SMOKY RIVER

Lee Floren

0-8161-3027-2 $10.95

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They called it the Wire-Cutter's War, that deadly battle between farmer and cattleman that turned the Texas Panhandle into a bloodbath. In the end, the squatters had won the right to string their fences. Ralph Watson had been in that battle, fighting for the cattlemen. Now he was in Montana, riding the open range. When the squatters started to move into Montana, Watson knew blood would flow once more. His loyalty belonged to his old friends, but this time honor tied him to the farmers. Before the bullets started to fly, Ralph Watson had to choose — loyalty or honor?

Lee Floren has written many Western novels. He lives in Mexico. His *Renegade Gambler* is also available in Large Print.

Jacket design by
Richard Spencer

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G.K. HALL & CO.
Boston, Massachusetts
1980

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Floren, Lee.
Smoky River.

"Published in large print."
1. Large type books. I. Title.
[PZ3.F66Sm 1980] [PS3511.L697] 813'.52 79-28243
ISBN 0-8161-3027-2

Published in Large Print by
arrangement with Lee Floren

Set in Wang graphic systems 18 pt Times Roman

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CHAPTER 1

Once a bank of warring Piegan bucks had sat their ponies on this same hill and had looked down on Smoky River. They had been searching for the Sioux, and even then War had been on these Montana hills. They had sat their pintos and roans and bays; sunlight had reflected from the steel of a scalping-knife being whetted against the dark palm of a Piegan buck.

Now the redskin was on his reservation. Now a group of whiteskinned riders sat their broncs on this same high hill. Now the sunshine reflected not from a knife. Sunshine reflected from the .45 revolver in the hand of Big Wad Morgan. Big Wad Morgan, owner of the immense Pothook ranch.

"Another damn' family of squatters

movin' in on my grass,'' Wad Morgan said, juggling his .45 suggestively.

There was softness in Wad Morgan's voice, but hell was in his blue eyes as he watched the wagon inching across the wilderness below. He was a big man — big in body, big in deeds — and he had helped run the Piegan off this land, he had helped eradicate the buffalo, and in place of the buffalo this range held his cattle — thousands of his cattle. He was somewhere between fifty and sixty, and his hair was iron-grey, but his body was still tough to the saddle.

Behind him, one of his Pothook riders moved against his stirrups, and the creak of saddle-leather was a harsh sound in the still, hot, summer air. That rider was Ralph Watson.

Wad Morgan went on, and he said: ''They come out of the east. Poor devils, in a way a man should feel sorry for them, and I do. They're trying to run away from a life of almost slavery in them mills an' them stores an' them factories. But they ain't farmers an' they ain't goin' to make a go of it, not on

land I claim."

Ralph Watson glanced at him. Big Wad Morgan did not notice the glance. Morgan was watching the wagon below them. The cliff fell off about a thousand feet at this point, sheer and rocky, and then Smoky River Valley lay below them — about three miles wide, and stretching out of sight to the east, where finally Smoky River joined forces with the Missouri. The river itself, twisting its way across this wilderness, was, from this high point, nothing more than a grey, winding rope, flanked by the greenery of diamond-willows, chokecherry treed, and buckbrush.

There were five Pothook riders, counting Big Wad. Three were old hands, men somewhere in that span called middle-age, and they had been on this ranch for years. Ralph Watson was the newcomer. He had worked for the Pothook for almost two years. He was wide-shouldered, and he was twenty-four, and he was a transplanted Texan. He had gone through the Wire Cutter's War — that deadly and bloody squatter-

ranch war — and he knew the tragedy of range-war. Now his face, old beyond its years, showed, for a brief moment, the memory of that War.

"You don't look well, Ralph."

It was Stumpy Jones who spoke to him. Stumpy, who had grown old in Big Wad's hire, who ramrodded the Pothook — a short, bowlegged man who was marked by the wind and sleet and the scorching sun.

Ralph did not look at him. He looked down at the nester family below him, their wagon moving slowly across the bowl of Smoky River. They had two head of cattle, grazing out from the wagon, and there were six head of horses beside the four hooked to the rig. These animals were mere dots down there against distance.

Wad Morgan sent him a calculated glance. Ralph's brown eyes met the faded blue eyes of Wad Morgan.

"I can't help but remember, Wad."

"Remember what?"

"The Wire Cutter's War."

Big Wad's voice was a husky whisper.

"All right, you can't forget it. What does it mean on this grass?" He answered that himself. "This is northern Montana Territory. That happened on the Panhandle of Texas."

" But it happened, just the same."

Big Wad looked down again at the distant wagon He laced both hands across the fork of his Hamley saddle, letting the six-shooter hang from a stubby forefinger.

"All right, forget it, Ralph."

Ralph showed a smile that was almost boyish. "I wish I could. But it does no good to try. A man only learns through what has gone on ahead of him. He learns through experience."

"I've had lots of that."

"You helped chase out the Piegans and the Sioux and the Bloods. Custer died because the Whites wanted Indian land. You sent the buffalo under the sod, and cattle took the place of humpbacks."

"An old story."

"Did the redskin win? Did the buffalo win?"

Now Big Wad Morgan looked flatly at his hired rider. "Are you trying to tell me my Pothook iron will lose?"

"I think you will."

Wad Morgan growled, "Hell, that sounds foolish." He sent his gaze up and down Smoky River. "Must be about six or seven shacks along there. I made an error when I let the first one settle." He seemed to have forgotten that Ralph Watson was alive.

Ralph was quick to note this fact. So for that matter was Stumpy Jones, who sent a quick glance at Ralph. Ralph smiled a little but his smile was not pleasant.

"We should take the down-trail, head those sod busters off, an' warn them," Big Wad said.

Ralph said, "I want no share of it."

Anger flushed Big Wad Morgan's rough cheekbones. "Are you afraid, Watson?"

"Not afraid. Just sensible."

Big Wad Morgan said nothing. He flipped his six-shooter upward, the sun flashed off it, the gun found its holster.

"Time we was headin' for the home ranch," Big Wad said.

They headed towards the northwest, riding across the hills. Occasionally they saw Pothook cattle, but the heat of day had them bedded in coulees and draws, where the cottonwoods gave them shade. Big Wad Morgan rode at point, two riders were behind him, and Ralph and Stumpy Jones brought up the rear. Ralph was still smarting from Big Wad's accusation. He was thinking, also, of Jan.

Big Wad and Mary Morgan had one child, a girl now twenty. Her name was Margaret, and Big Wad and Mary had also raised a niece, and her name was Janice — Jan, for short. Ralph Watson was thinking of Jan, and he remembered her blue eyes, her golden curls. He knew that he would have to leave the Pothook, and he would miss Jan.

He liked working for the Pothook. For one reason, it brought him close to Jan, who liked to break broncs and ride range, sometimes riding with him. Those were the days he had liked. She broke her own horses, handling them from the

moment a rope was first laid on them until she had them trained for roping and neckreining, but she did it through love and diligence, not through brawn and cruelty, as so many bronc busters did. But, through all this, she was delightfully feminine, and she looked better in a party dress than she did in levis.

He knew. He had escorted her proudly to a number of cow country dances, and she had been warm and soft in his arms, floating along with her blonde head lying on his shoulder.

This leaving the Pothook would not be easy.

Then the thought came in and it said, *Since the beginning of Time, man has had to fight for his principles.* That thought gave him a little comfort. Maybe this showed in his face. For he saw that Stumpy was looking at him, and it seemed that Stumpy had a smile for him.

"Buck up, kid," Stumpy said softly.

Ralph Watson only nodded, glad he had a friend.

They came into the home-ranch of the

Pothook spread — a proud display of buildings, with the big barn painted a new red, the corrals all well-kept with unbroken poles, and the long log house set in the cottonwoods of Black Buck Creek, a tributary of the Smoky. They dismounted and Ralph Watson automatically pulled the gear from his bronc, thinking that perhaps he was unsaddling a Pothook horse for the last time.

Big Wad Morgan went to the house. It seemed that Stumpy Jones was slow to unsaddle. The other two punchers — Mike Allen and Cartridge Case Maloney — got unsaddled and went towards the mess-shack.

Stumpy said, "Don't take him too seriously, Ralph."

"Thanks, Stumpy."

Stumpy busied himself untying his latigo. "I can see your point." When Stumpy had come to the Pothook he had been forty and his hair had been blond, and thick. Now it was grey and he sported a belligerent circle of short hair that was banded around his ears.

Stumpy pulled his saddle off his grey. "Life is an odd affair, Ralph. Some men become ministers. Some become teachers. They like those jobs. Me, I couldn't stand either. But the point is this: I respect them men for standing up for their own opinions."

"Thanks, Stumpy."

Ralph walked towards the mess-shack. Stumpy slowly lowered his saddle over the saddle rack. There was a strange look in his eyes as he watched Ralph's wide back go through the mess-hall door.

CHAPTER 2

Ralph was washing at the wash-stand when Jan came out of the big house. As he wiped his face with a towel he watched her approach. He had his dreams, as every young man has his dreams, and in every young man's dreams, of course, is a girl — *his* girl. Ralph could not call Jan *his* girl but he had her in mind much of the time.

"Unc wants you to eat with us in the house, Ralph."

Ralph nodded. "I was sort of expectin' that, Jan."

Her blue eyes ran across his face. "Something gone wrong?"

"No, nothing."

"Uncle seemed disturbed. Aunt Mary turned her tongue loose on him. He saw some nesters moving in, he said."

"On Smoky River."

She turned. She was the type that would let a man make up his own mind, and she was giving Ralph this opportunity.

"Anyway, Unc wants you to have supper with us."

She went into the house. She was small, only an inch over five feet, and she had a straight, pretty back. She would undoubtedly marry some man, for most women did that eventually, but that man would never dominate her personality, and Ralph was glad for that thought. She would work with him, be faithful to him, but she would always reserve that little something, that little bit of personality, for herself. Ralph always got the impression that God had smiled on her the day she had been born. He had put the bright dawn in her eyes, the gold of sunset in her hair.

Stumpy Jones snorted through his towel. "That Janice girl is the sweetest girl I've ever known." He looked at Ralph and Ralph thought he saw

something come in and suddenly cloud the foreman's eyes. But this something, whatever it was, was short of duration. Stump wiped his ears. "Well, almost as sweet, that is."

"Guess this is it."

Stumpy hung up his towel. "Remember that Big Wad likes you." He went into the mess-shack with its long table and its Chinese cook grumbling over the hot stove.

Ralph walked slowly up the gravel walk. Cottonwoods were moving in the soft hot breeze, their leaves making a singing sound. The lilac had quit blooming, for summer was too far advanced, but the wild flowers were blooming along the base of the long porch — the sweetpeas and the crocuses and bitterroots gathered by the women and watered by them. Ralph glanced at them and liked their beauty. He liked the Pothook and he liked Big Wad and Mary Morgan, and he liked Margaret, also — but he loved Janice. He was the quiet, reliable type, and he kept this to himself.

He crossed the porch and knocked on the door.

Mary Morgan came to meet him. She was a bony, angular woman who, at first glance, looked almost drab, almost work-worn. But when you got to know her you found her a vibrant person, in tune with her environment. Now she took Ralph's hat and gave him a quick squeeze of the hand.

"My favourite cowboy," she said.

Ralph felt his throat get a little tight. But he bowed and said, "And for that, Mary Morgan, I thank you. You remind me much of my mother."

She stopped. She looked at him. Then she put his hat on the hook. "I am glad of that, Ralph."

Margaret came out of the living-room. She was Janice's age, but she was taller, taking after her mother. Where Janice was golden-light, Margaret was dark. An only child, she had lived her own life, for her mother had seen she had made her own decisions.

"Dinner'll be ready soon, Ralph."

"Isn't that lazy Janice helping you?"

Janice's golden head came out of the kitchen. She had a spot of flour on her chin.

"I thought you were my friend?"

"I was, until I met Margie."

"Oh, shucks," Margie said, and returned to the kitchen.

"Sit down, Ralph," Mary Morgan said.

Ralph found a chair. A hall ran out of the living-room into the bedroom area. Somewhere back there Big Wad was grumbling as he changed clothes. Ralph and Mary talked a little. The girls moved in and out, carrying dishes and food, and they and Ralph carried on a running banter. Light talk, but under it was a heavy vein; all were aware of this.

Big Wad came in. He had on a new white shirt, he was clean-shaven, and he wore polished boots and nicely-creased woollen pants. He said, "Sit down, Ralph, and tie into it."

"Two wolves," Janice said.

"Saddle wolves," Big Wad said, and speared a biscuit. He had biscuits every meal. He had brought that habit up the Longhorn Trail out of Texas. But they

were not thinking of the biscuit habit. They were thinking of the implication behind two words: Saddle wolves. That was a term used on the range to designate and describe a ruthless killer.

They ate an excellent meal. Fried chicken, lots of potatoes, string beans. Janice and Margaret could really cook. Big Wad ate slowly, and, for some reason, there was not too much talk at the table. What little talk there was grew more grave in content as the meal progressed. Ralph waited for Big Wad Morgan to bring the subject around to the farmers. Ralph had already made up his mind. His decision was nothing new to him. He had lived with it for some time. He had two thousand and some odd dollars he had obtained by selling his cattle in Texas before he had headed north with a Bar Six trailherd into the Yellowstone country. He had never mentioned this sum to anybody. He was keeping it as a surprise for the day when he would ask Janice to marry him. It never occurred to him that Janice was awaiting that day patiently.

Big Wad shoved his plate back. "Ralph here wants no truck with us fighting the nesters," the cowman said.

The moment had arrived.

Ralph bit into his pie. It was very good — blueberry pie with a crisp crust. But he did not pay any attention to the pie, even though Janice had told him she had made it.

"Mr. Morgan, I'd like to tell you something."

Big Wad did not look at him. "Yes." The cowman nodded.

Ralph looked at Margaret. Her attention was on her plate. The attention of Mary Morgan was also on her food. Only Janice had eyes for him. And her look was warm and friendly; he was glad for that.

"Mr. Morgan, I went through the Wire Cutter's War of Texas. My oldest brother, John, was killed in that war. He was shot to death along a drift fence. A farmer shot him."

"Are you afraid of the farmers?" Big Wad mumbled.

"Big Wad, I've worked for you almost

two years. I like you and I like your family and I like my work. During the time I've worked for you I've never turned down a task you have asked me to do, have I?

"No. . . . "

"I broke the roughest, toughest bronc you have on the ranch — Old Midnight — and I made a cuttin' horse out of him. I'm not afraid of anything, sir, as long as I have one thing on my side.

Big Wad looked at him. "And what is that?"

"Righteousness. I want to be honest and right in whatever I do."

"Then you think I am not right when I run off a nester?"

"You have put it bluntly. I think you are wrong."

Mary Morgan studied him. She had her head cupped in her hands. Her dark eyes were serious but she said nothing. Ralph glanced at Margaret. She was still interested in her food, poking at a potato with a fork. Janice was looking at Big Wad.

"Why do you think I'm wrong? On

what grounds do you base your convictions?''

''On two points, sir, if I may say so. First, you don't own the land these farmers are settling on — it is government land you've used to run cattle over. You have no deeds to this land.''

''I have prior rights. Squatter's rights.''

''Yes, and the territorial court ruled squatter's rights illegal in the last session of the court in the Hayes case.''

Big Wad peered at him. ''You read a lot, eh?''

''Quite a bit, sir.''

Janice said, ''He always has his nose in some form of reading matter.''

Big Wad said, ''Please, Janice. . . .''

Janice blushed. Ralph sent her a reassuring look.

''Your other point, Ralph?''

Ralph shoved back his chair.

''First there was the Indian on this continent. Maybe he came here from some other land and maybe he had to kill another race before he could be the boss. That doesn't count now. Maybe he

was happy to a degree, but he always had wars."

"What's your point?"

"Then the white man came. For four hundred years he fought the Indian. Then Custer ran into the Sioux trap on the Little Big Horn. Custer got killed, he lost all his men, but he aroused public opinion — force put the redman on reservations. The white man had won. The cowman moved in with his longhorns. The hump-backs had been killed off so cattle grazed on the grass."

"I'm waiting."

"You know my point, Big Wad. For over twenty years you cowmen have been king. Now it is time you go — just like the Indian and the buffalo went."

"Farmers will take over?"

"To a degree, but not completely. There'll still be lots of cattle. But the cow business and farming will be joined together."

"Where will cows graze?"

"On land no good for farming. Land that is too rocky or too hilly. They'll be fed winters and not turned out to shift

for themselves in blizzards. Farms will raise the hay to pull them through winters."

"I can't agree."

Ralph thanked the women for the meal, and got to his feet. This was probably the last meal he would eat at the Pothook. That thought held no strength.

"Mr. Morgan, I've given this lots of thought. I've seen more than my share of guns and death. I'll go through a war again, though, if it is to fight for my honour or my principles."

"I honour you for that statement, Ralph."

"I want to be your friend. But some months ago I decided I could not stay on the Pothook."

"Why?"

"For one thing, I want to make some progress. I want to marry. I want a home and I want to raise some children. I want to be my own boss.

"That's logical."

"I have no trade or profession. When I was a boy I thought I knew everything.

I dropped out of school in the fifth grade. There is only one way I can make a living."

"How is that?"

"Farming."

Big Wad Morgan studied him, mouth opened slightly. "You mean —?"

"I'm going farming. I'm going to file on a homestead."

For a moment, there was a deep silence. Only Janice did not look at him.

Big Wad's expression was one of stunned surprise. Margaret studied him as though he were a queer animal suddenly shoved into the opposite chair. Mrs. Morgan nodded primly, as though satisfied.

Janice had a coy, shy glance. He could not read it.

"Then you'll be against me, Ralph?"

"Not unless you force me to be, Mr. Morgan."

Ralph thanked the women again, and then went to the bunkhouse. He sat on his bunk with his head in his hands. He heard the bunk beside his squeak as a man sat down.

"Don't take it too hard, kid," kindly Stumpy Jones murmured. "Remember you still have the biggest treasure a man can have — two of them, in fact."

"Yes?"

"You have your youth. And you have Janice."

Ralph lay on his bunk. He had to put his back to his foreman.

"Thanks, Stumpy boy."

CHAPTER 3

Ralph slept very little that night. His mind kept going back to the talk he had had with Big Wad, and then it would switch to a certain piece of land on Smoky River. Part of his homestead — about fifty acres of it — would be on the south side of Smoky River. The boundary line between the Pothook and its southern neighbour was the Smoky River. Therefore his homestead would be partly in land claimed by big Wad Morgan and partly on graze claimed by the Grouse Track outfit.

The Grouse Track had recently changed hands. Its original owner, another Texan, had gone well into the years, and about six months ago he had sold his cattle to a man named Matt Cogswell. Cogswell was a hard-faced man

of thirty odd, and nobody knew much about where he came from, or what he had done before he had bought the Grouse Track outfit. So far no farmers had settled on his side of the river.

Ralph was deliberately getting a homestead with Smoky River running through it, and the location of that homestead would be below the Narrows — here Smoky River came out of the rough high country. By running ditches on each side of the river he could take irrigation water on to his property. He could tap Smoky River on both sides, run ditches along the hills, and irrigate his homestead. He figured that dry-land farming was no good. Rain was uncertain — one time you got too much, the next summer you didn't get enough.

But, by so placing his homestead, he would gather the wrath of Matt Cogswell on his head, also.

Dawn found him up and about.

The dawn was chilly, here in this high northern country, but by noon the sun would be boiling hot. A trout jumped in Black Buck Creek, making a loud splash,

and the smell of the ferns and wild geraniums, growing along the creek, was a heavy perfume.

He had four head of saddle-horses, his own stock, and these were in the pasture. He got a horse out of the barn and rode out bareback and ran his broncs in the corral. He got a rope and made half-breed halters for them. He saddled Dingdong, the grey, and put a pack saddle on Whatchamahcallit, the sorrel. Then he got his gear from the bunkhouse. He had more than he expected, and the thought came that the longer a man stays in one place, the more useless possessions he acquires. He loaded his pack bags, strapped them to the saddle, and was ready to hit the trail.

Still nobody stirred on the ranch, and all were early risers. He had got out of bed very early. He swung up on Dingdong, took the lead-rope that led to his packhorse, and tied the other lead-rope — the rope to his other two horses — to the saddlehorn.

At that moment, Big Wad walked out of the barn.

Ralph said, "So long, Wad."

The rancher looked up at him. "This is hurtin' Jan," he said gruffly.

"Now you hurt me," Ralph said.

"Wait a minute an' I'll fix out your pay."

"Mail it to me in town."

Big Wad shrugged. "I'm sorta sorry to see you go." That, from him, was a concession. Men came and went off this big ranch.

Ralph rode away at a walk and left the big man standing there. When he reached the bend he looked back but Big Wad was gone. Ralph thought of Jan. He had ridden away without saying good-bye to her.

But he was sure she would understand.

To get to Sagebrush City, he had to ford Smoky River at Reno's Crossing, a spot where the river flattened out, thereby making a ford. Here he came upon a nester and his family, camped in the buckbrush. One of the boys had a throwline in the river and he was just pulling in a catfish when Ralph was letting his broncs drink in

the clear water.

"Lots of luck, eh, son?"

The boy studied him. "You a Pothook cowhand?"

"No."

"You're lucky then. Dad would have jumped you right off. He says the Pothook is our enemy. He says —"

"Jack, that's enough."

The boy's father, a wide, heavy-bellied man, came out of the brush, carrying his rifle.

Ralph said, "You don't need that rifle for me, mister."

The man put the rifle against a boulder. "I'm Tom Gillis. I'm movin' my family in on a homestead up the river a piece."

Ralph introduced himself. When he and Big Wad and the other Pothook cowboys had sat on the high butte yesterday it had been the Gillis outfit they had seen inching its way across Smoky River Valley.

Ralph said, "I'll be your neighbour, Gillis. I'm filin' to-day on a quarter-section that's astraddle the river directly

above your place. I suppose you have made out your filin' papers in town."

"Got everythin' in legal order, Mr. Watson."

They shook hands. Gillis' wife came over. He had a boy and a girl, younger than Jack. They were from Illinois. They had shipped by water to Fort Benton and then had driven up Smoky River from the riverport.

Mrs. Gillis frowned. "I have heard, Mr. Watson, that Mr. Morgan might try to run us off our homestead?"

Ralph said nothing.

Gillis looked up at him."What do you think? You know this country better than I do."

Ralph told about working for the Pothook. At this information, Jack stared at him. "A real cowboy," the boy said. Mrs. Gillis listened carefully. Ralph thought he saw something hard enter Gillis' eyes.

"You think Big Wad will fight you, Watson?" the farmer wanted to know.

"I don't know. I hope not."

"They tell me that Matt Cogswell has

posted signs across the river warning all farmers to stay out."

"I don't know about that."

Gillis spat tobacco juice. "Well, we break camp, an' drive to our homestead. Surveyor will be out to-morrow to determine our boundaries."

Ralph forded Smoky River. Silvery spray danced upward from the hoofs of his horses. His broncs had to swim a distance of about fifteen feet. Dingdong swam high, and he kept the seat of the saddle dry. They came up the gravel-strewn far shore and followed the trail through the cottonwoods and the buckbrush. Ralph was now on Grouse Track grass. Or, rather, grass claimed by Matt Cogswell's Grouse Track outfit.

The sun was high and warm when he rode into Sagebrush City. He did not take his horses into the livery-barn, for it would have cost him fifty cents a head to feed them. He picketed them in the sagebrush surrounding the cowtown and walked down the main street to the Broken Cinch Café.

He ordered hotcakes.

He was eating when the cook said. "There rides in Matt Cogswell an' Bart Hawkins."

Meal finished, Ralph dawdled over his coffee. Sagebrush City was not the county eat but there was a surveyor in town who also was commissioned to act as the U.S. Land Agent. Ralph had to wait until he got to his office. Matt Cogswell and Bart Hawkins came in. Hawkins was Cogswell's ramrod. He was a tall, thin man of about forty. He had a rough, angular face marked by a big nose that separated two hawkish dull-blue eyes. Rumour had it he was a gunman.

"Howdy, Pothook man," Matt Cogswell said.

Ralph nodded. "Not a Pothook man now, Cogswell. I quit the spread this morning."

Cogswell nodded. His attitude was, they come and they go. He and Hawkins took stools and ordered. Ralph did not like the pair. They seemed too cocky, too ruthless, too overbearing. He went outside. By luck, the land agent was unlocking his office, and Ralph crossed

the street. He showed the man the land he wanted, going to the big wall map, and the land agent-surveyor nodded dully.

"You're the first one to take up land on Cogswell's side of the river," he said.

"He won't bother your survey. You work for the gover'ment."

The man smiled. "I'm not worried about myself." He unlocked a drawer. "Nor you, either, for that matter."

Ralph only smiled.

He paid his filing-fee, got his papers, and went outside. Cogswell and Bart Hawkins had just left the Broken Cinch Café. Both saw him come out of the land-office.

Ralph needed some supplies. He intended to camp in a tent until he got a cabin built. He went to the Mercantile where he bought a tent and some groceries. He would need a wagon and some harnesses. Whatchamahcallit and his brother saddle-horses did not know it yet but they would become harness horses soon, whether they liked it or not.

The merchant scratched his head.

"Dang it, Ralph, it don't seem possible you'd go farmin'."

"Gotta get ahead, sir."

The merchant breathed deeply. "Well, I sure wish you luck." Suddenly his attention was riveted on the land-office across the street. Ralph saw Cogswell and Hawkins go into the office.

Ralph knew then there was trouble ahead.

CHAPTER 4

Bart Hawkins' dull-blue eyes bored into Ralph Watson. "See you filed on a homestead, eh, cowpoke?"

"I did."

Ralph was aware that the townspeople were watching them. Some stood on the street, some watched through windows in homes and business establishments. Ralph glanced at Matt Cogswell. The owner of the Grouse Track iron stood to one side, and about thirty feet back of Bart Hawkins, who had accosted Ralph in front of the Wagon Spoke Saloon, just as Ralph was walking by that establishment.

Evidently Cogswell had turned this matter over to Bart Hawkins. Yet Ralph noted that the Grouse Track owner, although he seemed to be loafing as he leaned against a frame building, looked

like he was a little tight and tense. He also had his right-hand thumb hooked in his gunbelt right ahead of his Colt .45. His eyes were on Ralph with a fixed intensity.

"Reckon that homestead runs some over on Grouse Track land, eh?"

"You read the surveyor's map correct." Ralph assured.

"You damn' right we read it right!" Bart Hawkins snapped. "You're the first nester what has taken up Grouse Track land! You figure on holdin' it, cowpoke?"

"I filed legally on it."

"Legally!" Bart Hawkins was working himself to a cold rage. Ralph caught the flat, ugly odour of whisky on the ramrod's hot breath. "Law is one thing, gunlaw is another. Never thought I'd see the time when a lowdown cowpoke would turn traitor to his kind!"

Bart Hawkins cursed him.

Ralph stood silent, feeling the cutting effect of the curses. He knew that Matt Cogswell had ordered Bart Hawkins to pick trouble with him. So he turned

to walk away.

Hawkins grabbed his shoulder. His fingers were steely thongs. He turned Ralph, and Ralph heard his shirt tear. It tore with a thin, ripping sound. Ralph looked at Hawkins.

"Take your dirty paw off my shoulder!"

Hawkins sneered. His lips drew back, showing ugly, crooked teeth. His eyes were small and dirty and mean.

"Mister, I gave you an order! You ain't answered to me yet, savvy? You goin' keep your carcass off'n Grouse Track grass?"

Ralph still kept his temper. He knew now he could not avoid trouble. Then another thought, hot and dangerous, came to him — if he ran from Hawkins, word would go up and down the range like wildfire, and word would proclaim him a coward. A brave man could live in this Montana range country. A coward could not.

Strangely, he thought, then, of Jan. For a moment her golden hair, her blue eyes, the softness of her personality,

came to him and gave him strength, and these gave him great courage. Jan would understand him if he did not fight. She would, because she always understood him. But the others —

He was glad, in a way, he did not pack a gun. But he seldom packed his .45. He took it only on hunting trips. Had he his .45 on him, Hawkins would have changed this into a gunfight. And Ralph, to put it bluntly, was not much of a hand with a revolver.

"Take your hand off me," Ralph said.

Bart Hawkins' answer was a sudden twist of his hand on Ralph's shoulder. He intended to pull Ralph ahead, throwing him to the sidewalk. But suddenly Bart Hawkins was going backwards. His arms grabbed wildly for a hold, but the air was thin; he went back against a building. Blood showed on a corner of his thin-lipped mouth.

"Mister," he gritted, "you asked for it when you hit Bart Hawkins. Mister, I jes' wish you packed a cutter, like a grown-up man does! I'd blow you to little bits an' —"

Bart Hawkins rushed him.

He came in with a bull-like rush. Then, just as he reached Ralph, he stopped quickly. Ralph had already hit. Hawkins' sudden stop, coldly calculated, did its work — Ralph's fist missed Hawkins' head. Hawkins went to his knees, and tackled Ralph.

He smashed a shoulder into Ralph's groin. He knocked Ralph backwards and then, quick as a cougar, Hawkins was on his boots, moving in. He was not rushing now. He was fighting with cold efficiency. He had Ralph off balance, and he knocked him down with a right to the ear.

Ralph felt the soil come up and hit him. His head buzzed and the thought came, This gent can really fight. He had sense enough to roll over three times. Hawkins came at him, kicking at him. Ralph's rolling made him miss. Ralph grabbed a boot as it went over him.

He jerked. Hawkins lost his stride, and he crashed to the dust. Ralph was on his feet, shaking his head, his fists ready.

"Come on, Grouse Track man!"

Hawkins got up. He evidently decided more tricks would do no good, for he fought straight up. And he knew how to fist-fight. Ralph found that out to his physical sorrow. He had sparred a lot with his brothers in Texas; therefore he was above-average in fighting.

For days Sagebrush talked about the fight.

It ended with Hawkins going down. He got on all fours, shaking his bloody head, and he got up again. Ralph again knocked him down. Ralph was winded, breathing came with harsh, tearing rasps. His fists felt like each weighed a ton. His knees were weak.

Hawkins got up again. He fought hard again, and Ralph had to go backwards. By back-pedalling, Ralph made a mistake. For he walked backwards, busy fighting, and he came close to Matt Cogswell.

When Ralph woke up he was in Doc Grammar's office.

His eyes wouldn't focus correctly. He blinked, but they had the same image when he reopened them — Jan was

sitting beside him. He stared at her as his senses gathered themselves.

"Where — where did you come from?"

"From the Pothook, of course."

Ralph closed his eyes. He felt her hand on his forehead. It was a cool, soft hand, even though it could handle a lasso. He raised his hand and put it over hers.

He opened his eyes again.

His head ached terribly.

"Somebody slugged me," he accused.

"Cogswell. You backed into him —"

"With his .45?"

"No, a quirt. The shot-loaded butt of a quirt."

"Ouch."

"Your head ache?"

"I thought the buffalo was gone," Ralph said, sitting up and holding his head. "They're not. There's five million of them galloping around in my skull. They're even raising dust."

Doc Grammar came in from the next room. "Drink this, you wild farmer." He was a fat, gross man who loved friendship and a bottle.

Ralph almost choked. He shook his head after he had drunk the vile potion. "Worse than one of Hawkins' right hooks. Where are those two hellions?"

"They left town."

The headache powder cleared his head somewhat. His jaw felt like a mule had kicked him. And the mule had had on steel shoes.

Doc Grammar got his hat off the hook. "Gotta make a call. Make him lie down for a while, Jan girl. I'll be back in about fifteen minutes.

The medico left.

Ralph looked at Janice. They still held hands.

"How come you're in town, Jan?

"I rode in. I didn't like it one bit that you left Pothook without saying good-bye to me."

"I'm sorry. I really mean that."

"Why didn't you say good-bye?"

"I – well, I —"

He stuttered to a stop. His eyes went over her lovely face. She sure could hide emotions.

"Ralph, I didn't like it one bit. I lost

my parents when I was a little tot, and Big Wad and Mary have been like my real parents to me, and I look upon Margie as a sister." Her voice broke a little. "Then I met you and we went out to herd cattle together, and we went to dances —"

"We'll do those things again, after we're married."

"Oh, Ralph!"

Her head was against his on the pillow, and her golden hair was spilled across him. He liked the sweet smell of her hair. He liked the feel of her vibrant, clean body. Then a little devil arose in him. She had switched things around rather cleverly.

He had got engaged to her, and he had not even asked her if she would marry him. His tongue had slipped. She had made it slip, though.

He lifted her head, kissed her despite his swollen lips. "You little vixen! You tricked me!"

"Ralph, I've waited so long!"

The seriousness of her voice stunned him more than had one of Bart Hawkins'

blows. His mother had often said that a man overlooks many things when around a woman and that many times a woman has to lead him into their discovery. His mother, he decided, had been a smart woman.

"Good gosh, honey, am I that wool-blinded?"

Her blue eyes were light across his face. "Not blind, Ralph. Just a little bit cautious, I guess."

Her head came down. Her lips were on his. They were moist and warm; they promised things. For a moment Smoky River and the homestead were miles away. With them, in this distant limbo, were also Bart Hawkins and Matt Cogswell. Yes, and the Pothook outfit, too.

Finally both came back to reality.

"Gosh," Jan said.

Ralph said, "I can't marry you, honey."

"Why not?"

He spoke slowly . "Look, you're Big Wadsworth Morgan's niece. Big Wad is like your dad to you. He doesn't want

me settling on his range. If we get married, he'll swear I married you to protect myself from him and his riders."

"I don't — quite follow you. . . ."

"Oh, yes, you do, sweetheart. If you marry me, Big Wad won't cause me any trouble. He'll swear up and down I'm hidin' behind your petticoats."

"Oh, no, Ralph."

"Oh, yes, Jan."

He got to his feet. His knees felt stronger. His head had cleared: now only a hundred buffalo jarred the corners of his brain. He regarded her with a solemnness. He was not an appealing, a pretty, figure. His shirt was torn, his skin showed, and his face was not the best-looking man's face in Sagebrush City.

His words were low. "I have a long hard fight ahead, Jan. It's a fight against the Pothook and Wad Morgan, and it's a fight against the Grouse Track and Hawkins and Cogswell."

"Uncle Wad might not fight against you."

"That is up to him. I hope he doesn't. I like him a lot. But the point is I'm not

marrying you with the prospect that you might be a widow in a few weeks, or even a few days."

"Ralph, please don't say that!"

"But it's true!"

Her arms were around him. Her head was raised. "Ralph, kiss me, and hold me, Ralph."

Time had no meaning again.

CHAPTER 5

Ralph made his camp in the buckbrush along Smoky River. Here it would be impossible for any man to creep up on him while he slept. The brush was thick and it would make a crackle.

Also he made a big rope corral with some spot-cord he had bought in Sagebrush City. Inside of this he held his four horses. He wished he had a dog and he made up his mind he would get one the next time he went to Sagebrush City. There were plenty of homeless dogs in that burg.

He slept soundly despite his swollen features, his aching bones. He had had little sleep the night before and he made up for it now. He was awake at dawn. Frost was on the brush, and the air was chilly.

He lay under his sougans, the earth hard under him, and he thought of Jan. She was a wonderful creature. Life had become doubly important since each had declared their love for the other.

Now his homestead meant more than it ever had. Up to yesterday, it had been a piece of land out of which he could wrest a living; now it had become the site of his future home with Jan.

He had sent Jan back to the Pothook.

He let his thoughts dwell for some time on Big Wad Morgan. He was an uncertain quality. Which way would he go? There was no conjecture when his mind settled on the Grouse Track outfit. He knew full well the direction Matt Cogswell and Bart Hawkins would take. They had taken the first step when he and Hawkins had tangled.

From this spot he could see the thin blue smoke of the nesters' morning fires. They were pencils of blue against the high Montana air. Below him a half-mile was the Gillis homestead. He wondered what manner of men the other homesteaders were. That was an

important factor. Yesterday it had not been important. Yesterday he had been a cowpuncher, not a homesteader.

He shot a cottontail rabbit, fried him for breakfast, and then rode Dingdong up the river to the Narrows. Here Smoky River tumbled out of the mountains, foamy and wild, to become quieted by the levelness of the plains. He crossed the river here. The crossing was shallow and he could move farming equipment across at this point because of its shallowness. He was on grass claimed by Cogswell's Grouse Track outfit. Grouse Track cattle were grazing in the buckbrush. Ralph hazed them into a bunch and chased them off his land. He would have to build a barbwire fence around his property once the surveyor got the property-lines surveyed.

He saw a big sign nailed to a cottonwood. He rode over to it and read: GROUSE TRACK LAND. FARMER, KEEP OUT! DANGER! MATT COGSWELL, OWNER. The background was white paint and the letters were painted in black with a skull-and-

crossbones below the warning.

Poor painting job, Ralph thought.

The sign was on his homestead. He had a sudden thought. He roped a Grouse Track bull and threw him and tied him down. Then he ripped down the sign and tied it on to the bull's back, running a length of spotcord through the nails, which he bent over in the form of staples. He then turned the bull loose. The bull bawled and bucked across the prairie, trying to throw the sign from his back, but the sign was tied tightly. Ralph laughed at the bull's wild antics. Sooner or later Cogswell and Hawkins would run across the bull. He could only imagine their anger when they saw their sign tied to his wide back.

The bull got tired of bucking and started to run. He lumbered over a hill and went out of sight into a coulee.

Ralph had decided to build his cabin on the south side of Smoky River. He would be closer to town and would not have to ford the river each time he wanted to go to Sagebrush City. Of course, this meant settling on Cogswell

range, but this was the logical place to put his cabin.

His fifty acres ran to the toe of the foothills. Here was a fresh-water spring that came out of the hills. He could clean it out with a scraper and a team and have plenty of good water after he had curbed it with rocks. He was sitting his saddle, studying the location around the spring, when the surveyor came at noon. The surveyor splashed his team and buckboard across Smoky River, a scowl on his face.

"You sure you still want this homestead, Watson?"

"Why sure I do! What would change my mind?"

"Common sense might have changed it, I figured."

Ralph smiled. "You figured wrong."

Ralph had some cold cottontail left and he warmed up some coffee. They ate in the shade of the cottonwoods with Smoky River singing its eternal song. Then the surveyor got out his maps. There had been a survey through here years before — a government survey.

Somewhere close was a section-line stake. They finally found it along the base of the hills.

"Ah," the surveyor said, "that's good. We can work from here." And he took a drink from his flask. "Want a snort, Watson?"

"Not now, thanks. Too hot."

The surveyor was pleased. Ralph's refusal meant more for him. He licked his lips.

"Never too hot to imbibe, Watson."

Ralph said, "Stay sober enough to run these lines correct."

"Me, drunk? Why, Watson, I could run these lines standing on my head, I could."

Ralph smiled. "Don't try it. Too many prickly-pears around. You'd get stickers in your skull."

They finally got the south side of Smoky River surveyed. Ralph drove in stakes and they figured he had fifty-six acres on the Cogswell ranch. He was looking to the south into the hills. The surveyor followed his gaze. He evidently saw nothing. He looked at Ralph and a

question was in his glance.

"A rider was up there," Ralph said. "Watchin' us."

" Cogswell man."

"I suppose so."

The surveyor said, "You're an odd duck, Watson. Well, now we go to the north side and finish the survey. This river will take up quite a few acres of your quarter-section."

"That river will make my farm pay."

"Irrigation?"

"Yes."

"Only hope for farming in this country. You're showing your good judgment on one point, anyway."

Tom Gillis rode up on a swaybacked old mare just as Ralph and the surveyor were completing the survey on Big Wad Morgan's range. The surveyor had established the boundaries of Gillis' farm that forenoon.

"I bin ridin' aroun' consultin' my new neighbours," the man said with an air of importance. "Some mighty fine people they are, Watson. We done talked things over. We're all against the cowmen in

this thing an' we've decided to band together to fight them."

Ralph scowled, but said nothing.

"Come night after to-night, we hol' a meetin' along the river, right about by Reno's Crossin.' "

"What's the meeting for?"

"For? Shucks, man it's as plain as the nose on your face, Watson! We all are in danger from the Pothook and the Grouse Track outfit."

Ralph didn't like this one bit. First, he didn't like Tom Gillis' overbearing tone of voice, and second, he did not like the fact that the farmers were meeting to discuss ways to hit at the Pothook. The Pothook had not yet hit at them. They were jumping the gun, it seemed to him.

"The Grouse Track isn't against you farmers," he told Tom Gillis. "None of you have land on the south side of the river. Cogswell will only be against me."

"Jes' the same, he's ag'in you — you're one of us. The foe of one of us is the foe of all of us, Watson."

"That's a nice attitude," Ralph conceded, "but I'd wait for a while.

Perhaps Big Wad Morgan doesn't intend to push you people around. Some of you have been on his range for two or three months, and he has done nothing yet against you."

Tom Gillis leaned forward and spat tobacco juice. "Watson, you sound like maybe you still work for the Pothook."

The implication was clear. Too clear. Even the surveyor caught it. Gillis was almost accusing Ralph of acting as a farmer in order to be a spy for the Pothook among the farmers.

Ralph kept his temper.

"You're going to make trouble for yourself. You're a newcomer here, Gillis. If I were you I'd sit back and watch for a while before I'd try to become a leader for people you have just met. You don't know much about this situation —"

"I got brains enough to know when I'm in danger."

"That's good," Ralph said. "Very good." He spoke to the surveyor. "Now, mister, let's check that northwest corner's location again, huh?"

He and the surveyor moved away, leaving Gillis sitting his old mare. The man's face was as black as a thunder cloud. He was still sitting his horse when Ralph and the surveyor reached the corner in question. Then Gillis turned and rode away into the buckbrush.

"Trouble maker," Ralph said quietly. "There is always one of those."

"Here comes two more trouble makers."

Ralph smiled. Jan and Margeret were loping out of the brush along Smoky River. Jan was a golden goddess, sitting her black-and-grey pinto; Margie was dark and lovely on her bay.

"A pleasure," Ralph said, hat in hand.

Jan smiled and nodded to the surveyor, who smiled back. She had that air of infectious happiness that some people seemed blessed with. When she smiled at a person that person always felt a lot better with the world.

Margie said, "Good gosh, cowboy, but that Grouse Track foreman sure ran a disc plow over your pretty face."

"I'm a romantic looking character,"

Ralph agreed. "How's your mother and dad?"

"Dad's grumbling, as usual. Thought your homestead would run across to the south of Smoky River?"

"It does. We've already surveyed it."

"What the heck do I know about surveying?" Margie asked. "Nothing, I guess."

The surveyor was a man with a fat wife and seven children. He rose gallantly to the breach. "I'll teach you, Miss Morgan."

"Good."

Ralph spoke to Jan. "Ride across the river with me?"

"Sure."

They forded Smoky River and rode to the south part of Ralph's homestead. He showed her the spring, told how he would curb it, how water would be carried down the hill in pipes into her kitchen, for the house would be located in the cottonwoods where it would have shade and windbreak.

"Oh, Ralph."

They talked over other points in

question. Where would they put the barn, and where would the machine shed go, and how about the garden — where would it be? For a few moments the clouds of trouble were broken apart by the wedge of a happy future.

When the girls rode back towards the Pothook, the surveyor said, "I'd take the dark haired one, the little beauty."

"Not me. I'll stay with the blonde."

CHAPTER 6

Bart Hawkins grinned crookedly. He had a split upper-lip and his right eye was almost closed.

"Well," the Grouse Track foreman said ironically, "I guess I won. He had to go to Doc Grammar's office. I staggered off under my own power, even though my steam-cylinder was leakin'!"

Matt Cogswell looked at his *segunde* with a slanting glance. They were riding across the high divide that rose between the home-ranch and Sagebrush town. Their broncs, singlefooting along, kicked up idle dust.

"Never settled a damned thing," the Grouse Track owner growled.

"Fists never settled nothin'. They jes' make matters worse." Bart Hawkins' long forefinger tapped the handle of his

six-shooter suggestively. "Them is the boys what settle things for once and for all."

"Sometimes," Cogswell grunted. "Other times, they put a noose aroun' a man's neck, fella."

Bart Hawkins locked both hands over his saddlehorn and leaned back against the cantle of his Al Fuirstnow saddle. "A man has to chance some things, boss. It's like love, that-away."

"He might have got scared, though. He might settle on the north side of Smoky on Pothook land, 'stead of runnin' his lines over acrost the river to our property."

"Not our property."

"We run stock over it."

"Yes, but we have no deeds to the land, remember that. Gover'ment land, open for homesteadin', it is."

"Here's our deed to it!"

Sunlight slanted in and shot facets of reflection from the barrel of Matt Cogswell's six-shooter. The gun arced, landed in the man's fist, then twinkled as it sank swiftly into its

black-oiled holster.

"That," said Bart Hawkins, "mixed with some brains."

"Now you're talkin', Bart."

"Got a bottle?"

Matt Cogswell twisted on his stirrups and unlatched a saddle-bag and took out a flat flask. He drank of it and handed it to Bart Hawkins. Hawkins finally lowered it, sighed, said, "Good, but it burns the cut on my lip."

"He can handle his dukes."

"What's the cut and when's the deal start, Matt?"

Cogswell said, "So far no nesters has moved in on our grass. If this gent homesteads he'll be number one. The Pothook made a mistake when they let the first farmer settle. If'n ol' Wad would have put the run on the first one, I doubt if others would have come."

"He didn't, though."

"We will — if Watson settles south of Smoky."

"When?"

"We'll watch him. He might not settle.

I'll send a man out to-morrow to spy on him."

They rode in silence for a few miles, their ponies still singlefooting. Occasionally a horse shook his head and made his bit-chains rattle as he fought nose flies. A horsefly sucked blood from a bronc's shoulder. Cogswell's hand came down and the horsefly was crushed. Cogswell rubbed the blood from his hand, using the bronc's mane as a towel.

Finally Cogswell said, "But we don't want to get off on the wrong foot, Bart. When you tangled with Watson to-day you served notice on them other nesters that the Grouse Track is their foe. The thing is to get them mad at Big Wad. Play both ends against the middle. We divide them an' we can whip them."

"How can we get them hot at Big Wad?"

Cogswell growled. "Use your brains," he said.

Bart Hawkins nodded slowly. "I think . . . I see, boss."

They put their broncs to a lope despite

the heat. Heat still clung to the parched Montana earth when they loped into the yard of the Grouse Track outfit. The house was long and rambling, made of sod, and it even had a sod roof. All the buildings were sod. Two giant cottonwoods, very old, were on each side of the trail, and from these hung a weather-stained big sign, the lettering on it barely discernible:

Grouse Track Ranch

The brand was there, too, burned into the bumpy wood. The track a grouse leaves in the snow, only magnified, of course. Smaller than the old Turkey Track brand of Old Texas, but yet the track of a grouse — one of those Canadian grouse that come into Montana in the winter time when the storms north of the Canadian Line become too severe. They loped under this sign and came to the sod barn and went down. A boy of about sixteen, his youthful face as yet unshaven, came out of the barn and took their broncs. He said not a word.

He was deaf and dumb. Cogswell had found him in a trail town. He had taken the boy and raised him. He had been five when Cogswell had found him in Cheyenne, a hungry waif. He had no other name than Mudo. Mude, the Mexican word for *dumb,* for a man for ever *silent.*

Cogswell dismounted, tossed Mudo his reins. "I brought you something from town, boy," he said. He untied a new catchrope from his saddle's fork. It was a *maguey* rope — the Mexican soapweed rope. A fine rope for roping something big and heavy.

Mudo's dark eyes were glowing coals. He dropped the reins and turned the rope in his fingers. He seemed fascinated with it. He shook it out and measured its length. This satisfied him.

He went close to Cogswell. Bart Hawkins, stripping his bronc of kak, watched. Mudo put his arm around Matt Cogswell. He put his head close to that of the Grouse Track owner's.

Hawkins had a lump in his throat.

Mudo rubbed his cheek against that of

Cogswell. Then he opened his mouth, but his laugh was silent; he hugged Cogswell quickly a warm, tight embrace. Then he backed away, fondling his new rope.

Cogswell patted him on the shoulder. Hawkins noticed that his boss kept his head down as he untied his latigo.

Mudo ran away, building a loop behind him. It trailed in the liquid dust, and the smell of the dust was good, and the sight of it was grey and strong against the sun. Mudo had a pinto pony in the corral and his saddle lifted and was cinched, and he went into the saddle with the loop hissing around his head. He loped the pinto out, rope moving; he bent low over saddle. He came to a sagebrush, the pinto moved out; the loop sang and settled over the brush. Then the pinto came to a jarring, rough stop, leaning against the *maguey* — his weight took the sagebrush from the dust, sending it flying towards him.

Mudo raised his hand, and he waved at them.

"He likes that rope," Hawkins said quietly.

"He's a good boy." Cogswell also spoke quietly. "He's always wanted a *maguey.* By accident one came into the Merc to-day, the owner told me. He hadn't ordered it but it was in the order by mistake. They're hard to get here in Montana. That one came from Santa Fé.

"Santa Fé. . . ."

Cogswell glanced at his foreman.

"Makes me lonesome," Hawkins said. "I can still see those crooked streets, those people moving along them." He looked at Cogswell. "We'll never see it again, Matt."

Cogswell was gruff. "What t'hell difference does it make?"

The softness had left. The moment, with its implication, its fellowship, was shattered, broken by the press of the circumstance. Bart Hawkins realized this, and a strange feeling came across him, and he knew then, as he had known before, that he would never really understand this man. Cogswell was good and he was soft; then, the next moment,

he was hell itself, and he was shiny steel. Of these things Hawkins was very acutely aware. What motivated these elements, what devils drove Cogswell — these were the unseen, the unknown, powers. But Hawkins was not one to dwell long on unsolved things. He was a follower, and he had to tie his admiration to one man, and this man was Matt Cogswell. He knew, without a moment of doubt, that he would die for Cogswell, if the man so demanded. It was not a domination of personalities. It was, rather a sublime allegiance, a wonderful friendship. Both were aware of this. Both respected the other's individuality.

They came into the house. Because of its thick sod walls, because of the drawn heavy drapes, the livingroom was cool. Somewhere, back in a wing of the house, a woman stirred, and Cogswell lifted his voice, asking her to bring them drinks. Soon she came, solemn of face, heavy of tread. She was a Piegan squaw named Lonesome Land.

"Here whisky."

She set the tray on the table. Then she waddled back to her kitchen domain. She had seen the marks of Ralph Watson's fist on the face of Bart Hawkins. But if they held any interest, she did not form a question. She shuffled out of sight.

They sent out men the next day. One watched the nester's camp below the homestead of Ralph Watson, the camp of Tom Gillis. Another watched Ralph Watson and the surveyor. It was this man that Ralph had sighted on the ridge.

The men came in and made their reports. The one who had watched Tom Gillis accented the fact that Gillis had ridden around talking to the other nesters. Plainly he was banding them together.

Hawkins listened. He had a beautiful black eye.

Matt Cogswell nodded.

The man went to the bunkhouse.

Hawkins looked at Cogswell, a question in his good eye.

Cogswell said, "We hit at Gillis tonight, Bart. You an' me. He'll blame it

on nobody else than Big Wadsworth Morgan."

"That's what we want," Hawkins said.

CHAPTER 7

Ralph Watson knew that the Grouse Track outfit could not afford to let him squat on its range. Therefore he did not spend the night in the tent he had erected in the brush along Smoky River. The tent, in fact, was just a blind; he took a blanket and climbed the ridge and slept under the rimrock to the south. The night was warm — a typical summer-night in Montana. A clinging heat that refused to give up hung to the sun-drenched earth. Crickets made their sounds, the ground was hard under him, and somewhere a cow bawled to her calf. Ralph had slept well the night before. Now, on this second night, sleep came slowly, and, when it did possess him, it did not wholly conquer his senses. It was an erratic, broken sleep.

Midnight came.

Sleep came then. An hour or so later it was rudely broken by the sound of distant gunfire. Ralph became quickly awake. He sat up, pushing away the blanket; the night had turned cool now. He did not have to look long to find the seat of the trouble. Below his homestead, on the north side of Smoky River, was a brush fire. The wind came from the west and fanned it into strong life. Ralph realized it was burning at the spot where the Gillis tribe had pitched camp.

At first, he thought perhaps the family had become careless with fire, and had started the dried buckbrush on fire; then, again came the sound of shots.

He was on his feet, fully clothed, carrying his rifle.

He ran to where Dingdong was picketed in the brush. He did not take time to saddle the horse. He jammed a bit between his teeth, untied the picket-rope, and mounted bareback.

The fire was blazing. The wind was sweeping it along with fierce ambition,

and fire was cutting into the dried buckbrush and willows and cottonwood trees. The wind would sweep it down Smoky River. Ralph knew what that meant. The other nesters would burn out.

He realized that the fire was on the Pothook side of Smoky River. If it had been deliberately set then Big Wad Morgan had set it. If Big Wad had set it, he had chosen the right time, and the right place.

Ralph scowled. Indecision was in him. If he rode to help his new neighbours, Cogswell and Hawkins might raid his camp. The glowing fire became stronger. Wind whipped embers high.

Ralph loped across the river, then headed down it on the Pothook side, pushing Dingdong. A bullet came overhead, discernible even above the pound of Dingdong's hoofs. Ralph sawed the bronc in, and slid to the ground. Ahead of him in the night riders had whipped across the darkness, moving towards the Pothook ranch — heading for the spread on Black Bulk Creek.

Ralph worked the handle on his Winchester, jacking new cartridges into the barrel. He shot at sound only; he could not see the riders. Then they were gone, out of sound range, into the northern hills. And Ralph Watson stood there, face bleak — the riders were heading towards the Pothook.

Had Big Wad and his men really started this fire? That seemed hard to believe. Very hard. Big Wad would fight in the open. Or would he?

"Watson coming in, Gillis!"

"Over here, Watson!"

The Gillis camp was gone. Flame had burned everything the family owned — their wagon, one of their work-horses, their tent and belongings. Flame was roaring through the buckbrush, whipped by the wind.

Gillis ran over, carrying a rifle.

"Somebody fired this, Watson! I traded shots with them. I was awake, settin' on guard — I seen the fire start. Rider rode up an' tossed a firebrand into the brush —"

"You recognize that rider?"

Flame etched red colour into the man's gaunt, blackened face. His wife was beside him, surrounded by her children. Ralph read terrible fear in her face. He looked back at Gillis.

"Too dark. But when they pulled out they headed for Pothook. Was thet you I heard shootin' back a-yonderly?"

"You did."

"Who'd you trade shots with?"

"They shot at me first. Riders, but I couldn't see them in the dark. I shot back but I'm sure I didn't connect. Man, that wind is really whippin' among those flames."

"Where did them riders head for?"

"North."

Gillis said, "Big Wad an' his Pothook men, sure as hell. War is declared. But we gotta warn these nesters."

"I'll warn them. You folks build a backfire. Unless this is stopped every cabin along the river is doomed."

"Big Wad Morgan's work."

Ralph said, "Might not be, fella. Big Wad fights in the open. He don't sneak through brush."

"You still work for Pothook?" The words came cynically.

"You accused me of that this afternoon. I'm with you farmers lock stock and barrel. One more smart-alec sentence like that, Gillis, and I'm whipping you to the ground with my fists!"

"Dad," Mrs. Gillis said. "Watch your tongue."

Gillis hesitated. Ralph saw his hands become bony fists at his sides. The flames danced, heat terrific; they lined Gillis' gaunt rawboned face, and indecision was there. Ralph thought the man would call him. He knew then that what Gillis lacked in brains and tact he would make up for in courage. Then Gillis walked away.

"Come on, git to work, family. Build a backfire."

Ralph turned his bronc and loped down the river. He made Dingdong level out in speed. Behind him the brush-and timber-fire lighted the sky. The wind, instead of dying, became stronger. Already the nesters were awake. They

grabbed shovels and started to build firebreaks around their shacks. They worked with feverish haste. But the fire, whipped by the wind, was too strong. It roared through the brush and timber, swept across the firebreak around the first cabin, and the cabin was aflame in no time.

"There she goes," a man said sourly. "All we got in the world, Sadie, 'cept each other."

"We'll rebuild, Henry."

The fire swept beyond the burning cabin, and sparks and brands flew high as a whirlwind whipped across the flames. Ralph realized that the wind was certainly against them. In fact, everything seemed against them.

"We oughta git our rifles," a farmer growled, "an' head for the Pothook an' wipe it out, even if some of us died in the job."

"Maybe Pothook didn't set it," Ralph ventured to say.

The man turned on him, a cornered animal. "How kin you say such a thing, neighbour? The facts hit a man right in

the face! There's your outerfit acrost the river on the Grouse Track side of the range. It ain't burnin', be she? Cogswell an' Hawkins ain't set it on fire. They'd git you, not us; we ain't on Grouse Track grass!"

"Ed is right," Gillis substantiated.

"Don't seem like Big Wad's work," Ralph said. "But maybe I'm putting too much faith in him."

"Looks to me," Gillis said, "like you're lettin' friendship interfere with your judgment, Watson."

Again, that overbearing tone, that smug assurance. But Ralph and the farmers had no time for argument. This required work. The fire was roaring towards the second cabin. The farmer who lived there had built a firebreak around his property with a team and a scraper. Despite the wide area he had cleaned the fire leaped it with no difficulty. The wind was too strong.

"There goes another," Gillis moaned.

One by one the homestead-shacks went down under the ravages of the fire. Although Ralph and the farmers worked

like Trojans, the wind defeated them — it increased instead of decreased as dawn came closer. They managed to confine the fire to the buckbrush, though; otherwise, it would have become a prairie-fire, sweeping across the range and leaving behind it a blackened area. The strength of the wind helped keep the fire out of the grass. The wind blew so strongly it swept the fire down the river and did not give it a chance to run north through the grass. When dawn came the last of the homestead-shacks was burned. The fire roared onward, heading down the river. Behind it huge cottonwood trees which yesterday were green and massive with wide leaves were smoking, blackened stumps that burned in the dawn, the smoke trailing into the air. Chokecherry trees this year would have no black berries. Deer and rabbits and bobcats had died in the fire. A black bear had been trapped and his carcass lay in the ruins. And the farmers were ruined. They had moved their cattle and horses out of range, but their property was gone. Burned and gone.

Ralph looked from man to man, from woman to woman — the marks were the same, they had been whipped but they were not defeated. Faces black, hands sore from shovel handles, weary and heartsick, the looked at this ruin, but yet, deep inside of them, was a fierce determination to succeed. He was sure of this, and an admiration arose in him; he was glad to be a member of this group — even though his former cowpuncher-friends now despised him.

"Me," he said, "I'm not whipped."

"No, you've got your outfit. No fire on your side of the river. That means that Big Wad and his men set this fire —"

"Dad, don't talk that way! We've had sorrow enough for one night!"

"Well, she be the truth."

Gillis said, "We call a vote, fellows. If the vote is yes, we ride to the Pothook, and we fight it out."

A man looked at Ralph. "You know this country, Watson. Would you ride with us?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It would settle nothing. Some of you would die. Then what about your wives, your children —"

Gillis pushed forward. This time his fists were ready. He pounded one fist against another. His blackened, rough face was terrible with anger.

"Watson, I believe you're a spy, put here by Pothook. I believe you know this fire was goin' to be set — maybe you helped set —"

Ralph kicked him. He knocked Gillis' feet out from under him. Then he hit the man as he fell. It was one blow — a clean blow — and it rolled Gillis a few feet. Gillis stopped and held his jaw. He spat blood. He glared up at Ralph.

"You took advantage of me —"

"Get on your boots and say that!"

Gillis started up. His wife held him down. "Please, men," she pleaded, tears in her eyes, "don't fight. My husband is wrong. His nerves are strung out. He has said something he did not mean."

Gillis sat there, feeling his jaw.

Ralph looked from man to man. They

stood dumb and mute, watching him with distrustful eyes. His gaze travelled from one to the other. They were all the same. Their eyes, their attitudes, were all identical.

He was caught, then, between two forces. These farmers detested him, were suspicious of him; they would not accept him. He had also cut himself away from his cowpuncher clan, from the Pothook riders, from Big Wad Morgan. He was caught in the middle.

Then logic, coming in, gave him solace. He spoke with a steady voice. They listened gravely.

"You men can do what you want. Ride against Big Wad Morgan and his men. They'll cut you down and kill some of you. You'll settle nothing — no more than my fight with Bart Hawkins settled."

"We're men, not louses."

Ralph overlooked that. "You're all broke, wiped out. You still have your wives, your families, and your horses and cows. You say you are men. If you're men, then you have something

else — you have grit and courage."

"We need money."

Ralph nodded. "For some weeks now I've had a plan whereby I could possibly make some money. My plan is not outside the law, either. If we band together, work together hard, we can do what I have planned. We can pull through this summer. But we have to work together always. One for all, all for one."

"What is this plan?" a woman asked.

Ralph said, "you people talk this over. If it is war you want with the Pothook I'm not in on it. I'll not be party to such death. If you want to work and work hard and succeed, come and see me at my camp. The rest of this is up to you."

He mounted and rode away.

CHAPTER 8

They rode into the night, two hard-riding men who had left flame behind them. They had set fire to the brush around Gillis' wagon, and they had fired into the night, driving the Gillis family to cover in the brush. They had run into Ralph Watson, and they had exchanged shots with him. But the night had been too dark, and in darkness they had found an ally. Now they pulled their broncs to a halt on the rimrock and looked down on Smoky River Valley.

"Look at thet bresh burn!" Bart Hawkins chuckled. "Every one of them nester outfits will burn down. Next time they rebuild they won't settle so close to the river!"

"Maybe there won't be no next time. Maybe they aim to hightail out of the

country . . .'' Matt Cogswell watched the fire spread.

''Everybody on fire but Watson's outfit. We oughta go down there an' put the torch to his spread.''

''No, by hell, no! He's on our side of the river. We don't touch him. We got to make this look like it's the work of the Pothook. Git them pitched against the Pothook and let Big Wad fight the battle. Hope it breaks him. It might. Then we can pick up the Pothook for a song, and I'll do the singin' of it.''

''What a voice!''

''That wind is sure workin' for us.''

''Wonder if we shot anybody at the Gillis' outfit?''

Matt Cogswell shrugged. ''Maybe we did, maybe we didn't. Who cares? Big Wad gets the blame.''

''I'd still like to burn down Watson's outfit.''

''You won't.''

''Wonder what them nesters'll do now thet everythin' they own is goin' up in smoke?''

''Hope they decided to tangle with

Pothook. We'd best drift, *segunde.* Come dayight we want to be on the home ranch."

They loped into the night, following the curvature of the land, for each knew this range well. Dawn was sprinkling the sky with velvet light when they rode into the valley holding the sod buildings of the Grouse Track. It was Bart Hawkins who first saw the bull. He reined around, staring at the animal; apparently he doubted his eyes. In the dim light the bull bulked larger than he should have.

"What the hell is the matter with thet bull, Matt?"

"What the ——?"

They rode over to the bull. On his side was a big wooden sign. As they got closer they could read the words. Then both sat in their saddles and exchanged glances.

"That's the sign we had posted on the spot where Watson pitched his tent, boss."

Matt Cogswell nodded, too choked with anger for mere words. He knew that

Ralph Watson had deliberately tied the sign to the bull as an affront against him and the Grouse Track outfit. The bull, used to the sign by now, grazed calmly, some of his wives and calves around him.

"The dirty ——" Bart Hawkins ground the words. "We oughta go back there an' work him over six-shooter fashion fer onct an' fer all!"

"Shuck down your rope an' lay it on him," Matt Cogswell ordered. "Get that sign off'n him pronto. I only hope none of the Pothook riders saw the bull with that sign tied on to him. Ol' Wad an' his men would laugh us off this range."

"Wonder how Big Wad is takin' in the fire? He can see it from his home ranch, I guess."

"He should be able to see it, if he's awake."

Big Wad Morgan was awake, too. He and his men were on the hill back of the Pothook outfit, watching the fire gut the brush and trees along Smoky River. Mary Morgan, who slept little, had seen the fire from her bedroom window, and

she had hurriedly awakened her husband. The girls had heard the commotion. Now, they were with the Pothook owner and his wife and his riders, standing there on the crest of a high hill.

"Oh, heavens," Jan had said. "Oh, that isn't around Ralph's homestead, is it?"

"Looks below there," Big Wad grunted. "Men, get some hosses, an' we're ridin' over that way."

"None of that!" Mary Morgan spoke hurriedly and sternly.

Big Wad looked at his wife. Her tone had been very curt. He wished he could have seen her face clearly but it was too dark. But he knew that her thin lips were set determinedly.

"We won't get in no trouble, Mother."

"I know you won't. You're not going, Big Wad. There is something fishy here. Somebody has set that fire to drive out those poor farmers. Did you send a man over for that purpose?"

"No, I did not. When I fight I fight

in daylight and I don't use fire. When I —"

"You said that before."

Jan said, "I'm riding over to see Ralph." She ran down the hill, hugging her dressing-robe around her as she hurried to dress.

"You go with her, daughter," Big Wad said.

"Poor girl," Mrs. Morgan said. "She'll be worried sick. She loves Ralph. Why the heck doesn't he marry her?"

Big Wad answered that. "Because he has principles, that's why. When they marry he wants a home for her. I hope nobody hurt that boy — If they did — Say, what about the Grouse Track outfit . . . ?"

They were going down the hill. Cowpunchers had run ahead to saddle horses. The big ranch bustled with activity. Within a short time Margaret and Jan came out, wearing levis and boots and shirts, and ran towards the barn for their horses.

Mrs. Morgan held her husband's arm. "Dad, this is a trick to get you to ride

over, and then the nesters will jump you and fight it out. It looked to me like the entire fire was on our side of Smoky River."

"It is. I could see that clearly."

Mrs. Morgan said, "Maybe it was started accidentally. But if it wasn't, the Grouse Track might have started it, just to make trouble for us. I don't trust that Matt Cogswell any further than I can throw that big Hereford bull, Old Windy, by the tail."

"That's just about as far as I trust Bart Hawkins, too. I wish Ralph would have beat him senseless."

"Oh, there is nothing but trouble, trouble, trouble. I spoke too fast, Dad. But please don't ride over there. Send some riders to scout around, but don't you go, please. You have such a quick temper."

Big Wad saw the logic of her argument.

"All right, Mother, for you. . . ."

So two of the most trusted Pothook riders — Stumpy Jones and Mike Allen — were dispatched to Smoky River.

They had orders to stay in the rimrock and watch but not to ride down and see how the nesters were faring. Stumpy nodded, the seriousness of the task on him; he and Mike Allen rode out on the lope, with Stumpy in the lead.

By this time, Margaret and Janice were out in the hills, heading for Ralph Watson's camp. Janice was worried sick. Maybe the fire had started accidentally, or maybe it had been deliberately set — still, it might have burned down Ralph's camp, and he might have been caught in the fire. These thoughts were the spur and the quirt that made her pinto run with wild abandon, regardless of the boulders and the rough terrain. Margaret whipped up her bay and rode beside her cousin, the noise of their horses forbidding all conversation. They swept across the hills, and finally they had to slow to a walk for a distance to give their ponies a breathing-spell.

"Margie."

"Yes?"

"If Ralph is all right, I'm — I'm not

riding back with you. I'm staying with him."

"But you're not married."

"I'll make him marry me. One of the farmers, they tell me, is a minister. Ralph has already proposed to me. Gee, he's a big sap, easy-going and clean and good, but gosh, how I love him!"

"You must love him! One moment you call him a sap, and the next you praise him. Well, we've made good time. Here we are on the rimrock over Smoky River."

"The fire is all on this side, too. That means that Ralph's camp never got burned."

"Good." Margaret was emphatic. Then a little sorrow crept into her voice. "They'll blame it on Dad and his men."

"Isn't this awful. All tangled up —"

"Let's ride to Ralph's camp."

The smell of the fire, musty and hot, was in the air, although the blaze was a few miles further down the river to their east. They skirted the burned area, the dawn coming across the hills, and they forded Smoky River opposite

Ralph's camp.

Jan said, happily, "There's his tent. There are his horses. Oh, there's only three — Dingdong is gone."

"He's gone out to fight the fire."

"Let's go after him?"

"Do you think that it's safe?"

"Safe? The farmers wouldn't hurt us! We're women but — well, maybe you're right. It wouldn't look good for Big Wad Morgan's niece and daughter to ride into that area. They might even accuse us of setting the fire, if it was not started through an accident."

"We had better wait here."

They waited. Dawn became brighter. Still Ralph did not make his appearance. Whatchamahcallit came up and begged for sugar. Jan became worried. She had to do something. Margaret started a small fire in the circle of rocks that Ralph used as a stove.

Jan cooked breakfast. She had to have something to do. She just couldn't sit and worry. She got some eggs from the tent, made biscuits. She and Margaret worked. They had breadfast ready.

Dawn had changed to early forenoon.

"Oh, where is he?" Jan asked.

Margaret said, "There's a horse fording the river now. I heard him splash."

Jan ran down the the trail towards the river. A rosebush caught at her with its claws, and she ducked under it and ran. A rider was just riding on to the rocks of the near bank.

"Ralph, oh, Ralph."

Ralph stared. "Honey, what are you doing here?" He was off his horse and running towards her. He smelled of fire, of soot, of smoke, but he smelled good. He was warm and real and very much alive.

"Oh, Ralph!"

CHAPTER 9

It was the strangest wedding that had ever taken place on Smoky River range. It happened in the buckbrush camp of Ralph Watson. One of the settlers — a gaunt, rawboned man of fifty — was a minister. He had on a pair of bib-overalls, heavy work shoes, and a blue shirt. These were the only clothes he had; the rest had burned in his cabin. One of the women had rescued her Bible when she had fled the fire. He used this and he remembered the wedding ceremony from long practice.

Stumpy Jones stood up with Ralph, Margaret Morgan stood beside her cousin. Jan held a bouquet of wild sweetpeas that one of the boys had picked in the foothills. There was the blue sky overhead and there were the

hills, brown with the sun and dried grass, and there was the terrible charred strip of timber along Smoky River.

The farmers listened. Some of the women cried softly. This was a release for their tight nerves. Mike Allen stood beside his bronc, hat in hand, and watched. The two Pothook men had ridden into Ralph's camp. The nesters, hearing of the wedding, had come in a body. Even at this moment, some covertly eyed Stumpy and Mike, even though both had emphatically stated not a Pothook man had ridden off the Pothook that night.

Gillis had intoned, in that deep voice of his, "We are all gathered here for a weddin', folks, so let's lay aside, for the moment, all suspicion an' hate one has for the other and God bless us all. Amen."

"Amen."

Ralph was so shaky he could hardly swallow. Jan stood the test much better than he. He stood under the rising sun, surrounded by fellow farmers, and he was being joined in marriage to the most

beautiful girl he had ever seen. Sometimes it seemed like a dream; it did not seem possible. Only when he sent a sideways glance at Jan did he realize it was real.

"I do," he said.

Jan's voice was low and sweet. This was not the way Ralph had intended to be married. He had thought they would be married in the church in Sagebrush, but by that time he would have a home built, have furniture and new dishes. He had nothing to offer Jan but his future. That, though, seemed to satisfy the blonde girl and, in this satisfaction, he read the true index to her character. She would go with him and work with him, even if it meant living in a tent.

"I do," Jan whispered.

Then the minister pronounced them man and wife. Ralph had borrowed a ring from a farmer's wife — one her mother had left her — and he slipped this on Jan's finger. Later on, he would get her a wedding-ring. But, as he had joked before the wedding, what man walks around with a wedding-ring, ready

for an instant marriage, like this marriage?

Margaret's dark eyes were sparkling as she kissed Jan and Ralph. Stumpy threw his hat up, grabbed Jan, kissed her roundly. One of the farmers had a gallon of whisky and they opened this. His wife glared at him, and Ralph found out later the woman had not known her husband had had the whisky; the farmer had cached it out in the hills so his spouse could not find it.

Stumpy held a glass, eyes roaming over the farmers. "Gosh, this is a good bunch, Ralph."

"There's plenty of room for more homesteaders."

Stumpy's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I'm twenty-two years old," he joked. "I follered the cows up from Texas. So far, for all my years of work, I got three blankets, a saddle, five head of hosses, an' some saddle-boils."

Ralph nodded. "And you'll keep on until you die and still have nothing. Hey, we have a fiddler, eh?"

One of the farmers started "Turkey in

the Straw." Soon they were all dancing, boots scuffling the soil. But that did not last long. The heat of day killed these activities. They all gathered in the shade along the river. One of the boys had caught a big pike, another had three catfish; they had a fish fry. By this time the whisky jug was almost empty. A few of the farmers slept, victims of the heat and John Barleycorn.

Margie said, "Gee, I hate to go home alone, Jan."

Stumpy bowed, almost falling down. "I shall accompany you, Miss Margaret." He bowed deeply.

Mike Allen bowed, too. "And I shall accompany Stumpy."

"Mother and Dad will be positively amazed," Margaret said. "Mother will cry a little, Dad will rant about not getting to see the wedding, and then both will look at each other and say, 'Our other little *daughter,* a married woman.' Then Dad'll sneak off an' have a big drink with Stumpy."

"We'd best go," Stumpy said. He spoke to Ralph. "What's next for

you, Ralph?''

''A roundup, if the farmers are willing.''

Most of the farmers, men and women, were alert now, listening. Stumpy scratched his head thoughtfully in puzzlement.

''Clarify them words, Ralph?''

''Mind thet old spread that used to run back in the rough country? The Slaughter outfit?''

''I sure do. Way back in the badlands, country as rough as hell is supposed to be. Old Man Slaughter had two boys, Alec and Gus. They run stolen hosses into Canady, usin' cattle raisin' as a blind. Sheriff an' his deputies got wise about a year ago, wasn't it?''

''About that,'' Ralph said.

''Where do we come in at?'' Gillis boomed.

Ralph spoke to the farmers now. ''Old Man Slaughter got killed in the gunfight. His boy Gus got shot up and died in Sagebrush within a day. The other boy, Alec, jumped the country; they hung him down around Cheyenne six months

ago — still horse stealin'."

Gillis frowned. "I still don't git the point, Watson."

Ralph said, "The Slaughters had some cattle back there, about three hundred head. Wildest transplanted longhorns a man ever saw. They bogey at the sight of a rider, an' rip through them badlands. Neither the Pothook nor the Grouse Track has tried to run them down an' iron them. Both of those outfits are so big that Slaughter's wild cattle mean nothing to them."

"They could mean a lot to us," a farmer said, eyes on Ralph. "An awful lot, at the price cattle are to-day."

"They sure could," Ralph agreed. "And they're free to whoever rounds them up and gets a brand on them first."

Stumpy said, "That'll be a chore." He looked over the horses of the farmers, tied to the nearby trees. Workhorses, for the main part — clumsy, heavy animals. A few saddle-horses, though these were not of the best stock. "Yes, it would be a chore. An impossible chore."

"I don't think so," Ralph said.

Stumpy said, "By heck, you'd try it, Ralph. And if anybody could cut the mustard, it would be you!"

Jan said, "He can do it."

"A bride's optimism," Ralph murmured.

But the farmers were suddenly interested. They were destitute and without finances — in fact, they did not have roofs over their heads. They pelted Ralph with questions. How far away were the Slaughter cattle? About ten miles, back to the west, towards the headwaters of Smoky River. What kind of terrain was it back there? Rough badlands, high hills, steep slants. Buckbrush and bulberry bushes and stump pine. Any water? Yes, there was water, but it was bad water — alkali water. Hard on the insides of a man or a beast.

"I doubt if it could be done," Gillis intoned.

"Talk it over, man," he said. "We have horses, although not the best; we'd have to live off the land — but there are a few antelope and deer back there.

We're short of equipment but we might be long on fightin' spirit."

Jan said, "We can do it. That will save us all. We'll come out with a winter stake if we get that herd to market."

"If," Tom Gillis said.

Again, Ralph had no answer. He and Stumpy and Mike Allen talked. Jan and Margaret stood in a group with them. Then Margaret kissed Jan, and she mounted, sobbing as though her heart would break. Stumpy hollered, "You'll see her again, even though marriage is like a death sentence — I've been married eight times. Come along, honey!"

They spurred out of the clearing, shouting wild cowboy yells. They forded Smoky River on the lope. Water hit Margaret and she laughed. Then they were climbing up the opposite rocky shore, heading across the plain for the Pothook. Jan and Ralph stood and watched them until they were out of sight. Ralph had his arm around his bride and she sobbed a little.

"Feel sad, honey?"

"Sad? Why, Ralph, I'm so happy!"

"Good girl."

The farmers were talking about the Slaughter cattle. Tom Gillis had seemingly appointed himself as spokesman for the group. Ralph did not like this. Gillis, he knew, did not like him.

Ralph said, "Let's go for a walk, honey."

They went down along the river where the shade was thick. Ralph had a throwline set there and they pulled it in. They had a big pike. Ralph scaled the fish and dressed him, squatting along the bank of the river.

"Scaling fish on my honeymoon," he joked.

"We'll have a honeymoon later. When we ship those Slaughter cattle to Chicago we'll go along and celebrate," Jan said.

Ralph kissed her. "Gosh, I can't believe it, Jan. Pinch me or kick me or something."

They sat on the bank and talked. The river chuckled, also; it was happy too. Wild ferns grew thick and had their

mystic odour. A magpie scolded them for invading his bailiwick. The gaudy black and white bird came close, inquisitive and angry. Ralph tossed a clump of soil at him and he flew away, talking to himself.

"Here comes a farmer, Ralph."

The man said, "Sorry to disturb you folks, but I came to tell you I'd ride with you, Mr. Watson, on that roundup. I haven't got a thing but my horses an' a saddle an' my clothes an' rifle, but I'll do the best I can with these things, you can bet on that."

"Good."

"Gillis is talkin' ag'in it. He is offerin' another plan, an' that is openly fightin' the Pothook."

"Pothook never started that fire."

"Gillis claims Big Wad did start it."

"You heard Stumpy Jones and Mike Allen talk, didn't you? Yes, an' Miss Margaret, too. Those three are good folks. They don't lie."

"I agree with you. I figure it was a smart move for Grouse Track to make, cause the blame would be laid

on Pothook."

"You see eye to eye."

"Anyway, I'm ridin' with you, Ralph."

Ralph said, "If nobody else goes, there'll be the three of us. We can make wages working those cows out of that rough country. The season has gone too far for me to farm. It'll be until next spring till I can plant a crop. I might just as well work at that Slaughter deal as sit on this homestead."

"You're right, Mr. Watson. But Tom Gillis says —"

"The hell with Gillis. I don't give a damn —" Ralph stopped and looked at Jan. "Pardon my French, honey. I forgot."

"Go ahead and cuss him."

CHAPTER 10

Big Wadsworth Morgan studied Stumpy Jones. "Ralph an' them crazy farmers is goin' do *what?*"

"Jes' like I said, Big Wad. Thet fire burnt them hoemen plumb outa business. They're flat busted. Ralph an' them aim to roundup them Slaughter cows back in the bresh-kentry an' —"

Big Wad snorted. "Those ain't cows! Them things is deers, not cow critters. You couldn't catch one of them with a race hoss on a level plain, they thet fast. But go on."

"They need a grubstake for winter, so they aim to roundup them Slaughter cows, with Ralph as wagon boss."

"Them farmers must be nutty."

"Them farmers," Stumpy said, "are nice people. All 'cept that loudmouth

Tom Gillis. I can't cotton to that man. Too loud, eyes too shifty."

"Don't know him. Don't care to know him."

When Mary Morgan had heard of her niece's marriage to Ralph, she had immediately dispatched a Pothook rider for Ralph's camp on Smoky River, inviting the newly-weds to a wedding supper at the Pothook. The big ranch was in a turmoil. Cowpunchers scraped their faces with razors, put on their store clothes, and polished boots. Bottles went around and some of the boys were singing in the bunkhouse. Their tune was not the most harmonious tune.

"Ralph's bitin' off more'n he can chew," Big Wad said.

"He's a good boy. Them farmers is good men."

Big Wad glanced at his ramrod. At that moment, Mary Morgan entered, face abeam. "Now you two get out of here while Margie and I fix the table. And oh, what a terrible racket from the bunkhouse! And they call that singing."

Big Wad wet his lips. "I'll trot down

an' halterbreak them to silence, Mother."

"You'll go down and *drink* with them, you mean."

Stumpy and Big Wad left. "Marriage," Big Wad said, as a parting shot. "Slavery."

Mary Morgan spread a tablecloth over the table, levelling it with a practiced hand. Margie put her head in the door.

"Dad grumbling again?"

"Yes, as always."

Margie said, "Mom, I oughta get married, too."

"Find a good man, build a good loop, and make a good throw, honey."

"I'll do that," Margie said, and her head went back and out of sight.

Dusk was gathering when Ralph and his bride rode down off the rimrock. Mary and Margie watched them and Mary said, "They're a lovely couple." Then she dabbed at her eyes. "I'm glad Dad and I could give Jan a good home. This would be heavenly, if only this trouble were not here — if Dad would forget about the farmers —"

"We'll make him forget." Margie was adamant. "He can't fight Ralph, and we'll see that he don't.

"We'll try."

Cowboys poured out of the bunkhouse, scrubbed to the skin, and guns popped and yells went up. They got horses and loped madly out to meet the newly-weds. They dragged Ralph from his horse and chased him in on foot. Ropes popped at his feet, cowboys yipped and yelled; he finally made the front porch, where he ran into Big Wad and Mary. They hugged him and pounded him and Mary kissed him a dozen times. Cowboys hugged Jan, almost pulling her from her saddle, and so the happy brigade reached the ranch house.

The supper was splendid. Mrs. Morgan and Margaret had really used all their culinary skill. Young sagehen was fried to a brown crust, the potatoes were brown, the gravy delicious. Everybody ate at the long table — cowboys, the Morgans, and the newlyweds. Ralph had a few drinks and he felt a little gayer

then. He was worried, though; this worry kept cropping up. The farmers, when they heard that the Pothook had given him and Jan a wedding-supper, would be more suspicious than ever that he was still on the Morgan payroll, a spy working in their midst for Big Wad Morgan. Gillis had a big mouth; both were bad.

"Roundup, eh?" Big Wad asked around a mouthful of spuds.

Ralph nodded. "Going to be a rough one, too."

Big Wad swallowed. "Sure will be." His tone implied that the very thought of the roundup was foolish. Ralph was quick to notice the sarcasm in his former boss' voice.

"I'll have some good hands," Ralph said, joking. "Plowhorses and Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck saddles."

"It can be done," Stumpy said, looking up.

Big Wad snorted. "Figured you were a better cowman than to make such a statement, Stumpy."

"I still say it can be done."

Mrs. Morgan came in and broke up the conversation with an irrelevant question. Ralph thanked her with his eyes.

The meal finished, four of the Pothook boys played guitars and sang, and Jan and her new husband sat in the shadows, listening. Jan's golden head was on Ralph's shoulder and her hair smelled clean and good. Ralph almost asked her if she would not stay in her room at the Pothook. He knew what her answer would be, though. She would stay with him in the wilderness camp. Her place, she would repeat, was beside him — he was her husband. And that would end it.

The hilarity was dying down. The effects of the drinks were dying off. Jan and Ralph said they would have to go. Mrs. Morgan was disappointed because she had not had a wedding present for them. Jan kissed the motherly woman and told her her love was the biggest present she could give. Old Wad blew his nose like a trumpet.

Then Jan and Ralph raced away, the crew hollering at them. Moonlight lay like a golden mantle across this land of loneliness with its slow cool wind, its high black hills, the rolling river. Once out of sight of the Pothook, Ralph and Jan drew their broncs to a running walk, and they talked of the morrow.

"We run the wagons out to-morrow," Ralph said. "All the women and kids are coming along."

"They have no other place to go, honey."

Ralph spoke soberly. "I hope I am doing right. I have money enough to tide us over until a year from this fall when we'll have a crop to sell. But I can see no use sitting around or building fence until next spring. I might just as well be out runnin' Slaughter cows as bellyachin' around home."

"That's right."

"Of course, I could be building the house, but we can do that this fall — we can build it during Indian Summer. It'll only take three or four weeks to run out all of those Slaughter cattle — that is, to

run out all we can get. We can't get them all, of course. What do you think, Jan?"

"I wish you would tell the truth."

Ralph looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"You feel sorry for those farmers. You don't want them to go broke and under. So you're giving them a chance to pull through the winter."

"Well, in a way — yes."

She said, "Listen, Ralph!"

They sat their broncs in the moonlight. Saddle leather creaked as ribs rose under breathing. Somewhere, towards Smoky River, cattle were running; their sounds made a dull roar against the still night. Ralph's face wore a puzzled look.

"Sounds like a beef herd runnin' in the distance, from about the direction of my camp."

"Who or what would run cattle, on a night like this? No mosquitos, no flies — and yet, that's cattle running."

Ralph said, "Come on."

They loped towards Smoky River. They came out of the foothills and

spurred across the wide flat, heading for the crossing north of Ralph's camp. The sounds of cattle were absorbed by the harsh jar of their own horses' hoofs.

Ralph's bronc pulled ahead. They crossed Smoky River with their horses lunging across the stream. Dust was rising from the vicinity of Ralph's buckbrush camp. Dust hung thick; they rode into it. Then Ralph pulled in his rearing horse.

Cattle had stampeded across his camp. The tent was down and it was ripped to shreds. Brush was trampled. Plainly he understood what had happened. Running cattle had stampeded over his outfit.

Jan said, "Cattle, stampeded! They went into the foothills! Ralph, what is this, anyway? Cattle don't just stampede and cattle don't graze the range in a big bunch — they graze in groups!"

Ralph spat his words. "Those cattle never stampeded! They were deliberately run over my camp to destroy it! This is some dirty work of Cogswell and Hawkins. They've tramped over my grub

box, an' my grub is scattered and ruint; they've ripped my tent to pieces —"

"This just happened, Ralph!"

The dust was clearing under the push of the wind. Ralph looked at the dusk-darkened rim of the hills. Cattle were moving over them, their run gone — they lumbered along.

"They're up there — Cogswell and Hawkins are up there — and they're watchin' us, an' laughing at us. Those two started this brush fire, too, that burned out the other farmers! I oughta ride up there an' —"

"They'd kill you. They'd shoot you out of saddle and they would be in ambush. You'd play into their hands, Ralph!"

Logic came in and pushed aside anger. She saw the lines of his face turn hard, and his lips became predatory. She had never seen this side of her husband before, although she had always reckoned him as a fighter. There was naked, raw hell in his eyes, and for a moment this scared her.

"Yes, I guess I would, Jan."

"We'll win yet," she said, her hand on his.

He smiled, then. "*We* sure will."

CHAPTER 11

He sat his saddle with his right leg swung over the fork, and he stroked a match to life on the sole of his boot. Over the flame of the match he looked down on Smoky River Valley there in the dusk.

"Well, that finished his outerfit, Matt."

Matt Cogswell grinned wolfishly. "Sure did, Bart. Ralph Watson lost about a hundred bucks right there, an' besides we served him notice to get off'n our land."

"Wish he'd come up an' fight." Bart Hawkins blew twin jets of tobacco smoke. His dull-blue eyes were as hard as polished Sioux flint. "I'd crave to tangle with him again . . . this time with six-shooters."

"He might come up lookin' for us."

Hawkins shook his head. "I doubt that. He's a married man now. A woman keeps a man peaceful."

"I had one that kept me fightin' all the time," Cogswell grunted, and smiled. "I fought all her relatives until they outnumbered me too bad, then I pulled up stakes. That was back in Tennessee."

"We'll wait a while?"

"Might jes' as well. You git over in them big rocks, an' I'll sit my horse over here — if he comes he'll prob'ly ride in between us, not seein' us."

They waited with patience. Dusk changed to night. Dusk came in and hid from sight the buckbrush camp of Ralph and Jan Watson. Cogswell could see them moving down there — small ants against the distance and the encroaching night — and then the darkness hid their movements. He drew the good air deep into his lungs and expelled it slowly. Then he heard a rider behind him and he moved his horse around and his .45 was in his fist. The rider came closer, and then the gun lowered. Cogswell said, "Mudo, Bart, it's Mudo," and he rode

close to the youth.

Mudo showed a clean, boyish face, and his smile was white from his glistening teeth. He made signs with his hands, letting his reins be loose Matt Cogswell watched the hands move, and then he shook his head. Bart Hawkins rode up and he said, "Damn that boy, comin' in behin' thet-a-way! I had a gun on him, figurin' maybe he was Watson sneakin' in —"

"I bawled him out."

"Yeah, an' how?" Bart Hawkins answered that. "With yore hands movin', an' your head bobbin'! What he needs is a good swift kick in the britches, an' he won't foller us no longer!"

"He's too big for that treatment."

Hawkins growled, "Come on," and rode towards the Grouse Track.

Mudo and Cogswell swung in behind the stiff back of the Grouse Track *segunde,* with Mudo riding close to Cogswell, who rode in silence. They went this way for a mile, drifting through the night on horses that knew this range, and then they went to a walk,

with Bart Hawkins still in the lead. Mudo reached over and put his right hand on Cogswell's shoulder. He shook his head slowly and Cogswell nodded.

Mudo settled back in his saddle.

Hawkins snarled, "What did he tell you, Matt?"

"You got eyes in the back of your head, Hawkins?"

"I seen him ride close to you. I seen him put his hand on your shoulder. What did he mean?"

"He promised never to follow me again."

Hawkins looked at Mudo. The mute regarded him with a fixed stare. Hawkins found himself hating this boy doomed forever to silence. Mudo looked at him and Mudo had hate in his eyes. It was there, visible and sharp, and Hawkins read it, despite the dimness of the evening light. Hawkins' lips drew down, mean and surly. Matt Cogswell noticed this, but he said nothing. This was an old, old feud.

"He better not. Next time he sneaks up on me I'm fillin' him with bullets."

"You'll have me to account to," Matt Cogswell reminded.

"This is touchy range. A man ain't got no call to sneak in behin' another man like he did on us. This range is a keg of naked dyneemite. The fuse is attached, the cap is in place. All that need be done is put a match to it. An' the flame of a .45 will set it off with a roarin' bang!"

"He promised he won't tail us no longer."

They rode in silence for a mile or so. Then Hawkins put his weight on one stirrup and looked at Cogswell.

"How about this fella Tom Gillis?"

"What about him?"

"What we goin' do with him, Cogswell?"

"Leave him alone . . . for a spell."

Hawkins growled, "He's our enemy. He's aimin' to git in there an' tie up them homesteads so the railroad can go through them an' have to pay him high right-of-way costs. He ain't no farmer."

"We know that."

"This lawyer fella back in Fort Benton, this friend of yours. He got his

information too late to do us much good. We all figured the railroad would lay steel down the Missouri to Great Falls, then down to Helena an' cross over Priest Pass, into Missoula. But shucks, all of a sudden the big domes take an idea to branch off at Fort Benton, then head up Smoky River to cross the Rockies on Marias Pas."

"You've told me that a dozen times! I'm sick of hearin' it! Sure, that attorney got his information too slow, or else we'd never have had a farmer on Smoky River. But we got it late and that's that. I'll bet you my bottom buck that Old Big Wad Morgan still don't know the rails will run up Smoky River."

"He shore don't act like it."

"He's a wise one, Hawkins."

Hawkins said, "Gillis is out tryin' to buy up them homesteads. When we burned them boys out we might've worked into Gillis' hands, boss. They might get discouraged and sell to him."

"We'll chance that."

Hawkins continued, "Ralph Watson either knows the rails are coming

through, or else he is plumb lucky — either side of Smoky River them rails run an' he has land they has to pass over. Fact is, maybe these farmers aren't such a nuisance, at that. They're all on Big Wad's side of the river except Watson, who's on both sides."

"Again you repeat yourself."

"What if it comes up our side of Smoky River?"

"I've got a plan for that angle, and don't worry."

"What is it?"

"It ain't complete yet."

Hawkins shrugged, "It'd better be complete soon. Them surveyors will work in here soon an' then them farmers will know for sure, an' if the rails go up the north side of Smoky, then them farmers has a good sum of money for right-of-way ground."

"Let's get into camp."

Next morning every man on the Grouse Track went with Matt Cogswell to Sagebrush. They got in before the U.S. Land-Office opened for business but the Silver Dollar Saloon was open.

Citizens wondered why all the Grouse Track riders were in town this early and in a body. But no questions were asked. The citizens of Sagebrush had little use for Cogswell and Hawkins and their outrider crew. The old Texan who had owned the Grouse Track before Cogswell had been a nice fellow and had had the respect of his fellow citizens. But not these two.

They got full of whisky and became boisterous. When the agent opened the land-office they trooped across the dust and clomped into his office. He studied them with resentment and with surprise.

"What is this? A necktie party?" he joked.

Cogswell growled, "We should hang you for settlin' them farmers on the north side of Smoky River."

"My job," the land agent said testily. "My sworn duty."

Hawkins asked, "You want me to take his mainspring out, boss?"

"None of that talk, Bart."

The land agent asked, "Well, what do you want?"

Cogswell said they wanted to file on homesteads. At this news, the land agent could not hide his surprise — cowpunchers were sworn enemies of homesteaders, and here a group of tough cowpunchers want to file on homesteads. The land agent had heard about the disastrous fire that had wiped out the meagre holdings of the Smoky River farmers. He had his own theories as to how that fire happened to occur. Now here was every man on the Grouse Track, and each man wanted a homestead. Plainly there was something in this transaction he could not clearly understand. What it was he did not know.

"Sit down, men. This will take some time. First, I'll have to check the eligibility of each of you to file a homestead entry. If any of you have ever filed on a homestead anywhere in the U.S. before then you cannot file on one here on Smoky River."

Cogswell sat down. "Get to work, gover'ment man. Henhouse Anderson, you're first. Take 'em by the alphabet,

land agent. One of you boys trot over to the Silver Dollar an' bring back a gallon of whisky? Tell White Aprons to put it on the Grouse Track bill."

"This is a government office," the clerk reminded. "Whisky is taboo here."

"That's good," Cogswell said. "I'm glad to hear that. I hate to think of whisky leading anybody astray. Stay on the straight and narrow, my good man. Okay, Henhouse, start the ball rollin'. Rest of you sit there an' enjoy your drinks. This gover'ment man can't drink on the job, so there's more for us in that case."

"No drinking in the building."

Cogswell nodded vigorously. "Oh, now I understand." He looked over the log building's interior with feigned interest. "Nice building, too. That's too bad nobody is allowed to drink in it."

He raised the jug and drank, then handed the jug to Bart Hawkins.

The clerk could do nothing.

The job required most of the day. Cogswell was very careful to get the exact locations of the homesteads in his

mind. Carefully he and the clerk checked the map. The homesteads were all on the south side of Smoky River. They abutted Ralph Watson's land on the east and so progressed down the river. One by one they progressed down the river on land over which Grouse Track cattle grazed. When it was all over, the Grouse Track men controlled a strip twenty miles long. It ran from the river to the foothills. If the railroad bought right-of-way up the south bank of Smoky River it would have to buy it from Grouse Track riders.

He and the clerk stood in front of the huge wall map. Cogswell's finger moved to the north side of Smoky River.

"That land is taken up, sir," the clerk said. "Those farmers are settled there."

"I know that." Cogswell spoke surlily. "But what if some of them farmers, or all of them, decides suddenly to move? Cain't my men then take up desert claims, or hill claims, an' run their land acrost the river, too?"

"Yes, if the farmers abandon their claims, that could be done." The clerk's

curiosity had reached a high point. "Just what is the motivation behind all this, Mr. Cogswell?"

"Well, don't you talk American? I cain't even tell what you mean!"

"Well, let's get outa here," Bart Hawkins grumbled. "Too danged hot in here for a white man."

They headed back for the Grouse Track. They had two gallons of whisky and jugs passed from hand to hand. Cogswell sent two men out to scout the farmers. They came in at dusk and unsaddled sweaty horses. One went to the bunkhouse and the other reported to Cogswell at the house. The man jokingly said the whisky had made him lose his mind.

"How come, Generty?"

"Them farmers is all at Watson's homestead. Looks to me like they aim to outfit a wagon an' move back into the hills. They ain't a one of them tryin' to build another shack."

"That whisky must have addled you."

"They're gettin' a wagon loaded with bedrolls. Another one loaded with what

little chuck they got. Maybe they aim to pull outa the kentry?''

''Let's hope so,'' Cogswell grunted.

CHAPTER 12

Ralph Watson and his strange group of riders left the buckbrush camp along Smoky River before the sun had slid upward over the eastern rimrock. There in the uncertain half-light before dawn they got their equipment and horses ready. Three of the farmers were married and their wives and children went along. Tom Gillis and his family also joined the roundup crew, with Gillis grumbling. Secretly he was trying to buy out the farmers, Ralph learned; Gillis had approached each farmer, and asked if he would sell his homestead entry. His terms started low and then went comparatively high. One farmer, a bachelor, sold to him, signed over his homestead entry, and then rode away, singing as he rode. The others would not

sell. Ralph could not understand why Gillis wanted to buy the other homesteads. The man evidently had money, too; he had paid the farmer in cash.

Jan said, "I don't understand this, Ralph."

"Neither do I," Ralph was forced to admit.

They took two wagons — one to carry what chuck they had, the other to carry bedrolls and gear. They could not pull the wagons all the distance back to the Slaughter range because of the roughness of the terrain. They would go up Smoky River as far as they could and there make camp. They were just about ready to leave and Ralph was giving the equipment a final check when Stumpy Jones rode into camp.

Gillis hollered, "A Pothook man! Comin' into our midst, neighbours! What do you want here, Pothook rider?"

Stumpy dismounted and paid Tom Gillis not a bit of attention. He spoke to Ralph who came hurrying over.

"This gent, Ralph, is sure full of wind."

Gillis knotted his fists. "Are you talkin' to me, Pothook rider?"

"You can take the saddle if it fits."

"I'll take no insults."

Stumpy's faded eyes took in the farmer. Ralph saw the old rider's face move into harsh lines.

"Mister, you're about twenty years younger than me, but I'll hit you so hard your old grandmother will feel it."

Gillis stopped. "I ain't got no grandmother. She's been dead nigh on fifteen year an' —"

"She'll still feel it," Stumpy said.

Two farmers came between them. One said, "Mr. Jones, what are you doing here? Are you a spy for Big Wad Morgan?"

Stumpy spat tobacco-juice disgustedly. "When you say that, sir, you tell me you do not know Big Wad. That man don't send out spies. He does his own dirty work if there is any to do. Some of you men plainly are off on the wrong boot. Big Wad ain't your enemy. Your enemy

is the Grouse Track."

"The fire that wiped us out was on Pothook side of the Smoky," a man reminded.

"Yes, an' it wasn't set by Big Wad. I guess you nesters ain't heard about what happened yesterday in town, eh?"

"What happened?" Ralph wanted to know.

Stumpy told about the Grouse Track riders taking up homesteads along the south bank of Smoky River. Ralph noticed that Gillis looked surprised. He was watching the man and he noticed that Gillis listened closely. He himself had sort of expected this move. By filing on homesteads the Grouse Track could hold key points along the river.

"I don't savvy that," Gillis said slowly.

"Good logic," Ralph said. "Cogswell wants some land under deed. Using it as a water-point for his cattle, he can run on range no good for farming — grass just good for grazing. He can raise hay in the valley and winter-feed and save cattle that would othewise die in blizzards

when grass got covered by snow."

Gillis shook his head slowly. Ralph thought a scheming look came into his eyes, but he was not sure. But he kept remembering that look, that surprise, and he found conjectures in them.

"Well, we gotta git goin'," a man said.

Gillis said, "I'd still like to know what Jones is doin' here in our camp?"

Stumpy smiled. "I guess you got that right, men and women. Well, I'll tell you — and this comes from the bottom of an old cowboy's heart, too — I want to join up with you folks!"

"Good boy," Ralph said heartily.

Jan said, "Ralph and I sure are glad to have you, Stumpy. You filed on a homestead yet?"

Everybody apparently had caught the "homestead" fever. Yesterday Stumpy had slipped into town and had filed on a homestead right below that of one of the farmers. In the land-office he had learned of the mass-filing of the Grouse Track riders. He had informed Big Wad of this fact. Big Wad and the Pothook boys had ridden into town this morning

in a body to file homesteads on the north bank of Smoky River.

Gillis asked, hollowly, "They — what —?"

"Cain't you hear?" Stumpy retorted. "I don't chaw my cabbage twice."

Ralph again got the impression that Tom Gillis seemed unduly stirred by the information Stumpy had imparted.

"Good thing for the Pothook to do," he said. "This way Big Wad holds waterin' places on the river an' also has good land that'll raise hay if irrigation water is turned on it."

"A waste of filin' fees," Gillis grumbled, and walked away.

Stumpy winked at Ralph. "That gent don't seem so sociable. Well, men an' women, do I ride with you?"

"We'll take a vote," a man said.

The settlers formed a knot and talked. Gillis gesticulated, and once his voice rose very loud. Stumpy had stood enough. He walked over to the group and said, "Forgit it, all of you. I don't ride with you, savvy? I either ride with you because all of you want me to or I

don't go. I can work my homestead while you're out tryin' to catch them Slaughter cows. I know thet kentry back there an' I figured mebbe you'd want an old hand on your side but if you listen to this windbag" — he jabbed a thumb towards Gillis — "an' believe in him I don't want nothin' to do with you."

Stumpy walked towards his horse.

A farmer ran and grabbed the old cowboy by the arm, stopping him. "Mr. Jones, you got us wrong — we want you with us. All of us except Gillis want you. Don't ride off!"

The farmer's wife, a small, pretty woman, held his other arm, looking up at old Stumpy with pleading eyes.

"Please stay, Mr. Stumpy."

Stumpy smiled at her. "You're a right beautiful young woman, ma'am. All right, I'll ride with you folks, an' with great pleasure."

Gillis glared at him.

Stumpy met the farmer's stare. "Somethin' on your little mind, sonny boy?"

Gillis said nothing. Finally he turned away.

Stumpy shrugged. "Gillis don't cotton to me," he told Ralph.

"Don't lose sleep," Ralph said, smiling. "He don't like me either since I bounced him on the ground the other day. All right, men and women, we start the wagons rolling. Stumpy, wagon-pilot us up the river, eh?"

"Here we go!"

Whips cracked. Kids hollered. Dogs barked. Stumpy rode ahead of the first wagon, which happened to be the mess-wagon, and he lifted his hat and gave a Sioux warwhoop. The wagon moved in behind him; the other wagon fell into line. They went along the edge of the river, following the grassy flat. The older boys hazed the saddle-horses, if the conglomeration of horses could be called "saddle" horses. They were "plow" horses.

Jan rode beside her husband. She was a pretty picture in her saddle, riding man-style; she wore levis and a cotton blouse and old boots. Yet the old

battered hat did not hide the beauty of her light-coloured hair.

Stumpy took the lead, acting as wagon-pilot.

Ralph shook his head in disbelief. "By golly, honey, I can hardly believe that Stumpy would leave the Pothook and sling in with us. I'll bet Big Wad doesn't know whether to get mad or laugh. I can see him jumpin' up and down and wondering what is next. He's lost three of us in the last few days from the Pothook."

"Maybe he might take up a homestead himself, Ralph."

"He prob'ly will take up one, when him an' his men file to-day in town. His wife is eligible for a homestead; so is Margie. No, she ain't; she ain't twenty-one yet, is she?"

"No, she's twenty, like I am."

"Shucks, you ain't much use to me then, if you can't file on a homestead. Kinda sorry I married you."

"I'll bet you are. Well, Your Royal Highness, I'll be twenty-one in a few days, if that makes you feel any better."

"Here we are — married folks an' already arguing, and I still don't know your birth date."

"Maybe I won't tell you, either."

Ralph smiled. "Oh, yes, you will, I reckon. You'll want a present and if I don't know the date of your birthday, how will I know when to buy you a nice purty present?"

"Oh, I might tell you . . . later. . . . "

There was dust and confusion. Dogs trotted along, seeking the shade of the buckbrush. Ralph noticed there was very little joking, though. That was not a good sign. He saw that these farmers were grim and tense. They were remembering the fire, and they remembered the loss of their houses and belongings, and these memories put a stern grimness in them. Someday they would find out who had lit that fire.

Then somebody had better watch out.

CHAPTER 13

Big Wad Morgan and his riders went in a body to the land-office. There they kept the clerk busy most of the day making out filing papers. The clerk was astounded. He had come out from the Great Falls land-office figuring he would have a long, long vacation — with pay — in the Sagebrush office. But things had suddenly turned out differently. They were making him earn his pay.

"I'm way behind on my surveying," he told the owner of the Pothook iron. "I still have to survey the homesteads filed on by the Grouse Track men. Then I can find the corner-posts of these claims you men have filed. Until I can run the survey post signs on the land you claim, I'll see that this prior ownership is honoured. We'll mark up

this map into rough lines to show locations until the absolute line can be run."

Big Wad snorted. "Me, filin' on land! Don't seem real, it don't. Here I've run cattle over thousands of square miles of land and I'm filin' homestead rights on a dinky one-hundred and sixty acres. Clerk, how much is the financial damage for all these claims?"

The clerk did some arithmetic. Big Wad paid for the group with, "All this gover'ment wants is more money, more taxes. That's a steep rate for filin' fees."

"But you get a quarter section of land for it."

"Still too high, I say. Too many people workin' for the gover'ment. Cost of gover'ment is too high. Gettin' higher every day, too. Whole thing going to pot."

The clerk winked at a cowboy. Big Wad did not see the wink.

"How come the Grouse Track take up homesteads?" a cowboy mused. "There must be somethin' behin' this thet we jes' cain't savvy, men."

"Ol' Cartridge Case Maloney," another cowboy said. "Always hintin' at some mystery. Ever find out who poured concrete into your new boots, Maloney? There's a good mystery for you to solve."

"Big Wad filled them boots of yours," a cowboy said.

Big Wad said, "Cartridge Case poured concrete in them."

"I didn't do it," Cartridge Case said. "Pinto over there did it. I seen him mix the concrete up in the wheelbarrow, I did."

Pinto said, "That was Mike you saw, not me. Sometimes we look a lot alike, seein' us from the back."

"Everybody was in on it, I guess. No, but it does seem odd, man."

"They prob'ly think the same about us," a rider remarked.

A man came in and said, "The Grouse Track men jes' rode in — three of them. Cogswell an' Hawkins an' thet deaf an' dumb youngster."

"What about it?" Big Wad growled. "We ain't got no feud with them."

"Me, I don't like the cut of their pants."

"Jes' keep your likes an' dislikes to yourself, fella. Now all you boys get your hosses an' light outa town. Be almost dark when we hit the ranch an' the women'll be worried an' waitin'."

"They're always worried," a rider grumbled. He wanted to stay in town, drink out a few saloons, and end up broke and with a headache. Big Wad knew this, and accordingly made his men mount and leave Sagebrush.

He rode behind his men, a mother hen herding her chickens. Matt Cogswell and Bart Hawkins and Mudo came out of the Mercantile and Cogswell said, "Like to talk to you a minute, Morgan."

"You boys ride on," Big Wad said. "I'll catch up with you."

He rode over to where the Grouse Track trio stood on the plank sidewalk. He liked neither Cogswell nor Hawkins. He was glad that Ralph had trimmed Hawkins' horns down.

"Got somethin' to say, Cogswell?"

"Done heard you an' your men filed

on homesteads."

"That's right. On the north side of the river — our side. Except for them claims taken by the nesters, we'll own all the land along Smoky on the north side until the river goes into the canyon."

"We own the other side," Cogswell said. "You boys had quite a fire over there the other night, eh? We saw it from the ranch."

Cogswell's face was emotionless. Hawkins studied Big Wad with glum certainty. Mudo looked at a town boy who stood under an awning and studied the mute.

"*We* didn't have it," Big Wad corrected. "We were all home on the ranch at the time it started."

"Prob'ly one of them farmers was careless with fire," Cogswell grunted. "Anyway, guess it burned some of them out. Jes' for curiosity, Big Wad, how come you an' your men turn homesteaders?"

"We want deeds to river bottom land. Ralph Watson has the idea. I lost my ramrod too. Stumpy Jones rides with

Watson and the farmers. He took up a hunk of land." Big Wad spat in the dust. "Now that you've put the question towards me, Cogswell, I'll shove it back. How come you and your hands file on homesteads?"

"Same reason you did."

"Well, we got that settled." Big Wad turned his horse, then reined in. "I had a brockle-faced steer that used to run along our side of Smoky. Pulled him outa a river bog about a week ago. He'd been in a coupla days an' was kinda ga'nted up. Kept an eye on him an' then he disappeared a few days back. He wander over on your side of the Smoky, Cogswell?"

"Never seen him."

"I might ride over there some day an' do some ridin' for him."

"You won't find him, Big Wad."

Big Wad Morgan's eyes were puckered a little. The tiny muscle along his jaw twitched. He knew full well the implication hidden in Cogswell's seemingly harmless reply. He had trailed the steer to the point where he had

entered Smoky River. That steer had crossed to Grouse Track range. But he knew he would not find him there. Cogswell had run across him and butchered him. Cogswell openly boasted of never tasting his Grouse Track beef.

"See any more Pothook cows over there, shoo them back."

"We'll do that. What about them nesters on your side of the river?"

"What do you mean?" Big Wadsworth Morgan played stupid.

"You know what I mean. They're cuttin' in on your graze an' water. You goin' let them stay?"

"I could ask you the same question," the cowman countered. "Ralph Watson is located on your grass — or rather, grass you claim. You gonna let him stay?"

"That's my business."

"You don't say! Well, them other nesters is my business, followin' your line of reasonin'!"

Big Wad loped away. His horse flung back dust and stones. Cogswell ducked a pebble and cursed the man. But he did

not curse so loud that Big Wad could hear. Big Wad disappeared around the corner of an unpainted building, hurrying to catch his Pothook riders.

Bart Hawkins murmured, "What if the railroad goes up the north side of Smoky? When the Pothook outfit will sell some high priced right-of-way."

"Railroad is going up the south side."

"Yeah, so that lawyer says, but he could be wrong."

" He's gettin' his cut! He can't afford to be wrong!"

"He doesn't know all the inside dope, I figure. He doesn't work for the railroad company. How long have you known him, Matt?"

"Long time. We were boys together down south."

"Well, maybe he's right, then. Still, wish we had had more men to file homesteads, and we'd've taken up homesteads on Pothook side of the river."

Matt Cogswell chuckled. He seemed to be pleased about something. Hawkins glanced at him quickly in surprise.

"What's so amusing, boss?"

"The land agent made a slip. When we filed yesterday we also filed notices we aimed to claim desert claims an' grazin' claims an' timber claims. I saw to that, remember?"

"Yeah, I didn't see through the move, then. . . . "

"Do you see it now?"

"No, I don't."

Cogswell explained. He had carefully studied the Homestead Act, even getting a pamphlet from Washington, D.C. that contained the Act in full. When he and his riders had filed these various homestead rights they had, in fact, tied up the northern bank of Smoky River from being homesteaded. They could exercise these rights if they so desired. If they were not exercised within sixty days, then they were declared null and void.

"How can we make sure we can get these claims? Why didn't we file them yesterday?"

Cogswell explained that, also. To hold down their claims they had to make

improvements within thirty days. Each homestead had to have a cabin and on each the claimant had to live six months out of each year. When the improvement conditions had been satifactorily met, then the claimant could file on additional claims, but, until the conditions had been satisfied, the future claims were held in option for him.

"Then we got the Pothook all tied up, eh? Yeah, an' we tied up Stumpy Jones' claim, too. How come the land agent didn't tell Big Wad and Stumpy about our claims?"

"The land agent doesn't know that much."

"Maybe we better see Ol' Man Webster?"

"Might help."

They left Mudo looking at some town kids, who wanted to fight him. He couldn't understand what the boys were saying, and they studied him with cold practicality. Old Man Webster was the town's only lawyer. He had his office-home over the Mercantile. He had not heard of this phase of the Homestead

Act, he said. He got out his government literature. Cogswell showed him the paragraph in question. Old Man Webster read it carefully, squinting over his specs at the Grouse Track men when he had finished.

"You are right, Cogswell. That puts the claims of the Pothook men on the list as second best and to be honoured only if your men do not fill their filing obligations."

"They'll fill them, sir."

Old Man Webster steepled his long fingers. Over the steeple he regarded Cogswell and Hawkins with tired old eyes.

"Big Wad will be mad as a hen doused in a water tank."

"His business, not mine."

"He won't like it."

Cogswell took his hat off the rack. "You had best inform the clerk about this," he told Webster. "I would tell him but he wouldn't believe me and he'd want to argue. You're a gentleman of the Law, and your word is an honoured word."

"Thank you, sir. I shall so inform him."

Cogswell went down the stairway, Hawkins behind him. Hawkins had found a new vein of admiration for his boss. When they came on the street, Mudo was fighting a boy much bigger than he. Cogswell said, "Look, Bart," and they stood there, and they watched.

The town had come alive, and men and women watched. Local kids hollered encouragement to their bully, wanting him to beat down the stranger. Cogswell watched and smiled. Mudo went into a crouch, feinted the bully off balance, and crossed a right. The bully went down. He got up and Mudo caught him with a straight left that sent him down again. This time the bully did not get up.

Cogswell said, "We taught him well, Bart. He fought better against his man than you did against Ralph Watson."

Bart Hawkins' face was black with anger.

"Don't rub my wool the wrong way,

Matt! Damn it, me an' Ralph Watson ain't done yet, an' you can lay your bottom dollar on that, too!"

CHAPTER 14

Ralph had been on many roundups before, but never had he worked with such a crew. They knew nothing about the methods used in running a cow-roundup and they knew less about horses and riding. He wondered if he had not been foolish for starting this roundup. Then he knew that there was no other course for these farmers. It was either roundup Slaughter cattle, sell them for what they would bring — or move out of Smoky River Valley and leave their homesteads.

"I don't know." he told Stumpy, shaking his head. "I sure don't know. God had better take good care of this outfit, because they can't take care of themselves."

"They'll snap out of it. They're new

here but they'll become cowhands. They got the main requirement needed to get their goals."

Such philosophy was not natural to Stumpy, and Ralph gave the short man a quick look of surprise.

"And what is that requirement?"

"Fight!" Stumpy said emphatically, "Fight! With fight a man can win anythin', even a redheaded woman's will!"

"How would you know about the redheaded woman?"

"I read that somewhere," Stumpy retorted. "Me, I'm only fifteen. Never been kissed and I'm shy and coy."

Ralph smiled and glanced at Jan, who was enjoying their conversation.

Jan said, "Sounds like old times to hear you two bantering each other. How much further do we drive, Stumpy?"

Stumpy looked around for a landmark, one hand braced on the low cantle of his Fort Worth saddle.

"About four miles, I reckon. We'll make it afore sundown.

Jan looked at the sun. "Yes, we

should make that by sundown."

Ralph said, "Come along, honey, and we'll do some scoutin'."

Ralph and his bride rode into the hills. These were not the rolling hills that ran out from each bank of Smoky River like the hills where the homesteads were located. These were steep slants, covered with thick buckbrush, and they had natural crevices in them, imprinted into the clay-like soil by rain and earthquakes across the centuries. Badgers and coyotes had dug holes also in the buckbrush. A bronc step in one of these and he might fall and roll over.

"This way," Ralph said. "We might see a buffalo back here. The hunters have driven them off the plains. But I doubt it. I wonder if the buffaloes will all be killed off and become extinct?"

"I hope not."

"They stand that chance. They've killed them by the millions in Kansas and Colorado and the Dakota Territory."

They rode up a narrow trail ground out of the sidehill by the hoofs of cattle that had come down to Smoky River for

water. When they gained the summit the rough country lay ahead of them. Brush and rough hills, deep ravines and tips of high peaks. Then, in the background, were the Big Rockies, the backbone of the North American Continent.

"Oh, how lovely, Ralph."

"Desolation, Jan. God's land, honey."

"Cattle, Ralph. Over there!" She pointed hurriedly,

Ralph focused his fieldglasses. The lenses brought the cattle nearer. "Slaughter stock. A cow, a calf, and two steers. I can see the Big S on their ribs. Wanta look?"

He handed her the glasses.

While Jan focused the glasses, Ralph studied the wild terrain, already building plans for the roundup procedure. There seemed only one logical method. That was to move the wagons up as far as they could into the canyon. Then, when the rigs could go no further, circle-riders would be sent out, driving cattle towards the river. You could not drive these cows — they were too wild.

The only thing a circle-rider could do

was get behind them, and they in their fright would head away from him. That meant the riders would have to stick to the high timbered ridges with their thick buckbrush, their scrub pine, their bulberry bushes with their long thorns that could rip through a man's pants and cut his flesh.

Then, after the cattle had run in this heat, other riders, stationed closer to the river, would come in, and give them an additional scare. This way the Slaughter S cattle would be worn down. Only if they were dog tired was there a chance to hold them in a box canyon for, if they were fresh, they would bolt past riders, no matter how narrow the inlet to that canyon might be.

"More cattle over there," Jan said, and pointed to another high hill. Ralph saw the ant-like forms of cattle against the distance. He knew they were not wild mustangs. He had a cowman's eye. He could tell a cow from a horse as far away as he could see them.

They saw more cattle.

Some were cows with spring calves.

The Slaughter outfit had really picked out a wilderness from which to operate their thievery. But, despite their secluded location, they had not been successful — the Law had stepped in and stopped them, even in this uninhabited wilderness.

"We'd better head back, Jan."

They were coming down a hill when one of Tom Gillis' boys found them. "Grub wagon done busted down, Mr. Watson. Mr. Stumpy sent me out to look for you."

"Broken down?"

"Yeah, reach done snapped."

Ralph frowned. He had inspected the grub wagon carefully the night before. The heavy reach had looked to be in tiptop shape.

"You hit a stump or rock or somethin' with a hind wheel?"

"Nah, happened right on level ground."

When they rode into the newly-made camp a man was hewing out a pine tree, making a reach with his broad axe. The wagon had been unloaded and what few

supplies the nesters had were stacked on the ground.

Jan said, "I'll unsaddle the horses."

"Thanks."

The reach had been removed from under the wagon. Ralph went over and looked at it. It had sheered off right where the kingpin goes through it. Stumpy Jones, who had been squatting beside a fire with a frying-pan in his hand, handed the pan to a woman, and walked over with his queer bowlegged gait.

"See any cows, Ralph?"

"Quite a few of 'em. Wild as rabbits thet had been shot at. What caused this reach to break?"

"You got me stumped. We was rollin' along, right here on this level strip, an'poppo — the reach snaps."

Ralph knelt beside the reach. He turned it over. Stumpy knelt beside him. Ralph studied the hardwood reach.

"Looks to me like its been cracked before it busted. I looked at it last night, though, and there was no sign of a crack. This sure looks odd to me, Stumpy."

"I inspected it last night, too. There was no crack there then,"

Ralph's gaze met Stumpy's. For a long moment both men were silent. The river made its far-away, roaring noise as water slipped over moss-covered boulders. Wind moved in the pine trees and made a soughing sound. Ralph spoke so only Stumpy could hear.

"I wonder if there is somebody in this camp who don't want us to roundup these Slaughter cows?"

Stumpy kept his head down and spoke very softly. "Me, I've thought of that, too. Somebody could have put a jack under this reach, put just enough pressure against it to crack it, trustin' it would break under a load?"

"That's possible. But who is it, and why?"

"Gillis is no angel."

"But why?"

"I dunno. He's causin' more trouble. He wants to buy homesteads. Why does he want all thet land? "

"You got me stumped."

"Me, too. But I'm keepin' an eye on

this Gillis gent.''

Gillis was talking with a farmer. He was gesticulating and evidently trying to prove some point of conversation. Ralph and Stumpy and the farmer got the new reach hewed out and into place. It was a make-shift job but it would do for the wagon could be moved only a few miles further up the gulch. There the rise of the canyon would stop further progress.

They reached the end of the canyon without further mishap. Then they bedded down for the night. Tarps were unrolled and bedding arranged. Ralph slept little. He was up at midnight and he walked down the river to where Stumpy and another farmer were holding the horse-herd. He and Stumpy hunkered and talked. The horses grazed on the river bottom. They were tired and hungry and had no inclination therefore to stray.

''You hit the hay, Stumpy. I'll take over from here on.''

''As you say, Ralph.''

Stumpy rode towards camp. Ralph circled the horses. Soon a man walked

down from the camp.

"Howdy, Mr. Gillis."

"Hello, Mr. Watson."

Ralph asked. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing."

Ralph thought, *He isn't bellyachin' for a change, and that seems odd,* but he did not put this thought into words, of course.

"Riders goin' out come daylight, Watson?"

"We start circlin' riding," Ralph assured.

False dawn was sneaking across the hills. There would be a dark period again, and then dawn would come in golden glory. Gillis looked at the dim outlines of the hills.

"Rough country," he said slowly. "And they tell me those Slaughter cattle are wild. No place for a farmer and a plowhorse."

"I agree with you there," Ralph said.

Gillis sent a slanting glance at him. Ralph noticed it but paid the man no more attention.

He walked back towards camp.

CHAPTER 15

Bart Hawkins and Matt Cogswell rode down off the rimrock, braced against the forks of their saddles as their horses slid in shale. Tom Gillis heard them and turned his bronc, and his hand went to the stock of the rifle in the saddle-boot under his left leg.

Cogswell had his right hand high, the palm turned towards Tom Gillis, who sat and watched. Suspicion left the farmer and he also raised his hand up to his shoulder in the Sioux sign of peace.

Cogswell said, "You're Tom Gillis, ain't you?"

"I am."

"I'm Cogswell. This is Hawkins."

"I know you both by sight."

Cogswell draped his right leg around his saddlehorn. He licked a cigarette into

slow shape and his eyes were on the farmer. Cogswell got the cigarette going and drew smoke into his lungs before speaking.

"How's the roundup going?"

"All right."

"Gettin' any cattle?"

"Only been gatherin' for two days. They're wild as a March hare, but we got about ten head kind a quieted down."

Cogswell looked at Hawkins. Hawkins dept watching Gillis. Gillis got an uneasy feeling. These two gunmen were very abrupt and a little too thoughtful. Cogswell finally spoke. "You know a lawyer in Fort Benton?"

"I know one."

"What's his name?"

Gillis gave the man's name.

Again, Cogswell looked at Hawkins.

"He's smart enough," Cogswell murmured.

Gillis watched. He saw through their plan. Or, at least he thought he saw through it. He decided to keep from disclosing his information. He watched them, eyes sharp.

"Yeah, mebbe too smart," Hawkins said quietly.

Cogswell turned his eyes back to the farmer. "This lawyer is close to a big dome on the Great Northwest Railroad Company. Did you get your tip from this lawyer?"

"What tip?"

Cogswell's smile was thin. "We both know what I'm talking about. You might just as well spread out your hand, Tom Gillis, an' show us your cards. Together we can do more than we can workin' alone."

Gillis frowned.

"The railroad?" Gillis asked.

"The railroad." Cogswell assured.

Gillis smiled "So you know about it, too? Well, I didn't get my information from the lawyer you mention. I got mine from the man who told the lawyer. He's sure the Great Northwest aims to lay rails along Smoky River through this section, followin' the river up to Marias Pass."

"You're here to get land, eh?"

"Yes."

Hawkins said, "So are we, brother. We got the south bank under homestead. We have our hands filed there."

"But the land will belong to your men, and not to you two."

Cogswell nodded. "That's right. But each man has signed an agreement to sell his land to us when he has got his first filing papers."

"There's many a slip," Gillis warned.

"We'll chance that."

"You laid a card — a good card — in my hand the other night when you started that fire above my place. You burned me to the ground but you still did me a good turn. You scared one farmer into selling to me. Others are on the verge if this roundup goes outa kilter."

"Fire? Cogswell asked.

"What fire?" Hawkins wanted to know, eyes sober. Cogswell said, "We could work together, Gillis. You could work from inside their camp, us from the outside."

Gillis watched him. He seemed fascinated by Cogswell's rough face. He

sent thoughtful eyes towards Hawkins.

Gillis said, "I couldn't trust you. Your word would be no good with me in this mess."

"I don't blame you," Cogswell replied. "But we could write out an agreement. The written word is good."

"I'd do that," Gillis said.

They talked over terms.

Gillis said, "Write that down, meet me to-morrow in the timber right above here, and I'll sign."

"We need you," Cogswell said. "You need us."

They shook hands, the three of them, and then Cogswell and Hawkins rode into the brush and were gone.

Neither Ralph nor Stumpy saw the meeting.

The two Grouse Track men rode down into Smoky River Valley. There the Grouse Track riders were constructing cheap one-room buildings. They were making them out of cottonwood logs. They were not much as buildings but they satisfied the homestead law requirements.

One man said, "One of the Pothook men was on this side of Smoky. He done tol' me the homestead entries of him an' Big Wad an' the other Pothook men are bein' held up."

"Yeah?" Cogswell was noncommittal.

"You got them tied up," the puncher said. "The papers went to the big office in Great Falls, where somebody found the papers you had filed, boss. Right smart work on your part, I say."

"Stick with Cogswell, and you'll ride high."

"Big Wad is Injun mad, this cowboy said. Wants to tear into you with a gun or his fists. He's got his lawyer in Fort Benton working."

"That's good."

The cowboy didn't know it — Big Wad didn't know it, either — but the lawyer Big Wad had working on the deal was the friend of Matt Cogswell, the lawyer who had given him the tip about the railroad going up Smoky River.

"How's them farmers comin' along with their roundup?" the cowboy asked.

Cogswell didn't know. He and

Hawkins had not been back in the rough country. They had ridden over directly from the home ranch, he lied.

"They got a job on their hands," the cowboy said. He spat on his hands, and swung his axe, singing, "Oh, for the life of a cowpuncher, with an axe in his hand, and a rope on his saddle. . . . "

Matt Cogswell headed for Sagebrush town, with Bart Hawkins riding high on his stirrups, hands braced on the fork of his saddle. Sagebrush was the centre of this; Sagebrush knew the direction from which the wind blew, and from what he could learn there, he would know what direction the wind might have tomorrow.

They dismounted in front of the land-office and went inside.

The clerk looked up with, "You got me in a bad mess, Cogswell."

Cogswell feigned ignorance. "Now what do you mean by that, sir?"

The clerk told about the trouble he had had with the Great Falls office, and then told about the argument he had had with Big Wadsworth Morgan. Cogswell listened with an attitude that this was all

news to him. Bart Hawkins chewed tobacco, looked for a spittoon, saw none, and walked to the door and spat, just missing the town drunk, who was staggering along. The drunk, deep in alcoholic bliss, did not even notice he had missed a deluge of brown tobacco juice. Hawkins grinned and went back to the desk and listened.

"I did what was legal," Cogswell said.

"I know that. Only thing, you know more about the Homestead Act than I do. You want my job?"

The clerk was joking, of course.

"You're doin' all right," Cogswell said. "My men are building homestead-shacks. They will fulfil all the requirements of the law. That land on the north side of Smoky will eventually belong to them."

"Big Wad Morgan is snorting like a bull hogtied for the branding iron."

"Let him snort."

Cogswell had the information he wanted. He and Hawkins had a drink in the Silver Dollar, ate supper in the café, and then headed for the home ranch.

They jogged their broncs through the dusk. Neither said much. Cogswell had had a good day.

He had won the first round.

CHAPTER 16

Ralph Watson soon understood why neither of the two big Smoky River outfits had tried to round up Slaughter cattle. To the Pothook and the Grouse Track the effort and time and money expended would not have paid dividends. Only to men like his farmers — men almost destitute who were flat in the pocketbook and down on their luck — did the roundup pay. And, even at that, it did not promise to pay much.

For the Slaughter cattle were wild as antelopes.

Ralph had worked cattle out of the Pecos brush with cow-dogs, and he early saw that the settlers' dogs might be useful. He picked out a brown coloured dog, and had him come with him. The dog made up in eagerness what he lacked

in brains. Within two days he was a fair cow-dog. Ralph would send him into the high brush saying, "Git 'em out Tulip." And Tulip would run out the Slaughter cattle.

They would roar out of the brush, horns laid back like a buck deer — horns that parted the brush as they ran. They leapt over rocks, across ravines, and ran as though the devil had goosed them. A man could not follow them on a horse. All he could do was point them down hill towards the camp and hope other farmers, some on foot, would chase them down to the meadow along Smoky River.

It was one thing to get them into a herd, and another to hold them. Once they lost a two day gather. Cattle broke in all directions, and the farmers' wives, who were on foot, even tried to head them off, but to no avail. The cattle broke back in to the badlands and were lost.

Jan almost got run over by a crazed longhorn. She got an old workhorse and rode into the hills where she met Ralph

and told him about losing the herd. Ralph waved in Stumpy and imparted this sad news to him.

"What'll we do?" Jan asked.

Ralph said, "There's only one logical thing to do. We can't hold them in a herd. They get their wind back and they stampede like rabbits ahead of a band of coyotes. We got to throw each one, put a halfbreed rope halter on him, and tie him to his brother."

Stumpy nodded. "Take a lot of ropin'. Lots of rope, too."

"I got a long bit of rope," Ralph said. "Bought it in town to make rope corrals out of. Say, where did Tom Gillis go?"

Stumpy looked up at the timbered ridge. "Last time I seen him he was up there. Let's get to work, son."

"Tulip, hit the brush!" Ralph said.

He and Jan and Stumpy ran about eight head into the clearing. Then they went to work with their ropes. They'd rope head and hind legs, with Ralph taking the hind legs, and then, a steer or cow down, they'd make a halfbreed hackamore and put on him. When they

got done the eight head of Slaughter cattle were tied together by their heads with about five feet of rope between each critter.

They started to run. One hit a tree, the rope went around it; the whole bunch piled up — a kicking, bawling mass of cowflesh. Jan laughed until tears ran down her cheeks. The steers got to their feet with difficulty, started to run again. This time one fell and he piled up all the others. This time, when they regained their feet, they stood still, their lesson learned.

"We might not have to halfbreed halter all of 'em," Stumpy said

Ralph nodded. "We can outfit a few more head of them. Then these can form the core of the herd. It's an old Texas custom, men," he told the farmers. "Ol' Chisholm trail system."

"They shore look funny," a farmer said.

Tom Gillis scowled in deep distrust. "I'm sendin' my wife an' children back down the trail," he told everybody within hearing range. "When them wild

ones stampeded this forenoon they scared me. What if my woman an' kids would've got run over."

"We have to chance all that," a man's wife said stoutly.

But Gillis sent his wife and children back down the canyon. They left on horseback. They were going to Sagebrush to stay until Gillis rebuilt his buildings. Ralph glanced at them as they left, and then looked at Jan.

"I can't understand that fellow, honey. His wife and kids were in no more danger than you or the other women and children."

He seems to have developed a sudden regard for their safety," Jan said softly. "And I wonder why? Surely those steers bolting for freedom did not scare him that much."

"Looks that way."

That evening Margie Morgan rode into camp. She hugged Jan and cried on her shoulder, saying she missed her very much. Ralph knew that was very true, for the two cousins had been reared together and had confided in each other

for all their lives.

"Ain't you happy to see me?" Ralph joked.

Stumpy said, "Or me, either?"

"The Pothook doesn't seem the same without you two," the dark-haired girl said. "Dad is absolutely mad, the poor man."

"'Cause I quit him?" Stumpy asked, jokingly.

"No, because he has already lost his homesteads."

Ralph dropped the bridle he had been mending. Stumpy let his mouth flop open as he looked at Margie in surprise.

"What do you mean?" Jan asked.

Margie told them about the prior claim of the Grouse Track outfit on the land north of Smoky River.

"Whew," Stumpy whistled. "Who would have thought that Cogswell was that smart?"

"He's got brains," Ralph admitted.

Stumpy's face paled suddenly. "Hey, maybe he's got prior claim to that homestead I filed on? I filed on it after him an' his men made their

applications."

"He has prior claim," Margie assured.

Stumpy said, "He'll never use his claim." He pounded one fist into the palm of the other and stalked away to nurse his anger.

The farmers crowded around her, their antipathy towards Big Wad Morgan's daughter dying under the duress of their thoughts. Were their homestead entries also in jeopardy? No, they had filed prior to the Grouse Track outfit. Their homesteads and that of Ralph were in the clear.

One woman shouted for joy. Another started to pray. Farmers smiled and slapped each other on the backs.

Only Tom Gillis seemed unmoved.

He stood and spat tobacco juice. Ralph wished he knew the man's thoughts.

Finally Gillis said, "We'll whup thet Grouse Track outfit to their knees. An' if we have to beat the hell outa Pothook we'll do that, too."

Ralph said, "That'd be a big order."

"You afraid, Watson?"

Ralph started forward, fists doubled.

Jan grabbed his arm. "Please, Ralph, please."

Ralph stopped. He would have to tear her hands from his forearms. He had never guessed that her slender body held such strength.

"She's right," Stumpy murmured. "Don't pick no more trouble with him, son."

One farmer said, "Come on, Gillis," and he and the farmer moved away, Ralph said, "You can let go now, honey."

Jan was trembling. Margie said, "He's sure got a short temper, that fellow. Dad isn't talking about hitting at your folks now. He's riled up against the Grouse Track. Talks about gettin' his riders together and running against the Cogswell spread."

"You better talk him out of that," Ralph advised. "There'd be a lot of death if that came about and I doubt if it would solve anything."

"Mother and I will watch him, you can bet on that!"

Margie had supper with them in the

makeshift roundup camp. Ralph had shot three cottontails, and a farmer had down two more. Ralph noticed that one of the young bachelors kept moving close to Margie. She didn't seem to mind, either.

Ralph said, "Jan an me'll ride down the canyon with you, Margie."

"Oh, there's no need to, Ralph. Thanks a lot, but Mr. York has asked if he could ride part ways home with me."

Ralph winked at Jan. "And you said *no,* I suppose?"

Margie blushed, and stuck out her tongue girlishly at him.

Dusk was thick when Margie and Neil York rode away from camp. From a high butte Matt Cogswell and Bart Hawkins had watched the roundup camp. Now, in the twilight, Bart Hawkins spoke to his boss.

"We cain't afford to let them get a herd to market, Matt."

"I know that."

"When do we hit?"

"When they get the herd ready to move out of the rough country. Then we swoop down and when it is over the

farmers will be dead or run out of the country and their land will be ours. Then let the railroad move through on either side of Smoky — we'll control both sides."

"That should be right soon," Bart Hawkins murmured. "Gillis will keep us up on the news."

"We'll get rid of Gillis, too."

Still Hawkins was not satisfied. "What if Big Wad Morgan joins forces with these nesters, Matt?"

"He won't. They mistrust him; he mistrusts them. Even though two of his hands are ridin' with these farmers jes' remember that Big Wad is a *cowman* from the backbone out — an' no dyed in the wool cowman is sidin' nesters."

"Hope you're right."

"I know I'm right. Ralph Watson is the gink who is caught in the middle. He's the one what has his cue on the eight-ball. Them farmers don't trust him, an' he's cut himself loose from the cowmen — he's a man alone — a gent without a country."

"He'll be worse than that when I get

him in my sights. Matt!''

Cogswell said, ''Let's ride,'' and turned his horse sharply.

CHAPTER 17

When Big Wadsworth Morgan rode the range, his daughter rode with him. Or, if Margie did not go with her father, then one of the trusted hands accompanied him. Big Wad bore all this with a twisted grin. He knew why his daughter or a Pothook hand always tailed him. Mary and Margie Morgan were afraid he would tangle with either Matt Cogswell or Bart Hawkins.

Resentment and anger were living forces in the cowman's thick chest. He had the impression that the entire country was laughing behind its hand. And it was laughing at the big Pothook outfit. Word had gone out that the Grouse Track had outwitted the Pothook. Cogswell had filed prior entry on homesteads the Pothook thought it

owned. The pride of the Pothook had fallen before the schemed ruthlessness of the Grouse Track. And pride meant much to the big outfit on Black Buck Creek. Pride and hard work had built the Pothook into a ranch with thousands of cattle.

He wanted to tangle with Cogswell and Hawkins. There had been a time, not so many years before, that this would have called for warfare between the big outfits. He would have armed his men and stormed the Grouse Track outfit. Yes, or called Cogswell's hand, and gone to him either with fists, or with guns.

He kept this to himself.

His men watched him, said nothing. He got the impression that they were ready the moment he gave the signal.

That was a good thought, a strong thought. Then, to kill its strength, came in the memory of his wife and daughter. They were peaceful people. They did not want him, their father and husband, to endanger himself — to possibly lose his life because Cogswell and Hawkins had

outguessed him, out-manoeuvred him.

"Pride goeth before a fall," quoth Mary Morgan.

Her husband studied her. "When did you get so full of proverbs?"

"I just happened to think of that."

Big Wad snorted. "Hogwash and liniment." He slammed down his weekly newspaper, put his reading specs on the mantelpiece and stalked outside, spurs chiming angrily with each step.

"A man ain't got no rights after he gits married," he told an old hand. "Look at thet loco Ralph Watson. Gettin' married afore he has a roof over his noggin."

"He's lucky."

"Lucky? Is everybody against me? Why is he lucky?"

"He's married Jan, that's why he's lucky."

"More hogwash an' more liniment."

"I'd sure like to have hitched up with her."

"Hell, you're ol' enough to be her great great grandpa."

"You're full of compliments to-day,

Big Wad. Thanks a million for them kind words."

Big Wad stalked away, spurs still angry.

He had his mind made up. He'd get a dozen hands, head for the Grouse Track some night soon, and he'd burn the spread to the ground — and heaven help any Grouse Track man who got in his way!

A few more nights.

He tossed his saddle on a line-back buckskin. Margie came running from the house, saddled her sorrel, and loped after him. She caught him as he was riding out of the cottonwoods.

Big Wad reined-in and swore. "Cain't I ever ride alone?"

"No."

"I'm over twenty-one."

"Yes, somewhat. . . . Where are we going?"

"*We!*"

Big Wad was going out to check on the progress of Ralph Watson's roundup crew. He had a number of times considered running down the Slaughter

cows and rebranding them with his Pothook iron. Yet the cost of the roundup had been prohibitive, he had figured, when balanced against the possible returns. He had to take his hat off in admiration to Ralph and his farmers. They were doing all right. He hated to admit it, but they were doing almost as well as a group of experienced cowpunchers. They were getting Slaughter cows out of the brakes.

And that was what counted. The methods used didn't amount to much. What counted was the goal gained. And Ralph and his farmers were gaining their goal.

Father and daughter rode in silence.

Margie noticed they were headed for the brakes of Smoky River. She said nothing and had her thoughts. She kept thinking of the young farmer, Neil York. He was such a nice young man! She had told her mother about Neil, too. But she had not mentioned him to Big Wad. After all, Neil York meant nothing in her life! Just an acquaintance, with a sweetheart probably back in Ohio,

his home state.

"Well, here's the rough country, eh, Dad?"

"Here we are."

They sat their horses on a hogback ridge covered with stunted scrubpine. The wind soughed through the trees. Below them was the small herd of Slaughter cattle. Big Wad studied the herd through his glasses.

"Must have about two hundred head, maybe less. I always figured the Slaughters had left about three hundred head back here, so Ralph an' his hands did right good. Looks to me like they got some of them tied together with halfbreed backamores."

"They have."

Big Wad nodded. "Good idea."

They rode on down Smoky River. Across the river the Grouse Track men were building their flimsy homestead shacks. The sight of them made Big Wad's blood fairly boil.

"Look at them damn fools!"

"We'd have been building shacks if —" Margie stopped suddenly.

"Say the rest of it, child! If thet Cogswell hadn't plumb outsmarted your dad! This is hard to take, honey."

"Please, Dad."

"Okay, okay."

Cogswell and Hawkins rode across the river towards them. Spray splashed from the hoofs of their broncs. Big Wad held his bronc and scowled. Margie breathed a little prayer.

"Dad, don't cause no trouble."

"They're ridin' in on Pothook grass. Their place is to stay south of the river. They ain't got no call to ride over to the north side. . . ."

Cogswell and Hawkins stopped. "Howdy, Big Wad. Howdy, Miss Margie."

"What you two doin' on my side of Smoky?" Big Wad demanded.

Cogswell showed a satisfied grin. Hawkins had both hands on the fork of his saddle and a sardonic smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Big Wad glanced at Hawkins, and hate was plain in his eyes.

"You seem to forget one thing," Cogswell said slowly. "We own land on

the north side of the Smoky now. The law says —"

Big Wad's lips trembled. "The law says this an' that, too, Cogswell. They's jes' too damn' much law now days! They's a law against everything. But they ain't no law that says a man can't do this to another man —"

Margie gasped. Her father, despite his age, was cat-quick. Hawkins never saw the fist coming. He never even had time to duck. One moment he was in his saddle, smiling satanically; the next, he was sprawled on the ground, knocked there by Big Wad Morgan's swinging fist.

"What the hell —" Hawkins glared up at the Pothook owner. He had his hand on his gun. "You cain't do that to me an' live —"

Big Wad Morgan had his .45 out. The black bore of the Colt lined itself with Bart Hawkins' head.

"I did it, mister, an' I'll live."

Hawkins drew back his hand. He got to his feet and he spat blood. He was careful to keep his hand away from the handle of his revolver. But his eyes

mirrored a terrible savage anger that could only be quenched by the fires of revenge.

"This ain't the end of this, Pothook man," Hawkins gritted.

Margie had her breath back. She looked at Matt Cogswell. Cogswell had lost the upper hand under the threat of Big Wad's pistol. And his eyes seemed undisturbed. He said, "Get in your saddle, Hawkins, and be good."

Hawkins climbed into his saddle. He kept rubbing his jaw gingerly. His eyes still showed disbelief. Big Wad watched them. Cogswell was apparently watching something or somebody behind the Pothook owner. Big Wad thought it was a ruse to get him to take his attention from this pair.

"Anybody behind us, daughter?"

Margie turned on her stirrups. "Yes, three riders are coming out of the foothills. Each has a rifle. Three of our men, Dad."

Big Wad growled. "Your mother has ordered them to trail us!" He looked at the two Grouse Track men. "This has

come to a showdown. You might have filed on homesteads on this side of Smoky River but it's one thing to file on a piece of land an' a horse of a different colour when you settle on it!''

''The law will say otherwise,'' Cogswell warned.

''The law here is in a man's holster. Yeah, or either in his saddle-scabbard.''

This was an open declaration of war. Cogswell realized that and his smile was thin. Hawkins realized it, also: he rubbed his jaw softly. Margie's face lost its colour momentarily.

''Come on, Dad.''

Big Wad holstered his gun and they turned broncs and loped towards the three Pothook hands who had reined-in about two hundred yards away with their rifles covering the Grouse Track gunmen.

Big Wad and Margie loped past the three riders. The riders did not turn to follow their boss and his daughter. Big Wad and Margie loped to the hills and then Big Wad got his Winchester out of its saddle-holster. He raised it and

covered the Grouse Track men and hollored, "I've got them in my sights, boys. Come a-ridin' towards me."

Only then did the three riders turn their backs to Cogswell and Hawkins. Cogswell's smile was still thin.

Cogswell said, "We ain't popular on this side of Smoky, Bart."

"He got me when I wasn't expectin' it!" Bart Hawkins was blustery with rage. "He popped me when I wasn't lookin' an —"

"Forget it, Bart. He got you . . . and that's that. There'll be another day. Come on, Bart."

"What if we turns our back on them?"

"They won't shoot a man through the back. Big Wad has principles."

"I don't like the idea."

"Lots of things you don't like. Come on, us for our side of the river, fella."

Cogswell turned his bronc and rode into the river. Hawkins hesitated, not wanting to turn his back on the Pothook guns, but then, seeing his boss's cold example, he also reined around.

It took nerve to ride away with those guns on them. Despite his calmness, there was a small cold spot on Matt Cogswell's spine. He was sure that the Pothook would not shoot at him with the desire to kill him. If a shot came it would be with the desire to scare him into greater speed. But still, the distance was far, and a bullet might not be aimed correctly. Yet no bullets came and the Grouse Track men reached their side of Smoky River.

Cogswell said, "They've ridden away."

The plain was without riders. Pothook cowpunchers had become hidden in the folds of the sun-browned foothills. Cogswell took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his silk handkerchief.

"Trouble, trouble, trouble. . . . "

"We'll get them!"

"Later," Cogswell corrected. "First, we hit these nesters, for the last time. We'll run their herd to hell and gone and gun them down in the dust."

"When?"

"To-morrow night, Bart."

Bart Hawkins' eyes glistened. He

rubbed a palm over the black handle of his .45. "I got a point to even up with Ralph Watson," he said savagely.

CHAPTER 18

Stumpy Jones licked a cigarette into a hand-packed cylinder. "Boogery cows, tired hosses, an' poor cowhands, Ralph."

"We're winnin'," Ralph said.

Stumpy stroked a match to life. "Yeah, we got a good gather, for the crew we have to work with. Them catch-dogs is responsible for lots of them cows. Run 'em till they was so dog-goned tired they forgot they was wild. Then them halfbreed hackamores on 'em holds the core of 'em together."

"We got about fifty with hackamores."

Stumpy blew smoke. "About two days of work, an' we'll be out of the brakes an' off Slaughter range. We should have over two hundred head by the time we hit your homestead."

"We'll all have a grubstake."

"I wonder," Stumpy murmured, "I wonder."

Ralph said, grimly, "We'll come out on top. We gotta come out on top, Grouse Track or no Grouse Track. Wish Jan would come back. Sorta miss her."

"Where'd she go?"

"Over to the Pothook for a day of visitin'."

Stumpy ground his cigarette dead on his saddlehorn. "Gotta give 'em a little leeway onct in a while, son. They git tired of lookin' at the same face each day. I kept close tab on my eighth wife, an' she left me because she didn't have no freedom."

"How about the ninth?"

Stumpy cocked his head and feigned deep thought. "Oh, yeah, my ninth. She ran off with her stepfather. But this ain't movin' cows, son."

"Come on, Tulip."

They were combing the badlands north of Smoky River. This was a lonesome, weird land of painted buttes that rose upward into the clear air. The wind was

hot, hard alike on man and horse; mosquitoes came from the river bottom, and they were also no help. Ravines ran across the sandy loam, cutting it into odd formations. Sandstone boulders, rain-washed and ugly, perched on hills, seemingly defying gravity by their grotesque positions.

Ralph had run wild cattle out of the brush of the Pecos. He had punched cows in the *saguro* country of Arizona, and the buckbrush and *mesquite* of the high Utah plains had also seen him on roundup. He had, for a few months, hazed cattle out of the Black Hills, working the border of Wyoming Territory and Dakota. These had been rough, tough jobs in a rough, tough country. But when compared with these Montana badlands, they were a Sunday School picnic.

"Git into the brush, Tulip."

Tulip went into the buckbrush, head down. Ralph followed the rim of the butte, travelling along an out-cropping of back rock. From this height he could see a young bull — a yearling — and two

cows in the brush. Tulip was on their trail. Once he saw the cur cross a small clearing, nose to the ground, heading towards the hiding spot of the bull and the cows.

Ralph watched, amazed at the knowledge this dog had gained in just a few days. He saw Tulip come upon the small herd.

The bull snorted, swung his short horns. He pawed and bellowed, wanting to fight. Tulip came in, and the bull rushed. Tulip swung out, came in again; he nipped the bull's hamstrings. The bull, alarmed and mad, pivoted.

"Run him out, Tulip."

But the dog had also pivoted. A cow rushed him, but he got the bull again by the hamstrings. The bull had had enough. He bawled and started to run, his cows behind him. Tulip barked, nipping them. The cur drove them down a coulee at a fast lope, brush and dust whipping behind them. They were headed for the herd. Ralph called the dog back.

Tulip stopped, looked up at him, then

started back. About half-way up the slope, he caught a scent, swung towards it. Ralph watched, frowning. He was puzzled. When he called the dog the dog invariably came directly to him. But now Tulip had smelled something.

He started to bark, hidden by brush. Ralph watched a man back out of the brush. Tulip was barking at him.

Ralph hollered, "That's enough, dog."

Tulip stopped barking. His mane stood up in anger. Now Ralph saw the man's bronc. He was almost hidden by high buckbrush. He would not have noticed the saddle horse had not Tulip driven this man from the brush. Logic had told Ralph the man would have a saddle horse close by. No man would hike on foot into this badland area. Ralph rode down to the man who stood in a small clearing. He recognized him as a Grouse Track rider.

"That dog — he'd kill a man!"

"I doubt if you're a man," Ralph said. "Seein' you work for Cogswell an' Hawkins. You spyin' for them, eh?"

"I don't savvy your talk, Watson."

"You'll savvy this." Ralph's right boot came out of the oxbox stirrup. He kicked the man in the chest and knocked him back. He staggered and sat down and his face was vivid with rage.

The man reached for his six-shooter.

His hand stopped suddenly, fingers spread. Then the hand drew back.

Ralph ordered, "Get to your feet. Keep your hand away from your pistol. Turn your back towards me." He gestured with his .45.

"What'd you aim to do to me?"

"Turn your back."

The man turned, hands shoulder high. Ralph dismounted slowly, always keeping his gun on the Grouse Track man. He came in behind. His free hand went out. The man's .45 swished as Ralph pulled it out of its oiled holster. Then it clattered to one side as he threw it into the rocks.

"Now hike out of here on foot, fella."

"On foot? Hell, it's eight miles to the Grouse Track!"

"So it is, but get moving."

"You keepin' my hoss? That's hoss-stealin', a hangin' offence."

"All right, so it is, then. Notify the sheriff. Get movin'!"

Ralph shot twice into the air. The man started on the run. Ralph shot behind him twice. The last bullet ricocheted with an angry buzz. The man ran up the slope, scrambling and falling, and went over the ridge. Ralph was surprised to hear shooting as the man went down the other side. Had he had another pistol on him?

Ralph saw Stumpy ride over the hogback, blowing smoke from his gun. Stumpy grinned. He had seen the ruckus Ralph had had with the Grouse Track man. "Me, I helped him along his way. He'll be a tired bucko by the time he hits the Cogswell camp. What about his hoss?"

"Slip his bridle off an' tie it around the saddle-horn. The bronc will go home of his own accord."

"This won't set well with Cogswell an' Hawkins."

Ralph said, "T'hell with them two. I'm about fed up with 'em. Well, they's cattle awaitin' for us to run them outa

the brush, Stumpy."

"Come to-day's gather, Ralph, an' we'll be ready to move the herd to Sagebrush town."

"We move them to-morrow."

Stumpy sighed. "Me for the bresh ag'in." He rode off with a cloud of dust behind him.

Ralph spent the rest of the day running wild-ones out of the brush. Tulip and he worked like demons. Tulip grew tired, his tongue went out; he trotted and drooled. Here there was little water, and Ralph had a canteen on his saddle. He dented the crown of his hat and made a dish out of this. Tulip lapped water and dropped in the shade. Ralph decided to let the cur rest. He sat beside the dog and rubbed his ears. Tulip ran out a long and red tongue and put it on Ralph's hand in wet affection.

They were sitting there when Jan rode along the trail. She did not see Ralph until he called to her.

"Oh, there you are — hidden by brush. Stumpy was tellin' me you were in this locality."

She dismounted and sat beside him.

Evidently Stumpy had not told about the run-in with the Grouse Track spy. Ralph did not tell her, either. She had enough worries without getting more on her thin but capable shoulders.

"How are things at the Pothook?"

She told about the run-in Big Wadsworth Morgan had had with the two Grouse Track men.

"Big Wad knocked Hawkins right out of his saddle. Margie said he did it with one blow, too."

Ralph let dust trickle through his fingers. "Another score for them to settle with Pothook. Big Wad is still a powerful man." Ralph rubbed his hands free of dust. "When did that happen?"

"Yesterday."

He nodded. "Well, gotta get to work, honey. Tulip needed a rest. Hot work down in that brush where he is. Hotter along the ground than up on a horse. What else did Big Wad say?"

"Nothing. He's nursing his anger. He won't talk. Occasionally he grunts. The women are worried terribly."

Ralph nodded, eyes sombre.

Jan asked, "Ralph, there's a cow-buyer in town. He'll be there a week, one of the Pothook men said. But Ralph, can Cogswell afford to let these farmers get this herd into Sagebrush?"

"I . . . don't . . . know."

"What do you think?"

Ralph had his thoughts. They were not good thoughts. He realized her statement had been correct. But he decided to give a cheery reply.

He mounted. "He won't hit at us."

"Why do you say that?"

"He has enough trouble with the Pothook."

Jan frowned prettily. "You can't shove enough trouble Cogswell's direction."

"He's got enough land."

"You can't give Cogswell enough land."

Ralph smiled. "Honey, what's the use of me saying anything — you block me each direction."

"I'm . . . afraid."

"Oh, shaw now, don't worry."

Together they worked the brush

country. Tulip gained more endurance as the sun lowered and the heat fell back. They rode through buckbrush, the brush popping against them in their speed. Jan got scratched across the face by the claws of a wild rosebush. Ralph said, "This is like the Brazos. Almost need a breast shield on a horse. Well, to-morrow this will be a thing of the past. The cattle are tired and we'll haze them hard in the mornin' towards Sagebrush."

"Wish we had them sold, and a cheque for them."

"If wishes were horses, all beggars would ride."

They came into camp at dusk. The cattle they had run down into the herd were now a part of the herd, and they milled. Riders kept them milling. Ralph rode around and around, keeping the cows milling; this way, they could play them out and finally they would bed down in fatigue. Tulip lay under a wagon and watched. Stumpy rode the herd, too; dust rose. Farmers were jubilant. The roundup had been successful. Ralph's stock had risen a thousand degrees.

"Work them down the river," Ralph ordered. "Get them on the flat by mornin'. Then, if they do stampede, we can cut them off from the brush country an' make them run themselves out across level ground."

Cattle moved through the dusk. Dust rose and came into your nostrils, and the dust was aged and grey. Saddle leather creaked and hoofs sounded. You heard a cow bawl for her calf. You felt the dust and it was good, for it was part of the earth.

Tom Gillis said, "This is a useless precaution, Watson. Damn' it, I don't like the way you handled this roundup!"

Ralph said, angrily, "Jes' get t'hell outa this camp, you trouble maker."

Gillis rode close. He lashed at him with his quirt. The end of it whipped across Ralph's forearm, stinging him through his shirt. Ralph stood on his right stirrup and hit Gillis. Gillis grabbed desperately for his saddle horn. Ralph's blow hit him on the jaw. It did not drive him out of saddle; it stunned him. Farmers came loping over.

One said, "Get outa camp, Gillis. We want no more of your tongue."

Gillis said, "Part of this gather is mine. I worked on this roundup." He held his jaw. His eyes were terrible.

Ralph said, "You'll get your share after we sell these cows."

"Get out," another farmer ordered.

"I'll meet you in Sagebrush," Gillis ground out. "An' you, Watson — pack your pistol the next time you see me!"

"With pleasure."

Tom Gillis loped away.

Stumpy said, "Good riddance for bad rubbish."

Cattle moved on. Behind the herd came the two wagons. They came out of the canyon and were on Smoky River Valley. They moved down the river for about two miles. There, on a grassy flat, Ralph called a halt.

"Roundup is over, men. We hold the herd here an' to-morrow we haze them into town for sale."

"Glory be," a woman hollered.

CHAPTER 19

Big Wad Morgan said, "To-night is the night, men. Come midnight we head for the Grouse Track. It's the showdown an' when we get through the outerfit will be in flames. Arm and ride, men."

"We're ready, boss."

He stood in the bunkhouse, the lamplight on his grooved, thick face — the last of the cowmen, a grizzled man ready and willing to fight. He had broken the bonds of civilization.

"The women don't need to know about this. Quietly move your broncs down into the cottonwoods so when we ride out they'll never hear us leave. I'll meet you in the cottonwoods at midnight."

"Fine, boss."

"Man, I'll sure be glad to hit at that

Grouse Track. We've took their guff too danged long."

A rider came in within the hour. The farmers had moved their herd down on Smoky River Valley. Soon another rider came in. One of the farmers, a gent named Tom Gillis, had ridden over from the nester camp, and had gone to the Grouse Track spread.

"A spy, eh?"

"Reckon he is, boss."

"The noose," said Big Wad, "tightens." He went to the house. "Me to bed." Roughly he kissed his wife and daughter. He tromped down the hall. He lay on the bed. He thought, Well, this is it. The big hall clock struck. Midnight finally came. He went out the window. Moonlight lay across the land. He came to the cottonwoods. His men and horses and guns were ready.

"Mount, men."

He led them. A big man on a big black stud. They went at a walk so hoof-sound would not move back to the women in the house. They rode this way for about two miles, and then, distance behind

them, Big Wad lifted his stud to a lope. His riders roared behind him. Dust rose and became part of the silvery moonlight. They were a dark, tight body of riders, sweeping across the wide expanse of this Montana range. Ahead across the wide expanse of them lay flame and death and destruction. But the Grouse Track had so ordered this move by the ruthlessness of its owners.

They crossed Smoky River. They did not seek a ford. They swam their broncs across the silvery expanse of water. Like wet muskrats the broncs clambered up yonder slope. Then, across the plains again — riders moving towards the south. Stumpy Jones heard them in the far distance. He had the ears of a cat but he lacked cat's eyes — he could not see in the night.

"Do I hear hosses runnin', Ralph?"

Ralph Watson cocked his head and listened. "I caught a sound a while back. Range hosses, I guess, runnin' from these mosquitoes." He slapped at a mosquito. "Thick to-night."

"To-night would be the night for the

Grouse Track to hit. The logical night, Ralph."

"Every man is in the saddle all night," Ralph said.

"Gillis. . . . Wonder where he went?"

"I dunno."

Gillis had ridden to the Grouse Track. There he had reported to Cogswell and Hawkins that Ralph and his farmers had moved their herd down on Smoky River Valley. Cogswell had listened, head canted. Hawkins had sat with his legs wide, a whisky jug on the floor between his boots.

"To-night or never," Hawkins growled. "Tomorrow night they'll not have cattle, they'll have money."

"No they won't."

Hawkins got to his feet. "We ride, then, boss?"

"Get the boys ready."

Hawkins' whiskery face showed a wide grin. "With pleasure," he said. They heard his boots move down the gravel walk.

Gillis said, "Those farmers will fight."

"I know that."

Gillis said, "They're ready."

Cogswell stuck a box of .45 cartridges into his pocket. "You ride with us," he said.

"I got a wife an' kids."

"You ride with us. I don't know how honest you are. You might be workin' two sides against the middle. You might try to sneak back an' warn them nesters an' git them ready for us to ride into a trap. You might want that herd all by yourself an' you might aim to get it by havin' us an' the farmers get rid of each other while you set back an' watch."

"My wife —"

Cogswell's .45 was on Tom Gillis. "You ride with us, understand?" His voice was low and rasping.

Gillis spoke hurriedly. "All right, all right. I ride by your side."

Matt Cogswell's eyes were tiny slits. "I should shoot you down in your tracks. You're a dirty double-dealin' son! You'd sell out your own class. They ain't nothin' dirtier'n a dirty spy!"

Cogswell's thick thumb pulled back the .45's hammer. The cocking sound of

the hammer was a sharp noise in the still room. Sweat flooded Gillis' low forehead. His lips trambled.

"Don't — fer Gawd's sake — My wife an' my kids — You want my murder hangin' over your soul for ever —"

"Won't bother me." Cogswell grinned with impish glee.

Gillis went to his knees. He clasped his hands in prayer. "Cogswell, don't kill me! I'll ride with you an' fight with you an' together we'll clean up when thet railroad builds through. I'll tear up the contract we made."

"I oughta send a bullet through your brain!"

Hawkins came in. "The boys is ready." He stared at the .45, then at Gillis. Gillis did not see Cogswell wink at Hawkins. Gillis had his head down, his hands clasped, and he was praying like he was being paid a dollar a word.

"Give it to him," Hawkins said.

The next thing Tom Gillis knew was getting a bucket of water in his face. This brought him out of his faint. A

boot kicked him a whamming blow in the ribs and that helped, too.

"Get up, get your bronc, an' ride with us!" Cogswell ordered, kicking him again.

Gillis got to his feet, lurched outside, and climbed on his bronc. Grouse Track men laughed at him. Cogswell came out and mounted. He looked over his crew. Evidently he was satisfied.

"Foller me, men," he cried, and whirled his horse.

"Lead the way, boss!"

Cogswell growled, "Gillis, ride at my left; Hawkins, ride at my right. An' no funny business, Gillis."

"I'm in this too deep," Gillis snarled.

They went across the hills, leaving behind the Grouse Track outfit. Once, when they were within a few miles of Smoky River, Hawkins leaned over and said, "Boss, did I hear hosses runnin' somewhere?"

"Where at?"

"That way."

Cogswell hollered, "I heard no broncs."

Hawkins settled back in his saddle. "Mebbe just my imagination. This moonlight is good for our cause." He drank deep of his bottle and handed it to Gillis, who grabbed it like a drowning man grabs at a liferaft. Hawkins growled, "Don't kill it, you land hog!"

Cogswell ripped the bottle out of Gillis' grip. Raw whisky jetted out across the farmer's bearded face. Hawkins laughed.

Cogswell drank, then flung the empty bottle into the night. It crashed against a rock and broke. Cogswell did not know that Hawkins had heard the Pothook men riding towards the Grouse Track buildings. When Big Wad and his riders came upon the Grouse Track the place was inky dark. They dismounted and moved in and then met in a body in front of the house.

"Place done deserted," a rider said. "They've pulled out. Now where did they go?"

"Only one place they could go," Big Wadsworth Morgan said. "They're out raidin' the herd the farmers

has gathered!"

"Here comes Pinto with a guy. Draggin' him, he is."

Pinto had found an old rider hiding in the haymow. The old man had been stationed behind as a guard. He was trembling with fear.

"Where'd your boss go?"

"You go —"

"Where did Cogswell head for?"

A Pothook man said, "We'll heat your feet for you, oldster."

The old man said, "Go ahead. If I didn't want to tell I wouldn't, hot iron or no hot iron. But it'll do no harm to keep the truth from you. Cogswell an' his men is raidin' the nester herd to-night."

"Jes' like we figgered," a Pothook man growled.

All eyes swung to Big Wad Morgan. Moonlight showed the ghost of a smile etched on the cowman's gaunt face.

"We head for Smoky River, men."

"An' help them danged nesters? Not me, boss. I hate farmers. I won't sling my gun for no sodbuster."

"We sling guns not for the sodbusters.

We're runnin' against the Grouse Track."

"Wahl, all right, if thet's the case. But if we hits the Grouse Track we'll help the farmers, jes' the same."

"Let's burn the buildings," a man hollered.

Big Wad Morgan grabbed the speaker's arm. "Oh, no, fella. We ain't got no grudge against this property. We hate the owner, not the buildings. Get on your broncs, men, an' follow me for Smoky River!"

They hit saddles. Broncs reared, fought their bits. Saddles creaked. Big Wad turned his black stud, holding his Winchester high.

"Smoky River, riders!"

From the hill two people watched. One was the squaw, Lonesome Land; the other was the mute known as Mudo. Mudo knew fear. The one man who had helped him, the man who loved him, was in danger. Mudo wondered if he would ever see Matt Cogswell again. Terror held him and he wept.

"You be brave boy. You be my boy!"

The squaw knelt. She took his arm and pulled him down beside her. He saw her head was down, he saw her lips move; he knew she was praying. He bowed his head, too. He could not hear her words.

Together, they prayed for Matt Cogswell.

CHAPTER 20

The farmer's bronc was winded. He came into camp at a faltering lope, and the farmer hollered, "Where's Ralph? Where's Watson?"

"Out at the herd, Ike. What's wrong?"

"Riders! They're headin' this way — they come from the Grouse Track — I seen them back in the hills about three miles!"

"Oh, Good Lord."

Women called to each other. The rider turned his bronc and rode towards the herd. Jan was riding midnight circle with her husband. Ralph said, "Hold up, fellow, you'll scare the herd! Thought you were out on guard, Myers?"

Myers gasped his story. He had seen them coming from the direction of the

Grouse Track.

Jan said, "Oh, heaven help us!"

"Take more than heaven," Ralph gritted. "It'll take riding and gunfire from here out. Jan, get back to camp. Get the women and children organized and move them hell-quick back into the hills."

"And you, Ralph?"

Ralph said, "We have to turn them. Hurry, honey. That's your job." He kissed her roughly. She clung to him. "Be a brave girl."

"I will – for you —"

She sobbed, and her horse carried her back to camp. Stumpy Jones rode over, heard the news, and his face turned ashen in the moonlight. Ralph said, "Get every man out of camp and on a horse. That's your job, Stumpy. I'll notify the rest of the riders here at the herd."

"We gotta move," Stumpy said huskily, "and we have to move damned fast!" His spurs lifted his bronc and he rode towards camp with a reb yell tearing from his lungs.

Riders were coming in. Quickly Ralph

told them about the approaching Grouse Track riders.

Riders came from the camp. They gathered around Ralph, men forced to fight for their families, their property. Quickly Ralph outlined his plan. There was not a voice raised in dissension. Their trust was automatically put in his person. This trust affected him and its responsibility was a heavy load.

"The thing we have to do is make this a running fight. We got to keep control of the herd. They'll stampede but make them stampede down the river away from their home range."

"Run 'em east, eh?"

"That's it, cowboy. They can't run over three, four miles. They're dog tired now; they won't run far. Three of you stay with the cows. The rest of us will ride south."

"To meet them?"

"Yes, meet them before they get to the herd."

"Name the ones to ride the herd, Ralph."

Ralph named three men with level

heads. He wanted level-headed men at the herd. Then he and the rest of his men headed to meet the approaching Grouse Track riders. They rode towards the hills and then a man called, "Here they come, Ralph! Yonder, off the foothills!"

"Hold in, men!"

Grouse Track riders were spilling out of the hills. They were black ants moving with reckless abandon across the plain towards them. Ralph conceded the first hand to Cogswell and Hawkins. He had hoped to get his men in the hills before the Grouse Track riders had arrived. Had he been able to do this he would have had more chance — his men could have used the terrain for protection. Now they were caught on the level plain of Smoky River Valley.

"Keep more or less bunched. They outnumber us. They split us and they got us. Fire to kill and shoot fast and often. All right, open up."

Still mounted, the farmers fired. Winchesters and short-guns made jagged holes of flame in the moonlight. But the

bullets did not stop the Cogswell riders. They fanned out, not a man leaving his saddle; a great cone of hard-riders, they came towards them.

Among the farmers, horses reared and fought bits. They were not used to being shot at. Also, because of their wildness, their riders had uncertain seats from which to take aim. Ralph waved his hand.

"We have to retreat. Work back to the herd. Keep firing."

"I knocked one outa his kak!"

Ralph thought, *That's Stumpy's voice.*

The farmers turned their broncs. Again, they loped across Smoky River Valley, only this time they went north towards the herd. Guns were flaring, their reports shattered the night. Already cattle were on the move. Gunfire had taken them off their bedding-ground and turned them into terrified creatures. They bawled, milled, broke from their milling — they stampeded. Ralph saw they were headed east down Smoky River. They had, at least, gone the right direction.

Now there was the dust from the herd. This was a hanging blanket of grey in the moonlight.

"They downed Myers," Stumpy hollered. "Dropped him from leather, back yonder. His wife an' kids —"

Thundering hoofs claimed the rest of the old cowboy's words. Ralph felt a sickening hand grab his belly. He could see the women out there — see them in his mind's eye — and he knew their sorrow, their uncertainty, their fear. Jan would be with them. Jan would be terrified with anxiety for him. He had to come through. Life meant a million things now that he had her.

They made a running fight for it. Riders milled, guns talked; cattle ran. Ralph knew the fight could not continue long. It was too wild, too savage, too destructive. A cow thundered by, wild-eyed with fear, and slobber was a grey cord, hanging from her jaws. She hit a Grouse Track horse. Her horns ripped, the horse went down; its rider ran. A steer hit him and knocked him down, and Ralph lost him in the melee of dust

and hoofs and horns and rifle-fire.

One Grouse Track man gone. . . .

He saw Gillis, then. The man had his back to Ralph. He brandished a rifle, his horse rearing. The implication of this man's presence with the Grouse Track caused a hot anger to flood Ralph. Gillis, he knew then for sure, was a traitor. And he lifted his voice in angry demand.

"Gillis, this is Ralph Watson!"

Gillis turned his bronc. A rider had come in from the side, and Gillis shot at him. Ralph recognised the rider as Stumpy. He saw flame come from Stumpy's short-gun, and then Stumpy had ridden by. Gillis dropped his rifle and went out of his saddle and lay on the ground.

Ralph's bronc was travelling so fast he could not miss Gillis. The bronc leaped over the inert form. Ralph wondered how long the fight had lasted. In one sense, it seemed like a hundred years; in another, it seemed only a few minutes. But a fleeting glance at the terrain told him the cattle had run about two miles . . . They were starting to

lose their wind.

Dust was a hanging blanket. Guns made jagged slashes through it. Ralph wondered who was winning. His forces were split, his riders strung out; he had no way of knowing how many men had left saddles. He hoped his farmers came through okay.

Then, through the dust, came a rider. And Ralph was face to face with Bart Hawkins. Their pistols spoke simultaneously. Ralph felt Hawkins' lead rip the fork of his saddle. A sledgehammer could not have hit it harder Ralph's .45 kicked back twice. Hawkins' bronc thundered into the dust, rider draped over his saddle-horn, and then the bronc was gone. Ralph knew he had hit the Grouse Track ramrod.

Cattle were slowing down. From the rim of the hills, rifles spoke; the women were moving in on them, he guessed. They were mounted and ready to fight with their men. Just then Ralph's bronc stumbled. He rolled over and over, carried by momentum; Ralph was thrown belly-down. Luckily the bronc did

not roll on him. He dropped his pistol.

He groped for it, cursing his luck. He was on foot and his horse was standing with one forefoot high, unable to put his weight on it. Ralph found his .45.

He walked to his bronc. The horse had hurt his ankle. Ralph knew the leg was not broken. Well, half-a-horse was better than no horse. He swung up into saddle.

Somewhere a man hollered, "This is Big Wad Morgan of the Pothook. Me an' my men are movin' in to side you, farmers. Cogswell, I want you."

Ralph drew rein. Out of the dust came a rider and he swung his weapon on him, then lowered it.

"We got them millin'," Stumpy grunted. "The Pothook has moved in. Talked a few words with a Pothook rider. They was at the Grouse Track, then swung around — Hey, look, Ralph!"

Ralph stared.

Out of the gloom had ridden Matt Cogswell. He hollered, "This way, Big Wad," and the Grouse Track rider's horse cakewalked on his hind legs. Cogswell had a .45 in his hands.

"Comin', Cogswell!"

Sitting broncs, Stumpy and Ralph watched, and the scene they saw they never forgot. The dust broke open and Big Wad Morgan rode out. Cogswell shot him and they saw Big Wad slump a little. Then Big Wad's short-gun talked — vicious, short jabs of flame. Cogswell went forward, hung on to his saddle, and then his bronc carried him into the night. And when Big Wad Morgan rode close to Ralph and Stumpy the man's face was livid with pain.

"He got me — in the high ribs — my shoulder is gone. But I gotta git him — he rode off —"

Ralph hollered, "Your fallin', Big Wad! Stumpy, help me hold him!"

They were on the ground with the cowman.

Somewhere a man hollered, "It's all over, farmers. We got them prisoners. But where is Hawkins an' Cogswell?"

Ralph said slowly, "I guess — we won."

"Nobody wins a war," Stumpy said solemnly.

Five years later, the Smoky River War was a thing of history, almost forgotten against the passage of Time. Within five years, Big Wad Morgan was dead, under the Montana soil he loved and fought to hold. He did not die because of the bullet from Cogswell's gun. He died when a horse went over backwards with him and crushed him under the saddle.

Five years later, farmers had homes all through Smoky River Valley, and Sagebrush was not a cowtown, it was a farm-town. The railroad did not go through the valley. Surveyors had found a better route across the Big Rockies. The line had gone out from Pacific Junction, west of Havre, Montana, and then had followed the Milk River across Marias Pass.

Five years later, Jan and Ralph Watson had three children — two boys and a girl. They had a fine farm on Smoky River. Their next neighbours were Margie and Neil York. With Margie and Neil lived Mrs. Morgan, who had sold out the immense Pothook herds.

Nobody ever knew what had become of Matt Cogswell and Bart Hawkins. Their bodies were never found, and they were never seen again on Smoky River. Their disappearance is to-day talked about in Sagebrush. Only two people know the fate of these two men, and one cannot tell. He can never tell. He is the mute known as Mudo.

After the disappearance of Cogswell, the Grouse Track was sold, the farmers buying the stock on jawbone from the Territorial government. The money was placed on deposit, as per Cogswell's will, in the Sagebrush bank for the boy known as Mudo.

Mudo never used a cent of it.

The squaw, Lonesome Land, took the boy in Canada, where she raised him with her people, the Piegans. To-day you see his paintings in various galleries around the world. They are simple paintings, for his subjects were simple Piegans, and he has put the prairie, the buffalo chase, and their characters into their faces. And he signs each painting with one word: Mudo. What he could

not express through his tongue he expresses through his brushes.

Mudo knows the fate of Cogswell and Hawkins.

He cannot tell.

So does the squaw, Lonesome Land, know their fate. She has told nobody. It is her secret, and it is Mudo's secret. Hawkins and Cogswell had tried to make the distance to the Grouse Track. Mudo and Lonesome Land had found them dead in the badlands, close to each other. They had buried them in the badlands. To-day there is no mound, no tombstone, over their graves. There is the clean Montana sky, the good Montana wind, and no man knows where their graves are — except Mudo and the squaw, Lonesome Land.

And in Smoky River Valley, men die and men are born. Only the river never changes. To-day it sings its simple song, and it dances over the rocks. The big pike lay in the ferns and fin their lazy way through the clear water. Beavers swim out into the night, and you can hear their teeth work as they cut down

timber for their dams. The river talks to them and they understand, for they understand the river.

Maybe the river knows the fate of Cogswell and Hawkins. Mudo knows it, and so does Lonesome Land, and they will never tell — for both loved the man named Matt Cogswell. And if the river knows, it will never tell either, for Smoky River has no tongue.

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