

swiftly downward, dropping the last ten feet or so, and landing awkwardly on hands and knees in the wet grass. He crossed the gully and hurried up the slope toward the house.

As he ran he could see that the back door, which had been fastened on the inside by a stout oaken bar, was now swinging ajar in the rain. The thought that he was weaponless occurred to him but he brushed it aside. The pock-marked man had fled in an almighty hurry on Tommy's own horse. Perhaps in his rush he had left Glynn's Colt behind. At any rate, there the house was, and Tommy was going back!

He found it empty. He wedged open the front and the back doors and made a leisurely search that disclosed nothing, except the fact of two locked closets on the ground floor—one in the rear room, the other built in under the stairs. He turned away dissatisfied, and with the idea of finding an axe or a bar to smash the locks; but there being nothing at hand, he abandoned the idea temporarily and climbed the stairs.

The battered chest in the room above was sealed. Someone had snapped the padlock onto the hasp. Glynn smiled. An axe would settle that, along with the closets below. He unbolted the door that had held him a prisoner in the adjoining room, and he shut the opened window. Then, whistling cheerfully, he descended the stairs and stepped out into the rain to hunt up an axe. He was beginning to enjoy the adventure in which he had up to now played so inept a part.

His cheery little whistle died a-borning as he stepped into the clearing. Baldy, his mount, was gone from under the shed as he expected, but—and Tommy rubbed his eyes. There was Baldy as large as life and apparently quite contented, strayed no farther than the shaft of Carver's Gold Mine and nibbling away gently at the silver-tipped weeds.

Glynn scratched his head in perplexity, but he was given small time for reflection. He whirled about as his ear

caught the swift clatter of hurrying hoofs. A rider—two—three—had shot suddenly from the green tangle into the clearing.

They swerved with hoarse shouts at sight of Glynn. The foremost of the riders threw up his hand with a sharp *spat! spat!* and Tommy, who had hurled himself instinctively earthward at the ominous gesture, leaped sideways to his feet. In two desperate jumps he had gained the shelter of Carver's house and slammed the heavy door behind him.

His heart was pounding and his brain buzzed queerly.

"If they're wise my gun is gone, I'm done fer," he thought grimly. "Done fer anyway, I guess. Phew! Whut in the name o' Merry Hell am I buttin' inter here?"

He looked about him uneasily, and outside a voice was raised commandingly. Tommy started. He knew that voice. It was Fred Trent.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Whut's up? It's me, here! Tommy Glynn!"

"Who?"

"Glynn. Tommy Glynn! What the—"

He heard a murmur of talk, then Trent spoke again.

"All right, Glynn. Jest stick yer hands up high an' empty an' step out here. No tricks—if ye're wise!"

Tommy emerged, wondering. He knew all three of them. Besides Fred Trent, the sheriff, there were Purdy and Harvey Conner. But though all three of them recognized him there was a curious woodenness about their faces and a tautness about their eyes. The sheriff and Purdy had drawn their guns.

"Whut yuh doin' here, Glynn?" snapped Trent.

"Why, I—I—whut's bitin' you fellers? I dropped in here to dodge the storm, an' fust thing I knowed—"

He stopped in confusion as he caught the sheriff's cold eye fixed on something he had forgotten; something that protruded damningly from his pocket. He drew forth the packet of bills.

"Found it inside, Fred," he said. "They's something dam' funny goin' on hereabouts, an' I'm not lyin'."

"Kerrect on that," muttered Trent. "Found it inside, hey? Where's the other feller?"

"Went away on Baldy," said Tommy.

Purdy looked incredulous. "Ain't that your hoss over yonder?"

"Must o' wandered back again," admitted Tommy helplessly. "Can't figger it myself. Look here," he added, "whut you ridin' down, Sheriff? Accusin' me o' somethin'?"

Trent's eyes were level. "Last night," he stated coldly, "the bank at Frawley was busted wide open fer nigh onto fifty thousand dollars. They killed Mooney and pulled out scot-free. Follered their trail a ways, an' then we sorta lost it; but from the general lay o' things— These two fellers—"

"You're wrong there, Sheriff," interrupted Glynn suddenly. "They was only one."

"One?" echoed Trent. "We follered two, an' seein' they's a hoss under that shed yonder, an' one by the shaft—"

"You're ravin' crazy," cried Tommy. "If you're fixin' to hang something on me I'll tell you right now you can't do it. I left Cross-J this mornin'—Dunlap'll tell you—"

"Needn't shout," said Trent. "If you got an alibi, that ends it, o' course. Harvey," he added to Conner, "I'm handin' him over to you. Come on, Purdy."

The two vanished within and reappeared presently, looking dissatisfied and uncertain.

"Back door's open," commented Purdy. "He mighta sneaked out while we was talkin'."

Tommy Glynn gestured impatiently. "It was open when I went in the second time. I tell you he skipped long ago! I dunno any more'n you about this place, but if you'll only lissen a minnit, why, mebbe— Good Lord, Fred, I was jest a boob; he took my gun an'—"

"Tell us about it," advised Trent,

"Here—wait! Let's move in outa the rain."

TOMMY told them—profanely and fervently—beginning with his blundering but innocent arrival at the sinister old house. They heard him through without comment. At the end Purdy spoke morosely.

"Pock-marked feller with heavy shoulders, hey? Seems to me I seen somebuddy—dunno jest where—huh!"

"An' that box upstairs," said Trent. "Crammed up with money, you say? Hmm! 'Twon't take much to find out."

He rose abruptly and went out, returning presently with a long-handled spade. "Found it at the diggin's," he explained. The blade was broad-edged and thickly flaked with rust.

They followed him up the stairs, Tommy included. He felt better with the story of his adventure off his chest. Ugly suspicion had brushed him too closely and too recently for comfort.

The scarred box in the upper room yielded readily. A sharp blow from the spade in the hands of Trent snapped the brittle hasp. He bent and lifted the lid.

"Uh-huh," he muttered dryly; and over his shoulder Purdy breathed huskily: "There she is—cold cash, by God!"

"But—" Glynn spoke anxiously. "Why did he plant it here? An' why did he skip out? An' if he didn't take Baldy, then whose hoss did he take?"

"That ain't half of it," growled Trent. "There was two of 'em—that I'll swear. Whut become o' the other feller? Nobuddy seen him a-tall—unless it was you!"

He smiled at Tommy's disclaimer.

"No, it warn't you, sonny; I'm purty sure o' that, I guess."

They carried the wooden chest and its contents downstairs and stowed it in a corner.

"We got *that*, anyhow," said the sheriff. "I reckon we'll let you set down on it, Purdy, case he comes back fer it.

Chances are he will if he thinks Glynn is still trapped here alone. Fifty thousand cash is mighty comfortin' to the touch. Besides, you're the only feller what's actually set eyes on him. He prob'ly thought you was headin' a posse, Glynn. When he cools down an' thinks it over, he'll be sneakin' back to make sure."

He paused and added soberly: "With you plugged proper an' his saddle-bags loaded, why, I reckon, sonny, that the pock-marked feller'd be purty close to leavin' thin air behind him. Hey?"

"All I want is one squint at him," growled Tommy darkly. "I'll fix the thin air part of it, Fred; don't worry!"

The rain was ceasing. Harvey Conner, at the sheriff's suggestion, went out to find a place of concealment for the posse's mounts. Purdy, squatting morosely on the treasure-chest in the corner, stared abstractedly at his boot-toe and whistled a soundless tune. Trent frowned at his spade.

"There's still them two locked closets, Sheriff," reminded Glynn.

Trent nodded. "All right. Come ahead."

There was little trouble with the one in the back room. It was a cupboard, rather than closet, with double doors and set into the wall. Trent's spade pried it open in short order, disclosing nothing more startling than dusty shelves, empty bottles, a gutted candle and a fragment of moldy bread.

Tommy's face fell, and the sheriff chuckled huskily.

"What'd yuh expect—a rope-ladder an' a mask, sonny?"

"Don't care whut you say, I'd be willin' to swear—" Glynn broke off and added brusquely: "Let's try the other one."

Purdy still squatted stolidly on the money-box in the front room. Conner, who had returned from his visit to the horses, nodded silently and followed the two men into the room of the stairway.

The closet was under the stairs, which had been enclosed and built

in for a depth of perhaps eight feet. "Waste o' time," growled Trent. "Locked since old Carver died, I expect. Young Hall prob'ly turned the key on every lock whut *had* a key, before he left. He'd o' done better if he'd burned the dam' place down, in my opinion."

He rattled the knob tentatively, then, inserting the rusty spade in the jamb, pried sharply toward him. A jagged splinter was dislodged but the door held.

"Bust in a panel!" cried Glynn impatiently. "That's the easiest."

"Wait," muttered Trent. "It's comin' now. I'm—"

With a loud rip it came. The broken door burst backward on its hinges, and from the closet came a man, lurching forward, straight at the sheriff. Trent, startled, sprang sideways and swung up his spade. Conner's gun had leaped smoothly to his hand.

There was no sound. At their feet lay the man, flat on his face where he had fallen. Purdy had bounded in from the next room and he stood there on the threshold, staring.

Trent lowered his spade.

"Dead," said the sheriff. "He's stiff dead."

He reached down and rolled him over; and Glynn exclaimed aloud at sight of the upturned face.

"That's him—the pock-marked feller that fooled me! Look at that! He's bin knifed!"

The body was stark. Someone had driven a blade into him, just below the breast-bone and to one side. The knife was gone.

"Anybuddy know this feller?" asked Trent.

"I seen him," said Purdy suddenly. "Him or somebuddy mighty like him. In Frawley—hangin' aroun' Duffy's—coupla times I mind. Musta bin watchin' the bank then."

"Who is he?"

"Search me, Fred."

"Trent's eyes swung toward Glynn. "Thought you said he rode away after he locked you up?"

"He did," insisted Tommy. "I heard him."

"But, dammit, how could he? He's bin in here dead as a smelt."

"He was alive enough when I saw him," muttered Glynn.

"Wait!" snapped Trent. "They must be sense to it somewhere. He nailed you upstairs, then he chased down, you say, an'—"

"That's right. I heard him holler out—"

"Hollered, did he?"

"Yes. He hollered somethin', then the door slammed and I heard Baldy's hoofs—thought it was Baldy, 'count o' the other hoss bein' lame."

"One thing's certain," said Trent sharply. "There's two of 'em—not one! How long was you upstairs before you took a chance on makin' yer jump?"

"A while, I reckon. Half hour, mebbe."

"Then in that time," mused Trent, "his pal grabbed this feller, knifed him, dragged him inter the house and got away again. Which same means that Mister Pock-mark never rode far in the fust place."

Glynn nodded dazedly. "It all happened before I jumped, I reckon. I heard steps once or twice, but I figgered I was jest hearin' things, 'count of Old Carver."

Purdy had been staring at the sheriff and rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"If that's all true, it follers that the other feller—the foxy one with the knife—he ain't no forty mile from here neither! We rode up right after Glynn made his jump, an' nobuddy went by us. I'll swear to that."

He moved toward the door and Trent called after him curiously: "Where goin', Purdy?"

"Outside a bit. Got a notion to see them gold diggin's."

TRENT nodded and the three men left together in the dim room listened to the diminishing crunch of Purdy's boots, and conversed in dull, spirit-

less murmurs, with sidelong glances at the ugly and disturbing thing on the floor. There was something curiously repellent and ferret-like in the blank, staring face of the victim.

Glynn stepped away suddenly into the dusty entry-room and, returning with his poncho, spread it across the body.

"Don't like his looks fer a cent," he grumbled moodily.

The sheriff was examining the shallow closet under the stairs.

"Wonder if we ain't right clost to the hull thing right here," he murmured. "Lookit that closet; tain't hardly two foot deep. Beats me why Old Carver should want to use ten feet o' lumber fer a two-foot closet. Got half a mind—"

He raised his boot and kicked at the dingy paneling that boxed in the stairway.

"Got half a mind," repeated Trent, "to git me an axe an' bust in the hull thing."

He kicked again, and suddenly Tommy Glynn's upraised hand moved warningly. He had crouched forward alertly at Trent's side.

"Listen," he breathed. "I'm dead sure I— There!"

They all heard it then—from somewhere beneath their feet in the quiet house came a scuffling bump, and a close-bitten, strangling cry.

"Heard it?" whispered Tommy. His lips were close to Trent's ear. "Underneath. He yelped. Mebbe— By God, he's comin' up!"

From beneath them came a loud, echoing cry and the rush of feet. Glynn and Conner leaped forward, but the sheriff was even quicker. In one headlong dive he had rounded the foot of the stairs and was grappling fiercely with a red-headed maniac who fought blindly with fear-glazed eyes. The room was hideous with the clamor of his cry: "Snake! Snake!"

Tommy rocked back on his heels with startled realization of who it was. And then, as Conner dove forward to Trent's

aid, the sheriff's gun-butt crashed down on the fugitive's head and the three men rolled together on the floor.

Glynn's gaze swung from the yawning panel in the side of the staircase to the unconscious man on the floor.

"Why," he stammered in amazement, "it's—it's—"

"Kerrect," said Trent grimly. "That's jest who it is."

"Comin' out," called a hollow voice from under the stairs, and a moment later Purdy's angular form writhed through the opening. "Git him, Fred?" He caught sight of the man on the floor and his jaw dropped.

"They's a tunnel," he gulped. "Right from the mine—north lead. I heard him holler. Behind a rock in the wall o' the north lead. Whut happened? He's bin campin' there—grub an' water an'—" He broke off in a dazed murmur: "Joe Hall!"

Trent nodded frozenly. "Carver's nephew, all right."

"But—" Tommy Glynn was blinking. "He left fer Denver a week ago."

Trent shook his head. "By the looks o' things I'll say he didn't."

On the floor Joe Hall was groaning feebly. His eyes opened. For a moment they stared upward, blank and uncomprehending, then suddenly he was in the throes of swift, unreasoning panic. His trembling fingers were clawing at his thigh.

"Snake!" he screamed harshly. "I'm bit! Don't lemme—"

They pinned him to the floor. Trent bent over him and with a flick of his knife laid open the cloth on his right thigh.

"Ahh!" said the sheriff thoughtfully. "I see."

He pinched gently at the puffed flesh and squinted at the tell-tale perforations.

"You ain't dyin' o' no snake-bite, Hall," he growled coldly. "Hol' him tight! Let him holler; jest hang on."

At the first twisting movement of

wrist and knife Hall's voice cracked in shrill agony. The sheriff seemed half-asleep.

"Here!" he muttered. "Rip a piece off his shirt. That's good. Thanks. Umm!—couple more. Make 'em a little longer. That'll do fine."

He stood up, blinking a little. "Jest hang on till he settles down. He'll be all right. More scared than hurt." He chuckled grimly. "Sure hates snakes! I'd like to find that pertickler snake myself—I'd make him a deputy, by God!"

WEALTH, gold—Joe Hall had wanted it all his life with a deadly avaricious longing that all the more intense because it was restrained and throttled within him. The same leaping flame of desire that tortured Old Carver burned secretly in the breast of the dour blacksmith who was his nephew.

By pure accident he had stumbled on the tunnel that hot afternoon he had buried his uncle—an obscure and safe retreat, known only to two men, and one of them just dead. He sat for a long time in the dim old house, his head hunched over in his hands, thinking, planning. . . . The picture grew clear. Canned goods and provisions, water; himself lurking below, to flee when he chose; and safe—everlastingly, absolutely safe! The exclamation in his brain rustled like an audible whisper. He smiled a pinched smile and thought of the bank in Frawley.

From that time on—and it took time maturing—he lived and slept and ate with the clink of gold in his ears. He went to Denver and sought out a man indispensable to his plan—a pock-marked and under-sized gentleman with a furtive air who had left Chicago in a hurry. Tony Ross was his name; one of his names, anyway. Ross came to Frawley, loitered about, and presently drifted out of sight.

A fortnight or so later, Joe Hall shook hands all around, and bought a ticket for Denver. Thirty miles to the

eastward he dropped to the road-bed on the upgrade near Hilton. Ross was waiting at the appointed place with horses and a few essentials, not the least of which was a compact collection of well-tested implements of trade.

There was no hitch. The bank at Frawley was an easy nut for the deft fingers of Tony Ross. It was only after they were riding away in a hurry with crammed saddle-bags that the annoying incidents began. They ran smack into Mooney, the bank-teller.

It was inconceivable that he should be abroad at that hour, but there he was. Joe Hall wheeled at his startled cry, saw the frozen recognition in Mooney's eyes and, with quick control, pulled down his rearing horse and shot Mooney through the head.

It was unfortunate. It made haste imperative and brought on the second misfortune. They hit Deer River safely enough, rode down the shallow stream for a mile or so, then turned into the hills. It was in the hills that Ross sprawled suddenly and the two fugitives faced the disagreeable fact of a horse with a broken leg. They hazed the useless animal to his stumbling feet at the brink of the gorge, and the crack of Hall's gun sent Ross's horse crashing out of sight into the pine-tops below.

Both men were sweating and nervous. Day was coming on with a sickly pallor and the fresh spatter of rain. They pushed the doubly burdened horse grimly onward toward Blunt Mountain and the safe haven of Carver's Gold Mine; and they made it, too, through sheets of rain.

But annoying incidents continued. With the plunder safely stowed in the chest upstairs and ready to be carried below, came a thundering bang at the outer door and a loud cry. Posse! They scuttled down to shelter like rats. Hall squirmed through the panel but the pock-marked Ross was trapped on the stairs and retreated backward in panic. The jig was up! He cornered the unsuspecting Glynn upstairs and dashed

out of doors with the one idea of getting away, and getting away quickly!

Hall heard him go and called warningly, but there was on stopping Ross. He made straight for the shed and Tommy's fresh mount, with the blacksmith at his heels. Hall was for staying. He argued fiercely that the stranger must be alone—a blunderer; but Ross had lost his head completely. He climbed into the saddle; and Carver's nephew, faced with the prospect of being cut off alone with a lamed horse, swore savagely and climbed up behind the other.

He was foaming with rage and as they clattered across the clearing toward the trail, he reached forward suddenly around his companion's body and drove a knife slanting through his ribs.

That ended the flight. He glared at the limp body on the ground, and considered. The original plan was still good. Mooney had died at Frawley in that swift instant of recognition. Tony Ross. The blacksmith's lip curled in a grin. There remained only the stranger—finish him like Ross and secrete the two horses in the ravine to the north—Who would know then, eh? By God! He scooped up the body with a grunt and bore it to the house.

Unfortunately, Glynn had not been idle. He was at that moment painfully working along the back slope of the roof; and Joe Hall, peering through the back door he had just opened, saw him make his leap. No time to waste! He jammed his victim in the closet, turned

the key, and slid out of sight through the panel under the stairs, to wait for his murderous opportunity.

It never came. Instead, it was Trent who came—Trent with his posse. Half-mad with fury and disappointment, Carver's nephew lurked out of sight and gnashed his teeth over his lost wealth. He backed stealthily into the blackness—he dared not risk a light—and it was thus, crouching, that the final blow of fate fell.

He heard the warning and threw himself sideways, but too late. He cringed at the darting pain in his thigh, sobbing and swaying in the dark; and then, as the full realization of his plight swept over him, the last vestige of his will snapped and he burst forth, blood-stained and staring, into the light.

THE slow murmur ceased at last, and for a space there was silence. Hall's eyes were like stones. He spoke again, dully:

"That's all, I guess, except—" He smiled crookedly at Tommy Glynn. "Be glad, sonny, that Trent and his gang got here so quick. If they hadn't"—his grin was ghastly—"I'd have killed you like a fly!"

"I believe that," muttered Glynn huskily; and in a lower tone—"Joe, I'm sorry for you! God's truth, I am!"

But Hall was not listening. With parted lips he was staring dully at something the others could not see, with the stark, despairing eyes of the man who has played all and lost.

