

"It's this way. I had my weekly word from Sheriff Burger today, asking if everything was all right and if there was anything I needed to just pass the word to his messenger. But he added a few lines in his note that I didn't like."

"What about?" Caliper asked.

Peters said, "Burger says there's three gunfighters hanging around San Rivedino. They've just come from New Mexico where they played a part in that TIX—Rafter-H range war, sometime back. Burger heard one of them say one night in a saloon that they had an appointment to meet Simon Crawford on business."

"T'hell you say!" Nogales exclaimed.

Peters nodded. "I don't like it either. To top that off, Crawford went to San Rivedino yesterday. Just got back this afternoon. He's cooking up something or I'm a liar."

"You say Crawford went to San Rivedino?" Caliper asked. "I didn't think that big hulk ever moved out of Ramrod Ridge. It must take a mighty powerful horse to carry that load."

"He drives in, in a buckboard," Peters explained. "Yes, I understand he goes to San Rivedino once a month to order a bill of supplies which are brought down later, mule freight."

"I'd sure like to get a look at the buckboard," Caliper said. "It must be plenty strong."

"I wonder," Nogales said slowly, "if Crawford is importing gunmen."

"That's the way it looked to me," Peters said.

"Did Burger know who they were?" Nogales asked.

"He got their names," Peters nodded. "Wait a minute." He drew an envelope from his pocket and consulted the note that was enclosed. Then he looked at Nogales, "Their names are Nevada Blake, Jim Muttershaw and Squint Merrick. Know any of 'em?"

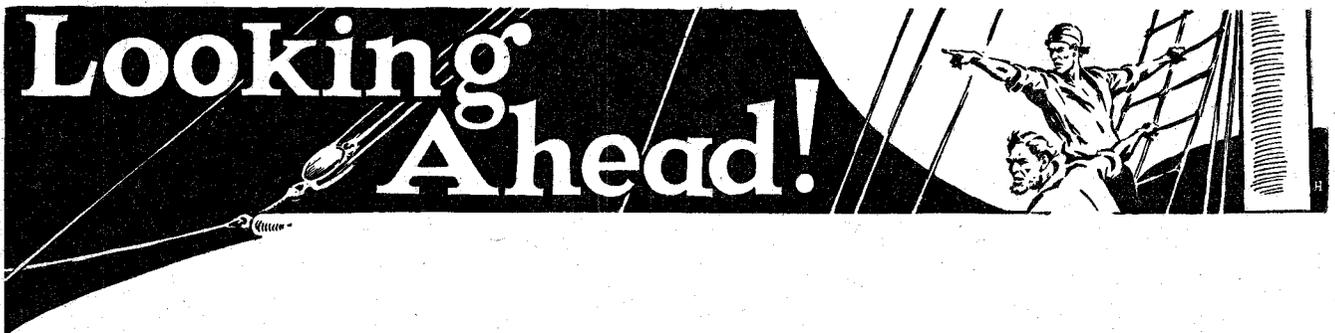
He looked questioningly at Nogales.

"Blake and Merrick are strangers. I had a scrap with Muttershaw once, back in Oklahoma." Nogales looked thoughtful. "His slug put me in the hospital for six months. He's plenty fast with his irons. I managed to wing one arm, but he got away with the horse we had the argument about. It was my horse. I was just a kid, those days, but I've always hoped to meet up with him again. He owes me a horse."

"Maybe this is your time to collect," Caliper said.

Nogales laughed briefly. "Maybe I'd be better off without the horse." He repeated, "Muttershaw's plenty fast with his irons."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



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Down on the dock he was yelling at them, waving his fists. "Rabbits!" he raged. "Cowards!"

# To the Last Ditch

They were both doomed—the village and the man. And the last-ditch battle to save the one made life possible for the other

By Bruce Hutchinson

AS SOON as I saw Roger get off the bus and stroll down toward the wharf I guessed what would happen, but I was in my boat, fifty feet from shore, and I couldn't do anything.

Young Jock Beecher was just stepping out of his boat when he caught sight of Roger, swinging down the gangplank with a yellow suitcase in his hand. Jock looked up at him for a moment and laid his fishing rod carefully on the wharf. Stolid, wooden-faced young Jock was as tall as Roger and his woolly Cowichan sweater made him look twice as broad.

Deliberately he crossed the wharf, his hands dangling. If Jock hadn't been around somebody else would have done the job the same way.

Jock said something that I couldn't hear. Roger laughed and came on, but his foot had hardly touched the wharf when Jock's fist caught him on the chin and he crumpled backward on the gangplank, his arms sprawled out through the railings.

I jumped out of my boat and ran across to him. He was lying with his eyes shut, his mouth open and his long, bony face was dead white—all the whiter for the tangle of black hair above it. I tried to help him up. Jock just

stood there, looking down at him stupidly. "I didn't think..."

"Never mind," I said. "Help me get him up."

He was heavy to lift and still he didn't open his eyes when we got him sitting up. I looked around, wondering what to do. It was none of my business, really, but Roger and I had been friends once and we were aliens here, both of us, among these people.

By this time some of the other boats had come off the Bay. Old Major Beeston clumped across the wharf in his ridiculous Life Guard boots and khaki shorts. "What's the blighter come back for?"

Mary Weir and her father watched from the other side of the wharf without a word and Crazy Carr stopped cleaning a salmon and grinned stupidly, with his knife in one hand and the gutted fish dangling from the other.

Then Dr. Archibald clambered out of his boat. "What's all this? What's happened, damn it?" He squatted down and began to feel Roger's head with his short, blunt fingers, muttering all the while. "Seems all right. Funny thing, this. Must be in bad shape." He peered at Roger over his glasses and began to twist his sharp little goat's beard.

"I didn't think he'd go down like that," Jock began again, but the doctor's Scottish wife thrust him aside and stood over us now like a stark stone monument, her hands folded across her stomach. "Peely-wally," she grunted, her face as rough and hard as granite. "Always he was peely-wally, that Roger Black."