

John Fleming Wilson

Wilkerson's fall from the trestle had not been unnoticed by his outlaws, and before anyone in the camp could make sure that the man was dead a couple of the Mexicans had quickly slipped down the hill to him. They found him still alive. Without paying any attention to John Dorr's men, who were still doubtful of the outcome of the battle, they dragged their fallen leader away and up into their own temporary camp.

It was not long before Wilkerson revived. He was terribly bruised and almost insane from physical pain and wild rage at his defeat. It was with difficulty that the unsmiling outlaws restrained him. Their chief took upon himself the task of making it plain to Wilkerson that this was no time for rash and unorganized attack.

"They have beaten us so far, senior," he said, quietly. "And you are very sick. Tomorrow we shall see."

The next morning the sun had scarcely touched the peaks of the mountains when Wilkerson stretched his stiff, sore limbs and began a fresh campaign. He made it clear to the leader of the Mexican outlaws that they must work swiftly.

"It won't be long before the news of this fighting gets out, and the authorities will take a hand," he said. "But if we can just get this mine into our possession in the next three days, I can hire you and your men as reasonable workmen and swear that Dorr and his gang are trying to take our property away by force. I guess my word will be as good as his."

"Very well," agreed the Mexican, after thoughtfully considering the matter. "We can get back into Mexico in 24 hours from here. So long as you pay us and let us—what do you call it?—loot, my men are with you."

Wilkerson covertly studied the desperado's impressive visage. Jose Vagas bore a renowned name on the border for daring, shrewdness and wickedness. He was known as "The Merciless." For five years he had had a price set on his head, yet because of the loyalty of his adherents and his own fearlessness he had escaped. No man better fitted for a sinister purpose could have been found. Yet mingled with Wilkerson's satisfaction at having such a tool to his hand was a dread of the man himself. And his calm insistence on the privilege of looting the camp when it was captured gave him a sense of pause. After all they were Americans down there in the Master Key camp. Through his binoculars he could see Ruth on the porch of the bungalow. Vagas, too, saw her. He took no pains to conceal the cruel interest in his eyes.

The next few days resulted in little

advantage to either side. John Dorr could not resist the temptation to go in for much-needed supplies because of the constant menace of the outlaws, who occasionally fired scattering shots down into the camp as a warning that they were vigilant. On the other hand, Wilkerson found it impossible to seize the camp without precipitating a battle from which he shrank. Deeply involved as he already was in crime he dreaded to cross the border line which would force him to place him beyond the pale and make him an outlaw.

Instead, he used every method to put himself outwardly in the right. He sent plea after plea to the sheriff of the county to come and restore order, assuring that he had been driven from his rightful property by violence and that the situation was such that without interference from the authorities there would be serious trouble and very likely bloodshed.

These pleas availed only partially. The sheriff made a trip into the mine, talked with John Dorr and Tom Kane and then sought out Wilkerson.

"It looks to me as if this was a case for the courts," he said, slowly, when he examined Wilkerson's forged deeds. "I know old Gallon pretty well, and he thought a sight of that Ruth girl. Fact is, he told me he intended her to have this mine. He said it to her in his will. Now you toddle along with these papers and want to take it away from her."

"Gallon and I were partners years ago," Wilkerson insisted. "We located this mine together and when I came back he gave me over my share."

"But you want it all," the sheriff said, dubiously. "It's all mine," persisted the other. "Didn't Gallon use all the money he got out of it while I was away? And when we came to a settlement he found that the mine wouldn't pay half he owed me."

"I'm simply a peace officer," the sheriff said, finally. "I don't know who's in the right. That's for the court to decide."

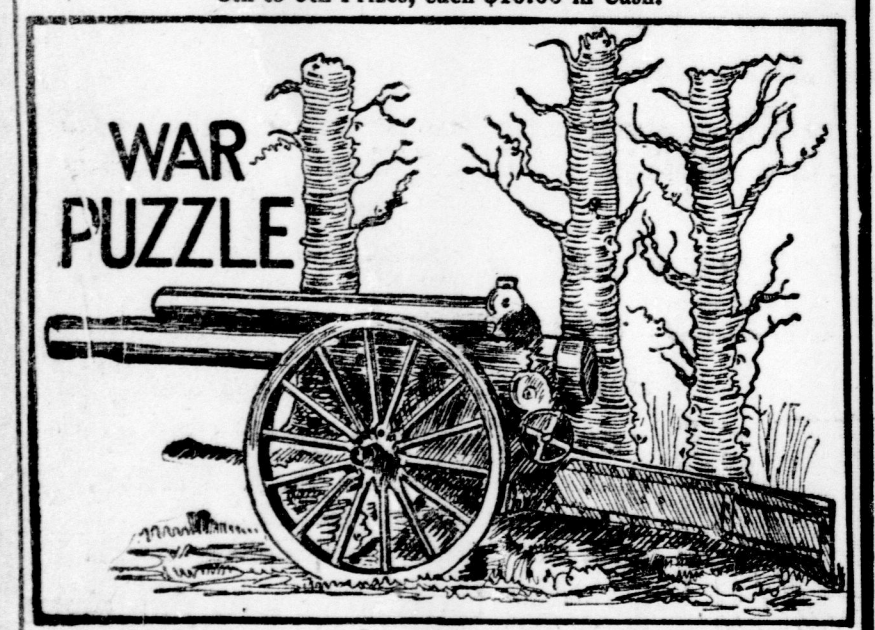
"Wasn't I in possession?" demanded Wilkerson. "Haven't I been driven out by force, me and my workmen?" "From what I've seen of your workmen," was the curt response, "I don't like their looks. And there are tales going around that Vagas is in the country."

"How can I help who's in the country?" demanded Wilkerson, much injured. "That's your lookout, not mine. All I'm asking for is protection."

The sheriff departed without giving

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Above will be found the picture of a modern gun of the kind that is being used in the present war. At a glance the gun and some odd trees appear to be all there is in the picture, but by careful scrutiny some soldiers' faces will be found. There are 19 of them in all. Can you find them? It is no easy task, but by patience and perseverance can be accomplished.

You may win a cash prize by doing so. Many have done this as will be shown by the names and addresses published below. If you find the faces mark each one you find with a dot and then send the picture to the publisher of this paper. Write these nine words plainly and neatly, as in case of ties, both writing and neatness will be considered factors in this contest.

This may take up a little of your time, but as there are TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS in cash and One Hundred premiums given away, it is well worth the effort. Remember, all you have to do is to mark the faces, cut out the picture and write on a separate piece of paper the words, "I have found all the faces and marked them."

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Winners of cash prizes in our last contest will be allowed to send in their entries. This contest will be judged by two who have been chosen by our publisher.

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Like a flash it came to him! What was that? The old man had so carefully cherished and handed him at last? Had Gallon foreseen something like this and prepared for it? In his last days, when his failing powers concentrated on his single aim and evolved a final safeguard for the Master Key.

With the sealed letter in his hand, John Dorr started the deciphering. NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL MY DAUGHTER'S EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY OR BEFORE THEN IF HER WELFARE IS THREATENED.

Quickly he tore the envelope open. The inclosure fell out in two portions. He put them together with a muttered

him any satisfaction, and Wilkerson determined that he would do. The Mexicans were getting restless as the Master Key hinted sharply that he was impatient.

"I'll just go down to the road in the morning and then walk into the camp. Leave it to me. I'll simply say I've come back to take charge and you are my miners." Vagas twisted his wily muscled face. "Then?"

"The men looked each other in the eye. That evil glance was sufficient.

John Dorr and Tom Kane, meanwhile, had been in constant consultation. One thing was constantly in their thoughts. "Ruth oughtn't to be here," John would say, dismally. "If it weren't for her, we could quickly settle those outlaws, for that's all they are."

"I reckon nobody would cry at the ink," the cook returned. "We did not get a few of them. But as you say, the girl is here, and that puts fighting out of the question. Unless they start it."

Wilkerson is bound to make some kind of a move tonight soon," said Dorr. "He can't satisfy those fellows of his for long."

Yet when Wilkerson appeared at the entrance to the camp one morning with a motley train of followers, Dorr was at a loss to know what to do. Wilkerson was apparently peaceful and expected a peaceful reception. His boldness had almost carried him through when the watch in his hand a revolver cracked, and the arm fell shattered to his side. And as Wilkerson glanced furiously about him he saw the camp ready. He was surrounded by the Mexicans and gashed Vagas by the arm.

"Stop your men!" he implored. "Don't let them fire a shot or we are lost!" It was too late. Passions long restrained now broke out, and in a minute a battle was raging between the walls of the gulch.

The miners had the advantage. They came from the shelter of their cabins, and they were united by a common purpose: their attackers were scattered, were divided between just for loot and their blood, and they were not so numerous. Yet they would eventually have made the camp untenable had not the thoughtful sheriff prevented a surprise for both parties.

After consultation with his advisers in his county seat he had appealed to the governor, on the ground that as one of the opposing forces was Mexican he felt that a superior authority should be called to settle a situation. The governor had agreed and ordered a troop of cavalry to the Master Key to preserve order. It was just when Wilkerson had seen his chance for a grand coup that the troops arrived.

Ruth, with some of the women, had taken refuge in John's house on the hill, with old Tom Kane as their bodyguard. Wilkerson knew that if he could capture Ruth he could make his own terms. He directed several of his men to make a detour around the hill and effect this. Meanwhile he set fire to the mine. The smoke and flames distracted the attention of Dorr and his men.

The ruse had nearly succeeded, but for Kane's quickness. Though he had not used his gun for many years he had not lost none of his old-time skill, and when the raiders made their final dash on the porch of the house the cook with a single glance over his shoulder shot from the hip. His man tumbled dead from the porch, and his companions sneaked back. At that instant the cavalry rushed in, and before five minutes were passed their commander had separated the combatants and proceeded to disarm them.

He then called Dorr and Wilkerson to him and curtly stated that his orders were to see that there was no trouble. "You quarrel I, I don't know," said Kane.

Wilkerson tried to argue, but neither the officer nor the sheriff, who now arrived, would listen to him. They also arrested Kane, and then they proceeded to the kidnapping of Ruth in San Francisco.

"You have anything against Wilkerson?" the sheriff asserted, "swear out a warrant for him. I'll serve it quick enough."

With this John must perforce be satisfied, but after a conference with Kane it was agreed that the latter should go to the county seat and make formal complaint and procure a warrant for Wilkerson's arrest on the ground of forgery.

"You and I know those deeds he flourishes aren't genuine," John said, earnestly. "Let's make it an issue and try it in court. At any rate, we'll rid of him for a while."

"I know you're right," the old cook assented heartily. "I'll be off today. With these troopers around the greasers won't dare to do anything openly. But keep your eyes open, John! They'll sneak something across, if they can."

"Trust me for that," was the reassuring response.

But when Kane had gone, Dorr realized that he was in a nasty predicament. Wilkerson was desperately playing so bold a game that it would take every resource at his disposal to meet him successfully. Ruth must be protected in her rights. The Master Key mine must remain in her possession undisturbed; that would be impossible until Wilkerson was eliminated. And that man was after great stakes, otherwise he would never have ventured so far.

As he debated this inwardly John went on in memory all the agents of the law. The last day when old Thomas Gallon had died, leaving his daughter in his charge. Before his mind's eye ran the pictures of the last scenes and then—

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