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TWO COMPLETE NOVELS 35c

He Held All the Aces—Until a .45 Joker Showed Up

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

(THIS RANGE IS MINE)



PAUL
EVAN

Complete and Unabridged

HE RODE THE SIX-GUN TRAIL

TO KINGDOM COME!

"The gun lay along the window pane, muzzle pointed upward, and a foot or so to its left was the palm of a hand, also pressed against the pane. Even as Jim watched, the gun moved until its muzzle pointed directly at Ben King's back."

That was Jim Lawson's introduction to the GUN-SMOKE KINGDOM in a secluded Arizona valley. And when he broke into that bushwhack set-up, he landed squarely in the center of a bitter struggle between the grateful and powerful Ben King himself and the infuriated nesters and small ranchers who had to pay Ben tribute for every calf and drop of water.

How Jim took advantage of his unusual spot to touch off the explosion that would tear the valley into two flaming fighting factions makes a fever-pitched Western that will leave every reader breathless.

***Turn this book over for
second complete Western.***

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BEN KING—He had turned a whole valley into his private domain, built a town all his own, and dealt out justice in a saloon called Kingdom Come.

JIM LAWSON—He fled from a killer's reputation only to learn that his guns were his only keys to peace of mind.

DAVE SIBERT—Foreman of Ben King's ranch, he considered himself the crown prince of a powder-smoke monarchy.

LOUISE KING—Though she was Ben King's daughter, she refused to wear his brand.

CHARLEY TEMPLE—A small rancher who finally realized that it was better to die with a gun in his hand than to live on his knees.

JUDITH TEMPLE—Her sarcasm wounded Jim Lawson more than the fists of vengeful cowboys ever could.

LIMPY—An old hand who knew the mystery of Jim's past and the secret of his future.

G U N S M O K E K I N G D O M

Original Title:

This Range Is Mine

B Y P A U L E V A N

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GUNSMOKE KINGDOM
(This Range Is Mine)

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AVENGER FROM NOWHERE

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Chapter 1

He had ridden six hundred miles in the last two weeks and it wasn't far enough. He wanted to put distance between himself and Redrock and Springwater and Sage and all the hated memories they held; he wanted to ride to the end of the earth and drop off into a void. But man and horse must eat. He had one dollar and sixty cents in his pocket and the end of the earth was still far away. The answer was a job, and, since he had no desire to linger on the way, the job would have to be a short one that paid exceptionally well.

Only the gods knew where he could find such a job in this sparsely settled country; but, gazing across the broad valley that lay below him, he could see the buildings of a town. Not much of a town, he thought gloomily, yet one never knew. Perhaps they needed a tough marshal who could shoot fast and straight and didn't care particularly whether the other fellow could or couldn't. He said, "Get along, boy," and sent the horse down the steep trail through the timber at the foot of the hills.

The valley was long and wide, with lush grass and a creek which pushed its waters lazily along the middle. A wire fence divided the valley lengthways and the creek wound through it like a child playing "go in and out the window." On his side of the valley men were working cattle, bunching them, cutting out, branding. Calf roundup time. Back on the Lazy L—— He swore and put the thought from his mind.

The trail snaked into the belt of timber and the scene was

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

erased by foliage, only the distant shouts of the cowboys reaching him. He turned abruptly right, following the contour of the hill. It had been a dry day and his horse would be thirsty; perhaps he might find a spring somewhere on the side of the slope.

He did. Water seeped from the rocks and dripped into a granite basin to form a tree-shadowed pool. He dropped the rein and dismounted, letting the horse drink while he unstrapped his empty canteen. He squatted by the edge of the pool, pushed the canteen under its surface and let the water gurgle in. He heard the rapid pound of hoofs to his left and thought the rider was showing a careless disregard for tangled brush and snatching branches. He glanced in that direction.

A sorrel horse broke through the underbrush and came to a halt at the edge of the pool. The rider was bent over the horn, head hanging, hands covering the face. He could see a well worn Stetson hat, a crimson scarf, blue cotton shirt, the right side of a pair of dusty levis and one scuffed and very small boot. Then he noticed the dark curl that hung below the brim of the hat and interest went out of his eyes. It was only a girl.

"Lose your dolly?" he asked harshly.

The head snapped up and a face looked at him. It was a startled face with round blue eyes, red-rimmed and moist. It had, in addition to the eyes, a small nose with a daub of dirt on it, a pair of lips shaped like the letter O and a couple of muddy marshes on the cheeks where tears had mingled with roundup dust. She said, "You're one of *them*, I suppose."

He said, "Sure," not knowing who "they" were supposed to be. He took the filled canteen to the horse, strapped it into place and swung aboard. He had to ride past the girl on his way around the pool. "Cheer up," he said, without looking at her. "He'll come back to you—the sucker."

"I'm not crying over any *he!*" she said furiously. "I'm cry-

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

ing because you and your bunch—Oh, get out of here and leave me alone!"

He raised an eyebrow. "If you're so anxious to get rid of me, get that crowbait you're forking out of the way."

"You can ride around me, can't you?" The blue eyes were blazing now.

"I can, but I don't aim to. Go home and wash your face."

She sat there glaring at him for a moment, then her lips tightened. "Of all the gall!" she said, and, spurring the sorrel savagely, sent him lunging through the brush.

He looked after her, left eyebrow up, left side of his mouth slightly twisted. He said to the horse, "Who does she think she is?" and rode on.

The trees thinned out and he caught sight of a rutted road on the edge of the valley floor and cut into it. Men were still working cattle on his side of the fence and every mile or so he would spot chuck and bed wagons. He passed houses and corrals and knew them for the homes of the men who worked the valley cattle. The hills kept pushing the trail to the left and presently he was traveling at right angles to his original course. He saw a row of cabins and shacks and the backs of false-fronted buildings, then the road turned sharply to the right and he was entering the town.

It was a small town, but two of its buildings were quite imposing. One was a general store which, judging from the ground it covered, must be carrying a huge stock. On a window were the words POST OFFICE, Kingdom, Ariz. The other was a two-storied saloon and gambling joint which announced itself the KINGDOM COME in large letter extending along the front of the building. Beneath this legend was the modest announcement that Ben King was the Prop. Ben King, the Kingdom Come, Kingdom, Arizona. A lot of Kings.

Dusk and the empty street told him that it was suppertime. He dismounted before a shack with the almost obliterated

sign LIVERY CORRAL. A man came slouching out, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

The rider asked, "How much for a grain feed and a night's lodging?"

"Fifty cents."

"The horse, not me."

"Still fifty cents."

The young man drew half a dollar from his chaps pocket and tossed it to the liveryman. The liveryman said, "I'm eatin'. Put him in a stall, will you? There's grain in the bin."

He went into the shack and the young man led the horse into a vacant stall and stripped off the rig. He found the feed bin and measured out a generous portion of grain, which he put into the manger. He tightened his belt a notch, gave the horse a farewell slap and walked back along the street to the Kingdom Come and looked over the half-doors. There wasn't a soul in the place except a bartender who had mounted a chair and was lighting one of the hanging lamps. He could see a fifty-foot bar with an expensive mirror behind it, a string of gambling layouts, chairs and tables. There was plenty of filagree and gilt in evidence; a pretentious place for such a small town.

He sat down on a bench at one side of the doorway and rolled a cigarette. He had smoked it and had started on a second one before signs of life showed on the street. A bunch of cowboys came riding into town, pulled up before the Kingdom Come and pushed through the doorway. They had a couple of rounds, then came out and drifted along the street. There were two restaurants and some of them went into one and some into the other. The young man tightened his belt another notch.

Along the street came a string of pedestrians, and when they drew near he saw from their garb that they were miners. They went into the Kingdom Come, stayed five minutes or so, then came out and headed for the two restaurants. The young

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

man fingered his belt, found there were no more holes, and said, "The hell with it!" He got up and followed them.

Half an hour later and fifty cents poorer, he emerged from one of the two restaurants. Lights now blazed in the Kingdom Come and he heard the chink of coin and rattle of glass. He shouldered through the swinging doors and joined the rank before the bar. He slid the remaining half-dollar over the bar and got a shot of whiskey and a quarter in exchange for it. He turned, hooked a heel over the rail and sipped the liquor slowly, making it last. He saw that the customers were cowboys and miners, with a sprinkling of men who dressed like cowmen but weren't. Their clothes were too clean, too ornate, and they wore their hardware low and tied down. Maybe the town of Kingdom needed a tough marshal, after all.

There were girls in the crowd, girls with bright-colored dresses and coquettish smiles who sipped what looked like whiskey and was probably tea. All but one had attached themselves to men. Women, he told himself cynically, were all alike.

The one who was alone drew his attention. She was blonde and she was beautiful in the way that polished ivory is beautiful. Nature had been kind but was not altogether responsible for the beauty; her hair was too ashen, the brows too thin and long, the lashes too dark, the lips too red. She was at the roulette layout placing bets and watching the spin of the wheel with avid eyes.

Slightly behind her stood a man. He was big, with a heavy face, a wide slit of a mouth below a stringy black moustache, and eyes of such a light gray that he had the appearance of a wall-eyed mustang. The girl placed a coin on a number and the wall-eyed man glanced at the dealer and nodded slightly. The wheel spun, the ball clattered, there was a pause, then the girl gave a squeal of delight and the dealer pushed money across the board. The big man nodded and the slit which

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

was his mouth curved slightly. He, thought the young man, must be Ben King, Prop.

About ten feet behind the big man was a side window, a black oblong in the wall of the passageway which extended along the side of the building. A dull flash took the young man's gaze to it. The flash came from the reflection of light on a nickel-plated gun barrel. He stiffened and stared, unhooking his heel from the rail. The gun lay along the pane, muzzle pointed upward, and a foot or so to its left was the palm of a hand, also pressed against the pane. Between gun and palm was the vague shape of a face. Only the eyes were distinct, made so by the very intensity of their stare. The stare was directed at the big man, and even as the young fellow at the bar watched, the face was withdrawn into the darkness and the gun moved until its muzzle pointed directly at the big man's back.

The young man's action was instinctive. The glass was small and heavy and fitted his hand like a ball. He stepped away from the bar and hurled it across the thirty feet which separated him from the window.

The glass smashed through the pane, there was a flash of flame and a roar, and smoke billowed through the broken window. He saw the big man stagger slightly and involuntarily duck, then the young man was leaping towards the doorway, dragging out his gun as he ran.

On the street, he turned left and raced for the passageway. He turned into the opening, thinking if that *was* Ben King and the town *did* need a marshal, this was his chance to demonstrate his title to the job.

He didn't find the man who had fired the shot, nor did the ones who came surging to help him. A long, lean drink of water with sagging jowls and the sad eyes of a disappointed bloodhound took charge and sent parties out to scour the alleys, probably knowing all the while that the search would be futile.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

The young man went back into the saloon, walked to the bar and asked for another drink. He put his remaining quarter on the counter with a sigh. A rough voice said, "Drinks on the house, pilgrim; all of them you can hold." The young man slid the quarter into his pocket to keep the dime company. "Much obliged," he said, and turned his head to look at the speaker.

The big man was holding a handkerchief against his cheek and there were red stains on the linen. He said, "That was close; damned close. If you hadn't chucked that glass— Get a look at the feller?"

"All I saw was a pair of eyes. They looked like hot coals and they were aimed at you." He didn't mention the nickel-plated gun.

"I'd like to find the son of a dog," growled the big man. "I'd rip off his hide and beat hell outa him with it. I'm Ben King. What's you handle and what you doin' in Kingdom?"

"I'm Jim Lawson and I'm looking for a job."

"Not no more, you ain't. You got one." Ben King glanced at Jim sharply. "Did you say *Lawson*?"

"That's right." Hard young eyes met the other's.

"I've heard that name before. Lawson, not the Jim."

"Ed Lawson, I reckon it was. They called him the Kid. He rubbed out ten or twelve men and specialized in growing gray hair for bank and railroad presidents. I'm his brother."

The two hard gazes clung for a moment, then the slit that Ben King called a mouth curved. This time the curve was not a stingy one.

"Now," he said emphatically, "I *know* you got you a job!" He motioned towards the bottle. "Drink up. All you want."

"Thanks. Later, maybe. What's the job you mentioned?"

"I dunno right now. I'll think of somethin'."

"The job I want will pay good money. But I'll earn it."

"I can afford to hire you. Fifty a week and you're on the payroll startin' tonight." Lawson blinked; it was a princely

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

salary. Ben King went on, "Stick around where I can find you when I need you." He turned to a bartender. "Harry, set aside a bottle of that Kentucky bourbon for Mister Lawson." He gave Jim a slap on the shoulder with a hand as heavy as a sack of coal and moved away.

Lawson stood with his back to the bar gazing thoughtfully about him. Luck was certainly with him; he could move on at the end of one week. He fingered the dime and the quarter that rubbed noses in his pocket. Too bad King Ben hadn't thought to pay him something on account; he couldn't stretch thirty-five cents over a period of a week even if he lived on bird seed.

He turned back to face the bar, and the man standing next to him said, "Have one on me, Lawson."

"No, you're having one on me. Harry, the Kentucky bourbon."

The bartender produced the bottle and Lawson motioned the other to pour. He was one of those dressed like a cowman who wasn't a cowman. He said, "Thanks, pardner," and tilted the bottle.

Jim said, "I reckon Ben's a king in more than name only."

"You sure spoke a mouthful there." The man tossed off the liquor and proceeded to elucidate. "Ben's sure enough king in this country. Founded the town of Kingdom, owns the Kingdom Come and built the only store within two hundred miles. Gets a rakeoff from the business men in town and the ranchers in the valley. Furnishes beef to Indian reservations and army posts and gosh knows what else. You sure had a hoss shoe hangin' around your neck when you tossed that glass. You say you didn't see the feller who was gunnin' for Ben?"

"Just a pair of eyes. And the gun muzzle when he cut down."

"Too bad you didn't see more. Mind if I have another?"

Jim didn't mind. He was buying information with somebody else's liquor.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"I'm Jeb Cawley." The man poured a drink and pushed the bottle back in front of Jim. Jim tilted it this time, took up the filled glass and once more turned his back to the bar. Jeb Cawley turned with him. "Yes, sir," he repeated, "you sure are wallerin' in luck. King Ben—that's what we call him—holds this country in the holler of his hand. Elects his own sheriff and judge and prosecutin' attorney and all the other county officers."

"Is Kingdom a county seat?"

"Might jest as well be. Official, I reckon it belongs to Oconino, or mebbe Navajo or Gila. I dunno. Anyhow, it's too danged far away for any of 'em to bother with and there's got to be some sort of authority. Ben's it."

"Who's the girl at the roulette wheel?"

"Ben's daughter, Louise. Queen Lou, they call her."

"It's a wonder he lets her loose in a joint like this."

"She's better off here than she would be cooped up in a house. Hell, nobody can just set and look out a winder without goin' loco. And Lou wasn't built for knittin'."

"I can see that," said Lawson drily.

Cawley gave him a sidelong glance. "Take a tip from me, pardner, and don't go gettin' idears. Dave Sibert's got her throwed and hogtied and all ready for the brandin' iron."

"Who's Dave Sibert?"

"Sheriff. Ben treats him like he's one of the family already."

"Any idea who it was that tried to blast the king off his throne?"

"Plenty idears. Ben's got enemies. Some fellers in town don't like payin' for the privilege of doin' business, and the valley ranchers are kickin' at payin' him a third of their yearly increase just because Ben seen the valley first."

"Did King string that fence down the middle?"

"Yeah. He claims the north half as his own. Aims to build a big house and stock up with shorthorns and turn it over to Dave and Lou when they get hitched."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"I see." Lawson tossed off his drink, turned to the bar and said, "Have another, then I'll be ambling around to see the sights."

They had another and Lawson said, "Be seein' you," and moved away from the bar. He headed for the roulette table, his immediate problem being how to multiply thirty-five cents by thirty-six. A small redheaded girl seated at a table with a husky miner gave him a smile and said, "Hello, big boy." He lifted the corner of his mouth at her and said, "Good hunting, Red."

He stopped at the roulette layout on the side opposite the blonde Louise King and let his gaze rest speculatively on the board. She was looking at him and he knew it but gave no sign. For the moment they were alone except for the dealer. The dealer said, "Place your bets, folks."

Louise put a coin on the red and won. She had a small pile of gold and silver in front of her. She said, her voice low and throaty, "Want to make a stake, cowboy?"

He looked at her directly for the first time, but there was no interest in the gaze. "Who wouldn't?"

"Ride with me and you'll make it." She placed a dollar on number 14.

"I never ride double," he said, and put his dime on number 32.

"Think you can afford that?" There was disdain in her voice.

"Nope. I'm fresh out of pennies."

The dealer spun the wheel, threw the ball with a deft twist of his wrist. The wheel slowed, the ball gave a final hop and landed in number 14.

"What did I tell you?" Louise cried triumphantly. She gathered in her winnings, put a dollar on number 12. "Better climb on with me."

Lawson waited until the wheel had been spun, then, just

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

to be contrary, put his quarter on number 14, playing the wheel to repeat.

She said, "Sucker!"

Number 14 won again.

"And my pop don't down the wheel, either," he murmured, as he picked up the stack of silver dollars the dealer slid across the board. The girl was staring at him, frowning. He gave her his lopsided grin, said, "Easy when you know how," and let the silver dollars slide into his pocket. He knew her eyes were following him as he strolled along the aisle.

He felt a light touch on his arm and looked down to see the redheaded girl who had been with the miner. He said, "Hello, Red. What did you do with Samson?"

"His name ain't Samson; it's Tiny Smith. I ditched him. Wanta buy me a drink?"

"Sure, but not tea. Wait here for me."

He went to the bar, got the bottle of bourbon and two glasses and carried them back to the table. He poured a drink for himself, then slid bottle and glass across the table. Red poured, tasted, and her face brightened. "Say, that's the real stuff, ain't it?"

"Compliments of Ben King and no commission for you."

She gave him a grin. "I can stand it. What's your name, big boy?"

"Lawson. Ever hear it before?"

"Lawson?" She looked puzzled, then her eyes widened. "Not Ed!"

He shook his head. "Ed's—gone. I'm his brother Jim."

"Brother of the Kid! By God, I'm glad to meet you! I knew Nesta Roselle; me and her worked in the same joint once. She saved the Kid's life."

"By taking the slug intended for him."

"Yeah." Red sighed. "She sure musta loved him."

"Thought she did. It wouldn't have lasted; seldom does." Bitterness had crept into his voice.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

She leaned across the table and put her fingers over his hand. "You don't believe in love, do you? Real love, I mean. You know—where a girl and a fellow just can't see anybody else but each other."

"That isn't love," he answered shortly. "It's temporary insanity. Pretty soon you get your senses back and realize what a fool you've been."

She looked at him wonderingly. "Geel! Some woman certainly musta taken you over the bumps!"

"You guessed it." He poured another drink and tossed it off. "Where can a fellow bed down for the night?"

She wrinkled her brow. "Gosh, I don't know, Jim. There's a widow woman named Masters who rents out rooms."

"Any empty rooms upstairs?"

She shook her head. "We girls room up there, two to a room. Sue Lanning and I have the first one on the right."

"I reckon it's the hayloft for me. Have another, Red, and I'll be on my way."

She poured a drink and he took the bottle and started back to the bar with it. Ben King was standing at the end of the counter and Lawson was some ten feet from him when he saw Ben straighten and stare towards the front of the room. Lawson turned and saw a man pushing his way through the crowd. He was a big man, a young man, and as handsome as they come. Crisp, curly black hair, eyes shaded by long lashes and perfect brows, smooth tanned skin, a dimpled chin with a small mouth above it and a neat black moustache above that. And an arrogant way of carrying himself that spoiled the whole effect.

Jim halted, watching him. He heard Ben King say while the young man was still some distance away, "What's wrong, Dave?"

Dave, thought Lawson. Dave—what was it? Sibert. Dave Sibert, Ben's sheriff and prospective son-in-law.

Sibert answered through tight lips. "One of the ranchers

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

out in the valley cut our fence and let the calves back on the south side. The whole job of cuttin' out and countin' will have to be done over."

"Cut the wire! Why, damn their hides!" Ben's pale gray eyes were blazing. "Get all the men you need and take 'em out there. And next time you gather them calves, keep men ridin' that fence day and night until we got the Crown brand slapped on 'em."

Dave Sibert moved on to the bar. "Can't do a thing until mornin'," he growled. "I betcha that Charley Temple's behind it. I'd like to see him get his needin's."

"You'll see it yet," said Ben shortly. He turned his head and saw Lawson. "Reckon you got here at the right time, Lawson. Report to me first thing in the mornin'; I got a job of work for you to do."

Chapter 2

Jim Lawson opened his eyes, saw the soft gray of dawn creeping through the hayloft window, and remembered that he was to report to Ben King for orders. He got up, washed at the horse trough, and had breakfast at the restaurant, where he learned that King had his office in the store.

King was behind a rolltop desk with a stack of papers before him. He nodded to Jim and said, "Sit down."

Lawson dragged a chair to the side of the desk and Ben leaned back and surveyed him thoughtfully. He said, "I have an arrangement with the valley ranchers whereby they turn over to me a third of their yearly increase in exchange for grazin' rights. We just finished tallyin' and had pushed our share on the north side of the fence when somebody cut the wire and let 'em back on the south side again. They've got to be cut out and held until we can get the Crown brand on them. You'll have charge of the day crew and Dave Sibert, the sheriff, will run the night gang. I'll hold you responsible for gettin' them calves back on our side and I'll hold him responsible for keepin' them there."

Jim leaned over the desk. "Let me get this straight. You say they have an agreement with you. That means they're turning the stock over to you of their own free will and not just on your say-so. Right?"

"Right. I put it up to each of 'em as he come into the valley, and they all agreed."

That settled it as far as Lawson was concerned. Whether

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

or not King held the right to make such demands didn't matter so long as the ranchers had agreed to the arrangement. He said, "I want a free hand. I don't want to be running back to town for orders every hour or so."

"You got a free hand and all the men you need to back you up."

"Right." Lawson got up. "I want the names of the ranchers and the number of calves due you from each."

"I got the list right here." King took a sheet of paper from the stack before him and Lawson scanned it briefly, folded it and put it into a pocket. "Your men are down at the restaurants," Ben went on. "I told them you'd take charge and they're waiting for you there."

Jim went to the livery corral, got his horse and rode back to the restaurants. The men were waiting outside. He looked them over briefly, said, "All right, boys. Mount up and we'll get going."

They rode along the trail and out into the valley. The roundup wagons were gone and there wasn't a rider in sight. Jim raised his hand to halt his men. "No use doing all the work over again. Ben has seven hundred and twenty calves coming. We'll cut out that number and let the ranchers make the adjustments among them."

They reached the upper end of the valley around ten in the morning, spread out in a long line and commenced their drive. When they had moved some two miles without spotting a single calf, Lawson waved for them to come in and sat waiting until they had grouped themselves about him.

"No use looking any further, boys," Jim said. "They've moved those calves during the night."

He glanced to his right and saw a ranch house and out-buildings close to the base of the hills. "Whose place is that?" he asked.

"Belongs to Charley Temple," one of them answered. "If

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

there's any monkey business goin' on, you can bet he's behind it."

Lawson said, "Wait here."

He wheeled his horse towards the house. As he approached, he noticed a dozen or more horses in the holding corral, and then he saw some men come out of the house to stand around watching him. He slowed to a walk when he was a hundred yards away and rolled and lighted a cigarette. He halted before them and eased his weight to one stirrup. Nobody spoke. They just stared at him belligerently.

"Somebody start talking," he said briefly.

There were ten of them and he guessed they were the valley ranchers. A man of average height and build, with salt and pepper hair and moustache and fierce dark eyes stepped forward a pace. "About what?"

"About calves that sprout wings and fly away overnight."

"What happened to them calves is our business."

"What happened to seven hundred and twenty of them is Ben King's business. And mine. I want them back on the range by three o'clock."

The man laughed. "You'll keep on wantin'."

"Are you Charley Temple?"

"I am."

"And you speak for the rest of these men?"

"That's right."

A girl had come out of the house and was standing on the gallery. She was a small girl with dark hair and deep blue eyes which regarded Lawson steadily. She still wore levis and cotton shirt and riding boots, but her eyes were not moist now and there were no marshes on the cheeks. Lawson continued to address Charley Temple. "You agreed to pay Ben King for the use of the range; it's my job to see that you keep that agreement."

"That agreement was made at the point of a gun," the girl cried.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Jim glanced at her briefly. "I don't care how it was made. And I'll do my talking to men." His gaze went back to Temple. "I want seven hundred and twenty calves on this range by three o'clock this afternoon."

"Then go and round 'em up. That agreement provided that King should cut out the stuff himself. We're not stirrin' a foot to help him and we ain't scared of you, Jim Lawson. The fact that you're the brother of the Kid don't cut no ice with us. Birds of a feather flock together and it sure looks like you got into the right flock."

Lawson's face tightened. "Three o'clock," he repeated and wheeled his horse. He rejoined his men, said, "We'll make camp at the edge of the trees. They have until three this afternoon to produce the calves."

"Think they'll do it?" one of them wanted to know.

"I don't care one way or the other." He led the way to the timber belt at the foot of the hills, dismounted and started to off-saddle. The rest followed his example, staking out their horses and finding comfortable positions on the ground. A blanket was spread and a poker game started. Lawson meanwhile walked back among the trees and seated himself on a stump near a small pole corral where he was out of sight of his men. Temple's mention of his brother had brought back the old hurt. Because Ed had been an outlaw and a killer, Jim was expected to follow in his footsteps. He had fought spite and animosity since he was seventeen and now he was twenty-three. He was all right as long as he kept moving, but any inactivity, a moment of solitude such as the present would intensify his feeling of loss and loneliness. A man can bottle up his emotions just so long and then something has to give.

"Nancy! Oh God!" The words were torn from him in a hoarse whisper.

"Lose your dolly?" a scornful voice asked.

His head came up and the next moment he was on his

feet, whirling to face the speaker. He said harshly, "Get the hell out of here!"

The girl was standing ten feet away from him, small, straight, with contempt written on her face. He took a threatening step towards her and instinctively she backed away. The look of contempt faded under the torture in his eyes and was replaced by one of puzzlement and dawning understanding. She crouched on her heels, picked up a twig and twisted it in her fingers. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. "Go ahead and bawl if you feel like it."

"I don't bawl and I'm in no mood to chew the fat with anybody, let alone a female. Go roll your hoop somewhere else."

She got up slowly, the blue eyes grave. "I'll go. But first, what are you going to do if those calves aren't on the range by three o'clock?"

"So that's why you hunted me up?" he said.

"I didn't hunt you up. I often come here when something's bothering me. But I'm interested, naturally. Dad and I have worked hard to get what little we have. I'm Judith Temple." She was silent for a moment and when she did speak again her voice, too, was bitter. "How would you like to hand over a third of your profits every year to somebody who has no right to it?"

"If I'd agreed to do it, I'd do it or get out. But I'd never be such a fool as to make that kind of an agreement in the first place."

"But suppose—"

"I said I didn't want to talk to you," he interrupted angrily. "Now get out of here and leave me alone. Go on—scat!"

Color rose quickly to her cheeks. Then after a moment she said gently, "Something or somebody has hurt you terribly, Jim Lawson. I'd like to help you, but I know you won't let me. Good-bye." She turned and walked towards the house.

Jim sat down again, his fingers fashioning a cigarette, try-

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

ing to force his thoughts into channels which did not lead back to the past. It was no use; so presently he got up and went through the trees and saddled his horse. He rode to the end of the valley and back, returning to the camp as the men were finishing their dinners. They had carried saddle rations, and one of them gave him bread and meat and there was plenty of coffee. He ate and felt better, and when he had finished he sat in the poker game.

At three o'clock he stopped the play. "Time to go to work," he said.

"See any calves?" asked one of them. "Or do we go into the hills and round 'em up"

"We do not. We go into the valley and cut out seven hundred and twenty yearlings. If they want to swap for calves we'll make a deal. If not, I reckon King will be satisfied."

There was a chorus of satisfied murmurs. "Lawson, you got a head on you like a tack."

They went to work, gleefully cutting out every yearling they came across. A gap was made in the wire and a man was posted there to count the animals as they were hazed through the opening. They weren't at it very long before somebody shouted, "Here comes trouble!" and Jim saw a bunch of horsemen spur out of the Temple yard and head across the valley in their direction. Lawson waved his men in and they converged on him, drawing rifles from saddle boots. Lawson disposed them in a long line, alert and ready for hostilities. The horsemen pulled to a halt and Temple advanced alone. He cried angrily, "What're you fellers doin'?"

"Collecting what you owe Ben King."

"But these are yearlin's. And branded!"

"You've taken King's calves, we're taking your yearlings. Fetch back the calves and you can have the yearlings. If the swap isn't made by this time tomorrow, we'll start working brands and burning on the Crown."

This brought bitter and indignant protest, and if the

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

ranchers had spread out instead of bunching there would have been a pitched battle then and there. But knowing what a single volley from Lawson's side would do, they took their anger out in words. And when they had run out of words, Lawson spoke to Charley Temple.

"We're cutting out seven hundred and twenty yearlings if we have to wait for the night gang to help us. Meanwhile, you're wasting time. You could be in the hills rounding up those calves."

Temple glared helplessly at him, his face white and drawn.

"Damn you, Jim Lawson, you'll pay for this," he said, and, wheeling his horse, led his men away at a furious gallop.

Dave Sibert arrived with the night crew while Jim was checking with the tally man. He rode up and asked angrily, "What in hell you doin', Lawson? Don't you know the difference between calves and yearlin's?"

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I ought to make them show birth certificates."

"You know damned well you're supposed to cut out calves."

"Also I know damned well I'm not riding into the hills to do it."

"What do you mean, ride into the hills?"

"I'll tell Ben King about it. He's the man I take orders from."

He wheeled his horse and rode away, signaling his men to follow. It was dark when they rode into Kingdom and Lawson went straight to the livery corral, put up his horse, then entered a restaurant and got his supper. One of his men sat beside him at the counter; he gave Lawson a grin and said, "You sure pinned Daves' ears back proper. He needs more of the same medicine. Since he got hisself engaged to Queen Lou he acts like he's already sittin' the saddle and got her single-footin' under him."

"He'll wake up when she throws him."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"And maybe she ain't the one to do it!" He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "That there filly's just achin' to get outa pasture. King Ben's built a high fence around her and feeds her grain and hot bran mash with sweetenin', but a filly's a filly whether she's a woman or a hoss. She'll bust a leg tryin' to get outa that pasture and if she ever does, he'll never get her back inside short of knockin' her down with a club and draggin' her."

Lawson turned to him. "What's your name, cowboy?"

The man looked startled. "Bub Whittaker. Hey! You ain't gonna—?"

"Not on your life, Bub. I just wanted to shake your hand. You've put into words what I've been thinking for a month." They shook gravely. "Ever been married?"

"Once. And that was once too many. My filly got outa the pasture and I tried coixin' instead of clubbin'. It didn't work."

The waiter pushed Lawson's order across the counter and Jim mechanically picked up knife and fork. His appetite was gone and the old sick feeling was back at the pit of his stomach. He set his teeth and forced himself to eat, cramming the food down hurriedly, determinedly. God! Would he ever get over Nancy and what she had done to him?

He finished and went out, giving an absent wave of his hand in answer to Bub's "See you later." He strode up the street and pushed through the doors into the Kingdom Come. He saw Ben King and Dave Sibert standing at the roulette layout with Louise and went over to them. Louise gave him a soft, "Hello, Jim." He nodded and Ben said gruffly, "I've been waitin' for you to show up and report."

"I ate first. What I had to report could wait." He spoke to Sibert. "Did you post riders along the fence?"

"What for? Ain't no calves on our side."

"If the ranchers let those yearlings out, your men'll stay on the job until they're back in."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

King swore harshly. "What's this Dave tells me about your puttin' yearlin's behind that wire instead of calves?"

"There were no calves to put behind it. The ranchers had moved every one of them back into the hills. I gave them until three this afternoon to get seven hundred and twenty calves back on the range and when they didn't do it I started cutting out yearlings. I told them we'd hold the yearlings until tomorrow afternoon in case they decided to swap calves for them; if they don't feel like swapping I aim to vent the brands and put your Crown on them."

They stared at him while this sunk in, then King's face lost its scowl. He slapped his thigh with a big palm. "By God, Lawson, that's usin' your head. What do you think of that, Dave?"

Sibert was furious. "Why in hell didn't you tell me about it, so's I could set guards on that fence?"

"Why in hell didn't you ask for an explanation instead of telling me I didn't know my business?" Then, as Sibert opened his mouth and anger flashed in his eyes, Lawson added, "And better count ten before you answer."

"Now, fellers," said King hurriedly, "don't go to lockin' horns over a little misunderstandin'. Dave was upset when he seen you cuttin' out yearlin's, Jim, and you got to admit you acted sort of touchy. Come along over and we'll have a drink." He took each by an arm and led the way to the bar, where he called for a bottle of the Kentucky bourbon.

Lawson drank in silence, a bit ashamed of his belligerence. Ben had called him touchy and Ben was right. He was carrying a chip on his shoulder and daring every man he met to knock it off.

Ben was saying to Dave, "You better scoot out there, son, and put the crew to ridin' fence. I'd rather have yearlin's than calves and so would Charley Temple and his bunch. I'm gamblin' they fetch them calves back, but we'll keep on cuttin' out yearlin's just the same."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"I'll go right out," Dave promised, and he stalked by Lawson without speaking.

Ben said, "Fine feller, Dave, when you get to know him. He'll sure make a fine husband for Lou."

Lawson turned his back to the bar and looked about the room. The girl he called Red was at the craps table with Tiny Smith; she gave him a grin a yard wide and a wave of the hand and he returned the salute half-heartedly. He heard Ben say, "Hello, Steve. Get anything on that gun-slinger?"

Jim looked past Ben and saw the man with the eyes and jowls of the bloodhound, the one who had taken charge of the hunt for Ben's assailant the night before. He wore a badge with the word MARSHAL on it. He shook his head and looked even more dejected. "Not a thing, Ben. Everybody alibis everybody else and we ain't got a danged thing to go on. Coulda been one of the fellers in the valley or one of Cass Bodaine's outfit." He extended a skinny neck to peer at Jim. "Didn't you see nothin' about the feller's face, Lawson? Moustache or beard or hat or somethin'?"

"He had a moustache. I could see that."

"What did it look like?"

"Like a bunch of hair under a nose. Just like yours. Or Ben's."

He still did not mention the nickel-plated gun. Whoever owned that gun hated Ben King enough to try to murder him, and Jim wanted to learn the reason for that hatred before turning him in. King ruled with a heavy hand and the fact that he had almost unlimited power to back him inspired sympathy for the underdog. Lawson had been an underdog himself and still was.

Ben asked the marshal, "You got deputies posted outside?"

The marshal said he had and Jim started a circuit of the room. He stopped at the blackjack table and watched for a minute or so, then strolled on to the roulette outfit. Louise was not playing; she was seated at a table with a glass before

her. Lawson let his gaze slide past her to rest on Red. Red said to the miner, "See you later, Tiny," and got up to come over to meet him. She took his arm and smiled up into his face. "Find a place to bunk last night?"

"In the hay. I'm still sneezing. How about a drink?"

He crossed the room with Red clinging to his arm, aware that Louise was watching them. He bought Red a drink, then once again crossed the room and sat down, tilting his chair against the wall. He'd really have to look for lodgings of some kind or sleep in the hay again. He glanced idly about him, noticing the shining back-bar mirror, the gilt, the ornate fixtures. Reminded him of Hal Turner's Gold Standard back in Springwater.

Jim brought the chair down with a thump. Again, and against his will, his mind had turned backwards and he mustn't let it do that. He got up and walked along the aisle, fists clenched. A soft voice said, "Jim!" and he halted abruptly and looked down at Louise King. The glass before her was empty and she was smoking a cigarette. Her violet eyes gazed up at him from beneath long, darkened lashes. He said roughly, "What do you want?"

"Sit down." Then, as he stood glaring at her, "Please, Jim."

He jerked out a chair and sat down. "Well?" he said.

She regarded him intently, flicked the ash from the end of the cigarette. "Why don't you like me, Jim? Am I so less attractive than her?" She jerked her head in the direction of Red.

"No." He spoke bluntly, deliberately so. "You're attractive in a sort of artificial way. Happens I don't go in for imitations in money, Jewels or women. Red may be a floozie, but she's honest about it."

"Meaning that I'm one and not honest about it?"

Jim shrugged. "I hadn't thought about it."

Her eyes snapped at him. "I'm not one of Red's kind. I'm not for sale to any man who comes along. But I some-

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

times wish somebody besides Dave Sibert would show me a little affection. I'm a woman and I've got everything Red has—and more of it."

He gave her a cynical grin. "Red's got something that you'll never have. Courage. Your father keeps you staked out in a rich pasture and you haven't the guts to break through the fence and kick up your heels."

"Think not?" Her eyes narrowed.

"I'm sure of it. After all, why should you break out as long as you can kid yourself into believing that you're having a hell of a good time playing queen and winning on your old man's wheel?"

"I'm not kidding myself. I'm not having a good time. I don't like it one damn bit."

He shrugged and leaned back in the chair. "I told you you lacked courage."

She continued to study him, thinking him the strangest man she had ever met. She said slowly, "I think I'll let you buy me a drink."

"No." He shook his head. "It's your old man's place; you can have all you want for nothing. Why should I spend my money on you?"

"You think you're mighty tough, don't you? All right. As you say, it's my old man's place. I'll buy you a drink." She stood up, caught a barman's attention and raised two fingers. When she had seated herself again, she asked, "Where are you lodging?"

"I slept in the Kingdom Come hayloft last night. Tonight I'm going to look up the widow named Masters. Somebody said she rents rooms."

"You wouldn't like it there." The barman fetched their drinks and she said to him, "Harry, tell Pop to step over here a minute, will you?"

Ben came over to them, his scowl telling Louise that he didn't approve of his daughter drinking with a comparative

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

stranger. Louise said, "Stop glaring at me like that, Pop. I asked Jim to have a drink with me. He's thinking of renting a room from Mrs. Masters. I don't think we should let him do it as long as we have that cabin out back. Why can't he use that?"

"Why, I reckon he could. Sure."

"It's the very least we can do. He did save your life, you know." She turned to Lawson and raised her glass. "Here's to the green pastures. On the other side of the fence." They drank and she said, "You can't miss it. We live in the big house at the end of the street on the left-hand side. The cabin is in back and the key hangs by the door."

Lawson got up. He said to Ben, "Thanks for the cabin," and to Louise, "Much obliged for the drink, Miss King."

He found the place easily, went inside and lighted a lamp. It was a small, two-roomed cabin, nicely furnished. There was a double bed with a good mattress and sheets and pillowcases. He stretched out on it and smoked, thinking. Louise, he was sure, was about to kick her way out of the pasture and he wanted no part of the deal.

He got up finally, bolted the front door, then made sure that the rear door was also locked. He undressed and got into bed and was asleep in a matter of minutes. Hours later he was awakened by somebody scratching lightly on the front door.

"Jim!" a soft voice whispered.

He didn't answer. He slipped out of bed, pulled the covers in place and smoothed them. He picked up his clothes and moved silently to a dark corner. Presently he heard a sound at a window and saw against the moonlight the head and shoulders of a woman. She was peering through the glass, and he knew there was enough light for her to see the empty bed.

After a while, the head vanished and he heard the rattle of the back door. She came back, looked through the window

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

again, then moved softly away. He went to a front window and saw her glide across the yard and enter the house.

Grinning a bit cynically, he got back into the bed and went to sleep.

Chapter 3

Sibert had walked home with Louise after the Kingdom Come closed. They halted on the front porch while Ben went inside to make a light. Dave was surly. "I want you to quit foolin' around with that Lawson feller," he told her.

She had been expecting it and was ready; she whirled to face him.

"Listen, Dave; from here on, I'm picking my own company and doing what I want to do. You and Pop have had me in the pasture long enough."

He gripped her by the shoulders. "You're doin' as I tell you to do!"

"Take—your—hands—away!" Her voice was low, but the words were brittle, and he let his hands drop. She said, "Don't ever do that again. I'm not a horse or a dog. I tell you I'm sick of being watched and guarded. I want to be like other women, do the things they do; and I'm going to. Neither you nor anybody else is going to stop me."

"I got a right—"

"You got a right to your own opinions, but keep them to yourself until we're married. If we ever are. I'm wondering if you're such a bargain as you seem to think. Go home; I'm going to bed." She went inside, slamming the door in his face.

He went down slowly off the porch, walked past the vacant lot to the corner of the next house, then turned and looked back. The downstairs light was gone, but the front room on his side of the second floor was lighted and had its shades

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

drawn. Lou's room. His gaze flickered back to the cabin behind the house; Lawson was bedded down there. It was too close to suit him. Too damned close.

He growled an oath and went on down the street. It was after two and he should ride out into the valley and see that his fence guards were on the job, but thoughts of Lawson and Louise kept torturing him and he decided to let it slide. He lounged around on the street smoking and thinking and finally turned back to halt at the edge of the vacant lot. The whole house was dark now.

Movement in the rear caught his attention and his head turned swiftly. The moonlight was not strong enough to reveal details, but he saw the slim, shadowy form which glided swiftly from the direction of the cabin. It disappeared back of the house, and Dave clamped his jaws and moved swiftly cross the vacant lot.

He gained the side of the King house and edged along it, slowing his pace as he neared its rear. At the corner he knelt and peered around towards the back door. There was nobody in sight. Swiftly he crossed to the other side of the house and looked towards the front. Nobody. Whoever it was he had seen had gone into the house by the kitchen door. He mounted the steps and tried the door. It was locked.

Dave stood there for a moment, fighting his emotions. Only two people lived in this house and the figure he had seen crossing the open space was not that of Ben. Ben was big and heavy and moved with a sure stride. It must have been Lou. And she had come from the direction of the cabin.

He wheeled and catfooted it to the cabin. Gently he tried the knob and found the door locked. He stole along the side and cautiously peered through a window. He saw a bed with a man huddled in the covers. Dave moved slowly away, puzzled and suspicious. He wouldn't say a word to Lou until he was sure. Then—!

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Lawson had his breakfast, got his horse and once more led the crew into the valley. They saw no calves, but it was still quite early in the morning, so he halted his men opposite the trail which descended from the south hills. They dismounted and lounged around, waiting. After a while one of the men yelled, "Hey, fellers, look!"

A thin stream of cattle was coming down the trail, with one man riding point and several on the flanks.

"The calves!" somebody exclaimed.

"Where'd they hide 'em up there?" another wanted to know. "Ain't nothin' up there but rocks."

"There's parks in the rocks. Patches of grass and water tucked away in hollows with rimrock all around."

"Shore 'nuff? Like the one over in the north hills, huh?"

"Hush your mouth!" The command was given in a lowered tone and Jim caught the apprehensive glance which was flung in his direction. Evidently he wasn't supposed to know about the hidden park in the north hills.

Eventually the cattle emerged on the valley floor. Charley Temple rode up to Lawson.

"There's your pound of flesh, Shylock."

Jim nodded and they rode to the fence and made a gap. As the calves passed through, both men counted, checking occasionally with each other. When seven hundred and twenty had been hazed through the opening, the rest were permitted to scatter. Jim turned to Temple.

"You and your men can gather your yearlings on the other side of the wire."

By noon the yearlings were all back on the south side of the valley and the gap in the fence was closed. Lawson assigned two men to ride guard on it, and with the others rounded up the calves and pushed them into a pasture in which was a cabin and branding corral. Fires were built, irons heated, and the work of putting the Crown brand on the calves began.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Dave Sibert rode out with the night crew. He did not come near Lawson, and the one glance Jim drew from Dave was pregnant with hate.

Jim led his men back to town, put up his horse and had his supper, then went into the Kingdom Come. He saw Louise seated at the table near the roulette layout and eventually worked over in that direction. She kept watching him and finally he had to recognize her with a nod.

"Sit down, Jim," she said. The smile she gave him was saccharine, but her eyes smoldered.

He sat down.

"Sleep well last night?" she asked.

"Like a top."

"Really? So you weren't disturbed?"

"Disturbed? Of course not. But that bed looked too pretty to muss up. I rolled in my blankets and slept on the floor." His look was guileless, and she frowned, undecided whether or not to believe him. He went on, drawling. "Some time after midnight I thought I heard a dog or something scratching at the door. I went right back to sleep." He got up. "I'll be moving along, Miss King. See you later, maybe."

She smiled up at him. "You might, at that. If the dog scratches again, let the poor thing in."

Jim left the Kingdom Come, walked along the street, and turned into a saloon owned by Cass Bodaine. Bodaine, he knew, paid Ben King for the privilege of operating and had been mentioned as the leader of King's opposition. A big, black-browed man who wore a perpetual scowl waited on him and he guessed that he was Bodaine. The man served him and said, "You're off your range, aren't you, Lawson?"

"I'm a maverick; I wear no man's brand. I'm working for King just long enough to get me a stake."

"He's a goddamned spy!" said a shrill voice beside Jim.

Lawson turned and saw a small, wizened man with fierce eyes, a scraggy moustache, and stubble-covered cheeks. He

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

wore the garb of a cowman, but it was tattered and torn, and his hat was a shapeless mass of limp felt.

"Take it easy, Jake," Bodaine said.

Lawson studied the old fellow, pitying him. Fate had evidently dealt Jake a mighty poor hand. The man was facing him, quivering, his moustache bristling. Lawson let his gaze go slowly over the other until it came to the gun which hung in a scuffed holster at his side.

"What the hell you lookin' at?" Jake snapped.

Lawson raised his eyes. "The gun. You don't see many nickel-plated ones. They reflect the light too easy."

The fierceness faded from Jake's eyes. He finished his mug of beer and went out. Lawson said to Bodaine, "What's his story?"

"A pretty sad one. He came into the valley with five, six hundred head of good cattle. King put the usual bite on him, a third of the yearly increase, and Jake balked. Ben cut out his groceries; he owns the store, you know. Then Jake's cattle began to disappear. At the first roundup his herd had shrunk to three hundred; at the second, Jake had maybe a dozen cows left. He had to give up cattle raising and go to work doing odd jobs for me." Bodaine wiped the bar mechanically. "They say his beef went to feed Uncle Sam's Army and Uncle Sam's Indians."

Lawson tossed off his drink, said thanks and went out. No wonder Jake had taken a pot shot at Ben King. Well, he'd earn that fifty bucks and then get out. He headed for the cabin to get his blankets. He was in no mood to have dogs—or women—scratching at his door.

Dave Sibert left the camp around midnight and rode in to town. He tied his horse at the Kingdom Come hitching rack and peered over the half-doors. Lawson was not inside. Dave left his horse and walked up the street to the vacant lot beside the King house, moved into the shadows and hunkered

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

down to smoke and wait. The house was dark and so was the cabin behind it. He squatted in dogged silence for half an hour, then he heard the thud of boots and the tap of heels which told of the approach of Ben and Louise. He saw them pass, two shadows against darker shadows, saw them enter the house.

Lights shone briefly through a downstairs window, then faded and grew again on the second floor. He saw Louise come to the window and draw the shade. He waited the quarter of an hour until the light was extinguished, then crossed the lot, treading softly. He hurried when he reached the stable, ducking behind it and circling the corral to come out behind the cabin. He stole past the back door and moved along its side. At the front corner he halted, stiffening. He could see the back of the house and his eyes had caught movement in the shadows there.

A slim form floated down the steps and came gliding across the yard towards the cabin, and under the rays of the moon Dave caught the flash of blonde hair. There could be no doubt; this was Louise and she was hurrying to the cabin to join the man who awaited her there. He peered around the corner; she was at the door and her hand was on the latch. He stepped forward, a wild rage tearing at him.

"Where do you think you're goin'?"

She snatched her hand from the knob. "Dave!" Then, furiously, "What do you mean by spying on me?"

"By jacks, you need spyin' on! You and that Lawson!" He pushed her aside and drew his gun. "I'll talk to you later. After I've settled with that yellow pup inside!"

He twisted the knob and kicked the door open, sprang inside. He stepped to the left to put the wall behind him and get him out of the rectangle of light which was the entrance. His gun was held steady at waist level and his eyes swept the room in quick arcs, trying to pierce the gloom. "Speak up,

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Lawson!" he grated. "Or ain't you man enough to fight for what you want?"

There was no answer, no sound of any kind except the quick breathing of Louise in the doorway. He dug a match from his vest pocket, snapped it into light with his left hand. He saw a neatly made bed which evidently had not been occupied this night.

He lighted the lamp, holding his gun cocked and ready. His gaze went to every corner of the room, then he snatched up the lamp and went into the kitchen. The back door was locked on the inside.

He wheeled on Louise. "Lawson's been sleepin' here, hasn't he?"

"How should I know?" Her face was white and cold. "So that's it! You and your filthy mind!" She drew the diamond engagement ring from her finger and flung it at him. "Take it! I never want to see you again!" She ran through the doorway and vanished in the darkness.

He stared blankly after her for a moment, his jaw sagging; then he wheeled and began to search the cabin, throwing things aside, cursing. He finished and stood in the center of the room, scowling about him. The glint of the ring caught his attention; he picked it up, glared at it for a moment, then hurled it through the doorway and into the darkness.

He strode through the entrance, leaving the lamp lighted and the door open behind him.

Chapter 4

Blinking dust out of his eyes, Lawson removed a thin layer of hay and got out of his blankets. He felt refreshed and ready for the job of calf branding which lay ahead of him. He shook out the blankets and rolled them, then descended the ladder and washed at the horse trough. It was barely light as he followed the alley to the cabin. He saw light through one of the windows and halted, frowning. When he moved cautiously nearer, he saw that the door stood open. He moved quietly to the entrance and looked inside. Things had been tossed about and a chair had been knocked over. Louise, he assumed, had come to the cabin and had tried to wreck it when she had found him gone.

He carried his blankets to the livery corral and tied the roll behind the cantle of his saddle, then went along the alley to the restaurant. He entered by the rear door, going through the kitchen. Jeb Cawley was seated near the end of the counter and Lawson slid in beside him.

"Howdy, Jim," Jeb said. "Say, what's eatin' Dave Sibert?"

"A Bengal tiger, I hope," answered Jim carelessly. Then, sharply, "Dave Sibert? He's supposed to be out in the valley."

"I know. But he ain't. He's been prowlin' around town wearin' a face like a thunderhead ever since I got up. Come in here twice and gave everybody the once-over and then went out again. He's standin' at one side of the door right now. Like he's waitin' for somebody."

Jim ate quickly, put money on the counter and went out

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

the way he had come in. He walked along the side of the building to the front, stepped around the corner and saw Dave Sibert standing within four feet of him, his back turned as he gazed up the street. Jim took two strides and halted behind him.

"Looking for somebody, Dave?"

Sibert wheeled, his hand flashing downward. Lawson seized his wrist and jerked the hand away from the holster.

"Nervous, aren't you?"

Dave Sibert wrenched savagely. "Damn you, let go of me!"

"Sure." Lawson hurled the arm away from him and his own right hand dropped to the butt of his Colt. "You won't make any mistake—now. I asked if you were looking for somebody."

"I was lookin' for you. Where'd you bunk last night?"

"In the Kingdom Come hayloft."

"Did Louise know it?"

"Why should she?"

Dave came a step nearer; his jaw was outthrust; but he kept his hand away from his gun. "Because night before last you slept in the cabin and she was in there with you. And last night I nailed her just as she was goin' inside again."

"Whoever told you she was in the cabin night before last lied."

"She was seen comin' from that cabin yesterday mornin'."

"She was seen coming *out* of that cabin?"

Dave made an impatient gesture. "Not *out* of it; but she was comin' from that direction."

"She wasn't inside the cabin. You have a nasty mind, Dave."

Dave glared, his fists bunched. "All right, I ain't got no real proof. But I'll get some. The little fool's crazy about you. When I accused her of bein' with you she busted our engagement."

"Three cheers for her. Next time she tries that cabin door it'll be unlocked."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"When that happens they'll drag you both out feet first!"

Lawson's look held a hint of pity. He said quietly, "Get wise, Dave. No woman's worth getting yourself shot full of holes. Or even shooting somebody else full of holes. They play on both sides of the fence, all of them. I know."

"Just the same, I'm warnin' you to stay away from her. If you don't, I'll shoot you in your tracks. Without warnin'." He glared at Lawson, then turned and strode up the street. And now Jim saw that men had crowded in the doorway and had heard the exchange. He shrugged and went after his horse. If Sibert wanted to air his private affairs before the whole town, that was his privilege.

The calves had been penned in a pasture. Lawson divided his crew into gangs, fires were built and irons heated and the work of roping and branding went swiftly on. The pasture had been made by stretching wire across the mouth of an indentation in the north hills where steep slopes rose on three sides and a spring came gushing from the rock wall. The place was made to order for a ranch site, with the high hills to break the force of winter winds and running water for both house and corrals.

"It's a wonder one of those ranchers hasn't filed on this place," Jim said to the man working with him.

The man gave him a sour grin. "I'd hate to be the one that did. Ben figgers this is his'n."

"Why hasn't he filed on it, then?"

"Why should he? Hell, ain't nobody gonna take it from him. This is where he aims to build for Dave and Lou when they get hitched." He gave Jim a sidelong glance. "If they ever do."

When noon came, it was evident to Lawson that the job would be finished within the next three or four hours, so he mounted and set out along the fence to check against breaks. He rode leisurely to the upper end of the valley, rounded the fence and came down the other side. He passed cowboys

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

working stock and saw the usual signs of activity about the buildings. One house appeared to be deserted, and he guessed it had once been the home of the rancher named Jake. He shook his head. That was a rotten deal, no matter how you looked at it. A hatred of Ben King began to build up in him and he was glad he wouldn't be working for the man after this one week.

As was usual when he was alone, memories began to gnaw. Without even looking where he was going, he crossed to the south edge of the valley and rode to the fringe of trees. There he pulled up to roll a cigarette. And while he was about it, he caught the soft neigh of a horse and saw the flash of a sorrel's hide. He knew now where he was. It was the place he had come to that day when Judith Temple had surprised him. He lifted his lips in a sardonic grimace and urged his horse into the trees.

She was seated on the stump, head lowered, with the old Stetson in her hands and her arms thrust between her knees. The dark hair tumbled about her shoulders and the slim, denim-clad figure presented a picture of deep dejection.

"Nothing like a good cry to clear the atmosphere," he said.

She raised her head and smiled. "You're wrong this time. I'm not crying. Just tired. Finished branding?"

"This afternoon." He took a deep drag on his cigarette. "I've been wondering why the ranchers were suckers enough to let Ben King charge them for range he doesn't own."

She shrugged wearily. "They just couldn't help it. Sheep crowded us out of New Mexico. Dad and three of his friends went in search of new range. They found this and it looked good. Grass, water, a town at one end of the valley where they could get supplies. On their way back they charted a route, locating camping places where the cattle could get grass and water. As soon as they got home, they loaded the wagons, bunched the stock and started the drive.

"It was pretty tough. We all lost cattle and when we finally

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

got into the valley, the ones we had left were gaunted down and footsore. We drove across the creek and camped on the north side and Dad started to build a home where you have the calf pasture now.

"Dad and the others went to Kingdom to buy nails and hardware, and Dave Sibert followed them back with a bunch of men. He told them the north side of the valley was already taken and if they built there they'd wake up some morning and find their houses in ashes. They didn't want any trouble, so they came over to this side and built."

"No interference?"

"No. They sold us anything we wanted, including milled lumber. Then, when we had nearly finished, King sent word that he wanted to see Dad and the others. They rode to town and Ben told them he wanted a third of their yearly cattle increase for the privilege of grazing in the valley. 'This range is *mine*,' he said."

"And they agreed?"

"Not at first. They defied him. He didn't bother them, but the next time they drove to Kingdom for supplies they were told that they couldn't buy at King's store unless they agreed to his terms." She paused, and he sat smoking and watching her. Presently she went on: "One of the ranchers hitched up a freighting wagon and started for Flagstaff for supplies. It was a long trip but we'd decided to make it rather than knuckle down to Ben King."

"And wagon, team and driver disappeared, huh?"

"Yes. We never saw them again. Well, we had meat, but we needed flour, salt, sugar, coffee, beans—other staples. The cattle were too poor to drive back and there was no other range near. We agreed to Ben's terms."

"All but Jake."

"You've heard about him? He came in later and we helped him all we could by furnishing him with supplies when King

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

cut him off. But his stock was stolen to fill King's contracts and were butchered and eaten before they could be traced."

He shrugged. "Well, it's a tough old world, and the more I see of people the more I like horses."

She was observing him gravely. "Most people are decent and honest and kind. There aren't many like Ben King, and even Ben could be decent if he didn't have so much money. You probably know the old saying about the root of all evil."

"The fellow who thought that up was cockeyed. He never had any experience with women."

"What's wrong with women?"

"Everything but the way they're made. Don't get me started on it. Just read the Bible and you'll see what the root of evil is and has been since the days of Eve and Delilah."

Without being conscious of it, his face had hardened. She gazed at him steadily and when presently she spoke, her voice was gentle.

"Jim, what did they do to you to make you so bitter? I wish you'd tell me."

"It would be a waste of words. At heart, you're just like the rest of them."

"That's hardly fair, is it? You don't even know me."

"I knew somebody like you," he blurted. Then, wheeling his horse with a savage jerk on the rein, he cut out towards the open range.

They finished branding before dark and, since there was now no need of riding fence, Jim ordered his men back to town. He followed them, riding slowly. He was in a savage mood. He put up his horse and walked to the Kingdom Come, yearning for the benumbed oblivion of deep, sodden drunkenness.

Dave Sibert's voice reached him as he was about to enter the saloon and he halted and looked over the doors. There were about a dozen men in the place, but his gaze focused on

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

the three who stood near the blackjack table. One was Dave Sibert, the second was Steve Conrad, Kingdom's marshal, and the third—

Lawson blinked. He had left Limpy six hundred miles behind and had not told him where he was heading. Yet here he was.

Sibert was speaking, his voice hot and angry. "—and if you've come here to take up for the brother of a dirty killer, we'll put you where you'll damned soon change your mind!"

Limpy was an old man, a skinny, bowlegged old man, and he was fairly hopping in his anger. His bright little eyes sparkled and his stubble-covered jaws quivered as he spoke. He waved a fist under Sibert's nose.

"You kin bury me in your deepest, stinkin'est dungeon and you'll never git anything different outa me, you lop-eared son of a polecat! Jimmie Lawson's a better man than you'll ever be, if you live to be two thousand and eighty-nine! And I'll stand up to any man—"

Sibert hit him. Even in his rage he was conscious of the watching men and did not strike him with his closed fist; but his palm caught the old fellow on the cheek with a sound like a board on water and Limpy staggered sideways, tripped over his feet and went down. One hundred and seventy pounds of bone and muscle leaped through the swinging doors and covered the intervening space in three huge strides. Dave saw it coming. He wheeled and crouched and his hand streaked for the gun at his side.

He wasn't fast enough. He got his fingers on the butt and that was all. A fist hit him on the outthrust chin like the iron-shod hoof of a horse and sent him crashing over the blackjack layout with such force that the table on which he landed collapsed beneath his weight. He landed in a welter of broken wood, and lay still.

Lawson wheeled to face Steve Conrad, feet planted solidly,

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

fists balled, cold fury in his eyes. Steve hurriedly removed his hand from his gun, looked at Lawson with sad eyes, and said, "You hadn't oughta done that."

The old man had scrambled to his feet and was massaging a leathery cheek with his fingers.

"Don't put your hand anywhere near that gun, Steve," Lawson warned. "Not now or when I'm leaving. I have eyes in the back of my head when I'm mad." He turned to the old man. "Limpy, you come with me. I want to talk to you."

Chapter 5

They hunkered down behind the livery stable and built cigarettes. They lighted up and Lawson said sharply, "I don't know how you found me and now that you're here I don't like it. If I'd wanted you along I'd have said so."

"I know, Jimmie. But it hurt mighty bad to know that after we'd shared so much grief you'd light out without even a fare-ye-well. And when that deed was delivered to Tom Payne, givin' him the whole Lazy L and the cattle on it, we just figgered you was bent on goin' to the devil and didn't give a hoot how soon you got there."

"So what?"

"So we both swore we'd be danged if you'd go alone. Tom was all broke up over Nancy, and your deedin' him the ranch didn't make him feel any better. He figgered it oughta be him givin' you the Tepee after his own daughter had crossed you so cruel. He was a sick man and couldn't come, so I did. If you're set on goin' to hell, I'll tag along."

Some of the chill left Lawson's eyes. He had known Limpy as long as he could remember: Limpy had taught him to ride and rope and shoot. If he had another name, nobody knew it, probably not even Limpy himself. A bronc had fallen on him when he was a boy and ever since he had walked with a limp.

"How'd you find me?"

"By usin' my head. I figgered you'd hit for the wildest country you could find, where you could wrassle with bears

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

and spit at wildcats, and that meant west. I figgered you'd lit out without much besides your hoss and ridin' gear and would have to stop often for grub. I knowed you'd be mad and surly and make yourself noticeable. It wasn't hard; everybody that saw you remembered the hard-eyed galoot with a chip on his shoulder.

"The last two hundred miles was sorta tough because there wasn't many people and no stores, but I kept headin' west. Tonight I rode into this me-tropolis, had somethin' to eat and went into that saloon and started askin' questions. The big feller that slapped me was lappin' up liquor with the marshal feller, and as soon as I mentioned you he turns and snarls at me like a catamount with the bellyache. He called you some names and it was more'n I was willin' to stand for. You were there at the windup."

"It wasn't the windup by a long shot. I'll give you the low-down and then maybe you'll decide to mosey on and wait for me outside the danger zone. I wish you would. No need for you to get sucked into the whirlpool, and that's what it looks like to me. Currents within currents, all strong and pulling down."

He gave Limpy a review of what had happened since he came to Kingdom, speaking coldly, dispassionately, accepting that part of the blame to which he thought he was entitled. "For one thing, I should never have taken that cabin of King's. I could read Louise like a book and knew that she was due to jump the reservation."

"Yeah, monkeyin' with her was a mistake; it got you one fine enemy in Dave Sibert. Now, let me get this straight. Feller named Ben King figgers he owns the town and the valley and collects from merchants for doin' business in Kingdom and charges ranchers for grazin' rights he don't own. Lets 'em come in and get started, with their cattle dog-tired and poor, then forces 'em to cough up. That's a low-down trick. And you work for him!" Limpy's voice cracked

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

with anger. "I'm a dad-ratted son of a bowlegged bovine if I ain't ashamed of you!"

"I set out to earn fifty bucks and that's what I aim to do."

"Hell!" Limpy spat to express his disgust. Then he shrugged. "Tell me about that whirlpool."

"All I can tell you is that there's plenty dirty water piling up behind several dams, and if one of them lets go, the rest will follow. The ranchers are sore and the merchants are ready to kick over the traces. Dave Sibert has to have his own way and if anybody opposes him he'll blast them down. I made him look foolish this morning and this evening I flattened him. As Steve Conrad said, I hadn't oughta done it. Then there's Louise. They've kept a checkrein on her for so long that she's become unmanageable and is going to get rid of it or she'll die trying. That'll start Ben King and then there will be hell to pay."

"Ben King can walk into a bullet as quick as any man. And fall as hard."

"Sure. But when a king's assassinated, there's a revolution. That means lots of lead in the air and all of it won't go into the ceiling."

"Mebbe you can collect your fifty bucks before the dams bust."

"Maybe. But we'll play it safe, just the same. You get out of Kingdom. Go into the valley and ask Charley Temple for a job. You'd better see Judith first. I told her about you. She reminds me a lot of—" He broke off.

"Go ahead and say it," advised Limpy. "That's what's the matter with you. Keepin' everything penned up, a-workin' and a-seethin', until somethin' has to let go. Learn to face it. Say right out, 'She reminds me of Nancy.'"

"All right," Lawson said tightly. "She does. Same fine eyes, same dark hair, same steady look. Damn it!" He came to his feet and started pacing. Limpy said nothing; and after a while Lawson squatted down again and started making an-

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

other cigarette. He lighted it and sucked for half a minute. When he spoke again, his voice was steady. "I guess that's the way to fight it, Limpy. Now get out to the valley and stay there until I've finished this job."

"Why?"

"Because after what's happened, Dave will have you tossed into the calaboose as soon as Steve can round you up. And if you resist, which you will, they'll shoot you."

"Mebbe I'll do a little shootin' myself."

"That's what I'm afraid of. You can't outshoot the whole town. And if they kill you I'll bust a dam myself, and I can't outshoot the town any more than you can. Now will you ride out and see Charley Temple?"

"Puttin' it thataway there ain't nothin' else I can do. But on this condition: that you keep in touch with me and when the time comes you'll cut me in on the deal."

"It's a promise. Where'd you leave your horse?"

Limpy said it was outside the Kingdom Come, and they walked down the alley to the rear of the saloon. Jim cut through the passageway which led to the street, saw the shape of the horse in the gloom and the shape of Steve Conrad leaning against the doorframe watching it. He went around the corner. Steve jerked his head around too late to do anything but say, "Oh, it's you."

"Right. My friend said I could use his horse, seeing that I've put mine up for the night." He strode across the sidewalk and untied. Steve shifted his feet uncertainly.

"Where is he?"

"Somewhere around. He won't be here to bother you after tonight." Jim swung into the saddle and rode away.

Back in the alley, he dismounted and thrust the rein into Limpy's hand. "Get going. The marshal was watching the horse and I told him you were leaving at once. Don't mention me to Charley Temple. Just say you're riding the grub line

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

and ask him to put you up for the night. Tomorrow get Judith aside and tell her I sent you."

Limpy rode off, and Lawson went around to the front of the Kingdom Come and entered the saloon. His first glance showed him that neither Sibert nor Ben King was in the room; his second found Louise King at the bar. It was the first time Jim had seen her there. He took a place some ten feet from her in time to hear her say, "Fill her up again, Harry." By the inflection of her voice, he knew that either she was drunk or getting that way rapidly.

The bartender looked distressed. "Maybe you'd better lay off for a spell, Lou. Ben won't like it."

"I've laid off long enough already. I gotta catch up. Go on, fill her up. Everybody has fun but me. Now I'm gonna have fun, too."

Harry reluctantly tilted the bottle and she tossed the drink down. She saw Lawson's reflection in the mirror, blinked, then turned her head to look at him.

"Well, if it ain't sonny boy Lawson! Hi-yuh, Jimmie boy!"

She edged along the bar, steadying herself with a hand. He watched her cynically, suddenly filled with disgust. Her hair streamed over her face and her eyes were glazed. "Where were you last night, lover?" she asked, with what was meant to be a smile.

"It's a good thing I wasn't where you thought I was," he told her coldly. "Why don't you curl up somewhere and take a nap? You look like an alley cat fresh out of the garbage pile."

She straightened with drunken dignity. "Oh, I do, do I? Tha's a fine thing to say after what I did for you." She thrust out her left hand, wiggling the third finger. "Looka that. Gone. I chucked it right in his stinkin' face."

"So he told me. Lou, you're not only drunk, you're crazy." He strode past her to the end of the bar. The girl Red was there, watching. He said, "How about a drink, Red?"

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

She answered in a low voice. "Not now. Here comes Louise; let me out of here!" She turned and walked rapidly away. Jim wheeled to face Louise.

She was coming slowly along the bar and some of the glaze had left her eyes. He thought, *If only women knew how they look when they're drunk*. She halted a few feet from him, swaying slightly. She said, "Still chasing that cheap little redhead, huh? You got no time for me, but her—I!"

She raised her hands, long fingers curved like claws, and leaped at him. He caught her by the wrists and she struggled with him, fury giving her strength. She shouted at the top of her voice, the words coming in bunches. "I'll claw you so bald-headed—that no woman'll—ever look at you—again! I'll make you look like—two cats—outa two alleys!"

Lawson cast her hands away from him and as she staggered back a pace, he followed and slapped her sharply on both cheeks.

"Snap out of it, you fool!" he grated.

For an instant she stood rigid, face white, sobered; then red crept into her cheeks where his hands had struck. The glaze was entirely gone now, and he dropped his hands, thinking she had regained her senses. He was wrong. She leaped again, and he raised his hands to protect his face. Like a flash, she dived beneath them and snatched out his gun. He gripped her wrist and turned the gun downward as it exploded. He twisted the gun from her grasp and gave her a push; her knees buckled and she sat down hard.

"Lawson! What in hell you doin'!"

It was Ben King pounding along the aisle, his eyes blazing. Behind him charged Dave Sibert, and behind Dave was Steve Conrad. Ben was jerking out his gun, and even as Jim caught sight of him the weapon came up and roared. Jim ducked instinctively and he felt the air from the bullet as it passed over his head.

Then he snatched his own gun from the floor where it had

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

fallen and snapped a quick shot in Ben's direction. Ben tried to dodge in midstride, overbalanced and went plunging to the floor. Dave Sibert, unable to stop in time, went down on top of him. Steve Conrad promptly dived for the shelter of the roulette table.

"The door! The door!" The voice was Red's, and she was making frantic gestures towards the side of the room beyond the end of the bar. Lawson leaped for the door, yanked it open, ran through and pulled it shut behind him. A bullet tore through a panel and he could hear Ben shouting instructions to get him, to put a guard over every horse in town.

He turned and ran along the short hall towards a door in the rear. This door opened on the alley, and to his left a flight of stairs led to the second floor. He leaped through the doorway, then heard the pound of boots in the passageway beside the saloon and remembered the guards Conrad had stationed there. He turned and sprang back into the hall and ran lightly up the stairs. Red had told him that her room was the first one on the right; he tried the door and found it unlocked.

He dodged into the room and closed the door as sounds filled the lower hall and men poured into it from the saloon.

It was a small room and he couldn't see much because of the darkness. There was a window in the front wall and one in the side; he went over to the latter, raised it as quietly as he could and looked out. Across a five-foot passageway he could see the roof of a one-story building with a false front.

From the alley came the sound of confused voices, barked orders, and hurrying feet. A man ran through the passageway below him and he heard him call as he approached the rear, "He didn't come through this way. I was standin' at the front the whole time. He's somewhere in the alley."

"Stay right where you are and see he don't try to slip through," came Steve Conrad's order. "The rest of you search the stable and look all around these buildin's."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Lawson debated remaining in the room, and decided against it. He pushed the window as high as it would go, squeezed through the opening and, hanging to the casing, cautiously stood up on the sill. He hesitated a moment, made up his mind that he'd have to risk it, tensed his muscles and leaped. He landed on the roof with a thud and crouched there, waiting.

Somebody said sharply, "What was that?" and there was silence for a few seconds. Jim heard a man come slowly along the passageway. He got to his hands and knees and crawled over the roof towards the false front, peered around it and saw men standing on the porch of the store, diagonally across the street from the Kingdom Come. He crouched in a dark corner, the Colt still in his hand.

Sounds of the search spread. Men came around to the front and light showed briefly in the girls' rooms as searchers peered into them. There was nothing to do but wait it out. Apparently nobody noticed the open window in Reds' room, or, if they did, saw nothing unusual about it.

The sounds moved away from the Kingdom Come as the searchers pushed systematically towards the ends of the street. Among the shouted orders Lawson had heard was one in Ben King's voice urging men to hurry to the livery corral and setting a guard over every mount in town. If he got out of Kingdom at all, it would be without his horse. Unless—

He got up, his face tightening. His was a good horse and he didn't intend to part with it. He looked once more around the false front; the street was empty and men no longer stood on the store porch. He worked his way around the end of the false front, lowered himself until his feet rested on a horizontal sign, eased himself to it, then let himself dangle from the sign and dropped. He landed lightly and stole past the Kingdom Come. He glanced over the half-doors as he passed and saw that the place was practically deserted.

He pushed ahead in the darkness, walking boldly. A man

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

suddenly stepped out into the pale moonlight and said, "Hold up, there! Who are you?"

It wasn't the voice of a man he knew, so Jim gave the name of one he did know. "Jeb Cawley. Where's Ben?" He kept walking.

The fellow said, "Up at his house. Hey, you ain't—!"

Lawson took two more long strides, said, "No, I ain't," and hit him. It had to be a knockout and it was; the man grunted and folded like a wet sack. Jim came to the vacant lot beside Ben's house, glanced across it and saw light in the cabin behind. There was light in the front room of the big house, too. A knot of men stood in front of the porch and Jim slid along the house on the side of the vacant lot until he reached the alley. He moved along it toward the rear of Ben's home. Three men came out of the barn and one of them carried a lantern. Lawson kept moving. The men stopped and one of them called, "Where you goin'?"

Lawson answered gruffly, "Ben sent for me," and angled for the back door. He passed them at a distance of twenty feet and mounted the low back steps. He tried the door and it opened. He went inside and closed it softly after him.

He was in the kitchen. Light filtered through the dining room and the connecting doorway. He moved to his right and could see into the living room. Steve Conrad's lean form was draped over a chair; he was gazing across the room and listening to a voice which belonged to Ben King.

"Let me get this straight, Dave," King was saying. "Lou broke the engagement. Why?"

"Because we had a fight."

"What about?"

Lawson bent, took off his spurs and put them into a pocket. He heard Dave say, viciously, "I caught her payin' a visit to Lawson back there in the cabin."

Ben roared his wrath. "Why, that lousy double-crosser! If I catch him, I'll break every bone in his body!"

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Jim moved swiftly but quietly, passing through the dining room. He reached the doorway opening into the living room without drawing Conrad's attention; he slid around the door-frame and put his back to it.

"Hold it, everybody," he ordered. The Colt was leveled at the height of his waist.

Conrad's head snapped around and he started to reach for his gun but, finding that it was wedged between his body and the chair arm, arrested the motion. Dave was sprawled on a horse-hair sofa, hands in his pockets and his long legs thrust out before him. Ben was standing in front of Dave; he had swung his big body at the sound of Lawson's voice and was staring at Jim.

"Where the hell you been hidin'?" he snapped.

"Here and there. Ask Dave again why Louise broke the engagement."

Dave sat up and jerked his hands from his pockets, but he did not make the mistake of going for his gun. "All right, I'll tell him." He looked up at Ben. "Night before last I saw somebody come out of the cabin where Lawson was sleepin'. Whoever it was came into this house. I know it wasn't you because of the size, so it must have been Lou."

"*What?*" roared Ben. He glared at Lawson. "Why you low-down bastard, you!"

"You'll pay for that, Ben. Go on and finish, Dave."

"You're damned right I will! I couldn't believe it of Lou, so I watched the cabin again last night. I was standin' right by the corner when Lou came out of the house. She had her hand on the door-knob when I stopped her. I accused her of goin' to meet Lawson and we had a fight."

Ben was still glaring at Lawson, jaw muscles bunched, the thin lips tightly pressed. Lawson kept his gaze on Ben's hands; if the man made a move towards his gun, he'd have to shoot him and to hell with the consequences.

He said, "Go ahead, Dave; you're doing fine. You went

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

into the cabin all set to blow me out of this world. Only I wasn't there."

"No," Dave admitted. "You got out while the gettin' was good and fixed yourself an alibi by sleepin' in the hay in the Kingdom Come loft." He turned back to Ben. "Ben, she must have gone out to be with him. What else would take her out there at three in the mornin'?"

"Maybe she wanted a little fresh air," suggested Lawson. "Maybe she was sick of smelling skunk."

Ben, hardly breathing, stood rigid with wrath. He said harshly, "This ain't funny. I'll have your hide for this, Lawson."

"I think you're a hell of a poor father to condemn your daughter without asking her first where she was that first night. She wasn't inside the cabin. And the second night I wasn't. I'm pretty well fed up with you and your godalmighty ways, Ben. And your stinking little town and everything in it. I wish now I'd never chucked that glass. I've earned my pay and I'm through. You owe me half a week's wages; that's twenty-five bucks. Fork it over and we'll call it quits."

Ben laughed harshly. "Like hell we'll call it quits! Who do you think you are, to stand there and defy me? You'll never get out of this town alive and I don't give a damn if you had six killer brothers. If you feel lucky, start shootin' and see how long you last."

"I don't care how long I last, but you do. And if I start shooting, you'll be the first to go. Don't kid yourself, Ben. No matter how big you are, how powerful, how much money you got, this Colt that's aimed at your belly makes me the boss."

He was standing on the left side of the dining-room entrance; now he took several sidesteps, keeping the Colt leveled, never letting his gaze leave Ben and Dave. On the far side of the doorway, he could hold Steve Conrad under his gun also.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

He said, "Steve, get up and keep your back to me. And do it slow and easy."

Steve gave Ben a questioning glance, but Ben was busy glaring at Jim. Steve uncoiled his lank form and got to his feet.

"Now draw your gun with two fingers and let it drop." Slowly Steve obeyed. The gun hit the carpet with a thud. There were two windows in the front of the room and one on the side. Lawson said, "Go to those windows and pull down the shades. All the way."

Once more, Conrad did as he was told. He drew the last shade and turned to face Lawson. Jim said, "Now listen and remember that if you slip I'll put a slug through Ben's belly without batting an eye. Go to the livery corral and get my horse. Saddle him and fetch him to the front door and then come in and tell me he's here."

Steve went out into the hall and Lawson heard the front door open and close. He said, "Ben, I'll take pleasure in killing you if you don't do exactly as I say. Turn around and put your hands in the air.' "

King glared defiantly, and Lawson cocked the gun. The double click seemed to convince Ben that he was not bluffing. He turned slowly, cursing beneath his breath. He raised his hands and Lawson shifted the Colt to his left hand and with his right drew out Ben's gun.

They waited. The minutes became ten, fifteen. Then they heard a horse come to a halt outside the house and a moment later the front door opened.

"The hoss is outside," Steve called.

"Come to the door and get this, Steve," Lawson said. Then when the marshal stood in the hall doorway, he added, "You're going out in front of me, Ben. My gun will be against your back and I'll be holding the hammer under my thumb. If my thumb slips, you know what'll happen to you. Now you better have Steve go out there and warn the men he posted

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

around the house not to get twitching trigger fingers when we come out."

It came reluctantly, but it came when Lawson nudged him in the back with the gun. Ben grated, "Go on out and tell 'em to hold their fire."

The marshal went out and again there was silence. Dave still sat on the sofa, shooting shafts of hate in Jim's direction. Lawson said, "You might as well go out too, Dave. Tell them I mean business. And leave the front door open."

When the two men had gone, Lawson waited a full minute, then reached out and grasped King's coat collar with his left hand. His right held the Colt against Ben's back. He was holding the hammer back with his thumb and the trigger with his forefinger. He said, "Start walking, Ben. And walk slow. Right out through the door and to the horse. And keep remembering that you're just one hop from eternity."

King started, walking slowly, stiffly. They went into the dim hall and out through the front doorway. Steve and Dave must have done their job, for there was no sound, no movement. But Lawson knew that men waited in the shadows, men with guns in their hands and murder in their hearts.

When they reached the waiting horse Lawson said, "Take the rein and lead him straight down the road and out of town. And don't stumble."

King took the rein and started walking. His was the last house on the street and they were in the open almost at once. There was no moon but the stars were bright. A quarter of a mile beyond the town Lawson glanced over his shoulder. He could see nothing to alarm him but felt sure that men were stalking him in the shadows. He said, "This'll do," and let go King's collar. He shifted the gun to his left hand, reached out and took the rein from Ben. He let it drop and said, "Turn around."

Ben turned. "You called me names back there that I didn't like," Jim said. "I told you you'd pay for it and this is it."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

He struck Ben on the mouth with his right fist and Ben stumbled backward, tripped over a stone and sat down. Lawson snatched his gun with his right hand, got the rein in his left and seized the saddle horn. He vaulted into the saddle and struck with his heels as he landed. The horse leaped forward and suddenly the guns began to blaze. The shots came from behind him and to his left. He swung the horse abruptly to the right and bent low over the horn. He heard the whine of slugs, heard, above the heavy reports, the harsh, cursing voice of Ben King. Ben was shouting, "A thousand dollars to the man that gets him! A thousand dollars in gold!"

Chapter 6

Night had already fallen when Limpy rode into the Temple ranch yard. There were lights in both the house and the bunkhouse at the rear. He got off his horse at the house, mounted the gallery and knocked on the door. It was opened by a pretty girl in a calico dress, with a red ribbon tied about a cluster of dark curls.

Limpy dragged off his old Stetson. "Evenin', Miss. I'm sorta off my range and hanker for a real bunk. You reckon I could bed down somewhere without gittin' in nobody's way?"

"Of course. Come in." He followed her into a room where a man sat reading a newspaper. She said, "Dad, here's a cowhand looking for a bed."

The man got up and offered his hand. "We'll sure enough find one for you, pilgrim. I'm Charley Temple. Had your supper?"

"Yeah, I've et. Call me Limpy." He gave Temple a friendly grin. "Easy to remember."

"Glad to know you, Limpy. This is my daughter, Judith. You come along with me and I'll show you where to put your hoss. You can bunk with the boys. Sure you're not hungry?"

"Not a bit, thank-ee."

They went outside. Limpy picked up the rein and the two men walked to a small corral near the bunkhouse. Charley said, "Put him in there and take your rig and blanket roll inside."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Limpy set about off-saddling. Temple, watching him, asked, "You a stranger around here?"

"Yep," Limpy answered, and let it go at that, remembering Lawson's warning not to mention him to Temple. He said, "Looks like good grazin' land, what I've seen of it."

"It's fine range here in the valley. Come through Kingdom?"

"Yeah, I come through it. Didn't stay long. Got somethin' to eat and went into a saloon and a feller with a marshal's badge started askin' questions. I got into a argument with him and decided not to stay. Jails are so danged confinin'."

Limpy pulled off his saddle and bedroll and put them on the ground. He led the horse towards the corral and Temple opened the gate. Limpy slipped the bridle, gave the horse a slap on the rump and sent it trotting into the enclosure. Temple said, "I'll fork some hay in for him. Come along and meet the boys."

There were two cowhands seated at a table playing cards. They laid down their hands and looked questioningly at Charley. He said, "Boys, this is Limpy. He's ridin' the grub line and hankers to bed down with humans for a change. Limpy, meet up with Shorty and Pete."

They were both middle-aged, both lean and tanned, and both wore hair under their noses; but Pete was of average height while Shorty, in contrast to his nickname, stood about six-feet-four. Shorty jerked his head. "Two empty bunks over there. Take your choice."

Limpy said "Thank-ee," and carried his saddle and blanket roll across the floor. He dumped the saddle in a corner and put the roll on the foot of the bunk.

"We eat together over at the house," said Temple. "Breakfast at six."

Limpy said "Thank-ee" again, and Charley went out.

"Feel like a little poker?" asked Shorty hopefully. "Casino's kinda tame after you've played it seven nights a week for a couple centuries."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"Poker," said Limpy cheerfully, "is my middle name." He dragged up a chair and Pete rubbed his hands in anticipation and shuffled the deck. He slapped it on the table, said, "High deals," and the game was on.

They turned in at midnight and were up at dawn. Limpy washed at the pump and went with Pete and Shorty into the ranch house. The appetizing aroma of coffee and bacon and flapjacks greeted them, and Judy, busy at the stove, flashed them a smile and said, "Sit down, boys; grub's comin' right up." She raised her voice and called, "Dad!"

Temple came in from the other room. "Good mornin', boys," he said, and sat down at the table. "Sleep good, Limpy?"

"Like a hawg in a buffalo waller. Sure did feel fine to git somethin' under my shoulder blades besides *terry firmer*."

They finished mopping their plates simultaneously. "Make yourself at home, Limpy," Temple said, "We got some calf brandin' to do."

"I seen a pile of cordwood outside; I'll give it a good workin' over."

"Don't have to unless you want to," grinned Temple, "but I'm bound to say that woodpile has been botherin' all of us."

When they had ridden away, Limpy put a chunk of wood on the sawbuck and went to work. He was going strong when Judy came out of the house an hour later. She glanced at the pile of stove lengths and said, "Knock off for a minute, Limpy. I'd say you've already earned your lodging."

She sat down on the chopping block and Limpy mopped his forehead, kicked a length of wood from the sawbuck and seated himself. He said, "I ain't as handy at it as I used to be but I can still make the splinters fly." He started building a cigarette.

"What ever brought you to this part of the country, Limpy?"

"I come here lookin' for a feller. A friend of mine. Just about the best friend I ever had."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"Here in the valley?"

"In Kingdom. Fact is, he told me to look you up and tell you he sent me." He scratched a match on the sole of a boot, puffed for a moment, then looked at her directly, "Feller name of Jim Lawson."

He saw her stiffen. "Jim Lawson sent you to me?"

"Yes'm. You see, I got into a ruckus with the town marshal and a big, han'some brute called Dave. I'd just hit town and was lookin' for Jimmie. I asked if they knowed him and this Dave feller said somethin' oncomplimentary about him. I insulted him right back and he smacked me."

"That was Dave Sibert. He *would* hit an old man!"

"Who's a old man?" growled Limpy. "I ain't but a mite over sixty and I'll be dad-burned if I can't handle him with one hand tied behind me."

She smiled. "Did you?"

"Didn't get the chance. The door busted open and in come Jimmie at a gallop. He was on Dave before Dave knowed it. Hit him onct, right on the kisser, and that was enough. Dave took a back flip over the blackjack layout and ruined a table and two chairs. We went out, leavin' him there."

"Good for Jim Lawson!"

He gave her a shrewd look. "You like that tough hairpin?"

"Yes. And I don't like Dave Sibert." She sobered. "Jim Lawson is a hard, bitter man, but I just can't believe he's always been like that." She went on slowly. "He reminds me of a colt that has learned to love and trust people and then has been hurt so badly that all his faith has been destroyed."

"Reckon you got him figgered out about right, Miss."

"It was a woman, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"I thought so. I came across him accidentally and he treated me with contempt; not contempt for me alone but for all my sex. And once when he didn't know I was near, he said a

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

woman's name. He said it as though the memory of her tortured him. The name was Nancy."

Limpy's face was tight. "Nancy was the woman."

"I wish you'd tell me about it. I'd like to help him get back his faith in people."

Limpy gave her a long look, then fumbled for paper and tobacco and made another cigarette.

"It's the old story, Miss. Nancy and Jim was sweethearts since they were kids. When Jim's brother Ed went on a robbin' and killin' rampage, just about everybody turned against the boy but Nancy and her pa. Her pa was sheriff at the time. Sheriff Tom Payne. They stuck up for Jimmie and his folks, but in time they had to leave their ranch and find range somewhere else. Jim was seventeen then.

"When he was twenty-one, he come back to Redrock aimin' to take over the old spread and tend to his knittin' and make folks forget that his brother was the famous Kid. It was a long, uphill fight and Nancy stuck right to him through it all. I'm right proud to say that I helped him some. When everything cleared up, they got married. They started housekeepin' on the Lazy L and I reckon they was happy. I know Jimmie was. A couple years went by and then—" He broke off to light the cigarette.

"Another man?" she asked softly.

He nodded. "I still don't understand it. I'd known Nancy ever since she was foaled and I thought she was all wrapped up in Jim. But a feller come along sellin' lightnin' rods. He was slick and good-lookin' and could talk the ears off'n a brass monkey. He set eyes on Nancy and after that you couldn't have kept him away with the United States Army. But he was awful slick about it. Pertended to like Jim an awful lot and insisted on puttin' his contraptions all over the buildin's so as to show how good they was. Leastwise, that's what he said he was doin' it for, but now we know that he just wanted to be near Nancy.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"Jim was out on the range most of the time and this feller—his name was Dick Manning—stuck around the house." Limpy shook his head. "I don't know; I sure as hell don't. It's got me buffaloed, Miss; I'll be a dad-burned son of a knock-kneed kangaroo if it ain't.

"Anyhow, one day him and Nancy shows up missin'. His fancy buggy and a young, high-steppin' bay hoss was gone, too. There was no farewell note or nothin' like that, but it sure looked like an elopement. We found Nancy two days later. There'd been a runaway and the whole outfit was piled up in a ravine back in the hills on the road to Sage. Nancy was dead. Broken neck. The buggy was wrecked, but there was no sign of Manning or the hoss. Later some folks in Sage remembered his gettin' on the stage for the East." He looked at her solemnly. "Manning musta rode the hoss to Sage and then turned him loose. Reckon he knew he'd better put plenty distance between him and Jimmie."

He dropped the cigarette and crushed it into the earth with a heel. "Well, there she is. Or nearly. Just one thing more. Nancy had told her father that she thought she was gonna have a baby. So Jimmie lost his wife and his child, too."

"Oh!"

Limpy saw that she had clasped her hands tightly together. He went on, a bit grimly. "Nancy's father was all broke up. He loved Jimmie like a son and he felt terrible ashamed that his daughter would double-cross the boy that-away. And Jim—well, he just wandered around like a lost soul and I reckon everything he looked at reminded him of Nancy, so one day he just lit out. Lit out and left everything. Couple days later Tom Payne, Nancy's father, got a deed to the Lazy L through the mail. Jim had signed everything over to him.

"Tom wanted to light right out after the boy, but I talked him outa it. He'd had a heart spell and was in no condition to

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

travel. I said I'd go lookin' for Jim. I started trackin' him and the trail led to Kingdom."

There was another silence, then Judith said, "And he sent you out to me. I'm glad of that, Limpy. What does he want me to do?"

"Just find somethin' for me to do for the time bein'. He thinks that trouble's shapin' up in Kingdom and I reckon he figgers I'd just be in the way. But I made him promise to deal me in if things get tough. I'm afraid for him. Right now he don't give a dang if school keeps or not and he'll meet trouble more'n half way."

"I know," she admitted. "We'll give you a job, of course. We don't need any more hands but we ought to have somebody to help with the chores. I'll ask Dad and I know he'll put you on the payroll."

"Payin' me won't break you, Miss. I don't need money; just a place to sleep and my meals. And"—he gave her a stern look—"don't go tellin' your pa that Jim sent me. From what he tells me he don't stand in very high favor with your pa and the other ranchers."

"I won't say a word. But, Limpy, we've just got to help Jim Lawson. He needs somebody to think about him and do things for him and try to make him see that all women aren't disloyal and—and unfaithful."

"He'll take a lot of convincin'. And I'm tellin' you you're gonna have a tough time of it. You see, you look a heap like Nancy. She was dark-haired and blue-eyed like you and just about the same size. He'll think of her every time he looks at you."

"That's bad, isn't it?"

"I dunno. I sure dunno." He rose briskly and put the stick of wood back on the sawbuck. "I gotta get to work and earn my flapjacks. But it sure has been a relief talkin' to you, Miss."

She stood up, slim and straight. "Call me Judy, please. And let me know when Jim needs help. I want to be in on it, too."

Chapter 7

Lawson expected pursuit, and he was not mistaken. The offer of a thousand dollars in gold for his hide assured Ben King of all the help that good horseflesh and greedy guns could provide. Jim hadn't gone a hundred yards before they were after him.

To add to his difficulties, his knowledge of the terrain was very limited. The town, he knew, lay in the mouth of the valley and the road which entered it and continued along the south hills came from the east and passed through Kingdom. Lawson had swerved south to get away from the gunfire; when the ground began to rise he swung eastward, keeping close to the fringe of trees and following the contour of the hills.

He was riding away from the valley and it was an hour before he dared draw rein. He heard the thud of hoofs and they were very close. Ahead of him a hill thrust its shoulder out on the level and he would have to round it. That meant losing a lead that he couldn't afford to lose. He jerked his horse to the right, forced him into a tangle of scrub pine and pin-oaks, and drew his Colt.

They swept past his hiding place, riding hard, irregularly grouped. When the last one had thundered by, Jim jumped his horse from the shadows and fell in behind them, becoming another shadow racing along a line of shadows which were trees. They swept around the jutting hill and then the leader

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

halted and the others drew rein and awaited his instructions. The addition to their number had not been noticed.

When he spoke, Lawson recognized the voice of Dave Sibert.

"Can't hear him any more," Dave said. "He sure hasn't got that far ahead of us. That means he doubled back. We'll spread out and work back towards town and we'll have him between us and the boys at the other end."

They swung their horses and angled off to form a line. Lawson, who now found himself in front, gave a muffled oath and dismounted. Dave, riding by, asked, "What's wrong, feller?"

Jim made his voice gruff. "Loose cinch. Go ahead; I'll catch up."

Sibert rode on and Lawson pretended to be working with his saddle. He waited, listening to the diminishing sound of hoofbeats, then grinned and got on his horse. He left at a walk, angling back towards the trees. He resumed his original course and after an hour or so saw a gap in the hills to his right and turned into it, reaching at last another narrow valley. He turned westward, reasoning that eventually this course should cross the trail by which he had originally reached Kingdom. Dawn was close when he found it and, turning into it, came once more to the summit of the south range of hills and knew that the valley lay before and below him.

He rode down the trail and through the trees and out on the valley floor, and this time he continued straight across to the fence. He cut the wire and went through, forded the creek and headed for the little indentation where the Temples had hoped to build their home. It was Crown calf pasture now and there was a line cabin there.

He reached the cabin as daylight was breaking and picketed his horse on grass behind it. He went inside, rummaged about and found a can of tomatoes and a little flour, salt and about

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

a handful of coffee. There was a stove and a stack of firewood; he built a fire in the stove, boiled water in a saucepan and added the coffee. He drank the brew black and ate the can of tomatoes. It wasn't much of a meal and he knew that he would have to get some supplies somewhere. And Ben King owned the only store within two hundred miles.

He stretched out on the bed and smoked and mulled things over.

Ben King had placed a price on his head and caution told him to get the hell out of the country as fast as his horse could take him. But caution was no longer his mentor. For one thing, Ben King still owed him money; for another, Ben King thought himself just about invincible and there was a strong temptation to prove him wrong, to drag him from his throne and make him eat crow—and like it. Jim found himself considering ways and means. It would be a one-man job at first, for the ranchers did not trust him and he didn't even know the merchants who were chafing under Ben's hard curb. Cass Bodaine was supposed to be their leader, and Bodaine knew Jake, the man who had tried to kill Ben. Lawson had spared Jake and Jake knew it; he might make contact with Bodaine through Jake. Limpy was at the Temple ranch, or should be, and might do Jim some good over there. But any primary action against King would have to be taken by Lawson alone.

When you got right down to it, it was King's money that made him well nigh omnipotent. Take his income away from him and he wouldn't be able to hire guns. His income came from the store, from the Kingdom Come, from the cut he received from merchants and ranchers, and from sales of beef.

Lawson lay there on the bed, eyes open, most of the morning, and when hunger told him it was noon he had things pretty well doped out. For the first time since Nancy's death he had found something to stir his ambition. He tightened his belt, took a long drink of water and called it dinner.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

That afternoon he saddled up, rode into the hills and looked for a place to camp. He found a spot, staked out the horse, then spread out a blanket and slept. When he awoke it was supper time, so he had another drink of water and tightened his belt another notch. He told himself grimly that if luck was with him, he'd eat his fill before morning.

It was not yet dusk when he saddled up and rode out into the valley, but by the time he reached the fence the light had gone. He let himself through the wire and headed for the Temple ranch. By the time he reached it the darkness was thick.

There was light in the front house and also in the one he judged to be the bunkhouse. Limpy would be in the latter if he was on the ranch at all. He cut a wide circle around the buildings, tied his horse to a tree and went to the back of the bunkhouse on foot. He peered through a window and saw Limpy at a table playing cards with two other punchers, but Limpy's back was towards him so he circled the bunkhouse and looked through the window on the other side. After a while he got Limpy's attention and motioned towards the rear of the bunkhouse. Limpy nodded, and Jim once more circled the building and stood in the shadows, waiting.

Limpy joined him a few minutes later. He said, "Gosh, I'm glad to see you, Jimmie. Ben King and that Dave feller rode out with a bunch of men and searched every buildin' on every spread. They said they was lookin' for you. What in time you been up to?"

"Tell you about it tomorrow. Ride to the other side of the valley. You'll see a line cabin there. I'll be somewhere around. Right now I want you to dig up a couple gunnysacks for me."

"They's some in the feed shed. What you want 'em for?"

"I'll tell you about that tomorrow too."

Limpy moved away and presently returned with two gunnysacks. Lawson said, "Thanks. Now you better get back to that

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

poker game before the boys come looking for you. See you tomorrow."

He got his horse, led the animal around the buildings and out to the road before he mounted. Limpy waited until he was sure Lawson was in the clear, then walked slowly around the bunkhouse. He had a hand on the door latch when Judith's voice called softly to him. He turned and went to meet her. She said, "I saw a man leading a horse towards the road. Who was it?"

"Jimmie Lawson. He's hidin' out in a line cabin on the other side of the valley and come over to borry a couple gunnysacks. When I asked him what he was fixin' to do he told me he'd let me know tomorrow. I'm to ride over to see him then. I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

One of the men stuck his head through the bunkhouse doorway and called, "Hey, Limpy! You're holdin' up the game."

Limpy answered, "Be right with you." To Judy he said, "I'll be seein' you," and went back into the bunkhouse.

Judith stood there thinking. Gunnysacks. What did Jim Lawson want with gunnysacks? To carry something in, of course. Supplies? Probably. He had been forced to leave Kingdom in a hurry and had fetched no food with him. Just why he had been forced to leave Kingdom she did not know, but judging from the diligence with which Ben and Dave had pressed the search for him King must have considered his offense a grievous one. And now he was going back.

Alarm seized her. "But he can't!" she said aloud. "If they catch him, they'll—!" She didn't finish, but turned and walked briskly towards the corral.

Lawson rode slowly, planning to reach the store around closing time when he was least likely to run into a lot of customers. He kept to the road until the buildings of Kingdom stood out against the skyline, then turned right into an alley and picked his way along the line of shacks until he

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

reached a point directly behind the store. He tied his horse to a ring in the stable wall, took the gunnysacks and mounted the loading platform.

He pushed on one of the big doors; it gave before him and he stepped into a room faintly illuminated by light from the big room beyond. Through an open doorway he could see a stretch of counter and miscellaneous merchandise piled in the aisle or hanging from the ceiling. The storekeeper, a short, stout, baldheaded man, leaned over the counter, his attention fixed on the loungers gathered about the cold stove out of Lawson's sight. Lawson tied the gunnysacks together by a corner of each, then walked through the doorway into the store proper.

The baldheaded clerk jerked his head around, recognized Lawson, and straightened, his mouth open. Lawson glanced quickly to his left, saw four men seated in a half circle, all staring at him. He said, "Good evening, gents," and halted where he could watch them and the storekeeper at the same time. To the latter he said, "Ben King owes me twenty-five bucks; I'm taking it out in merchandise. You can put the stuff in these." He tossed the tied sacks on the counter.

The man said, "I can't do it. Ben'd raise hell."

"If you don't, *I'll* raise hell." Jim slid out his gun and held it negligently by his side. "And I'm in a hurry. Put in a sack of flour, a side of bacon, five pounds of beans, five of sugar, couple pounds of coffee. When you have that done I'll be ready with more."

One of the loungers got up and stretched. "Gettin' kinda sleepy," he said casually. "Reckon I'll turn in."

"Reckon you'll sit down," said Jim shortly, and poked his hat to the other side of his head with the gun barrel. The man sat down.

Lawson hoisted a hip to the counter. "Get busy," he told the clerk.

The clerk shook his head, clucked worriedly and went about

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

filling the order. He kept glancing towards the front door as though hoping that somebody would come in. When he had put the articles in the sacks, Lawson added to the order. "Half a dozen cans of milk, some canned fruit, salt, pepper, baking powder, dozen cans of tomatoes. And shake a leg."

The men around the stove were silent. Jim said, "If you fellows keep as quiet after I leave I won't know you if I ever meet you on the street."

One of them spat in the box of sawdust and said, "Feller, you're diggin' your own grave. Fast."

The front door opened and Steve Conrad came in. He ambled down the aisle, his attention on the men about the stove. He said, "You fellers are mighty quiet. What is it, a funeral?" His gaze left them and went casually to the man seated on the counter. His hand went to his gun.

"Hold it, Steve!" Lawson said sharply, and slipped from his perch.

But dollar marks were dancing before Steve's eyes and he didn't check his draw. Leaping sideways, he bumped a counter just as he fired and the jar threw his gun slightly out of line; the bullet sped past Lawson, who crouched near the end of the counter, and thudded into the wall. Lawson fired once and Steve spun around and dropped his Colt, gripping his arm with his left hand.

Jim did not fire again. He swept the four at the stove with a swift glance and they pushed their arms into the air. "Put the sacks on the counter," he told the clerk: "I'll take what you got in them. Tell Ben I'll collect the rest of the bill when I have time."

Jim took the loaded sacks. They were heavy and he swung them over his left shoulder, one in front and one in back, the tied ends holding them together. Boots were pounding the front steps as he backed through the doorway and across the stockroom. He slid through the open door and leaped from the loading platform. Inside the store men were shouting and

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

he heard the pound of their boots as they raced for the rear of the building.

He threw the gunnysacks across his horse's withers and jerked loose the rein. He leaped into the saddle and wheeled the horse, cutting along the alley towards the road. Guns flamed from the loading platform and lead whined about him. He reached the road and turned left into it, then glanced over his shoulder to see whether pursuit had started yet and was surprised to see a rider not more than a hundred feet behind him. Evidently somebody already mounted had been close enough to follow him immediately.

Jim headed for the shadow of the hills on the south side of the valley. When he reached them he looked back again. The other rider was still the same distance behind him, a vague shape in the starlight. A quarter of a mile behind, other horsemen raced across the open space he had just crossed.

Lawson kept on riding, realizing that he could not expect to gain on them with his horse carrying an extra fifty pounds. He reached a dark cluster of trees and swung the horse sharply to get behind them. He pulled to a halt, determined to dispose of the one who followed him so closely. A bit to his surprise, the rider flashed by without pausing, bent low over the saddle horn. He waited there in the dark shadows and presently heard the thud of the racing hoofs made by the main body of pursuers. They too flashed by his hiding place.

Her pursuers were very close when Judith swung into the Temple yard. She reined in and sat her pony, waiting. She heard the drum of approaching hoofs, then a bunch of horsemen turned off the road and came racing up. She caught the glint of a gun and heard Dave Sibert's triumphant voice. "By God, we got you this time, Lawson!"

"So it's you, Dave," Judith said. "What do you mean by scaring the daylight out of me like that?"

"Judy Temple! You mean that was you we was chasin'?"

The kitchen door opened and Charley Temple came out-

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

side. "What's goin' on here? Sibert, what are you and your men up to now?"

Judith spoke quickly. "I rode to town to get some bacon and heard some shots in the store. I didn't want to get mixed up in a gun fight, so I started back. This whole bunch came racing after me and I got scared. They chased me all the way home."

Sibert swore angrily. "We thought we was chasin' Jim Lawson. He held up the store and shot Steve Conrad. He lit out in this direction and I aim to get him if I have to search every house in the valley."

"Go ahead and search," said Temple coldly. "You're the sheriff. But you're crazy if you think Lawson's hidin' out here. I'd rather harbor a family of skunks than that feller."

Sibert searched, and he searched thoroughly. But he didn't find Jim Lawson. He rode away at last, sullen and wrathful. And Judy hummed a little tune as she undressed and got into bed.

Chapter 8

As soon as Jim reached his camp, he built a small cooking fire and prepared a hasty but plentiful meal. His long fast made the food taste exceptionally good, and as he smoked his after-supper cigarette he felt in better spirits than he had since leaving Redrock. He had made Ben King realize that men lived who dared defy him, who could even punch him in the mouth and get away with it. He had taken the supplies he needed right out of Ben's store and had wounded Ben's marshal in the process. The picture of Ben's wrath that he conjured up was a pleasing one.

He turned in early and was up at dawn. When he had finished breakfast, he got everything in readiness for a quick start, then walked down the side of the hill to a place from which he could see the line cabin. Here he hunkered down to smoke and wait.

Limpy appeared at last, loping over the rise this side of the creek. He located the cabin, headed towards it, and when he was near enough Jim caught his attention by standing up and waving his hat. Limpy angled up the slope to where Lawson awaited him, dismounted.

"Well, you sure raised hell," Limpy said, dismounting. "Sibert and his men have been all over our side of the valley. Come bustin' in last night lookin' for you. The story is that you held up the store and danged near shot the marshal's arm off. Ain't you got no sense?"

Lawson grinned. "Not a lick. I don't need any as long as

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

I have you to ride herd on me. That was pretty smart, leading Ben's gunnies into the valley while I got away."

"Feller, you're way off the range. The one that figgered you was headin' for Kingdom and trouble and rode herd on you was Judy."

"Judy!"

"Miss Temple to you. She seen you leave the yard and asked me who it was. I told her because, believe it or not, there's one gal that's all for you. It was her that led Sibert's bunch to the Temple ranch, not me. Yeh, that gal's as smart as they come. She rode into the yard with Dave and his bunch hot on her heels and beat him to the punch by accusin' him of scarin' her half to death. Took the wind right outa his sails."

"What right did she have to follow me!"

"None. But it's a danged good thing she did."

"Maybe so. But I don't like to be under obligations to any woman."

"Git your gunnysacks filled?"

"Got enough grub to last me for a while."

"Then I reckon you'll be pullin' out."

"Not yet. I haven't collected all that Ben owes me." Jim was silent for a moment, then went on harshly. "I'd like to twist that sonofagun's tail, and twist it till he howls. He's a big, arrogant bastard who thinks he owns the earth. I'd like to teach him different."

"You can't put him outa business alone. And if anybody tries to help you Ben'll shut off their grub."

"He can't stop them from eating if I fetch a load of supplies from Flagstaff and hide them where he can't find them."

"That's been tried. It didn't work."

"King was expecting them to do something like that. This time we'll stock up before we break with him. Of course, we'll need a wagon and we'll need money."

"Charley Temple's got a freighter, a reg'lar prairie schooner.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

But you can't count on his help as long as you're runnin' the show. Him and the rest don't trust you."

"They ought to know better by now."

"They don't. Charley as much as told Dave Sibert that this thing of wantin' you so bad was just a bluff. They know you saved Ben's life and collected the calves for him, and they can't figger his turnin' on you so suddenlike. They think he's pullin' some kind of trick on 'em."

Lawson decided that the ranchers' attitude was understandable. "All right," he said. "I'll do it alone if I have to. I'll get a freighter if I have to steal one."

"Me'n Judy can steal Temple's outfit for you. She's with you even if her old man ain't."

"Leave her out of it. We'll do our own stealing."

"Gonna steal the money, too?"

"I might. I'll try Cass Bodaine first, though. He's the leader of Ben's opposition in town and I can contact him through the fellow Jake who took that pot shot at Ben through the window." He tensed suddenly and put a hand on Limpy's knee; a small body of horsemen had come into sight from the direction of Kingdom. "They're going to comb this side of the valley," he said after a moment. "I've got to find me a camp that's safe. Let's go."

At Lawson's temporary camp it was a matter of a few minutes only to saddle up and tie his equipment in place. They set out, heading up into the hills, looking for a good hiding place. Neither of them knew anything about the country but they kept doggedly at it and finally came to a faint trail which they followed. It led them to a wall of rimrock which at first sight appeared impassable, but showing, when they were sufficiently close, a cleft just wide enough to admit man and horse. They followed the twisting passage for a short distance and suddenly found themselves in a grassy basin where probably a hundred head of cattle grazed. Lawson re-

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

membered the remark one of King's men had made about the park hidden in the north hills and guessed that this was it.

On the far side was a grove of trees. They crossed the basin to it and dismounted at a place where the brush and foliage concealed them from the view of anyone entering by means of the fissure. Lawson set about making camp and when he had finished the task saw that Limpy had seated himself on the ground, back turned, and appeared intent on something before him. Curious, Lawson approached and looked over the old man's shoulder, then let out something like a whoop of joy. Limpy was placing red and black men on a checkerboard.

"Limpy! Doggone your hide, where did you get that?"

Limpy turned a grinning face to him. "Fetched it along just in case I happened to run into you. Figgered you wouldn't run me off as long as I had it with me. Set down and try your luck."

"Luck!" Lawson was almost laughing. "No luck to it. Just brains. Betcha I can trim you three out of five."

They played five games and, true to his promise, Jim won three. Then, reluctantly, he pushed the board aside. "You've got to get back to Temple's place," he said, "or they'll miss you at dinner and ask embarrassing questions." They put the checkers in a box, Lawson talking. "You've got to locate a freighting wagon and horses to pull it and figure out the best way of borrowing it. And while you're at it, find out if there's a way out of the valley without going through Kingdom. When you get that done, come over and tell me about it. By that time I'll have the money for the supplies."

They got up and Limpy said, "You watch your step, feller. No use gettin' yourself bumped off until after you've twisted Ben's tail."

Jim promised to be careful and Limpy rode out into the basin. Lawson turned back to the camp. He walked about, keeping behind the trees, exploring. There was no exit at this end of the basin, no way of scaling the rimrock which towered

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

above him. If they caught him here there would be no escape.

He went to the edge of the trees and stared out across the basin. Some steers were grazing close by and his eyes went automatically to the brands on their flanks. He didn't see a single Crown; the brands he could read were those of valley ranchers, Charley Temple's CT among them. His lips tightened. Ben King wasn't satisfied with his third, he was stealing stock from the ranchers.

Somehow the long day passed. Nobody came into the park. He ate mechanically and drank from a spring. It was barely twilight when he saddled up and rode down to the valley floor and headed for Kingdom. He circled the town and approached it from the side upon which Ben's house was located. It was very dark and the bulk of the building loomed like a mountain before him. He rode along the alley, alert and watchful, until he reached the rear of Bodaine's saloon. There he dismounted and tied his horse behind a shed, then stole to a side window and peered through the pane. Neither Bodaine nor the man Jake was in the saloon.

Disappointed, he withdrew to the alley, found a seat inside the shed and smoked. He guessed it was about eleven. He waited an hour, then went back to the window. No Bodaine, no Jake. During the next two hours he made several trips to the window, all of them fruitless, and finally the lights inside the place began to blink out. The saloon was closing for the night.

Jim took a final peep and saw a bartender was putting out the last light. There was nobody else in the place. He went around to the front and waited by the doorway, and when the bartender came out he said, "I'm looking for Bodaine; where can I find him?"

The man evidently did not recognize him. "Cass drove to Flagstaff for a load of liquor. Be gone a week."

Lawson went back to the shed and smoked another cigarette. He didn't want to wait until Bodaine got back. An idea

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

came, took hold, grew, and his eyes narrowed. He got on his horse and rode along the alley to Ben King's. The house was still dark. He put the horse into a vacant stall in Ben's stable, then walked to the house. Both front and rear doors were locked; he tried windows and found one that was slightly raised. He pushed up the sash and squirmed through the opening.

He was in the dining room. He felt his way into and across the living room and into the front hall. He mounted the stairs and went to the front of the house and into the room on his right. The aroma of cosmetics told him he was in Lou's room, so he crossed the hall to the room on the other side. He closed the door, crouched and struck a match. A quick glance told him he was in Ben's room and located a clothes closet in one corner. He blew out the match, opened the door again, and moved over to the closet.

Presently he heard the slam of a downstairs door and the murmur of voices. Ben and Lou had entered. He waited until he heard their feet on the stairs, then slipped into the closet and drew the door almost shut. He heard their perfunctory goodnights, heard Lou close her door. Ben came into the room and closed the door behind him; a match flared and he lighted a lamp. The bed groaned and Ben grunted as he tugged at his boots, then came sounds which indicated that he was removing his clothes. Footsteps padded across the floor and the closet door was pulled open. Jim pushed his gun against Ben's hard belly.

"Howdy, Ben," Jim said. King stared, his mouth open. "No noise, Ben," Lawson went on. "A bullet in the belly hurts like hell. Back up and lie down on the bed."

Ben slowly backed away, prodded by the Colt. Lawson followed him closely, motioned with his head and Ben turned and sat down on the bed.

"Turn over on your stomach and cross your wrists behind your back."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Ben obeyed. He was tough, but he could figure odds. Jim slipped his gun into its holster and took some pegging strings from his chaps pocket. He bound the hands together and then proceeded to secure Ben's ankles. Next, he tied Ben to a bed post and gagged him with his own scarf. Ben's clothes were draped over a chair, and Lawson went through the pockets. He found a wallet with twenty-odd dollars in it and a bunch of keys. He put the money into his pocket.

"I'm paying myself off, Ben," he said. "This money and the groceries will just about square us as far as wages are concerned." He pushed the bunch of keys after the money, took a quick look around the room, blew out the light and tiptoed into the hall and down the stairs.

He let himself out the back door, got his horse and rode him down the alley to the Kingdom Come stable. He didn't tie the animal in front of the stable but circled to the back and left him there. The street was empty when he emerged from the passageway and he got between the swinging half-doors and the solid oaken one on the inside, found the key which opened it and went inside. He felt his way to the bar and behind it to the till. This was also locked and he used a precious minute and a half getting it open. He scooped out coins and bills and put them into his pocket, not knowing how much he was taking but judging from the weight that it would be enough to purchase all the supplies the freighter would hold. It seemed to Lawson only just that Ben King should buy food for the ranchers he had defrauded so long.

Jim had just finished when he heard a distant yell. He ran for the door, sliding his hand along the bar, using it as a guide. He heard boots pounding the plank sidewalk and knew that Ben had got loose or had been released, and had guessed that Lawson had taken the keys in order to get into the store or the Kingdom Come. He knew, too, that if he tried to reach the rear door in the darkness he would be delayed by the furniture which cluttered the room, and he just couldn't risk

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

any delay. He pushed through the swinging doors and into the street.

A gun flamed and he felt lead snatch at his coat. He ducked low, racing for the deeper shadows on the far side of the street. More guns flamed and men shouted. He flung himself down at the base of a building and lay flat, as men ran past him, heading for the corner. When it was safe to do so Lawson got up, trusting to the darkness to prevent recognition. He saw light flicker in the Kingdom Come and boldly crossed the street. A small bunch of men stood near the entrance to the saloon and the starlight glinted on gun barrels.

"Anybody watching the back?" he asked gruffly, and somebody said, "Hell, yes; that's the first thing we thought of."

It gave him an excuse to go through the passageway. As he emerged into the alley a man challenged, "Who are you?" and he asked, "Found any signs of him yet?" The challenger said they hadn't, but as soon as Dave Sibert could collect enough men they'd sure enough make a thorough search. Lawson said, "He'll be on his way before them. Anybody look behind the stable?"

The man said, "That's an idea; let's look right now," and they strode away together, safe from questioning because there were two of them and Ben's men were looking for a lone nuisance named Jim Lawson. They rounded the rear corner of the stable and Lawson's companion said, "There's a hoss!"

Jim was close behind him. He said, "Damned if it ain't!" and brought his gun down on the fellow's head. He stepped over the man's body, got into the saddle and rode away. He made it back to his hideout without trouble, but he knew that he had been lucky for the third time in succession, and could not expect fortune to favor him again.

Chapter 9

Dawn had almost come by the time Jim Lawson reached the park, for he got off the trail several times. He turned in at once and the sun was high when he awoke. Limpy came riding somewhere around mid-morning and found the checkerboard on the grass with the red and black armies arrayed for battle. He squinted at it and said, "We'll talk first, and you'll start the talkin' by tellin' what happened last night. King's men are swarmin' all over this side of the valley and I had a heck of a time gettin' here."

"Nothing much happened. I went to town to see Cass Boudaine, but he'd gone to Flagstaff after liquor. I didn't want to come back emptyhanded so I captured Ben King, took his keys and raided the till in the Kingdom Come."

"And you said nothin' much happened!"

"It was pretty easy. He got loose before I'd finished, but men can't see in the dark and if you mix with them and keep your mouth shut you don't run much risk."

"Until they start carryin' lanterns and usin' pass words. How much did you get?"

"Enough to buy all the supplies we'll need. How about the freighter?"

"We can get Temple's—with Judy's help."

"We don't want her help."

"You won't get the wagon without it. They's two cowhands on that spread besides Charley and they ain't either of 'em deaf. Or dumb, neither. The wagon's under a shed and after

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

you got your hosses hitched to it you'll have to drive past the bunkhouse and the big house. You'll make as much noise as a circus parade. We got to have Judy in it."

He asked grudgingly, "How can she help?"

"She said she'd fix it and she will."

"Damn it, Limpy, I didn't want her to know. Women talk—"

"Now wait a minute! Your mind's warped all outa shape when you start talkin' women. Where would you have got back there at Redrock if it hadn't been for Nancy? Now let me talk, dang it! I know she double-crossed you, but that was on account of a man, and in them cases women ain't responsible. When it come to fightin' for you, Nancy was in there punchin' twenty-four hours to the day. When you was hidin' out on that mesa she'd have let 'em tear her tongue out before she'd give you away. And don't try to conterdict me because what she did is hist'ry. Judy can be trusted and we can't get along without her, and if you got any regard for me a-tall you oughta be willin' to take that on my say-so regardless of your own opinion of females in general." Limpy took a deep breath; it had been a long speech for him.

Lawson frowned for a few moments, then grinned. "All right, you old pirate; you've talked her into the deal. Tell her to let me know when she's ready. How about a way out of the valley?"

"Judy said they's a road at the upper end. Not much more'n a cattle trail and tough goin' until you git over the hills, but you can make it."

"I'll have to find a place to hide the stuff after we bring it in. I'll scout around this afternoon. Now let's get down to business. I'll give you a man and still beat you."

They played for an hour, then Limpy left, promising to return the next day. Lawson packed a cold lunch, saddled up and left the park to search for a hiding place for the supplies. He rode warily, halting often to listen, and though he

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

found several places, he wasn't entirely satisfied with any of them. He ate lunch in the saddle and kept working westward until he reached the end of the valley. Hiding places that were large enough to hold a whole wagonload of supplies were not easy to find, and he finally returned to the one that seemed the most promising. It was a depression in the side of a ravine fairly well screened with brush. He surveyed it a bit doubtfully and decided that it would have to do.

He ate a late supper and spent an hour or so puzzling over the checkerboard in an effort to keep his mind occupied. The loss of sleep the night before made oblivion comparatively easy after he had turned in. He was up at daylight, however, and after eating composed himself to wait for the arrival of Limpy. He was hunkered down at the edge of the trees when he saw two riders enter the park. The distance was too great for immediate recognition but he knew neither of them was Limpy. He eased back into the shelter of the brush and watched.

The two rode out into the basin and halted near its middle, and now Lawson saw that one of them was Dave Sibert. Dave made a sweeping motion with an arm and when they remained in that one spot Jim guessed that they were making a rough count of the cattle. After a while they turned and trotted to the entrance and vanished in the fissure. Lawson said, "Hm-m," and drew his brows together. Looked like Ben King had another beef contract to fill. He got up and went back to camp and sprawled on his stomach before the checkerboard. An idea had just been born and needed mulling over.

So absorbed was he that it took a disturbance in the brush close at hand to alert him. He rolled quickly and sat up, his hand going to his gun. He caught sight of a horse and whipped out the weapon; then the rider came into view and he holstered it.

Judith Temple reined in the sorrel and smiled down at

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

him. "You play checkers!" she cried delightedly, just as though Limpy had not told her.

"A little."

She continued to scan the board, leaning a bit from the saddle. "Whose move?" she asked.

"Black."

She pointed. "Move that one in front."

He glanced down at the board. "Want to lose it?"

"Yes. Move and force a jump."

He grinned, made the move and the jump.

"Now move the one in the second row and jump again."

He moved the black checker, took it with a red, then gave a slight start and squinted up at her. "Are you smart, or was that an accident?"

She dropped lightly from the horse and let the rein drag. "We can soon find out," she told him, and stretched out on the ground on the other side of the board. She arranged the checkers deftly. "Your move," she said, and the game was on.

Half an hour later he looked up and said, "Draw. You *are* pretty good."

She sat up laughing, the color in her cheeks. She didn't look like a boy now, for she was wearing a corduroy riding skirt and a silk blouse and her dark curls were pulled over a shoulder and tied with a red ribbon instead of being piled beneath her hat. Memories of the one she so much resembled made him so heartsick he wanted to bawl. He got up and strode through the trees as though to scan the basin, took out his handkerchief and blew his nose violently; then, not having any reason for remaining, turned back. Judith was still seated on the ground, stacking the checkers in their box.

He hunkered down opposite her and said, "How about that freighter?"

"I'll see that you have it," she answered, without looking up. "Tomorrow night, Saturday, would be the best time."

"How are you going to work it?"

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"Shorty and Pete will go to town right after supper. Usually they don't go until pay day, but I gave Limpy some money and he's going to lose it to them tomorrow afternoon. Dad never goes to Kingdom if he can get out of it, so I've talked him into visting the Bronsons with me. Limpy will be alone on the ranch and he can hitch up for you."

"Suppose Shorty and Pete don't go to town?"

"They will. I know them."

"How about horses?"

"It's a long haul so you'll need six. All but the riding stock are on the range, but I'll round them up tomorrow and leave them in that small corral near the stump where you saw me the other day."

It was very simple, but as Limpy had said they could not have managed without her. She got up. "That's what I rode over to tell you. Dad put Limpy to work and he couldn't make it."

He got up slowly, his gaze on her. A sudden desire to touch her possessed him. He fought back the impulse, as she asked, "Where are you going to hide the load?"

"I've found a place."

"I know of one that Ben King can never find."

"This one will do," he told her shortly. No woman was running this show.

She nodded. "If you're satisfied with it, it must be all right." She walked to her horse and he followed her. She said, "I wonder why Ben King keeps cattle up here when he has the whole north side of the valley."

"Because they're not his cattle. I've seen every brand in the valley but the Crown."

"You mean—he's *rustled* them?"

"It looks like that to me."

Anger flamed in her eyes. "If Dad knew—!"

He interrupted sharply. "I don't want him to know. It

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

would start the war before we're ready. Now run right over there and blab it to him."

Her chin went up. "I won't tell him if you don't want me to."

They were facing each other less than three feet apart. Purpose came into his eyes and he moved a stride forward, his arms extended. She took a quick backward step but his hands gripped her shoulders and drew her close. His arms went about her. She had doubled her arms against his chest and the eyes which looked up at him were troubled. He bent swiftly and pressed his lips hard against hers.

For a moment there was a stiffness, then her body relaxed. Just for an instant her lips responded; then she jerked her head aside and whispered, "No!" He kissed her again on the cheek; it was like kissing marble. He pushed her away.

"Playing hard to get," he said harshly. "Or haven't you ever been kissed before?"

She did not answer; she just stood there looking at him, her expression unfathomable. Had he known that she had heard the story of his betrayal he might have read in the blue eyes just a hint of pity and, most certainly, of understanding; but he didn't know and his failure to read her irked him. He said, "Well, run along and tell your papa what a low-down reprobate I am. He can lay for me with a shotgun tomorrow night and shoot me full of holes for trying to steal his freighter. And don't forget to remind him that Ben King'll pay a thousand dollars for my hide."

She turned slowly to her horse, took the rein and stepped into the saddle. He stood watching cynically, expecting a final verbal volley. There was none. She rode away, not rapidly, not slowly, just rode away; the trees swallowed her and presently he heard the soft thud of hoofs as she crossed the basin. He said an explosive "Hell!" and kicked the box of checkers into the brush.

For the next hour he sat or paced, fighting back the mem-

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

ories that her presence had brought. For that one moment when he had held her in his arms it was as though he were holding Nancy, and the old wound was gaping again. He asked himself what in hell was wrong with him to let a woman so disturb him and went to recovering the checkers from the brush. He put them on the board and sprawled out in front of them. He thought, *Well, that's the end of our bright little scheme to get hold of Temple's freighter*, and condemned himself for allowing Judith to be drawn into the thing. There just wasn't any plan, no matter how carefully conceived, that couldn't be messed up by a woman.

It was a hard day to get through and the following one, Saturday, was even worse. He did not hear from Limpy and was firmly convinced that their chance of getting the Temple freighter was gone. He rode across the valley in the darkness with the intention of scouting the Temple ranch and, if he found it populated, to make a tour of the other ranches in the hope that one would be temporarily deserted and would have a suitable wagon and team.

The place was dark when he approached; he dismounted and led his horse, gun in hand. Near the house he halted, peering about him, expecting an ambush. He saw a pinpoint of light spring up momentarily and then fade and knew it had been made by a man smoking a cigarette. He stiffened and half raised the Colt.

Limpy's voice came out of the darkness. "That you, Jimmie? What you waitin' for?"

He relaxed his muscles and grinned with surprise and relief. He pushed the gun into its holster and strode forward. "Mean to tell me everything's all set?"

"Sure. Didn't Judy say we'd have her ready? She's all hitched up and ready to go. We can tie our hosses to the tail-gate."

"We?"

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"Why, sure. I'm goin' along. Holy hoppin' Toledo! Somebody's got to take the blame for stealin' this freighter."

It took eight days to drive to Flagstaff; they rested the team, took a day to load, and made the trip back in nine. They drove into the valley after dark and angled across the range to the hiding place Lawson had selected. They packed the goods up the slope on their horses, making a dozen round trips to do it, then drove the freighter as close to the Temple ranch as they dared. Having unhitched the horses and turned them loose, they made their way to the park where Jim had camped before.

They slept late and had a leisurely breakfast. Lawson said, "We're all set now. The next thing to do is to bring the ranchers out into the open against King."

"That oughta be easy. Just fetch Charley Temple and a couple of 'em up here to take a look at the cattle in the park. It's plain, downright rustlin' and they'll be ready to lynch him."

Lawson cocked his ear towards the basin, listened intently for a few seconds. "That's funny," he said. "Damned funny."

"What is?" -

"I haven't heard a sound from them since we got up. Let's take a look."

They got up and went through the fringe of trees and gazed out into the basin. There wasn't a cow in sight. Limpy said, "Gone! Now I'll be a red-headed son of a jugnosed rhinoceros! Whadda we do now?"

Lawson turned and strode back to the camp, Limpy after him. They got their horses and saddled up swiftly, then rode towards the fissure through which they had entered the basin. There they drew rein. Lawson scanned the ground, said, "They didn't go out this way. There must be another entrance to this park."

They started around the edge of the basin and had gone

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

about a mile when they found it. A broad trail made by many cattle led to the wall of the basin, then cut to the left around a projecting shoulder of rock and into another fissure large enough for the passage of a wagon.

Lawson scanned the trail. "Four or five days old." He turned to Limpy, his eyes glinting. "I'm going to follow them. You ride down into the valley and get Charley Temple and his two men. Don't bother with the other ranchers, it'll take too long to round 'em up. Fetch Charley and his men and keep on until you catch up with me."

He put his horse to a lope as Limpy wheeled his mount and raced across the park to the other exit. Limpy rode as rapidly as he dared over the treacherous mountain trail and put his horse to a full gallop when he reached the valley floor. He splashed across the creek, let himself through the fence, then headed straight for the Temple house. He saw a rider approaching and waved, and Judy came racing to meet him. She cried, "Limpy! I knew you'd made it when I saw the wagon."

Limpy asked, "Where's your dad?"

"Out rounding up horses to pull the freighter back into the yard."

"We got to find him right away. Jimmie sent me. You know that herd of rustled stock? Well, King's driven it off. Four, five days ago. Jimmie's followin' and he's gonna need help."

They raced towards the ranch buildings and presently crossed a rise and saw a mounted man leading a horse and Judy let out a shrill yell to halt him. He was Charley Temple. When they pulled up he said, "Dang it, Limpy, why'd you steal my freighter?"

"Tell you all about it later. Right now we've got work to do. Jimmie Lawson's been campin' up in the hills in a park with cattle in it. Them cattle are wearin' the brands of you and the other valley ranchers. Ben King rustled 'em, sure as shoot-in'. Now they're gone and we figger Ben's gonna sell 'em.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Jimmie started after them and told me to get you and Pete and Shorty and foller as quick as we can."

"Our cows! In the hills! Why, damn Ben King's hide! He's not content with takin' a third of our increase, he—"

"Where's Shorty and Pete?" interrupted Limpy. "We gotta get goin'."

"They're around somewhere." Charley handed the rope to Judy and said, "Turn him loose and hunt them up. Take 'em to that park or tell 'em how to reach it. I'll ride on with Limpy."

He wheeled his horse and went racing over the range with Limpy close behind him.

Meanwhile, Lawson rode swiftly, the trail easy to read. He was wondering where in this direction lay the point of delivery and regretting his lack of knowledge of the country. The terrain continued rough, the country rugged and hilly; Lawson paused only to breathe his horse. When noon came he did not stop to eat, and the sun was sinking when at last he emerged from the hills and came out on a level stretch of wasteland. There was a water hole here and its margins were well trampled by the cattle. He knew that the herd had been held here to rest them before the trek across the desert.

He staked out the horse, took some emergency rations from his saddle pocket, and ate a meal. When the darkness was thick he filled his canteen, watered the horse and set out across the desert. At two in the morning he reached the other side and saw a range of low hills ahead of him. And at the base of those hills he discerned a flickering glow and his blood quickened with the thought that this was probably a campfire built by the drivers of the herd. He staked out his horse and rolled in his blankets for a few hours' sleep.

He was up at dawn, ate some more canned stuff and pushed on. As the light strengthened he was able to see the trail which led upwards to a notch in the hills. There were cattle on the trail and he knew he had caught up with the stolen herd. He

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

camped behind some rocks, waiting until the cattle had passed over the crest of the hills.

He set out again around noon, and as he ascended the slope to the pass he kept looking over his shoulder along the trail which stretched behind him. When he was a short distance from the top of the grade he spotted two riders, dots in the floor of the valley behind and below him. He rode clear through the pass and saw the string of cattle descending the trail on the far side. They were moving slowly and he knew now that he could overtake them any time he wanted. He rode back to the entrance to the pass and could see the approaching riders quite distinctly. One, he felt sure, was Limpy. He stood where he would be limned against the skyline, waved his hat slowly, and got an answering wave.

The man with Limpy was Charley Temple. Both were dog tired and their horses were staggering. As they got stiffly from their saddles Lawson said, "You'd better rest a spell. The herd is only a mile or so ahead."

Temple nodded and said nothing. Limpy explained, "The boys are somewhere behind us. Charley and me lit out right off and told Judy to round 'em up. Charley figgers the herd is headin' for Fort Blaine."

"How far is that from here?"

Temple said, "Not more than ten miles. There's another range of hills beyond this one, then a wide valley. Blaine is in the middle of the valley."

"Can they make it today?"

"I don't think so. It's a tough trip and the critters are tired. My guess is that they'll camp on the other side of the next range and finish the drive in the mornin'."

"We won't jump them until the others arrive. There's grass and water in the valley and I figure we ought to slip down one at a time and make our camp there."

This they did, riding down the trail one at a time so as not to attract the attention of the drivers ahead of them.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

When they reached the valley's floor the herd was hidden by the dust of their own progress. Limpy had exhausted his scanty supply of rations and Lawson had a single can of tomatoes remaining. They shared this and called it dinner.

Shortly after they had eaten they saw three riders emerge from the pass and come sweeping down the trail. They were Shorty and Pete and Judy. Temple waved them over to the camp. He said to Judy, "You weren't supposed to come along."

"Nobody told me not to and I thought you might need me. Have you had any dinner?"

"We just ate Lawson's last can of tomatoes. Didn't think to fetch any grub along."

"I did." She untied a pair of gunnysacks she had hung over her saddle. "If 'somebody'll build a fire and fetch some water I'll start the coffee going."

They had bacon and beans and fried potatoes, and Judy had even brought along a big bunch of cookies; they ate like the half starved men they were and when they had finished even Lawson would have admitted that she had proved her usefulness. The last of the cattle entered the pass around mid-afternoon.

"We'd better follow them," Jim said. "We don't want to lose contact."

They crossed the valley and climbed the trail to the pass. On the far side they looked down and saw that the cattle were half way to the bottom. Across the plain, some six miles away, were the buildings and the stockade of Fort Blaine. By the time the tired cattle reached the foot of the trail it would be dusk, and, since there were both grass and water there, it was safe to assume that the drivers would bed down their cattle and finish the drive the next day as Charley had guessed.

The pursuers camped there in the pass, ate supper and turned in immediately after they had eaten. At ten o'clock Lawson awakened them and they rode down the trail and

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

into the valley. When they had approached as close to the camp of the drivers as they dared, they left the horses with Judy and went ahead on foot.

The drivers had made their camp a short distance from where the herd was bedded down, and when Lawson and his party were near enough to make out the four blanketed forms of sleeping men they halted and removed their spurs. They crept up to the camp on all fours, then Lawson, Temple, Pete and Shorty each selected a man, while Limpy stood ready to cover the attack with his rifle.

Lawson reached his man and leaned over him. He was sleeping on his back, his mouth open, and in the pale moonlight Lawson recognized Jeb Cawley. The instinct which seems to belong to the man who lives in close proximity to danger prodded Cawley into consciousness; he suddenly opened his eyes and looked up at Lawson. He made an instinctive movement towards the folded gunbelt at his side, but Lawson jabbed him with the Colt and whispered, "Take it easy, Jeb."

Cawley said, "Lawson, by Gawd!"

"Roll over, Jeb, and cross your hands behind you."

Jeb rolled over. Lawson tossed the blanket aside, took a pegging string from his pocket and bound the fellow's wrists. Then he fastened his ankles together and stood up. Temple, Shorty and Pete were performing like operations on their prisoners. Lawson asked Cawley, "Who's in charge of this drive?"

"I am."

"Got a bill of sale for the critters?"

"Yeah. One bill of sale coverin' a mixed herd, listin' the number of each brand. All I know is that I'm to turn the stuff over to a Government purchasin' agent and get—" He stopped abruptly.

"Get the money for them," finished Lawson. "I reckon

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

you have two men ridin' herd. What time do you relieve them?"

"Midnight."

"Well, you lie right still and maybe I can talk Temple out of hanging you." He joined the others and Limpy came up and whispered, "Everything under control?" Lawson said that it was and sent him after Judy and the horses. He said to Temple, "We'll ride out to the herd and relieve those night-hawks."

When Judy fetched their horses, Lawson and Temple mounted and rode out to the herd. The men on duty saw them coming and met on the near side of the resting cattle, eager to be relieved. It wasn't until Lawson spoke that they realized they had been tricked.

"Get your hands up, boys," Lawson said. "We're taking over." They were startled, but they could see the glint of moonlight on guns and they obeyed. "Watch them, Charley," Lawson warned, and circled around the nearest man and took his gun. His horse nudged the man's mount and the animal pranced nervously. Instantly the remaining guard wheeled and jumped his horse into a run, ducking low in the saddle. Temple brought up his gun and Lawson said sharply, "No, Charley!"

Temple turned his head to glare. "Why not? He's a rustler, ain't he?"

"You're apt to stampede the herd. Ride circle on the critters while I put this bird in cold storage."

Charley started riding slowly around the herd, singing in a low, soothing tone. Lawson took his prisoner to camp where he was tied up and put with his four companions. Lawson sent Shorty and Pete out to watch the herd until two o'clock, when they would be relieved.

Temple came riding in, swung off his horse and said, "We'd better all turn in and get some sleep. It's goin' to be a

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

long, hard drive back to the valley and we'll need all the rest we can get."

"Why drive them all the way back to the valley when there's a buyer waiting over at the Fort?" Lawson wanted to know.

"You mean sell 'em to the Government?"

"Why not? Jeb has the bill of sale showing the number of each brand. I doubt if you get a better price for them anywhere else."

Judith cried, "He's right, Dad! Drive them over to the Fort as though we were delivering for Ben King. Collect the money and divide it among the ranchers according to the number of cattle each furnished."

A grin crossed Temple's face. "By jacks, Lawson, that's some idea! And I believe now I had you all figgered out wrong. I thought at first this fall-out with King was all a bluff; but now— Well, how'd you like to shake hands?"

Chapter 10

The deal was completed the following morning. Leaving Limpy and Judy to guard their prisoners, Lawson, Temple, Shorty and Pete shaped up the herd and drove it to the Fort. The cattle were turned into a corral outside the stockade, the animals were tallied and their brands checked against the bill of sale. The purchase price was paid in gold and the four headed back to the camp. Here Lawson ordered Limpy to set their five prisoners free. When the bonds had been severed and the men were rubbing life back into wrists and ankles, Lawson addressed them.

"You men deserve hanging and if Charley Temple had his way that's what would happen to you. But on the chance that one or more of you didn't know those cows were rustled we're going to turn you loose. We'll keep your guns, but you can have your horses and the grub you fetched along. You'll ride north and you won't come back." Jim let his gaze pass over them slowly, scrutinizing the features of each in turn. "I'll know every one of you if I see him again. If it's within a hundred miles of Kingdom I'll drop him in his tracks. Get your horses and the grub and get out."

They lost no time in saddling up and riding away. As Lawson stood looking after them he felt Judy's hand on his sleeve. She said quietly, "You know, Jimmie Lawson, I don't believe you're nearly as tough as you pretend."

He shook the hand from his arm. "Don't get any funny notions. I'm not letting them go because I'm kindhearted. I want

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Ben King to know that we despise his jackals so much that we can be content with scaring them off."

"I see," she said, and turned away.

They made the trip back in two days, and the evening of their return the valley ranchers were summoned to a meeting at the Temple house. When they were all assembled Temple told them of the capture of the stolen herd and the sale at Fort Blaine. He paid each his share of the money received and gave full credit for the exploit to Lawson.

"By grab!" said one of them named Les Stocking. "It's about time we told Ben King where to head in. If there was only some place where we could buy supplies we could refuse to hand over any more calves and fight his men with guns if we had to."

"I wish I could depend on that," said Lawson drily.

Stocking wheeled on him. "You can! If we'd known this was goin' to happen we could have laid in enough stuff to last us a couple months; but that feller that got away'll tell Ben how we got the cattle back and if we buck him he'll cut off our grub and put out riders to watch the road so's we can't haul any in."

"Suppose you had enough supplies to hold out for three months, would you be willing to buck King? I mean fight him to the finish. And think that over before you answer."

Stocking stared at him, frowning, then turned to exchange looks with the other cattlemen. Slowly each nodded his head. Stocking gave Lawson a long, level look. "The answer is yes."

Lawson gave them a grin and said, "Tell them, Charley."

Temple said, "We have the supplies. Lawson and Limpy took my freighter to Flagstaff and loaded up. The stuff is hid in a place Lawson knows. We can defy Ben King; we can fight for our rights without fear that our folks will be starved."

There was excitement then, as men questioned, exclaimed and praised. When the noise had subsided Lawson said, "There's one thing I want understood. I'm running this show.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Ben King has put a thousand-dollar price on me and it's a personal issue between us. I'm going to break that bastard." He got up. "Go to your homes now, and if Dave Sibert wants to search your houses for me make him get a warrant before you let him in. He'll get one, of course, from Ben's so-called judge; but it'll show Ben that he's going to have a fight on his hands."

Temple said, "It'd be a heap easier if the town merchants threw in with us. Maybe when they hear of our stand they will."

"I aim to see that they do. There's enough grub for all of us." They left then, talking in low voices, excited at the prospect of coming out into the open against their enemy. When they had gone Lawson asked Charley, "You still want that place on the other side of the valley for your home?"

Temple's eyes glinted. "More'n anything in the world, Jim."

"Then saddle up tomorrow morning and ride to the nearest Federal Land Office. File on the quarter-section where King has his line cabin."

"It'll take a week to ride there and back. I hate to leave now."

"You want to lick King, don't you? Locating on that place will help do it. He's set his heart on building there. So far he thinks it's God's particular gift to him, but if the going gets tough he may bend enough to file on it. Beat him to it."

Charley nodded. "I'll do it. And you'll make your headquarters right here in the house."

Lawson shook his head. "This is the first place King will look for me. And he wants me mighty bad. No, Limpy and I will hide out somewhere close at hand."

"I know just the place," said Judy. "It's where I wanted you to hide the supplies. It's where I used to have little parties all to myself and even Dad doesn't know where it is."

"Show us where it is right now. That fellow who got away

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

will be reporting back, and Ben won't lose any time looking for me."

Judy lighted a lantern and led the way along the path to the stump and the pole corral, then cut back towards the rock wall of the mountain. They saw a dense growth of brush and saplings which sprang from the very base of the hill. She said, "Don't disturb the leaves any more than you have to." She moved some branches aside and stepped behind the saplings, moved sideways for half a dozen yards, then stooped and disappeared. Lawson, behind her, saw the mouth of a cave outlined by the lantern light within. He stooped and followed Judy and Limpy entered behind him.

A few feet from the entrance the ceiling was higher and he could stand erect. The cave was some thirty feet deep and about half as wide and the floor was hard and level. There was a table made from a large packing case and several smaller boxes served as chairs. Judy said, "I cleaned it out and kept it in fairly good shape. You can get what things you'll need from the house. There's some kind of air passage and you can have a fire without suffocating yourselves. You can put your horses in the pole corral and I'll catch up a couple more and put them in too, so that Ben's men won't be suspicious."

"We'd better fetch what we need right now. Stuff to eat, pots and pans, water, coal oil for the lantern and firewood. Limpy, you're going to have to make a trip over to the park. Right now."

"What for? We only left a little grub and we got plenty of that now."

"The checkerboard, feller. How'll we pass the time without it?"

They made several round trips to the house, fetching along the things they would need, and on the last trip they brought their horses. Limpy set out for the park in the north hills and Lawson said to Judy, "Well, you didn't blab on the big bad wolf after all."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"I could never think of you as a wolf, Jimmie. I prefer to think of you as a big, noble stallion, capable of affection, loyal, ready to give all his great strength for those he loves."

He laughed harshly. "Meaning some sweet little filly with big eyes and a lovely black mane and an innocent look. Don't kid yourself, sister; this stallion fell for that once and woke up in the glue factory."

"They'd never make glue of my stallion. My stallion would fight his way out into the wild pastures again. He'd know that not all fillies with big eyes and dark manes are incapable of affection and loyalty. Good night, Jimmie. Pleasant dreams."

He had put his rig on the horse to transport it, and the animal was tethered to the corral. He went to it, tightened the cinches and adjusted the bridle, then removed his blanket roll and carried it into the cave. He extinguished the lantern and went back to his horse, mounted and set out for Kingdom. He did not take the road, but crossed the range to the fence and followed it to the town. He rode boldly along the street, knowing that in the faint moonlight features would appear as hazy as though shrouded with fog. He drew up before Cass Bodaine's saloon, dismounted and found a seat on the bench at one side of the doorway.

When he was sure nobody was near enough to observe him, he looked through a front window. Cass Bodaine was behind the bar and the man called Jake was standing before it. Jim turned, rolled a cigarette and sat there, smoking. He could see the heads of the men as they pushed through the half-doors, their features lighted from within. A dozen of them left or entered before Jake came out. As the man turned away, Lawson whispered his name.

Jake halted, took a couple doubtful steps towards Lawson. "Over here on the bench," Jim whispered, and Jake came forward slowly, peering through the darkness. He halted near the bench and asked, "Who are you?"

"A fellow who don't like nickel-plated guns."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"My Gawd!" Jake gasped, but came over and sat down beside Lawson. He lowered his voice. "You loco? Every gunny in town's prayin' he'll meet up with you."

"I had to see you, Jake. I've got to talk with Cass Bodaine. Where can I see him after he closes?"

"Why, up to his house, I reckon. He lives on this side of the lot beside Ben King's place."

"He live alone?"

"Yes. Old lady Masters cleans up for him once a week."

"Go inside, get Bodaine alone and tell him I must see him. Get the key from him and give it to me. I'll let myself in and be waiting there."

Jake got up and moved away without a word. He went into the saloon and came out again within five minutes. "Here's the key. Cass'll be up as soon as he can get away."

"If you need a thousand bucks real bad you can tell Ben where to find me."

Jake answered, "I'd cut out my tongue before I told that bastard. If you're fixin' to cook his goose I want to be in on it."

Lawson rode up the street, turned off at the vacant lot and put his horse in Bodaine's stable. He let himself into Bodaine's kitchen, found a chair. Bodaine arrived within ten minutes, locked the door and sat down. He did not light a lamp.

"What did you want to see me about?" he said.

Lawson told him of the capture of the herd and the trip for supplies. "The ranchers are ready to buck Ben King and they need your help. How many men can you count on?"

"Myself and Sam Tate and Joe Daly, the other two saloon-keepers; Chink Moore and Paul Tibbets, the restaurant owners; Rudy Zeh, the blacksmith; Tim Weston at the livery corral; Tom Carter, the saddlemaker, and Tony Settino, the barber. And Jake Shale, the rancher that Ben put out of business."

"That's ten in all."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"They all have friends who'll help."

"Good. With the ranchers and their help we can come close to matching Ben gun for gun."

"In numbers but not in firepower. Most of Ben's men are professionals."

"How often do you settle with Ben?"

"Every month. On Thursday Dave Sibert will be around to collect a third of our profits. I take it we tell him to go chase himself."

"You do. Every one of you. See the rest of them and pass the word."

"Ben'll raise hell. He'll probably send some of his bunch in to bust up things and start fights and make all the trouble he can for us."

"If he strikes, we'll strike back. He gets his money from the cattle he takes from the ranchers, from the money he collects from you, from his beef contracts, from the Kingdom Come and the store. We'll cut off the cattle and the cash and do all we can to cripple his beef sales. If we can put the Kingdom Come out of business we'll be hitting him where it hurts."

"He has too many men for us to wreck his saloon. We can't set it afire for the same reason that he can't burn ours, the whole town would go up in smoke. If there were empty lots on both sides—" Bodaine broke off.

"We'll wait for him to start the war. We'll think of some way to hurt him." Jim got up. "I'll be on my way. Pass the word and stick to your guns. Buy all the grub you can before you make the break and remember we have plenty supplies in the valley."

Sunday night had come, and the Kingdom Come was open and running full blast. Ben King was standing near the roulette layout watching the flow of gold across the bar and gaming tables when a man pushed through the doors, halted to look about him, then came purposefully forward. He was

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

one of the crew in charge of the beef herd and the look on his face told Ben that something had gone wrong. He motioned the man to a vacant table and the fellow told his story.

"You're sure the feller was Lawson?" Ben said, when he had finished.

"It was Lawson, all right. I hung around the Fort that night and the next mornin' and saw them deliver the cattle."

"What became of the other boys?"

"They passed the Fort an hour after the herd was delivered, ridin' north. Why they didn't get their necks stretched is more'n I can tell you."

Ben thought a moment, then said, "Keep it quiet. If anybody asks about Jeb and the others tell 'em I put them on another job. Find Dave for me and send him over to the office."

The man went away and Ben crossed the street to the store. He walked rapidly, his fists clenched, and he swore beneath his breath as he walked. Inside the office he lighted a lamp and paced the floor, thinking. Dave came in and Ben told him what had happened.

"That's bad," said Dave. "About the cattle, I mean. Suppose those ranchers come to me with evidence that we stole their stock, what am I goin' to do?"

"They won't come to you. They gave up my bill of sale when they sold the stock, pretending they were deliverin' for me. Somebody figgered it was better that way than drivin' the critters back and tryin' to pin the rustlin' on me. Pretty smart, damn 'em!"

"This Lawson feller, I'll make short work of him. Hell, he's wanted for shootin' Steve Conrad, for housebreakin' and for robbery. I'll round him up and we'll have Judge Foley give him the works."

"That'll be just dandy," said Ben sourly. "Just dandy. You go right ahead and do that. But take enough men with you when you go after him."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"I will, but I don't need 'em. I can handle that jigger alone any day in the week and twice on Sunday."

"Well, this is Sunday. But kill him just once and I'll be satisfied."

Dave got up and hitched his gunbelt. "If he's around he'll be hangin' out at the Temple place. I'll ride right out there."

"And pass the word that Lawson's been spotted in the valley and that the reward's still good."

Dave left to gather his posse and the news of Lawson's presence spread through Kingdom. Men who had given up hope of earning the reward got their guns and horses, threw together some grub, and set out once more on the quest. Dave and three deputies rode swiftly along the valley road and directly to the Temple ranch. Had it been daylight, or the distance not so great, they might have discerned a lone rider following the fence in the middle of the valley; but they didn't see him and the man with a thousand-dollar reward on his head rode into Kingdom for his conference with Cass Boudaine.

It was quite late when they rode into the Temple yard, but there was a light in the house and another in the bunkhouse. Dave rode to the former and thumped on the door. Judy's voice asked, "Who is it?"

"The law. Open up."

"What do you want?"

"I want to search the house. I'm lookin' for a wanted man."

"Have you a search warrant?"

"Hell, no. Open up, I tell you."

"Sorry, Dave. You'll have to get a warrant before I let you in."

"By God, we'll see about that! Bill, get an axe from the woodpile."

The bunkhouse door opened and two forms slipped out into the moonlight. They carried rifles and they immediately dissolved in the shadows at one end of the building. A voice

drawled, "You bust into that house, Dave, and I'll split you wide open." Dave recognized the voice of Shorty.

It was almost unbelievable. Never before had anyone had the temerity to challenge Dave's authority. He shouted, "Come out of there and hand over them rifles. You're under arrest."

"What for?"

"Interferin' with an officer in the discharge of his duty!"

"Nobody's interfered—yet. And it sure ain't your duty to bust down that door. If you still feel like arrestin' us, come and get us."

That was the end of that. Furious, Dave recalled the man who had started for the woodpile. "I'll be back and don't you forget it!" Dave yelled, and wheeled his horse away from the house. When they were on the road again one of his men asked, "You goin' back to town for a warrant?"

"Hell, no. If Lawson's hidin' there he'll be gone by the time we get back." He checked his horse and the others halted also. "We'll ride back, easy like, and when we get close we'll leave the hosses and *Injun* up on foot. If Lawson's hidin' there he'll try to sneak out, and if he does we'll nail him—good."

They walked their horses so that the thud of hoofs would not be heard at the house, and when they were a couple hundred yards from the buildings they dismounted and tied their horses and moved quietly ahead, keeping to the shadows. At Dave's whispered order they separated to take positions where they could watch both buildings.

At the end of ten minutes the house went dark and Dave gripped his rifle more firmly. Now, he thought, Lawson would come sneaking out. But the minutes passed without anybody appearing and presently the light in the bunkhouse was extinguished. Again Dave waited hopefully and again he waited in vain. At the end of an hour he gave up the vigil, signaled his men to join him, and led the march back to where the horses were tied.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"We'll search every ranch house between here and town," Dave told his men. "Lawson's hidin' out in one of them, that's sure."

The next place belonged to Les Stocking, and once more Dave pounded on the door. Les put his head out of a second-story window.

"Come down and open up," Dave said shortly. "I'm lookin' for a wanted man and I'm goin' to search the house."

"Got a warrant?" he was asked for the second time.

"You let me in or I'll bust down the door."

"Go ahead and bust. I'll be waitin' with a gun full of buckshot and I'll chaw you up into little pieces."

Again Dave rode off with what dignity he could muster. He didn't stop at any of the other ranches. "They're all in it," he said bitterly. "They'll wish they weren't by the time I get through with them!"

He found Ben at the Kingdom Come just as the place was about to close. He made his report, tersely and profanely. "So they want search warrants, do they?" Ben said. "All right. Tomorrow get 'em from Chris Foley, take enough men with you to make 'em stick, and don't be too damned careful when you go through them houses. And startin' tomorrow every damned thing they buy at the store is goin' to cost them double. We'll show these birds who's boss in this neck of the woods."

"We ought to keep men in the valley all the time. No tellin' what they'll do once we get 'em stirred up. And with Lawson on the loose—"

"We'll put men in the valley. I'll start 'em to work on that house for you and Lou. She'll come around when she knows we're startin' on the house. By God, she'd better if she knows what's good for her."

Dave's eyes narrowed as another idea struck him. "You know, Ben, we may be playin' the wrong hunch. Maybe Lawson ain't in the valley at all; maybe he's hidin' out right here

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

in town. We surprised him here that night he busted into the Kingdom Come. And lost him. That'd be easy if he had a hideout in town."

"With Cass Bodaine, say?"

Dave nodded. "With Cass Bodaine. I'll ride up there and take a look."

He hurried out, found his deputies still waiting, and took them with him. Bodaine's saloon was dark, so they continued up the street to his house. There was a light in the kitchen. Dave posted two men at the front and took the third one with him. He went up the three back steps, seized the door-knob firmly and turned it. The door was locked.

"Who is it?" Bodaine called.

"Dave Sibert. Open up, Cass."

"What for?"

"Goddam it! Because I want to come in."

"Come back some other time."

"Listen, Cass, I'm lookin' for a fugitive from the law. You better damned well let me in."

Again came the provoking question. "Got a warrant?"

It was the last straw. Dave turned away. For a moment he considered getting Judge Foley out of bed and having him issue the damned warrant; but it was two in the morning and he had a hunch that he wouldn't find Lawson anyhow. Dave dismissed his deputies and rode home, cursing.

Chapter 11

It was Monday morning and Lawson and Limpy were playing checkers when Judy called and came into the cave. Her face was stormy and she spoke without greeting them.

"Dave Sibert came out to search the house last night," she said, "and I wouldn't let him in without a warrant. He came back this morning with the warrant and eight men. They tramped dirt all over the house, pulled the bedding from the beds, pushed the furniture about and broke some of Mother's fine china. I'm so mad I could bust!"

Limpy said, "That's too danged bad, but it's war, Judy. It'll start in earnest on Thursday when the fellers in town refuse to kick in with the usual ante. Me and Jimmie was just talkin' about it; we was thinkin' it ain't so good havin' the ranchers spread out all along the valley. Ben can deal with one family at a time. We figger we oughta put 'em all up on your place if we can."

"I'm sure we can. We could take a couple families in the house, put two in the bunkhouse, and fix quarters for the rest in the barn and wagon shed and the freighter itself. Some of the men can camp in the open. Tell you what I'll do; I'm going to drive to town for a load of supplies and I'll stop at every house on my way back and tell them about it. The men can fetch tools and lumber and we can make the alterations before Ben gets wise."

They agreed that this was a good suggestion, and she left them. When she returned that evening anger was once more

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

written on her face. "What do you think?" she said. "I ordered a lot of stuff and that storekeeper of Ben's charged me exactly twice the price for everything. When I demanded to know the reason for the robbery Ben came out of his office and said he'd ordered the price increase and if I didn't want to pay I could deal elsewhere."

"Did you pay?" asked Lawson.

"I certainly did not. And when I stopped to see the ranchers on the way back I found that some of them had been in and had been told the same thing. Nobody had bought anything, of course."

"How'd they like the idea of all livin' at the same place?" asked Limpy.

"They thought it was a good idea. They all plan to be here by Thursday."

On Tuesday the ranchers began to arrive, most of them driving wagons loaded with tools and lumber. They pulled the freighter out of its shed and made it fit for occupancy, then started putting partitions in the shed and in the barn.

The work of remodeling continued through Wednesday, and that night the ranchers nearest town brought their families, their supplies and what household goods they valued and could transport. They were silent and grim; they knew that the break must come and were taking no chances on being cut off from their friends. The men who worked for them came with them.

That same night Charley Temple returned and came to the cave for a talk with Lawson. Judy had brought him up to date on developments and he approved what they had done. His distrust of Lawson had entirely vanished. He had filed on the quarter-section where King's line cabin stood.

"Write a letter to King informing him that there will be no more calf donations," Lawson before he left. "Have the ranchers sign it and take it to Kingdom in the morning. Give

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

it to the storekeeper to deliver to Ben and get out of there before he reads it."

Charley nodded grimly. "I'll do it. Comin' on top of the other it'll just about drive Ben wild. We'd better get all set for trouble."

The storm, as predicted, broke on Thursday. Ben King was in his office working on his books when he heard the quick thump of feet on the steps. He swung around in his chair as Dave Sibert entered. Dave's features were screwed up into an ugly scowl.

"What's wrong now?" Ben asked.

"Bodaine and the rest of 'em refuse to pay up. Told me they were done coughin' up a third of their profits."

Ben stared at him unbelievably and continued to stare until the significance of the statement sank in; then he got up quickly, knocking the chair aside, and grabbed up his hat. "By grab, we'll see about that. Come along."

When they strode into Cass Bodaine's saloon a hush fell over the place. Cass was behind the bar; he had been expecting the visit and his hand rested on a loaded forty-five beneath the level of the counter. Ben stopped just inside the doorway, looked about him, then walked to the bar. He said in a deceptively quiet voice, "What's this Dave tells me about your not payin' your tax, Cass? Reckon he misunderstood you, didn't he?"

"He heard me all right. We fellows in business can't make a go of it as long as we pay you money to which you ain't entitled. This is a free country, Ben. We're through paying."

"If you're through paying you're through eatin'."

"We'll try to get along."

"All right." Ben straightened and suddenly his wrath spilled out in words that were hot and profane. He cursed Cass and his companions, using every vile epithet he could think of, and Cass stood there taking it. When at last Ben had finished,

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Cass said, "Get out, Ben. Get out quick." His hand whipped up and Ben found himself looking into the muzzle of the forty-five.

Ben said, "All right, you asked for it," and went out, Dave trailing him. He strode swiftly back to his office and he did not speak until he was inside. Then he said, "Get some boys from the camp and send 'em up to Bodaine's. I want the place wrecked and wrecked good. Just Bodaine's; when the rest of 'em see what happened to him they'll be glad enough to cough up." He opened the door in the side wall and called to the storekeeper, "No more grub for Bodaine, Tate, Daly, Carter, Zeh, Weston, Moore, Tibbets and Settino. Not a dime's worth."

"Yes, sir." The clerk came around the counter and extended an envelope towards Ben. "Charley Temple left this for you."

King took it, glanced at it, then closed the door. He said, "Dave, I want four men in the store every hour it's open."

"Right. What's in the letter?"

King ripped open the envelope and took out the sheet of paper it contained. "Probably a kick about the doublin' up of prices." He opened the paper, glanced at it, then Dave saw his face stiffen. He read it through, cursed and crumpled it into a ball.

"What's it say?"

"The goddamned gall of them! Informin' me that there won't be any more calf cuttin'. Why, damn their hides!" He wheeled and yanked open the door and called across the room to the clerk. "That order goes for the valley ranchers, too. No supplies of any kind at any price. Got it?"

The clerk said, "Yes, sir," and King slammed the door and threw himself into the swivel chair. His face was red with wrath.

Dave said, "I'd better post men at the roads. They might try to fight their way out to get grub."

"I wish they'd try it! A few men in the hills on both sides could make mincemeat of them. I just wish they'd try! I'll

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

leave that to you. And watch that pack trail over the south hills."

"Funny that Bodaine and the ranchers should both clamp down at the same time. Somebody's been organizin' them, and it looks like Lawson to me."

Ben gave him a sour look. "You were the lad who was goin' to round him up so quick. You're havin' a hell of a time doin' it."

"Me and about thirty others. I been ridin' the hills until I got corns on my bottom. But I'll get him."

"You get them fellers workin' on Bodaine first."

Dave left and Ben sat at the desk scowling.

They wrecked Bodaine's saloon that evening. Ten men swarmed into the place and shot out the lights, then went about in the darkness sweeping bottles off the back bar, smashing kegs with axes, upsetting the gaming tables and breaking the furniture. They made a good job of it and Bodaine could do nothing to prevent them. He and Jake stood in a dark corner until the job was finished and King's men had surged back into the street; then Cass lighted a lantern and surveyed the damage. The place was not beyond repair, and there was fresh stock in the cellar.

A voice spoke from one of the broken side windows. "Open the sash and let me in. I don't want to cut myself."

Bodaine raised the sash and Lawson slid through the opening. He said, "Put out that lantern, Jake." Then, to Bodaine, "They made a pretty good job of it. Going to take it lying down?"

"You ought to know better than to ask that."

"Yes, I reckon I do. Jake, slip out and get that blacksmith—Rudy, eh, isn't it? Tell him to fetch along a cross-cut saw and something to force the lock on the Kingdom Come cellar door."

Jake left and Bodaine said, "If you're thinking of wrecking

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

the Kingdom Come you might as well forget it. King will have armed men watching it."

"I doubt it. He'll never dream that you'll strike back at him. But even if he has men there I don't think they'll be there long. Tonight the ranchers are going to tear down that valley fence. They're going to make piles of the posts and start a couple dozen fires. He'll send every man he can find out there."

Jake returned presently with a big man who carried a saw and a crowbar. Cass introduced Lawson to the blacksmith and Lawson said, "Jake, mosey down to the Kingdom Come and hang around until it closes. Then see if you can spot any guards around the place and report back."

When he had gone, Rudy Zeh said, "Jake tells me you fellers aim to put Ben out of the saloon business. That's risky as hell. We start bustin' things and they'll surround the place and pick us off when we come out."

"We're not just going to smash glass and furniture," said Lawson. "Ben has the men and the money to put things right back into shape unless we do a real job. And we want to do it in such a way that none of you men are implicated. Listen."

He outlined his plan and when he had finished Zeh said, "By jacks, I believe it can be done. Yes, sir, Lawson, it listens awful good to me."

Bodaine said, "And none of the girls upstairs will be hurt, either."

It lacked an hour of the usual closing time when Jake came back at a run. "Don't know what's goin' on in the valley," he said, "but the sky's red and a feller come bustin' into the Kingdom Come and talked to Ben and then went out with just about every man in the place after him. Ben ordered the joint closed and what fellers stayed in town are at the end of the street lookin' out into the valley. Only one around the Kingdom Come that I could spot is Steve Conrad, and he's got his arm in a sling."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"Fine!" Jim said. "We'll make this strictly a Lawson job and keep you boys in the clear. Jake, go down and tell Tate and Daly to keep open until you give word to close. And see the other men and tell them to get themselves iron-clad alibis. Then join us in back of the Kingdom Come."

Jake left again and Lawson and the other two went through the rear doorway and along the alley to the Kingdom Come. There was nobody around the place but the single figure seated on the bench outside the front door. Lawson slid around the corner and sat down beside Steve Conrad.

"Nice evening, isn't it, Steve?" he said, and nudged the startled man with his gun.

Steve gasped, "Lawson!"

Jim plucked the gun from the marshal's holster, felt him over for other weapons. "Get up and we'll take a stroll down to the jail."

Lawson walked him along the street to the jail. There was a lamp burning on the desk. Lawson took a ring with keys on it from the wall and ushered Steve into the cell room. He said, "We're going to reverse the usual procedure. You're going to be the town's guest instead of me." He put Steve into a cell, handcuffed his hands behind him, then gagged him with his own scarf. He went out and locked the door, leaving Steve making muted sounds.

When he got back to the Kingdom Come, Rudy Zeh had torn the lock from the slanting cellar doors. Lawson got a lantern from the stable and a bucksaw from the woodpile and they went into the cellar and shut the doors. They covered the two cobwebby windows with gunnysacks and went to work.

A row of heavy posts ran along the middle of the cellar, supporting a central beam across which the floor joists ran. It was a wide floor and there was considerable weight to be held up. One man sawed through the joists while another tackled the supporting posts, sawing them almost completely

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

through. When Jake arrived they worked in shifts. Two hours after they had started Lawson mopped his brow, picked up the lantern and inspected their work. They declared it well done.

Lawson went outside, got his horse, and tied the animal to the hitching post in front of the stable. He took three forty-foot lariats from the horn and went back into the cellar. He gave the ropes to Bodaine and went outside to mount guard. The men Ben King had left to guard the town were still at the end of the street. In about five minutes Bodaine and the other two came out of the cellar and Cass handed the end of the rope to Lawson.

"They're all hitched together," Cass said. "All we need is a little power."

Lawson said, "You and Jake join Ben's men at the end of the street and let them know you're there. Rudy, take the crowbar and saw home with you and remind your wife that you haven't been out of the house."

They vanished in the darkness and Lawson waited for a full ten minutes. Then he got his horse, tied the end of the rope about the horn, got into the saddle and said, "Get along, Pieface, and when I turn this rope loose, keep going. And fast!"

The horse took up the slack in the rope, put his weight into the pull, then gave a lurch as Lawson spurred him. There came a succession of sharp cracks as the posts parted, then a ripping, tearing sound as the flooring gave. There came a veritable cataract of noise as gaming tables, bar, piano and furniture fell or slid into the cellar.

Lawson lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin. The first floor of the Kingdom Come now reposed in the basement. He cast the rope aside and put the horse to a full gallop.

The crash rumbled through the silent town like the long roll on a battery of tom-toms. It reached the patrons in the two saloons that were still open, it brought sleeping citizens

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

erect in their beds, it turned the men at the end of the street in their tracks to stare towards the Kingdom Come.

"What was that?" asked Cass Bodaine loudly. He wanted it known that he was with King's own men when the cave-in occurred. Jake, equally anxious to establish an alibi, said, "Didn't sound like no explosion."

"We'll see," said one of King's men, and started down the street.

They followed in a pack, puzzled but alert. They saw no fire, smelled no smoke; the Kingdom Come, as they neared it, showed no change in outward appearance. And then a small huddle of frightened girls came out of the passageway with blankets and other bedclothes about them, and Red cried in a shrill voice, "It was downstairs. Sounded like the whole place had fallen apart."

Nobody had a key and looking through the windows was like peering into a dark well. "Where's Steve?" somebody wondered. "He was supposed to set right here on the bench and watch the joint."

Nobody had seen Steve. One of them thought of Harry, the bartender, and a man was dispatched to get his key. Before he returned, a man who was poking about in the rear of the place found the cellar doors open and a length of rope running from them. He yelled the news to the others and they cautiously descended the steps. The air was heavy with dust. Several of them struck matches and held them aloft. They couldn't see much but what they did see caused one of them to exclaim, "The whole floor's caved in!"

They got lanterns and investigated. Broken flooring sagged from the sills, and piled in the middle of the cellar were everything from chairs and gaming tables to bar and piano. Near the foot of the steps was one of the heavy supporting posts; it had rope tied about it and one end showed the straight, clean cut of a saw. The mystery was solved.

Hard glances sought out Bodaine and Jake. Bodaine said,

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

"I'll remind you fellows that Jake and I were with you when this happened." The gazes shifted; Bodaine and Jake were in the clear.

The news spread and people gathered outside the cellar doors. King's men surrounded them, questioning. Tate and Daly had kept their places open until after the cave-in; there were patrons to prove it. The other business men with the sole exception of Rudy Zeh had been in one or the other of the two saloons. Zeh said, "I came out of my house after the racket and walked down with Will Dell." Will Dell corroborated the statement.

"Where the hell is Steve?" asked somebody impatiently. "He was here on the spot; he oughta know what happened."

They thought Steve might have slipped down to the jail office to take a nap and went down to see. There was a lighted lamp in the office but no Steve, and they glanced perfunctorily into the cell room. A series of muffled noises led them to Steve. They got keys and unlocked the handcuffs and they removed the gag. Another mystery was solved. The whole thing had been engineered by Jim Lawson.

"Seems like that bird can do just about what he wants to in this town," somebody growled, and there were nods of agreement in the darkness. Perhaps for the first time in Kingdom's history men began to question King Ben's invincibility.

One of those who questioned stood in the rear of the crowd, unnoticed. Louise King had been drawn from the house by the sound of the cave-in and had prowled about watching and listening. Louise had done plenty of thinking in the months that she sat at a table in the Kingdom Come and there wasn't a thing wrong with her brain. She had the firm conviction that conditions as they were could not last forever; King Ben was a tyrant, and tyrants seldom live long. Indeed, the handwriting was already on the wall; just a few weeks before, somebody had tried to shoot her father through

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

a window, and only Jim Lawson's quick action had saved his life. Now Lawson had turned against him. Lawson had humiliated him, had defied, had laid rude hands upon him and had tied him ignominiously to his own bed and robbed him. Lawson had recovered a stolen herd and had converted it into cash. Now Lawson had put the Kingdom Come, main source of Ben's income, out of business for a long time to come.

Thought of Lawson tightened Lou's face; Lawson had humiliated her, too. He had spurned her advances, compared her with an alley cat fresh out of the garbage and had struck her. She could still feel the sting of his hand on her cheeks, but even more humiliating was the sting to her pride when she had found the cabin door locked against her. She longed for a chance to even the score with him; but at the same time she had no sympathy for her father. All her life he had been telling her what she should eat, what she should wear, what she could or could not do. She was fed up with the whole business and she had made plans. She thought, as she walked back to the house, that the time to put them into operation had come.

Ben King and Dave Sibert came riding in from the valley at the head of a bunch of men. Word of the catastrophe had been sent them. Dave was seething, Ben was tightlipped. He knew that now more than at any time he must not betray signs of panic or weakness. He took personal charge of the investigation, not even looking at the ruins of the once ornate saloon and gambling hall.

He took over the office of Judge Foley and sent men after the town merchants. Their stories were straightforward and they had witnesses to back them. Reluctantly Ben was forced to admit that they could have had no part in the actual demolition of the Kingdom Come. Steve's story cinched the case against Jim Lawson. The fellow must have worked a long time sawing away at those posts and joists, but he was known

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

to be a determined man and Ben had ample proof of his daring and resourcefulness.

It was dawn by the time the hearing was over and the verdict of guilty passed. Ben took Dave aside and said, "I want Lawson. Dead or alive, but preferably dead. Go through every house in the valley and the hell with warrants. Bust in if you have to and shoot if they resist."

Dave gathered his men and rode.

He returned that evening and, the Kingdom Come being out of business, found Ben in his store office. He reported tersely. "The ranchers have all left their places and gone to the Temple ranch. It's a regular fort with maybe twenty armed men. I wanted to tackle them, but the way they're holed up we'd lose half our men. I put a couple fellers in the hills where they could watch with glasses, but there ain't a sign of Lawson about the place. He must be in hidin' somewhere in the hills or maybe in town."

Ben's decision was instant. "Search the town. Every house in it, includin' my own. Make sure he ain't here, then take your men and comb the hills on the north side of the valley. He found that park of ours so he must have been hidin' out somewhere near it one time or another."

Dave searched the town. Every building was entered and ransacked, regardless of the protests of its owners. He even investigated the roofs and peered into wells. Jim Lawson just wasn't in Kingdom. Dave put his men to combing the north hills, but kept the roads and the pack trail well guarded and maintained the watch on the Temple ranch. If Lawson showed there he determined to attack with every available man, regardless of the cost in lives. Anything to get Jim Lawson.

Jim knew that they would be moving heaven and earth to find him. He guessed that King would have men watching the Temple place and was sure that any indication that he was hiding near the ranch would bring an attack which would result in wholesale murder. So, much as he chafed at the

inactivity, he remained in the cave and tried to kill the monotony by playing checkers.

His seizure of the cattle and the destruction of the Kingdom Come had hit King where it hurt most, in the pocket-book. And the latter had helped the other three saloonkeepers, for the miners liked their liquor and would patronize their establishments now that the Kingdom Come was no longer in business. Bodaine's main stock, the kegs of whiskey and beer he had brought from Flagstaff, had not been touched; he could make temporary repairs and reap the harvest. If King wrecked the saloon completely he'd turn the miners against him, thus adding to the forces which opposed him.

For the moment it was stalemate and King's move. Three sources of his income had been cut off. There probably would not be another beef contract for some time, and without the merchants and ranchers as customers the store would show a sharp decline in profits. Ben had to pay an army of employees, and if he tried to end the deadlock by an all-out attack he was bound to suffer cruel losses and possibly decisive defeat. Thanks to the hidden supplies, the opposition could hold out for weeks.

Lawson told Limpy of the destruction of the Kingdom Come and Limpy had gleefully passed the story on to the ranchers. The surprise and delight were all the greater because he had not confided his plan to anybody, not even to Limpy. The destruction of the fence had been Charley Temple's idea and Lawson had taken advantage of the diversion it afforded. Getting back to the cave had not been easy, for King's men were scattered all over the valley; but he had made it safely.

Reprisal followed as a matter of course. Before the flames from the burning posts had completely died, other fiery lances stabbed skyward as men dispatched by King moved along the valley burning the houses which had been abandoned by their owners.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Lawson heard of this from Judy the following morning. "We expected it, naturally," she said. "We knew that Ben King wouldn't let the burning of the fence pass without some attempt to get even. But they were homes and dear to the people who lived in them. Oh, I wish there was some way of making Ben King pay for them!"

"He'll pay," promised Lawson. "He'll pay in blood and he'll pay in gold. This is one time he can't win. Tell every family to set a value on the things that he destroys and we'll squeeze it out of him before we get through."

After that hectic night, peace seemed to settle over the valley and its neighboring town. Cattle grazed contentedly, riders in the employ of King were rarely seen. The miners came to Kingdom after their day's work was done, but now they flocked into the establishments of Bodaine, Tate and Daly. Ben King kept to his office in the store, hardfaced and silent, awaiting word of the capture of Lawson and the capitulation of his enemies. To him this was not stalemate, but checkmate. The ranchers must eat and the merchants must eat and eventually they must run out of food which they had stored against the emergency.

The break must come, and very soon. It did. Around noon one day about a week later King heard the swift thud of hoofs in the street outside his office and after a moment Dave Sibert burst in. Dave's face was shining. "We got them now," he declared. "Got them cold."

Ben came out of his chair. "You've caught Lawson?"

"No, but we've caught somethin' almost as good. We'd worked through the north hills and got a little beyond that calf pasture when one of the boys found a hideout. It was in a ravine, a sort of cave in the wall hidden by brush. He got another feller and they pulled the brush away and there was the damndest cache of supplies you ever seen! Sacks of flour and beans and rice, and bacon and hams and enough canned

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

goods to last the whole town for a month. Them ranchers musta got 'em into the valley before this thing broke."

Ben's eyes were glowing. "No wonder they didn't mind my shuttin' off their grub! By God, we'll fix 'em good. Ride down to the livery corral and get that freighter; we'll haul the stuff right to the store and put it on the shelves. And some day, right damned soon, we'll sell it back to them over the counter. And they'll be glad to buy."

Chapter 12

The long week had dragged by and Lawson, practically a prisoner in the cave, felt like a trapped animal. He played checkers with Limpy until for once he had his fill of the game, but there were minutes and hours with nothing to do, and then memories crowded in. He dared not leave the cave during daylight hours because the glint of sun on binoculars gave warning that the ranch was being closely watched, and sight of him might bring an all-out attack. While Lawson was confident of their ability to defend their position, the ranchers must suffer some losses and he wanted to avoid this if it was possible.

Seeing Judith on her occasional visits to the cave was a torment in itself. The closer his association with her the more she reminded him of Nancy. There were moments when the desire to take her into his arms became almost a physical torture; there were other times when, remembering his betrayal, he wanted to get so far away from her that he would never see her again.

He actually welcomed Judy's announcement that their supplies were running low. To replenish them they would have to make a trip across the valley and that meant action of a sort. Action was what he needed.

They made their preparations for the trip carefully, selecting a light spring wagon and greasing axles and springs carefully under cover of darkness. Scouts were sent into the surrounding trees to make sure that the watchers in the hills had

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

not closed in on them during the night; the wagon was drawn by hand to the road and the team hitched to it there. Lawson and Limpy tied their horses to the tailgate, intending to use them in transporting the goods from the hiding place to the wagon.

They drove at a quiet walk straight out into the valley, the greased wheels making but little sound on the soft turf. There was no fence to halt them now and they drove across the creek and headed for the ravine where the supplies had been hidden. Off to their right they caught the faint glow of firelight and knew that some of King's men were camped at the calf pasture. They circled slightly to insure their not being seen or heard and finally drew rein in the shadow of the trees on the north side of the valley.

It was easier and safer to lead their horses to the ravine than to ride them, and they moved ahead cautiously, stopping every minute or so to listen. They were following the bed of the ravine, and ordinarily they would have led the horses right up to the screen of brush before the cache; but Lawson halted when still some distance away and whispered to Limpy that he was going to scout the place on foot and would signal with a whistle if the way was clear.

He moved ahead slowly, silently, his eyes probing the darkness which in the ravine was intense. The outline of a pine against the sky found the hiding place for him, and he groped his way to the side wall and extended his hand to feel for the brush which screened the entrance.

In the act of moving a bush aside he arrested the motion. He had no reason for believing that the hideout had been found, but if it had, stealth would serve only to warn those who awaited him. The situation called for speed; Lawson drew his gun, took a deep breath, and plunged right through the screen of brush.

He knew at once that the place had been found, for there was a dim aura of light ahead of him and an instant later

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

he broke through the brush and saw a lighted lantern with the wick turned low. On the ground about the lantern were sleeping men, and sitting with his back to the wall of the shallow depression was one who was awake and holding a gun on his lap. The guard let out a startled yelp and whipped up the gun, and Lawson shot him through the head. Jim turned and ran, as awakened sleepers threw aside blankets and snatched up guns. He heard a yelled, "Halt, there!" from the lip of the gully and then came the boom of a gun and the whistle of lead. The gun continued to roar and the lead to whistle as he ran along the rough ravine bed; then came the flash of Limpy's rifle and he heard a choked yell of pain from the top of the ravine.

Limpy had the horses turned and thrust the rein into Jim's hand as he came running up. They vaulted into their saddles and broke the horses into a run, heading for the valley. The ravine flattened out and there was nothing between them and the wagon but a strip of timber. They raced through the strip, emerged on the valley floor, halted momentarily beside the wagon, and heard the thud of hoofs from the direction of the camp at the calf pasture.

"We'll have to leave the wagon," Lawson said. "That bunch is heading out into the valley to cut us off. Come on." They raced towards the creek at a full gallop, drawing their Winchesters as they rode. As they neared the ford they picked up in the starlight a compact body of riding men off to their left and heading them slightly. Lawson inched his horse beside Limpy's. "When I give the signal," he called above the roll of hoofs, "stop and get off your horse and cut loose!"

The horsemen drew closer as their courses converged, and several shots were loosed at them by excited riders. They went wild. And then, when the distance was right, Lawson shouted "Now!" and they slid off their mounts as the horses came to a stop and, raising their rifles, took aim and fired. The leading rider tumbled out of his saddle and behind him a horse went

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

down. The rest of the bunch swung away to the left in a milling mob, and another horse fell. They sped away with rifle bullets pursuing them and Limpy and Lawson leaped back into their saddles and raced for the ford. They crossed the creek well in advance of King's men.

Jim and Limpy rode straight into the Temple yard. King would know now that Lawson had sought refuge here, and Jim hoped that the knowledge would bring an immediate attack. Now that they had lost the supplies upon which they had depended so heavily, only a showdown fight could bring them victory.

The fight did not materialize. King's men camped out of rifleshot and Lawson had no doubt that reinforcements would be sent for and guards posted along the road to prevent his escape. His face was grim when he and Limpy stalked into the Temple house. They were met by Judy. She said quietly, "They found the supplies, didn't they?"

"Yes," answered Lawson harshly. "Go ahead and say 'I told you so.' If I had listened to you and cached the stuff in the place you wanted me to they wouldn't have found it."

"We don't know what might have happened, Jimmie. It was just an accident that they found your hiding place. They were searching the north hills for you and just stumbled on them."

"I should have known better than to hide the stuff so far away from us," he said bitterly. "You can't win a checker game if you have your men scattered all over the board."

Temple came in with some of the other ranchers, having posted guards to prevent a surprise attack. They were grim-faced and dejected. One of them said, "Well, we're licked now."

Charley Temple wheeled on him. "Cut out that kind of talk! We ain't licked. We're in a bad hole but we ain't licked."

Les Stocking said gravely, "If King puts enough men out

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

there on the range, we won't even have meat to eat. Unless it's horse meat."

"We can stretch out what we have for quite a spell."

"A couple of days. I'd say our best bet is to take a bunch of men, run off these fellers on the range before they're reinforced, and dash right over to the cache and load what grub we can into gunnysacks."

Temple's face brightened and he glanced at Lawson. "How does that sound to you, Jim?"

"No good. The stuff isn't there. They moved it."

Temple growled an oath. "They found the cache, moved the stuff and then planted men there to wait for us. How come they didn't get you?"

"Luck. I got a hunch to scout the place. There was a lantern and some men asleep on the ground and one sitting with his back to the wall to watch. There were no supplies there."

They considered glumly. One of them said, "Don't suppose there's a chance of fightin' our way out with a wagon and gettin' back in again."

Stocking said, "If they got men watchin' the pack trail you can bet they've got both ends of the valley guarded. If we all bunched together, we might fight our way out, but what would become of our families while we're gone? And if we took them along, what would become of our stock?"

"Well, we'll sleep on it," Temple said. "One of us might think of somethin'. If it comes to the worst, maybe we can make a better deal with King."

It was wishful thinking and they knew it. Any deal they made now would be more severe than the one they had repudiated. They got up and went to their quarters. When they had gone, Lawson said, "I hate to knuckle down to Ben King and I'm not going to. I got you into this mess and I'll get you out."

"Forget it," Temple said. "You couldn't help what happened."

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Judith said nothing, but she was watching Jim's tight face. "Come on, Limpy, we'll get back to our cave," he said, and went out without saying good night.

Temple said wearily, "I'm goin' to turn in, Judy. Seems I can think better lyin' on my back in the quiet. Good night."

"Good night, Dad. Don't worry too much. We'll find a way."

He left the room and Judy blew out the light. She stood there in the dark kitchen, thinking. Jim Lawson had taken their defeat squarely on his own shoulders, and since his wife's unfaithfulness Jim Lawson was a man who would almost welcome death as a release. She had watched his face and had seen the look of determination come into it. He was going to do something, just what it was she had no means of knowing; but it would be something bold, something dangerous, and he was sick enough and bitter enough to cast aside all consideration of the odds against him.

She moved quietly to the door, slipped out into the starlight and went silently along the path towards the cave. When she reached the pole corral she stopped and crouched close to a tree to watch. The minutes dragged by and became an hour and still she watched, held by a firm conviction that Jim had formed a plan and would attempt to carry it out tonight.

At last, she heard a faint rustle near the cave entrance, then a shadow emerged from the brush and moved silently towards her. It was Jim Lawson. He went into the corral, quietly walked down his horse, and led the animal from the enclosure. He worked in the shadows but from the sounds she knew he was saddling up. She rose, flexed her stiff muscles, and stole quietly towards him. When almost beside him, she said quietly, "It's Judy. Where are you going?"

He spun around at the first sound of her voice, then stood rigid. "I'm tired of being cooped up. I'm going for a ride."

"You're going to do something reckless. I don't want you

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

to. It would hurt—all of us terribly if—if you were to be—killed.”

He answered roughly. “Why should you, any of you, bother about me? You hardly know me. Better shed your tears over somebody else.”

“I’m not crying.” Her hand was on his arm. “It’s just that you’re so wrong, so utterly wrong. About people, I mean. There *are* people who love you, who don’t want to see you hurt any more. Don’t go, Jimmie.”

She could feel him looking at her through the darkness, and when he spoke his voice was almost gentle. “Sometimes, Judy, I almost believe you. But I can’t. Don’t worry about me. Forget me entirely. Better go back to the house.”

He turned and her hand fell from his arm. He mounted swiftly, swung the horse and rode off through the trees.

She stood there looking after him, her fists clenched at her sides. And now the tears were running down her cheeks. She felt that he was going to his death and she didn’t want him to die. But she was only a girl, a girl whom he despised, and all she could do was wait and hope and pray. And keep her gaze towards Kingdom, watching for some sign that would tell her he needed her. She believed that somehow God would give her that sign.

Chapter 13

Jim Lawson, although careless of personal danger, did not relax his caution. He did not head for the road because he knew it would be guarded; he angled up into the south hills and eventually circled so as to pass the Temple ranch on the upper edge of the timber belt. He crossed the pack trail by which he had first entered the valley, moving slowly, watching keenly for signs of the men who were guarding it. He continued along the fringe of trees for some distance, then cut down the slope until he reached the base of the hills. When he was sure he had passed the men who watched the road to Kingdom he found the road and followed it.

He entered Kingdom by means of an alley and continued until he came to Bodaine's house. By this time the saloons were closed and the town was as silent as a graveyard. He tried Bodaine's back door, found it locked, and rapped lightly on the panels. He continued to rap at intervals until at last he heard the sound of shuffling feet and a cautious, "Who is it?" He whispered his name and Bodaine opened the door.

"Leave it unlocked," Lawson said. "I'll put my horse in the stable."

He did this, then went into the dark kitchen and closed and bolted the door behind him. Bodaine asked, "What happened in the valley? Dave Sibert came galloping into town and took every man he could find back with him."

Lawson told him of the loss of the supplies and Bodaine said, "Gosh, Jim, that's bad. Awful bad. We're about out

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

of grub ourselves and were fixing to get in touch with you to get more. Without grub we just can't keep up the fight against King."

"We'll eat if we have to break into the store and take what we need."

There was a moment of silence, then Bodaine said, "King has four men in the store every minute it's open."

"Why not tackle it when it's closed?"

"There's nobody there then, of course. But it's locked up tight and Steve Conrad is prowling around."

"To hell with him. What other men has King in town?"

Excitement showed in Bodaine's face. "Say! You might have something there, Lawson. Sibert took just about every man except the four at the store. You want to try it tonight—now?"

"No. We can't just carry stuff away in our hands. While we're at it we might as well make it worth while. You'll have to see Weston at the livery corral and arrange for packhorses. Two for the valley and two for the town. And the other men will have to be in on it, for we'll have to work fast and the more men we have the quicker we'll get it done."

"You can count on them. We're all in this so deep that we can't back out. If we don't eat we'll have to knuckle down to Ben King, and if we do that he'll grind us into the dust so deep that we'll never get out."

"I'm glad you realize it's a fight to the finish. We've got to take off the gloves and fight with our bare fists. With our feet and claws and teeth, too. Limpy and I killed some of King's men tonight and we'll have to kill more before we get through with this."

Bodaine said, "I'll pass the word tomorrow, and I'll get the packhorses and see that they're waiting behind the store."

They talked it over for a while, then turned in. In the morning Bodaine said, "I've been getting my meals at the restaurant. They're still in business. When Ben refused to sell

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

them grub, the miners went to the store and bought everything they needed. Ben couldn't do a thing about it or the miners would take the town apart. I'll fetch a tray of stuff back for you. Lock the door behind me and wait right here."

He returned half an hour later carrying a tray, and Jim let him in. Bodaine waited for him to finish the breakfast, then said, "I'll fetch you some dinner at noon. Meanwhile, I'll get in touch with the other men and scout around and let you know how things stand."

Across the vacant lot stood the house of Ben King. Ben had gone out into the valley with his men, but Louise was at home. A week had passed since the wrecking of the Kingdom Come and to Louise it seemed like a year. She saw her father only rarely and they usually spent what time they were together quarreling over Dave Sibert. Louise had come to detest even his name. She wanted freedom to choose her friends, to go when she liked and do what she wanted to do.

Louise had gone on trips with her father and one of those trips was to Chicago. Louise had never forgotten that trip; she remembered all too well the bright lights, the theatres, the glittering restaurants, the wonderful hotels. A girl with her beauty could go far there, she told herself; and with the passage of the dull days she found herself making plans. There was no stage service out of Kingdom, but she could ride. She took to saddling up one of her father's horses and going for rides along the Flagstaff road. She didn't enjoy horseback riding but she forced herself to it, increasing the length of her time in the saddle until she no longer suffered physical discomfort. When she left she would take nothing but a blanket roll, some food and the clothes she wore. She could get a complete wardrobe when she reached the city. She would need money, but she knew where she could get it.

On this particular morning she was seated at the breakfast table having a second cup of coffee. The table was by a win-

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

dow and she could see Bodaine's house on the far side of the vacant lot. She was gazing absently at it when she saw Bodaine pass carrying a tray. She watched as he carried it to the back door and was admitted to the house. She gave the incident no thought, assuming that Cass has fetched his breakfast home instead of eating it at the restaurant.

When she had finished she went out to the stable and saddled up the horse, and as she led him into the yard she saw Bodaine come out with the tray. She got into the saddle and set out on the Flagstaff road, promptly forgetting Bodaine and his tray in her concentration on riding. She returned at noon, put up the horse, cleaned up, changed her clothes, and prepared dinner for herself. While she was eating she saw Bodaine arrive with another tray. Her brows drew together in a frown. Bodaine never ate dinner at home, therefore he must have a visitor. She remembered that the door had been opened that morning by somebody inside the house. She kept watching the windows in the hope of getting a glimpse of the visitor but nobody approached them and presently Bodaine came out with the tray.

Louise found herself wondering who this visitor could be, and, because it offered her something to do, she went out the back door, sauntered to the stable, went through it and out its rear doorway. She walked across the space which separated it from Bodaine's stable, slipped through the rear entrance and peered in the stalls. Bodaine kept one horse; there were two in the stable now. She knew Bodaine's horse by sight, but she did not recognize the other nor did the brand on its hip mean anything to her except that it was not from any of the valley ranches. She turned to the saddles which hung on the wall. One had Bodaine's initials burned in the leather skirt; the other had initials, too. They were formed from brass studs and they were J L. She stiffened, her frightened gaze going to the front doorway. J L meant James Lawson. Jim Lawson was hiding in Bodaine's house!

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

She ran quickly through the rear entrance and across to their own stable. There she stopped, looking towards the back door of Bodaine's house. He didn't come out; he didn't know that she had discovered his presence. Her eyes, which had been wide with excitement, narrowed and her face hardened. She had told him that he would pay for his treatment of her and now she had him at her mercy. She walked back to the house, thinking.

There were four of her father's men at the store, but if they captured Lawson they would claim the thousand-dollar reward. Steve Conrad was a negligible quantity, no match for Lawson. If she sent word directly to her father he would consider Lawson's apprehension a family matter and would brush aside her claim. And she could use that thousand dollars in Chicago. Dave Sibert was the man to notify; he would see that she got the reward if for no other reason than to win back her friendship. Her lips tightened and she nodded jerkily. She sat down at her father's desk and wrote a note, sealed it in an envelope and addressed it to Mr. David Sibert.

She took the note to the store and gave it to one of her father's men. "I want you to find Dave Sibert and give this to him," she directed. "Don't give it to anybody else." The man nodded, told his companions that he was riding on a mission for the queen and left the store. Louise returned to the house to watch and wait.

Louise was still watching and waiting when darkness fell, her impatience and growing anger causing her to forget about supper. She could not know that her instructions to deliver the note to nobody but Dave had caused the delay. The messenger had to inquire as to Dave's whereabouts, and several times was sent to camps miles distant only to find that Sibert had left for another one in a different direction. He stopped with some of the men for supper and finally located Dave inspecting the guards at the road at the upper end of the valley.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Dave read the note by the light of a match and swore excitedly. He sent the man back to town without any explanation, then rode swiftly to the nearest camp and ordered the men to follow him to town. He circled out on the range in front of the Temple ranch and found Ben King camped with a large force of men there. He told Ben the news and Ben, eager to trap his arch enemy, went along with most of his men, leaving only three to watch the ranch, trusting that the ranchers would not discover the depletion of the force which confronted them and deciding that it didn't matter if they did. They just couldn't risk leaving their home base.

One of his enemies knew of his departure. Judith King, restless, worried, still kept her eyes towards Kingdom, waiting for that sign. A whole night and a day had passed since Jim's departure, and she had not slept since he had gone. She was out on the road now, having slipped past their own guards, and she heard the commotion at the distant camp and knew by the sound of hoofs that a concerted movement was taking place. It was too distant and too dark for her to distinguish the racing forms, but her ears told her that they were riding towards Kingdom. Jim Lawson, she was sure, had gone to Kingdom. She remained where she was, her gaze turned towards the town ten miles away.

Dave Sibert was foxy enough to approach the town cautiously and to lead his men into an alley instead of the street. This time Lawson must have no warning of their presence. Half way to Bodaine's house they left their horses and moved ahead on foot. They reached Bodaine's house and at Dave's low-voiced command started to surround it. A slim figure came running across the vacant lot and interrupted them. It was Louise. "He's gone," she said bitterly. "He got his horse and went down the alley half an hour ago. What held you up?"

"Your sendin' for Dave instead of me," King told her wrathfully. He said to Dave, "The feller may be hangin' around town yet. Divide up into three bunches, one for each

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

alley and one for the street. Start at this end of town and search every buildin'. And if anybody makes a noise and scares him off, I'll skin him alive."

The store had closed at ten, and shortly thereafter Lawson had taken his horse and led him along the alley. At the valley end of town he circled to the passageway on the other side and followed it to the loading platform behind the store. Men were awaiting him there, the town merchants and saloon-keepers and the man called Jake. And there were four pack-horses.

The heavy shutters on the store windows were not closed, but the sashes were fastened and the doors barred. Bodaine had a jug of molasses and a newspaper; he spread molasses on the paper and stuck the sheet over a pane. He tapped with a stone until the glass broke, the pieces adhering to the molasses. There was no tinkle of broken glass to draw attention. Jake slipped through the opening and unbarred the back door and they went to work.

"We'll load you first, Jim," said Bodaine. "You got to get back into the valley and you'll want to have a head start."

Weston had fetched the gunnysacks from the livery corral and they moved about in the darkness filling them. Jim loaded them on the pack animals as rapidly as they were passed to him. The gunnysacks held small articles and canned goods; the sacks of flour and beans and the hams and sides of bacon were loaded as they were.

"All ready," whispered Bodaine at last. "Keep off the road and in the shadows as much as you can." He pressed Lawson's arm. "Looks like we're going to get away with it."

Jim went out on the loading platform with him. He heard a small rattle such as a man might make by walking into a pile of tin cans, and peered into the blackness of the alley. He saw movement and whipped out his gun.

"What is it?" Bodaine whispered. "You see anything?"

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

There was movement! Shadows were standing towards the store along the alley. A man shouted, "There he is! On the loadin' platform!"

Lawson dropped to all fours, dragging Bodaine with him. A gun flamed and the bullet passed over them with its peculiar whine. Lawson fired at the flash, said sharply, "Get inside, Bodaine! You—Weston! Inside the store."

Jim fired three shots rapidly, covering the movements of Weston, who was vaulting to the platform. He fired once more as they crowded through the doorway and pushed against the men who had come hurriedly to the entrance. Lawson sprang inside and slammed the door, feeling for the bar. He called, "Close all the shutters you can get to!"

A volley of shots sounded and lead plunked into the heavy doors.

Somebody said, "They've got us cold. Boys, we're sunk!"

"Cut out that kind of talk and get those shutters closed." Lawson pushed through them and started for the front of the store, reloading his Colt as he did so. It was very dark, but he remembered the layout and kept an elbow brushing the showcases to guide him along the aisle. He heard boots thud on the front steps and then came the rattle of the door as a key was inserted in the lock. He pushed the last cartridge into the cylinder, snapped it shut and fired through the door. There came a cry of surprise and the sound of retreating footsteps.

There was a bay window on either side of the central door and the entrance could be seen by looking through the glass sides. He moved across to the left wall and saw that the steps were temporarily clear. A man came running up and stood peering out through the glass. Starlight reflected on a nickel-plated gun. Jake muttered, "All I ask is one good shot at the bastard."

"You'll probably get it," said Lawson. "Right now you can do more good if you hunt up a hammer, some twentypenny

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

nails, and a length of plank to spike over these doors." Jake turned away and Lawson saw occasional patches of light as Jake struck matches in an attempt to locate a bin of nails. "They sell guns in this place," Jim called. "Find them and arm yourselves."

Bodaine's voice said, "I found a bullseye lantern," and presently light from this source was aiding their search. Jake came up with a length of two-by-four, hammer and spikes, and nailed the timber across the front doors. A few of the side windows had been shuttered.

The building was surrounded. Lawson, peering through the front windows, could see the vague forms of men on the far side of the street and watchers at other windows reported more men on the sides. In the back they could hear the confused sounds of voices and moving feet, and presently Ben King called from the loading platform, "Lawson, you'd better give up! We got you surrounded and you can't get away." They didn't answer and they heard King jump from the platform. Jake ran to the single rear window, knocked the panes out with his nickel-plated gun, and instantly a volley of lead took out the remaining glass and thudded into the wall. Lawson got hold of him and dragged him back.

"Don't be a fool, Jake," he said. And Jake muttered, "Just one shot. That's all I want."

The men had armed themselves with rifles and revolvers taken from the cases, and there was plenty ammunition. Bodaine had lighted a lamp behind a counter and had turned it low so that they could see well enough to move about without bumping into each other. Lawson suddenly remembered the door which opened into King's office; there was a bolt on the store side and he shot it. He moved around the room noticing that some of the men were at windows, crouched low, grimly holding rifles. Tony Settino, the Italian barber, held an opened razor in his hand. The firing had ceased for the moment and the silence was deep.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Again King spoke from the loading platform. "Your last chance to surrender, Lawson. I have over twenty men here; if you refuse to come out with your hands in the air, we're coming in after you. Cass and Tim and the rest of you, turn Lawson over to me and you go free. You have a minute to make up your minds."

Once more Jake leaped for the window and again Lawson grabbed him and pulled him back. He held Jake until Ben had gone, then walked to the doorway which led into the store proper. Bodaine, Tate, Weston and Tom Carter, the harness maker, were standing in a grim, silent group.

"All right, boys," Lawson said. "You heard the offer. Want to turn me over to him?"

Carter said gravely, "We don't do things that way, Lawson. You're one of us. If Ben King wants you he takes us with you."

"The rest of you feel the same way?"

"We do," said Bodaine firmly. "We're in this together. King can probably break in and if he does there'll be a slaughter. But we're not sacrificing you or anybody else to save our own hides."

Weston said, "If only the ranchers knew about this we could just about wipe out Ben's army. With them to hit from the rear and us to rush 'em from the store—! But what the hell! they can't hear shots ten miles away, and even if they could and knew what the shootin' was about they wouldn't know that Ben's pulled his men away from the ranch."

Lawson said, "That minute's just about up. Likely they'll attack from the front. They can shoot the display windows out and try to get in that way. Let's get set for them."

He called men away from the windows and they hastily formed a line across the width of the store. One of the guards at the front yelled, "Here they come!" and backed away, firing.

The windows rattled under a volley, then glass shattered

as the leaden slugs crashed through the panes. The defenders had crouched low and the leaden hail swept over their heads. They started shooting and two men who had leaped through the shattered windows fell. The men in the store kept pumping lead through the display bays and finally King's men retreated to the street.

Lawson grabbed Jake by a sleeve and pulled him away from the line. He led the way into the back room, said, "I'm going to make a break for it. I'm going to try to fetch those ranchers in. We'll unbar this back door and when I give you the word you yank it open for me. As soon as I'm out, close it and bar it. Understand?"

"You ain't got a Chinaman's chance. And by the time you ride that ten miles after 'em and ten miles back with 'em it'll be all over."

"Not the way I'm going to do it." Lawson quietly removed the bar and leaned it against the wall where Jake could get it easily. "Grab hold of that latch and when I say so open the door—fast."

He went to the rear window and cautiously peered through. There were men back there, a couple near one corner and three near the other, their attention on what was happening at the front of the building. One of the group of three was a big man and, even in that faint light, Lawson thought he recognized him. He backed away, drew his gun and said, "Tell the boys to hold the fort no matter what happens. All right, open her up!"

Jake yanked open the big door and Lawson leaped out on the loading platform. As he crossed it and jumped to the ground he heard the door slam behind him. He ran directly towards the big man and his two companions.

They wheeled and Jim fired. He sprang sideways and the bullets they loosed swept by him. He fired again and one of them went down. Again he leaped and again he fired. A second man stumbled, dropped his gun and staggered weakly

towards the building. The big man alone now faced Lawson and Jim had no time to sidestep again. Sibert's bullet struck him high on the left arm and the impact of the slug swung Jim half way around. He fired as he was turning and saw Sibert stagger. He continued the motion started by the bullet, pivoting completely and firing again as his sights lined on the target after the turn.

Dave was stumbling towards him and he seemed to have lost control over his gun. The slugs sang past Lawson or bit into the ground. Jim fired one more shot, the last in his gun, and he was so close that he could see the grimace of anguish on Dave's face. Jim had to step aside to prevent the man's collapsing against him. He leaped into the shadows and ran.

The two at the far corner had withheld their fire because of the danger of hitting their own men, but now they cut loose in earnest. But Lawson was hidden from their sight and they were shooting at shadows. Lawson hoped that the firing would be mistaken by those in front as part of the general engagement, thus giving him time to do what he had decided to do.

He cut through a passageway to the street and went along it, reloading his Colt. He came to Bodaine's house and the vacant lot beside it. On the far side of the lot a light shone in King's house. He went past the lot and mounted King's porch. He tried the door, found it locked and rapped sharply. The gunfire had ceased and it was silent. He heard the click of heels in the hallway, heard a key turn in the lock, then the door opened and he was facing Louise. He pushed inside and kicked the door shut.

Louise moved back a pace, one hand going to her throat. "You!" she gasped. "What are you doing here? I thought—"

"That they'd got me? Well—" He glanced at his limp left arm. The coat sleeve was soaked and blood was dripping from the ends of his fingers. He laughed harshly. "Looks as though they did, at that. But not all of me by a long shot.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

March ahead of me back into the kitchen." Then, as she simply stared at him, he waved the gun threateningly. "March, or I'll bust you over that lovely blonde head with this."

She backed along the hall, her frightened gaze on him. There was a lighted lamp in the kitchen. He glanced quickly around, saw a coil of clothesline hanging on a nail and took it down. He said, "Sit in that chair."

Louise obeyed mechanically and he proceeded to tie her to it, helping a little with his left hand. He lifted the corner of his mouth in a sardonic grin. "Hate to treat a lady like this, but it's only temporary." She called him a name and he added, "That's the King in you talking."

There was a can of kerosene in a corner; he got it and went upstairs. Maybe the ranchers couldn't hear the gunfire but they would see the glow of fire in the sky over Kingdom. Whether or not it would fetch them he did not know. He thought of Judy; she knew that he had left the ranch and would guess that he had come to Kingdom. At this hour she should be in bed; he could only hope that she was awake and watching. He grinned sourly. Hoping that a woman was watching! He! There was an ironic twist to that.

He poured kerosene over the carpets, the curtains, the bedding, and the woodwork until there was no more left in the can. He struck matches and got the fire started. The kerosene caught with a loud *woosh* and the flames leaped high. He descended the stairs quickly, knowing that it would not be long before the blaze would be detected by King's men. It was one reason for the fire; if it didn't bring the ranchers, at least it would relieve the pressure on the men inside the store.

Louise had by now almost completely freed herself of the ropes. She cried, "What did you do?"

"Started a bonfire to pay your pa for those he built in the valley," he said quietly.

They could hear the roar of the flames and suddenly she redoubled her efforts to get free, her eyes big. "Help me out

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

of this! Hurry! There's something I must save. Hurry, I tell you!"

In her excitement, she tangled herself in the rope. He said, "Keep your shirt on," and freed her.

She ran past him and into the front room and he followed. She seemed to have forgotten his presence. She went to a wall panel and felt feverishly about its surface, pressing, and suddenly the panel slid back and Lawson saw the front of a small safe. She fell on her knees before it and her hands trembled as she moved the dial. He stood behind her watching, and his face was tight.

She missed it the first time, said "Damn" and started over again. Right to twenty; left three times to seventy; back twice to ten; left to zero. She tugged at the handle and the door swung open. She snatched up a metal box and got up and he said, "I'll take that."

He was holding his gun with his numb left hand and had snatched the box with his right. She wheeled on him, fury in her eyes. "No!" she cried, and struck him in the face with her fist. He clung to the box and she twisted about trying to tear it from his grasp. He let go suddenly, raised his hand and put the palm against her face and pushed. She staggered backwards and sat down violently. The box slipped from her grasp and struck the floor; the lid came open and packages of banknotes and containers of coins spilled out on the floor. She scrambled for them and he seized her by the hair and threw her roughly aside. He said fiercely, "That money belongs to the men your father robbed through the years and I'm going to see that they get it. Put your claws on it and I'll stamp on them."

She cried, "Damn you, Jim Lawson, I need it! I want to get out of this hole! I can't go without it!"

He righted the box, started scooping up money and filling it. She made another try and got another shove. Suddenly she collapsed against a sofa and started to cry. He finished filling

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

the box, picked it up and stood for a moment looking down at her. She lowered her hands and the face she turned to him was distorted with disappointment and rage.

"You win" she said bitterly. "You always win. And, God! how I wanted to go."

He set the box on the table, took out a package of bank-notes, saw that they were twenties and riffled their edges in a quick computation. He tossed the package into her lap. "Ought to be a couple thousand there," he said quietly. The smell of smoke was strong and the hall was brilliant with light. "I reckon it's time we both got out of here."

He went through the dining-room and the kitchen and out the rear doorway. She followed him. There was no breeze and the house stood alone; the fire would not spread. He turned left towards Bodaine's house, and when he looked back Louise was running towards the stable.

Chapter 14

The sky was bright from the flames and Jim Lawson had to dodge from shadow to shadow as he moved along the alley. In the street he heard yells and the pound of feet as men came running from the direction of the store. The palace of the king was afire and all other issues became unimportant. When he emerged into the street opposite the store, he found it deserted but he could see some of the defenders crowded into the display bays looking towards the conflagration.

"It's Lawson," he called, and crossed the street to join them.

He got in through one of the broken bay windows and they crowded excitedly about him, questioning. Bodaine said, "When Jake told us you'd made a break for it, we thought you were crazy. But you had the right idea; you drew them off just as they were about to break in."

"Holy cowbells!" exclaimed Tim Weston. "If only we had time to get horses, we could cart off everything in the store."

"We don't have the time," said Lawson shortly. "We don't have time to do anything but get set for the attack King's sure to make when he sees his house is beyond saving."

"You figure he'll come back here and take it out on us? Then let's get the hell out, while we have the chance."

"And be hunted down like rats? Get some sense into your head, man! He'll be as burned up as the house. He knows that I set the fire. And even if he wasn't sure I'd come back

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

here, he'd jump every one of you with everything he has just to get even."

"Maybe," said Sam Tate, "settin' the fire wasn't such a good idea."

Lawson forced himself to be patient. "I didn't set that fire just to draw King's men away from the store. A while ago Tim Weston said how fine it would be if the ranchers knew that King had pulled his men into town to attack us. Remember? That fire is a signal. They can't hear the shooting but they can see the flames in the sky. One of them knows I came here and will be watching. I'm gambling that that person will read the signal right."

"That makes things look different," said Bodaine. "But if that somebody doesn't read the signal right, we're sunk. Well, what do we do?"

"We stay right here and swap bullets. They outnumber us, but they're the attackers and we can whittle them down to our size. We'll have to stall them as long as we can and hope. Now start piling up stuff to get behind. Anything that'll slow a bullet. And get the rest of those shutters closed."

They went about the work swiftly, grimly, putting obstacles in the aisles, making barricades of the counters and merchandise, and when they had finished, they took their places behind their breastworks and waited. There were eleven of them, but only five could be called fighting men. These were Lawson, Bodaine, the two saloonkeepers, and Rudy Zeh. Jake was old and very nearsighted; Tom Carter, the saddlemaker, knew little about the handling of weapons and was not physically strong; the two restaurant owners were not fighters; Tim Weston was an elderly man and a poor shot; Tony Settino was willing but hardly knew one end of a gun from the other.

When at the end of an hour the attack came, it came with a ferocity that almost caught them by surprise. King's men surged down the street in a mob, some of them carrying a twenty-foot log. While their companions poured a steady

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

fire through both front windows, the men with the battering ram swung around, got a running start, and drove up the steps. The log hit with such force that the doors and the nailed timber were carried away and the next instant the front of the store was filled with shouting, shooting men.

They were met with a withering volley from within, and a few of them went down. The rest threw themselves behind such objects as offered protection and poured a steady fire into the barricade.

The bullets went clear through the flimsy fortifications and some of Lawson's men were hit. In daylight it would have been a slaughter. Lawson saw Cass Bodaine fall back on the floor beside him, and he passed the word to retreat to the back storeroom. With Rudy Zeh to help, he dragged the unconscious Bodaine with him, and when all his men were inside the back room, he slammed the door and barred it.

Bodaine was hit in the shoulder, but Lawson judged that the bullet had missed his lung. Tim Weston had been shot in the hand; Tibbets, the restaurant owner, got a slug through the thigh; Rudy Zeh had a deep gash in his scalp. In the lull that followed their retreat, wounds were bandaged and Cass was put in a corner where he would be out of the line of fire.

The lull did not last. Again came the thump of the battering ram and the door to the stockroom was smashed. Lawson's men poured lead through the opening, but bullets from the store drove them to one side of the room. Then they heard the battering ram being dragged away, and a minute or so later its butt struck the back door.

"If they bust that door down," said Zeh, "they've got us. They can shoot from both sides and riddle hell out of us."

"They'll break it down," said Lawson tightly. Lead was sweeping through the back window and to try to fire from it would be suicide. There came another terrific thump and the door bulged inward and the bar across it split. "The next one'll do it," predicted Lawson. "Pull over here against the

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

wall and when it goes, pour it to them. We've got to fight our way out."

Again came that shuddering thud, followed by the groaning and splitting of oak. The bar gave completely and one door was torn from its hinges. They fired a deadly volley into the men who still clung to the battering ram. The survivors dropped the log and jumped from the platform. Lawson sprang to the doorway, yelled, "Follow me!" and leaped out on the platform.

The flames from the house were dying, but there was an eerie glow over the town, and they could see the figures of King's men scattered about the alley. It looked like another charge of the Light Brigade. And then, above the gunfire, Lawson heard the roll of hoofs! He stiffened and his eyes blazed, and for a moment he was a perfect target for any one of King's men who might draw a bead on him.

"Judy! This way, girl!" The words came to his lips of their own volition.

A body of ghostly riders swept around the corner and into the reddish light, and in the very front rode a slight figure on a sorrel pony. Then guns were blazing and horses were thundering past, and King's men were running every which way or hastily throwing down their weapons and raising their hands in token of surrender. The sorrel pony pulled up at the loading platform, and Judy swung off and grabbed Jim with both hands.

"Jimmie, are you all right?" she cried almost hysterically.

His good arm went about her and he drew her close. She raised her lips and he kissed her. She went limp against him and she was crying. "I prayed to God to give me a sign and he did. Oh, I waited so long! I didn't sleep last night or all day or tonight. I kept watching the sky over Kingdom hoping that you'd call for me if you needed me. And you did."

He cleared his throat and released her. The firing had ceased and it was fairly quiet. Prisoners were being rounded

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

up and disarmed. Limpy came hobbling up, his old eyes blazing. "Jimmie Lawson, you dadblasted son of a jackass! What the hell do you mean by sneakin' off and leavin' me to stew and fret! If it hadn't been for Judy—" He broke off abruptly. Lawson had dropped his supporting arm, but Judy was still holding to the lapels of his coat and she was still softly crying. Limpy growled, "What the hell'd you do to her?"

She pushed herself away and gave Limpy a brilliant smile. "Nothing, Limpy. I—I just started bawling again."

Limpy said to Lawson, "You can thank her that you ain't layin' on your back and lookin' up and not seein' nothin'. That li'l gal insisted that you'd send for her if you needed her; said she was lookin' for a sign. We couldn't git her to take time out of watchin' even long enough to eat proper. And, by gum, the sign come! I'll be a dadburned son of a curly-haired kangaroo if it didn't!"

The sound of two distant shots reached them. They were so closely spaced that one seemed like the echo of the other. Somebody said, "Sounded uptown. Maybe somethin' in King's house blew up."

"Where is King, anyway?" Lawson asked sharply, but nobody knew. Nobody had seen him since the second attack had begun. "How about Jake? Where's he?"

Nobody had seen Jake since they had come charging out of the store.

Lawson started walking towards the street, Limpy and Judy almost running to keep up with him. Charley Temple and some of the men followed. The house was almost gone, but the grounds were still well lighted. Lawson headed for the stable which, while charred on the front, had not burned.

They found King's horse first. It was standing uneasily over trailing reins, in back of the stable. A few yards away they found Ben. He lay on his back, his eyes staring at the ruddy sky. There was a hole between them and the stare was blank.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

Six feet from him they found Jake. He also lay on his back and he also looked towards the sky. His old face was placid and the dead eyes seemed to smile. He had been shot through the heart and he still clasped the nickel-plated gun.

"He prayed for just one shot," said Lawson softly. "I reckon that was all he needed."

There was peace now in Kingdom, peace in the valley. In town, men worked cheerfully at the task of repairing damage, while on the north side of the valley ranchers were building new homes. Charley Temple, using lumber hauled to the site by Ben King, was making rapid progress with the house of his dreams. The remains of the burned fence had been cleared away and cattle grazed over the rich range.

In the shack that had once served Ben King as a line cabin, Lawson and Limpy sat at their checkerboard. Limpy pushed a checker and said, "Jump."

Lawson started to jump, stopped, said, "Hell! Another one for you." He got up and paced the floor while Limpy slowly gathered up the checkers and placed them in their box.

"Jimmie," he sighed, "why in time don't you settle down? Gosh, you can have your pick of any job in the town or the valley, or you can start a nice li'l spread of your own. That box of money you got from Lou and hid in Bodaine's barn was a lifesaver for these men; that and the rest of King's property has paid them back in full and they've tried their dangedest to give you a cut. Which you wouldn't take. 'Twenty-five bucks,' says you, 'is all King owed me.' And that's all you'd take."

"It's all I need." Jim scowled at the old man. "Limpy, when you take two games in a row from me, it's a sign that I should be moving on."

"How about Judy? I reckon you know the gal's in love with you."

He gave Limpy his lopsided grin. "She just thinks she is."

"Uh-huh. And I reckon you just think you're in love with her."

"That's not so!" denied Jim hotly. He glared at Limpy, then said more calmly, "I'm pulling out tomorrow morning. Early."

"You gonna sneak out on me this time?"

"Why should you tag along with me? Charley Temple likes you; you're set for life here."

"If I go, it'll be because I want to. Gosh darn it, you need somebody to talk to."

"I got along for a month without anybody to talk to."

"I know." Limpy gave him a sly glance. "I know why you don't want me along. I'm beatin' you at checkers too danged reg'lar and you don't like it."

Lawson grinned and his eyes softened. "You old catamount! Come right along and I'll take the conceit out of you in a hurry. Be ready to pull out in the morning."

Limpy said he'd be ready and that he reckoned he'd better look over his rig. He left the cabin and went around to the corral. Judy was there. She looked steadily at Limpy and said, "He's going."

"Yeah, he's goin'." Limpy made a helpless gesture. "He's runnin' away from you, Judy, and they's no use tryin' to talk him outa it. He's a burned baby and he ain't playin' with fire again right soon. But I'll keep in touch with you and I'll give you the sign if he needs you."

She shook her head gravely. "You won't have to. I'll know, Limpy. And when he needs me, I'll come."

The next morning, Lawson and his partner took their leave. Charley Temple was genuinely sorry to see them go, and once more urged Jim to accept a share of the money he had saved for them. Jim refused. "Tell the rest of them good-bye for me, Charley. I'm glad I'm leaving when you have the world by the tail and a downhill pull."

He walked over to his horse. Judy was holding the rein and this morning she wasn't wearing levis and a cotton shirt.

GUNSMOKE KINGDOM

She had on a print dress and her dark hair hung in a cluster of curls over one shoulder and was tied with a red ribbon. She handed him the rein and smiled up at him, and her eyes were very blue. "Goodbye, Jimmie," she said. "And lots of luck."

His left arm had nearly healed, but he had not used it much yet. But he used it now. He put both arms about her and drew her close. He bent down and kissed her. Then he pushed her roughly from him and said, "Goodbye, brat." His voice was husky and he didn't look at her; instead, he turned to Limpy and asked harshly, "What the hell are we waiting for?" Then slipping into the saddle, he wheeled his horse and rode away without glancing back.

A slow grin crossed Limpy's face as he lifted himself into the saddle. He looked at Judy and winked. There were tears in her eyes now, but she winked back at him. They understood.

Some day—somewhere—