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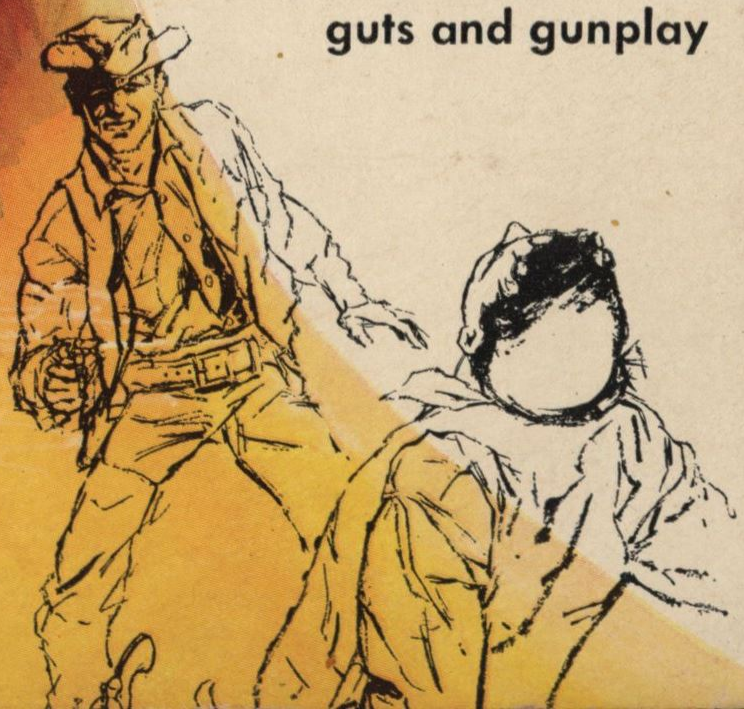

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BAR 6 ROUNDUP

OF

BEST WESTERN STORIES

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Selected and with Introductions by
SCOTT MEREDITH

PERMABOOKS
NEW YORK

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BAR 6 ROUNDUP OF BEST WESTERN STORIES

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THIS ONE IS FOR

MURRAY, ALMA, AND GLENDA

INTRODUCTION

THE OTHER DAY, at a party, I told a friend of mine that I'd just about completed making my selections for this collection of best Western stories, and I mentioned the fact that, as is always the case when I work on a book for this yearly series of anthologies, I'd read over six hundred possibilities and had had a fine time doing so. The tail end of this statement seemed to puzzle my friend, who has often told me smugly that he wouldn't read a Western story for a million dollars, and he stared at me for a long time before replying.

"I can't imagine how you can *enjoy* the job," he said, finally. "It must be like seeing the same Hopalong Cassidy movie over and over again six hundred times. Don't you get sick and tired of reading all those stories about roving cowhands who expose crooked foremen and get the ranchers' daughters?"

This is, of course, the sort of comment which trips lightly on the lips of people who aren't familiar with the modern school of Western fiction, and it would make good sense if it happened to be true. But, happily, it isn't, and there is probably no better proof of this fact than the eleven stories, typical of the new type of Western at its best, which are collected in this book.

Here, by way of illustration, are the heroes, or lead characters, of the stories in *Bar 6 Roundup:* 1. a bank-robber on the run; 2. a young father; 3. a rustler; 4. a homesteader from New Jersey; 5. a New Englander; 6. a railroad man; 7. an ex-soldier; 8. a young rancher; 9. an outlaw; 10. an Indian brave; 11. a hired killer.

There's not, you'll note, a trite wandering cowhand among them.

And here are the villains in the stories:

Seven of the eleven stories have no real villains at all, in the usual sense of the word. The villains in the others include: 1. a rancher; 2. four drifters; 3. an Army officer; 4. a bodyguard.

There's not, you'll note, a trite crooked foreman among them.

And as for the ladies, there's not a single rancher's daughter, either. Seven of the stories have no feminine characters at all; the women in the others include a Mexican peasant, a homesteader's wife, a wagon-train Captain's ward, a fortune teller, and a prostitute.

The reason for all this, of course, as every regular reader of the current Western story already knows, is that the Western has grown up far beyond its earlier status as a genre of stereotyped stories and stereotyped characters. It has accomplished this by abandoning the old hat and the ersatz, the stale stories (like that wandering cowhand—crooked foreman item) of a West which never really existed, and by turning instead to genuinely authentic, hard-hitting, fast-moving stories of people who *could* have lived, in situations which *could* have happened, in the actual old West. This authenticity of character and locale, of action and motivation, has turned the new Western into both more exciting reading and a genuine literary form, the latter because it now really reflects and portrays an important part of our American history. And, in a way, the Western has now become "respectable"; which is why, in preparing these anthologies, I check such literary periodicals as *The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, The New Yorker* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review* along with more mass-circulation magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's* and the straight Western magazines like *15 Western Tales* and *Texas Rangers*—and find good possibilities for inclusion in all of them.

So then, as I told my friend at the party, I found no wandering cowhands, no crooked foremen and no ranchers' daughters, but I *did* find plenty of excitement, plenty of authenticity and plenty of enjoyment in reading the stories which follow. I hope—and believe—that you will, too.

—SCOTT MEREDITH

BAR 6

Roundup of Best Western Stories

BACK TRACK

By H. A. DeRosso

H. A. DeRosso is a master of the unrelentingly grim, no-light-moments school of story, in which the facts of Western life are stated without sweetening or apology. Here is Hank DeRosso at his best, in the story of a man who knew his future consisted only of a hangman's rope or a bullet.

AT HIGH NOON they rode out of the timber. There below them, at the edge of the small plain, lay the village, its tan jacals seeming unreal and toy-like at this distance.

"San Miguel," Llano Lane said. "Nine years, Dave, isn't it?"

Recollection brought no nostalgia to Dave Merritt, not yet. "About that," he said.

"That was after the S. P. job, wasn't it?" Llano Lane said. "We were here a month. It was a nice place to lay low in."

"Let's hope it still is," Merritt said.

Lane threw Merritt a look. "The only time a deputy comes to San Miguel is to collect the taxes. What you so jumpy about?"

Don't you know, Merritt thought, especially after Spencerville? The coming of the end. Don't you feel it, too?

Aloud he said nothing.

Lane shifted his weight in the saddle. A hand rose and rubbed his craggy nose. "I wonder if they still remember us."

"No one ever forgets Llano Lane," Merritt said. A little bitterness crept into his voice but it was not intended for the man but for the situation. He felt Lane's sharp look again.

"Forget Spencerville," Lane said. "There's just the two of us now but we make a good team. We'll have our days again."

Maybe we will, Llano, Merritt thought, but you want to know something? I really don't much care. I feel too tired and old to care.

Aloud he said, "Whatever you say, Llano."

The horses moved on. The clopping of their hoofs hung an instant in the air and then was gone like forgotten memories. . . .

They rode into San Miguel from the north. Several mongrels came yapping to greet them and Lane's sorrel shied once and kicked out and sent a dog tumbling and squealing. After that the dogs kept their distance.

From open doorways and glassless windows dark, impassive eyes watched the two tall riders. A hush seemed to gather so that the clopping of the horses' hoofs on the hard-packed earth of the street rang clarion clear.

Too many dark trails, Merritt thought while the skin twitched and crawled on his shoulders. The ghosts of too many dead men. The coming of the end. Don't you feel anything at all, Llano?

In front of the cantina of Elfego Vara they reined in. Llano Lane stepped down and brushed at the dust on his arms and thighs. The eyes still watched with that secret stolidity.

Elfego Vara dozed behind his plank bar. The years had not been too good nor too unkind to him. A little more fat around the middle and a smattering of gray in the coal black hair and a slight sallowness in the complexion.

Spur tinkle woke him. He blinked his eyes rapidly to clear them of the mists of sleep and then watched the two tall men with a puzzled look of semi-recollection.

"Tequila, Elfego," Lane said. His voice seemed to boom in the hushed dimness of the cantina.

A wrinkle formed between Elfego's eyes as he poured the drinks. He glanced from one to the other of the tall men, a glimmer of recognition deep in his eyes but never quite coming through.

Lane grinned. His teeth looked very white framed by the black beard. "Nine years ago, Elfego," he said. "We spent

many pesos here in your cantina. Look behind the beard. Don't you remember Llano Lane?"

"Llano Lane," Elfego breathed, eyes widening. There was both fear and awe in his voice.

Merritt threw down the tequila and while it burned his throat and stomach he looked about, searching the dimness for what might be there but wasn't, this time. Deep in his mind something stirred which he could not define. A fragment of forgotten memory that left him vaguely uneasy.

"We wish a place to stay," Lane was saying. "A good jacal for me and my compadre. You remember the señor Merritt, do you not?"

"And the others?" Elfego Vara asked.

A flash of Spencerville passed before Merritt's eyes.

"There are no more," Lane said. "One jacal is all we need."

Yes, Elfego, just one jacal, Merritt thought. Dandy Jim Hayes and Johnny Forrest and Flint Quarternight and Ben Lord and Sundance they don't need jacals or anything any more.

"More tequila, Elfego," Lane said.

This one did not burn quite as much. Merritt searched the dimness of the far corners, the dimness that seemed to have diminished, and now his spirits lifted and he did not care so much any more.

"What are you waiting for?" Lane said.

"Señor Llano. Pardon. I grieve to ask. But I have five little mouths to feed. The money. I grieve."

Lane laughed, quietly but with a ring to it like the ring of blue steel. "Did I leave you unpaid nine years ago? Have I any debts from that time? Is not the word of Llano Lane good with Elfego Vara? Go and find us the jacal. We are tired and wish to sleep. Andale pronto."

Yes, Elfego, andale, Merritt thought, and forget about money. I have a gold eagle. Llano has even less. Forget about money. If we'd had better luck in Spencerville—Andale, Elfego.

"Of a certainty, Señor Llano," Elfego Vara said. "The jacal. Pronto. You wait here."

His sandals whispered like lost secrets as he padded across the earth floor to the door. His body blocked the light an

instant. Then the sun was bright and clean where it touched the threshold. . . .

Llano Lane stretched and sighed. "Man, but it's good to have a roof over your head," he said. "No more sleeping out, in the brush, in the timber. No more of that for a while."

Dave Merritt stood at one of the glassless windows of the jacal, looking out. Somewhere inside him something ancient was whispering but all he caught was the hiss of sound. He could not make out a single word.

"What's come over you today, Dave?" Lane asked. Gray eyes weighed and pondered. "Relax. We're safe here."

Merritt said nothing.

"No one comes here," Lane went on. "No one bothers these people. Leave them alone and they'll leave you alone. We had it good that other time, didn't we?"

"We had money that other time," Merritt said.

Lane was silent a moment, struggling with his thoughts. When he spoke it was very softly. "These pelados know better than to cross Llano Lane. They might not hear much of the outside world but they've heard of me."

"We had money that other time," Merritt said again, "and we were worth less. Money gives some cowards courage."

Lane gave that laugh with the ring of steel. "Why are you so worried? I'm the valuable one of the pair. What did that poster we saw yesterday say? Five thousand for me but only one thousand for you. The price has gone up since Spencerville." He laughed again.

Spencerville, Merritt thought. It doesn't bother you one little bit, does it, Llano? Do you think we can go on forever? The coming of the end, Llano. Don't you ever feel it?

"Sit down, Dave," Lane said. "Relax. Me, I'm going to sleep."

He lay down on the pallet on the floor and closed his eyes and shortly he was breathing the soft, muted breath of sleep. His hand lay on the handle of his pistol. He never slept any other way. . . .

Merritt felt the ancient stirrings in his mind as he walked through the village. Memory upon memory returned as he passed each hut. Eyes watched from everywhere but he heard

not a single greeting though word of him and Lane must have already circulated through San Miguel. The eyes just watched, passively, patiently, neutrally right now.

He found it at the far end of the village, the house of Agustin Prado. The years had changed it little except for a few more pit marks in the adobe. Goats were still penned behind the hut and the pepper trees still whispered gently in the wind.

He wondered what it was that had led him here. Memories, yes, of a few sweet moments but they had been only a few of many and had never really meant anything to him. There was something more, an ancient hunger and yearning perhaps? He could not understand a thing like that.

The woman was bending over the hearth. Creak of leather and spur jingle told her he had entered and she straightened with a small gasp and came around ponderously. It was not until he looked in her eyes and studied the shape of her mouth that Merritt recognized her.

"Margarita," he said.

The years and child bearing had made her breasts massive and widened her hips and added flesh all over her. They had also put a sullen resignation to the burden of life in her face. She eyed him without speaking, frowning the while, and he knew that she had not yet seen beneath the brown beard.

"I'm Merritt," he said.

Her face brightened. "Ah, yes, the señor Merritt." Then sullenness blanketed it again. She went on eyeing him.

Merritt looked about. Gloom hung like thin smoke in the room and in the dimness, standing together, he could make out the varying sizes of four children. They watched him with a somber, open curiosity, watching him and the pistol in the holster at his side.

"Agustin?" Merritt asked. "Your father?"

"Dead."

Something skipped in him. Was it a heartbeat? A foreboding?

"And Ana Lucía?" he asked.

"Dead."

This time he knew definitely there had been a pause in his

heartbeat and he could not understand because it had never been like that, for him.

"I'm very sorry," he said, and glanced again at the children, drawn there by something beyond his ken.

"Sorry," said Margarita, and her tone rose and now the cross that she convinced herself she bore made her voice tremble. "After nine years you return and say you're sorry."

He was frankly puzzled. "I do not understand. Your father, your sister—" He did not know how to finish.

"Yes, my sister. She is dead these many years but she left something for you. Something for you to remember her by."

"I really do not understand, Margarita."

"Anita," she said, and the tallest of the children stepped forward to stand beside her. "Look at her, Merritt. Look at her eyes. They are blue, Merritt, the only blue eyes in San Miguel. . . ."

That night he slept very little. It seemed that every time he dozed he found himself in the hut with Margarita and the children, especially the blue-eyed one who stood there so somberly still, staring up at him while something old and fierce and frightening stirred in him.

"I have a good husband," Margarita was saying, a whine in her voice, "but we have three of our own to feed. Still she is my sister's flesh and blood. We clothe her and feed her but it is so hard. And now we have another on the way."

His throat was dry and pained him when he spoke. "Ana Lucía—How did she die?"

"A plague. Anita was not yet one year old. My father died that way, too."

He stared at the child who stared back at him. In the gloom he could not make out the look in her eyes. Something strange and new yet hauntingly familiar stirred in him and for an instant a feeling akin to panic chattered in him.

"It has been so hard," Margarita was saying. "But my Pedro is a good man. We will take her in, he said. She will be as one of our own. But it has been so hard, so little money, so little—It has been very hard."

He took his eyes from the child's face and glanced at her

dress. It hung loosely over her body and it was ragged and torn in two places and it was none too clean.

"I thought since she is yours," Margarita was saying. "Anything will help. Even a little. After all, she is yours. Look at her eyes. As blue as your own. A little would help."

The cold breath of an ancient wind brushed by him. Was there really so little time left?

"Deny her," Margarita was saying, and her tone said that the cross she bore weighed heavily now. "Deny her then. We will manage. Somehow, no matter how little, how poor, we will manage."

He did not know what prompted him to do it. His hand reached out, awkwardly, intending to touch the child only lightly on the head. She shrank, eyes widening, and then quick as a cat she ducked under his arm and was past him with a swift pattering of bare feet and gone out the door and he was standing there, turned half around, hand still outstretched, watching the door that showed him only sunlight and emptiness. . . .

"I've been thinking," Llano Lane said. He sat at the table in the jacal, drawing phantom patterns on the table-top with a finger. "I can see all the mistakes I made in Spencerville. The next time there won't be any mistakes."

Merritt felt his fists clench, and he opened them, hoping that Lane had not noticed.

"I guess I got a little cocky," Lane said. "I had a bunch of good boys and everything I tried came off real slick. A train in Kansas, another in Oklahoma. Everything I tried worked without a hitch. I thought because I had some good boys all I had to do was ride into Spencerville and then ride right on out."

Merritt stood at the window, watching the leaves of a cottonwood fluttering in the breeze. There was something akin in his own heart, a flutter that seemed to urge hurry, hurry. Hurry for what? he asked himself and found no answer.

"I thought I would do something that had never been done before," Lane was saying. "Knock off two banks at the same time. We were seven good men and I figured it could be done.

But I was wrong. I made mistakes but I see them now. Next time there won't be any mistakes."

A sense of futility swept over Merritt, leaving him weak and shaken. His eyes lowered, to the dust of the street, but he was looking beyond that and seeing only the endless blackness of the abyss.

"We rode in in one bunch," Lane said. "That was the first mistake. We were recognized. They blocked the streets and we had to shoot our way out. Next time it won't be like that." Gray eyes picked up Merritt's back and examined it. "Are you listening, Dave?"

"Where will you get five more men?" Merritt asked. "You'll never get another five as good as them."

"I know," Lane said, "and I won't even look. Next time there will be only two. Just you and me, Dave . . ."

Down in the thickets along the creek she sat on a fallen tree in sullen brooding. A worn path led him there. She was so lost in her child's world of grief and resentment that she did not hear him. Only at the last moment did she glance up at him towering over her. He saw her thin body gather, ready to flee, and his heart ached in fear of this and he stopped abruptly. That seemed to reassure her but she stayed all gathered and tensed, watching him with a dark suspicion.

"I won't hurt you," he said. "I'd never hurt you. You know that, don't you?"

She watched him with wide eyes. There was a measure of fear in them but there was more, much more. They reminded him of an old woman's eyes which had seen all there was to see, all that was dark and evil. There was no innocence here.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said. "I won't do anything to you."

The eyes took on a glitter like secret laughter. At him? They were an old woman's eyes, all wise. Did she know him for what he was?

"I want to talk to you," he said. "I'm your—father."

He thought he heard laughter, mocking, scurrilous laughter. But her face remained grave. Her lips had not moved. The laughter had been borne on the winds of time, the winds of memories and shame and reproach.

"Margarita told me you were bad," he said. "She told me she had to punish you because you stole a piece of silver. Don't you know it's wrong to steal?"

He stopped because in the long, haunting corridors of time mocking laughter was shrieking. He became aware that the palms of his hands were wet and that his face was warm. Was it because the old woman's eyes watched him so all-knowingly?

"Anita," he said, sweating now while he listened to that laughter shrilling in scornful glee, "it isn't right to take something that belongs to another. Don't you understand that? You wouldn't want any one to take something that belongs to you, would you?"

He stopped. What could she have for any one to take from her? A ragged dress that had probably been given her grudgingly. Certainly nothing else.

"You should mind Margarita," he said. "She is good to you. She has others but she takes care of you, too, and you should mind her and be grateful for that. Do you understand, Anita?"

The eyes watched him, not frightened any more, but cunning and still suspicious.

"Anita," he said again, "will you try and remember what I've told you? Won't you tell me that you'll mind me?"

The old, wise eyes glittered, full of wariness. The mouth remained grave and still. He stood and watched while back in the paths of time reproach and remorse gathered and when he thought the cruel laughter was about to begin again he turned and walked away. . . .

"It'll be just the two of us," Llano Lane said. "In Spencerville."

"Spencerville?" Merritt swung around, mind suddenly full and aching from that other time. "Are you crazy, Llano?"

Lane laughed that laugh with the ring of steel. "Why not?" Excitement laid a sheen over his eyes. "No one will expect us to try it there again, not after what happened. That's the last place in the world they'd expect us to try."

Something dismally chill crawled across Merritt's shoulders but still he started to sweat.

"Just the two of us," Lane said musingly, eyes far away

toying with something that still was not clear to him. "And we'll hit both banks, at the same time. You just watch, Dave. It'll work this time."

"We'll never make it," Merritt said. "How can we? We failed when we were seven. How are we going to do it with only two?"

"We'll fool them," Lane said. "We'll disguise ourselves. That's the only thing I have to figure out. What the disguises are going to be. But I'll get it. Nothing ever stumped Llano Lane for long."

Merritt turned back to the window and watched a barefoot boy leading three goats through the village. He kept seeing those eyes, old woman's eyes.

Lane was silent a while, gray glance studying Merritt's back. After a pause, Lane said, "What's on your mind, Dave?"

Merritt stared into the distance and the past. That frantic urgency breathed on him again. Hurry, hurry, it pleaded. Hurry how? he asked and heard no answer.

Lane kept watching him. "Something's eating you," Lane said. "If I didn't know you better I'd say you were scared but you never were scared of anything."

"It's nothing, Llano," Merritt said. "I'm all right. . . ."

This was her world, a child's world of fancies and dreams and exquisite joys, down here among the thickets that shielded her from watching eyes and set this world apart from that other world that held so little. She knelt on the ground and built little mounds of sand with her hands. This must have afforded her pleasure for she was making small, crooning sounds and Merritt stopped a while and listened. It was the first time he had heard her voice.

When he started ahead his spurs tinkled and this warned the child, and she leaped to her feet and whirled, all in one flash of movement. She stood there poised on the balls of her feet, ready to flee, so Merritt halted.

"It's only me," he said. "Don't run away."

The child watched him, eyes wide and wary.

"I brought you something," he said, extending it toward her. "See? It's a doll, a rag doll. I bought it from another little girl."

She hadn't wanted to sell. She had cried and raised a fuss but when he offered her father the gold piece it was done.

The child's eyes fixed on the doll and stayed there, mesmerized. But she did not move.

"Here," he said, taking a step ahead. "It's yours. I'm giving it to you, Anita. Here. Take it."

The two small hands that she reached up trembled. Her face said that she did not believe this to be true, that she expected him to snatch the doll away at the last moment. But she reached her hands up anyway.

"Take it," Merritt said.

She grabbed the doll and pulled it from his grasp swiftly as though afraid that he would not let go. She clutched it to her breast and looked up at him with shining eyes, not old woman's eyes but the shining, guileless eyes of a child. Her mouth twitched in a brief, wan smile. Then her face was grave again.

"Anita," he said. "I'm not like other men. I'm not free to go where I please. I'm no longer free to do as I wish."

The urgency in him cried hurry and for an instant he could have wept. The time was so short. He knew it was short. He could feel it in the chill crawling of the skin of his shoulders.

If only Llano would forget Spencerville. That was too risky. Maybe some other place. Some other place and the money he got there he would use to put her in a good home where she would have good clothes and good food.

I wish I did not have to steal and possibly kill for you, Anita, but there is nothing else for me. If they take me alive I'll hang. I'm sure of that. There's nothing else I can do.

He dropped to one knee in front of her. "Anita," he said and then stopped for he could not expect her to understand. She stood there, hugging the doll, watching him gravely, and sudden impulse made him stretch out his hand to touch her. She winced as his hand moved and then stood her ground bravely but he could see the shadow of fear deep in her eyes. Reluctantly, sorrowfully, he withdrew his hand without having touched her.

He rose to his feet. "Be a good girl, Anita," he said woodenly. "Mind Margarita. Be good."

He turned and started back to the village. The winds from out of time were very cold and melancholy now. . . .

Llano Lane sat at the table in the jacal, cleaning his pistol. He ran the rod through the barrel and the cloth came out clean. Holding the pistol up to the light, he squinted into the barrel. Then he chuckled.

"I've got it, Dave," he said. "It just came to me. You remember that small Amish settlement north of here? Jericho I think it's called. There's our answer, Dave."

Merritt said nothing. He stood in the doorway, looking out. He felt as cold and detached as the flesh of a dead man but he was sweating.

"We'll trim our beards the way they trim theirs. We'll steal a couple of outfits from them and ride into Spencerville like that, a couple of Amish preachers." Lane chuckled again. "Who'll ever think it's us? I told you I'd find a way."

Lane started on the cylinder, running the rod through the chambers. "No one will give us a second thought," he said. "The Amish don't carry guns. They don't go around robbing banks." He chuckled. "Man, is Spencerville going to be in for a surprise."

Merritt turned from the door. A sudden spasm set him to trembling but it was quickly gone. Then all he felt were the cold winds of time and doom.

Anita, Merritt thought, if I was sure Spencerville would work, if I was sure—But we can't go on forever and I want to make sure. For you.

Lane held the cylinder up against the light and peered into the chambers. "Well, what do you think of it, Dave?" he asked. "You haven't said."

The time for talking was done, Merritt thought. Words meant nothing any more. There remained only brutality and death.

"I'm sorry, Llano," Merritt said as he drew his pistol and fired. . . .

The wind sweeping across the land was cold against his shoulders, and he hunched them to shield the child who was now sleeping in his arms. With sleep the little body had finally relaxed and now nestled against him with a softness and warmth that caused him to marvel. This new wonder almost

made him forget Llano Lane, slung across the saddle of his sorrel there behind.

The lights of Fort Benson, where he had a sister who would take Anita, glistened like jewels in the night. He rode into town the back way and made direct for the sheriff's office. A lamp glowed inside and Merritt reined in his black and dismounted very carefully so as not to awaken the sleeping child.

The sheriff was dozing but Merritt's steps woke him and he came to, eyes batting in startlement as they took in the tall man with the sleeping child in his arms. Merritt's pistol rapped hollowly as he tossed it on the desk in front of the sheriff.

"I'm Dave Merritt," he said. "Llano Lane is outside, dead. I killed him. I've come to give myself up and collect the reward. . . ."

THE REGULATOR

By JOHN PREBBLE

The four men looked at Walt James, and one of them pointed contemptuously to the apron tied around his waist. *"Olé!"* the man said. *"Olé la señora!"* But they weren't laughing, later on, when James began to track them with gun in hand. . . .

THE DRIFTERS CAME an hour after dawn. Walter James and his boy heard the nervous beat of hoofs down by the corral, and then a man's laugh, an insanely mirthless sound that scratched unpleasantly on the morning air.

Walter put down the skilly of beans and wiped his hands slowly on his hips. He looked at the Henry rifle that hung on a peg by the door. He looked at it cautiously, moving his eyes only, so that his son might not catch the glance. He knew that most men who recognized that laugh would expect him to take down the Henry and use it.

He looked away from the gun. He said flatly, "Somebody come calling, Son. You stay here." But the boy was already bounding into the sunlight outside.

Walter James looked once more at the rifle, and then he went out too. Three men sat their ponies near the sunflower patch, their bodies fallen into that hunched unconcern that comes on a man after a hard ride. When he saw them Walter took his son's shoulder in a hard grip and he said, "You stay quiet, Boy. Mind what your paw says, you stay quiet."

One of the riders was a thin, yellow man who wore a greasy Confederate kepi, although the war had been over for years. There was a fat Mexican in a striped poncho. His face was wet with sweat beneath the brim of his needle-crowned som-

brero. The third rider was a half-breed with plaited hair. Behind them a riderless horse leaned over a crooked foreleg, dirty white lather over neck and flanks.

A fourth man was inside the corral, passing his hands over Walter's sorrel. He said something, and the man in the Confederate cap laughed again.

Walter stared at the fourth man and knew that this was worse than he had expected. This man was big, and he wore a hickory shirt and a cowhide vest. His black felt hat had a punched-in crown and a snakeskin band. Every movement of his powerful body was like an evil answer to a threat, and as he moved the sun shone on his hand-gun. He wore it strapped to the right thigh, and the holster had been cut away below the trigger-guard.

The Mexican looked up to the house and called, *"Olé!"*

He pulled his rifle from its scabbard and pumped it, resting it on his saddle-horn.

"Paw . . .?" said Billy.

Walter pushed his hand down on the boy's shoulder and said nothing.

The man in the black hat climbed over the fence and said something to the 'breed who got down and began to unsaddle the fourth horse. Then the others came up to the house, the big man grinning as he walked through the dust, but with his humorless eyes fixed on Walter's face. The Mexican had a handful of sunflower seeds and he pushed them into his mouth, chewing noisily, but his right hand held the rifle straight at Walter James.

The big man stopped about four yards away, still grinning, his right hand hooked in his belt above his gun. His lips were wet and red behind black stubble. "You're Walt James," he said. "I know you. You know me?"

Walter kept his body still. "Everybody hereabouts knows you. You're Johnny Owens." He nodded at the rider in the Confederate cap. "He's your brother Virgil. The others I don't know, but I guess the law wants them too."

They laughed. The Mexican spat out a mouthful of husks at Walter's feet.

"That's right," said Johnny Owens. He jerked his left thumb

at the Mexican. "This here's Cholla." He ignored the 'breed. "You think maybe you're the law?"

Virgil Owens heeled his horse to the left, shifting in the saddle so that his gun-hand was free. In the sudden silence Walter could hear the quickened breathing of his son.

"No," he said soberly. "No, I ain't the law."

"No, you ain't. You sure ain't!" said Virgil, and he pointed at the apron that was still tied about Walter's waist. He looked at the Mexican. *"Olé!"* he said. *"Olé la señora!"*

The Mexican kissed his finger-tips and his body shook with laughter.

Walter looked down at his son. Below the straw-yellow hair a dark flush colored the boy's neck.

"You got a gun?" said Johnny Owens.

"There's an old Henry inside."

"Go get it, Virgil." The thin man slid from the saddle and walked into the house. Walter wondered if he would look in Mary's settle where there was a shell-belt and a Navy Colt. But Virgil came out with the rifle only, and Johnny Owens casually smashed it on the chopping-block.

"Who else you got here, James?"

"There's no one else. Just me and my boy," Walter James said. "He's only twelve." And he wondered why he thought this appeal would mean anything.

Owens looked at Billy, "Where's your maw?"

"She's dead," said Walter James quickly, and was surprised to find that it was still not easy to say after all this time. "She died last fall. There's just me and the boy."

Virgil Owens leaned his back against the hitching-rail and said lazily, "Heard you was in the war, James."

"Seventh Michigan," said Walter quietly.

"Georgia Volunteers," said Virgil, as if exchanging pleasantries, and then, "Beats me how the Yankees won with yellow-bellies like you."

They looked at Walter curiously, waiting to see the effect of this taunt. Walter felt the twist of his son's body beneath his hand, and knew, without looking, that the boy's face was turned up to him in anguished appeal.

Virgil laughed, and the Mexican spat out the last of the husks.

"We got no call to stay," said Johnny Owens. "You know?"

"I heard the Regulators were looking for you," admitted Walter.

Johnny Owens grinned. "They're looking," he said. "I'm trading your horse for mine. That's a fair trade?"

"If you say so," said Walter.

Owens went on grinning. "You're an accommodating man, James. We're much obliged to you." And then the grin left his face. "See what food they got, Virgil."

The thin man went back into the house. When he came out he was carrying a bag of flour, some bacon, and a sack of coffee. He was eating some of the beans that had been in the skilly. He was also carrying the Navy Colt, and Walter felt the rush of anger in him at the thought of Virgil Owens' hands pawing among Mary's things.

Virgil said, "Lookut what the Yankee forgot, Johnny. That's downright forgetful, Johnny. Ain't it, Johnny?"

Johnny Owens looked at the gun, stepped forward, measured the blow and hit Walter James across the face with the back of his hand.

As Walter went back with the shock of the blow his hand released his son's shoulder. Billy squealed with anger and flung himself at Johnny Owens, his yellow head down to butt, his arms flailing. Virgil caught him by the neckband and pulled him off his feet.

"Spunky kid," said Virgil, loose-lipped in his insane laugh. "Sure he's yours, James?" He threw Billy back to Walter.

The 'breed came up with the sorrel, and Johnny Owens swung himself on to it. For a moment he stared down at Walter, his hand resting on his gun, and the others looked at him as if they knew what was going to happen, because it had happened before. The Mexican was grinning. Then Johnny Owens shrugged, kicked his heels into the sorrel, and the four drifters rode down the draw to the southwest.

Walter watched them until the dust leveled into this strata and then disappeared altogether. He wiped the salt blood from his lips. "Go get some kindling, Son," he said.

The boy went away, his head down and his feet dragging.

He stopped at the corner of the barn and stood there, and Walter waited for him to turn, willing him to turn and look back, but Billy went on. Walter went back into the house and sat in the rocker with his hands between his knees. Mary's clothes had been dragged from the settle and spilled on the floor. The anger in Walter's throat was despairing and useless. He went down on his knees and gathered the clothes gently, the cotton prints and the ginghams, returning them to the settle, putting away with each a recollected memory of the woman who had once worn them. She would have found some way of explaining to the boy why his father had acted the way he did before the Owenses. If there could be an explanation. If there could be an explanation, that is, that Walter was sure was the right and true one.

He went over to the basin and threw cold water on his face, washing the blood from his mouth. Feeling came back into his lips, and with it the pain. He looked at his reflection in the splinter of mirror-glass by the towel, young-old and thin, gray in the long black hair at the temples. For a moment in his mind the reflection was replaced by the picture of a younger face, one that had stared back at him often enough ten years before, self-assured and challenging beneath a Union-blue kepi. It occurred to him that this was the face that Billy had seen whenever he looked at his father, until this morning.

And he knew that there was no explanation that would restore that picture.

He went down to the barn. Billy was sitting there, staring out across the plain, and his face was dirty where he had rubbed at the tears, but he was not crying now. Even more than usual the color of his hair reminded Walter of Mary.

"Billy? Billy, you all right, Boy?"

When the boy did not answer Walter put out a hand and touched his shoulder, but Billy flinched away from it.

"All right," said Walter James. "It's all right, Billy. You just sit there." And he went back to the house.

The sun was well past noon when the Regulators rode up. There were fifteen or twenty of them, mostly neighbors, and Walter found it strange to see some of them wearing guns.

Old Man Prescott was leading them, sitting upright, with his long legs straight and thrust forward, and his gray hair coming out in spikes from beneath his dirty hat. He looked down from the saddle at Walter James and bit his yellow mustache. "Get a horse and gun, Walt. We're going after the Owens boys."

"I guess you are," said Walter. "They stopped by here six or seven hours back. Took my sorrel and left a spent horse. It ought to be shot. I'd be obliged for the loan of a gun, Mr. Prescott."

"They stopped by here," said one of the riders, "and you're still living?"

"We're both still living. Me and my boy. I'd like that gun before you leave, Mr. Prescott."

Old Man Prescott wiped the back of his hand across his mustache, bringing the movement up sharply at the end. "Then you coming along?" he said.

"No," said Walter. "There's just me and the boy. I'm not leaving him."

One of the Regulators laughed. "What happened to your face, Walt? Somebody hit you?"

Old Man Prescott turned his body in the saddle with unexpected sharpness. He snapped across at the rider, "Shut your mouth until you got something worth saying!" Then he looked back at Walter.

He said softly, "You signed the articles, Walt."

"That was before Mary died. The boy's only got me now."

Nobody spoke. The horses moved uneasily, stirred up the dust and sneezed in it.

"It won't look good, Walt," said Old Man Prescott at last.

Walter said nothing, and the old man leaned down and his saddle-leather creaked. "Give me your hand, Boy." He pulled Billy up before him, and the boy straddled the horse, his hands gripping the horn and his eyes looking away from his father. His face was red beneath the pale hair.

"Put the boy down, Mr. Prescott."

"You know why we formed the Regulators, Walt." Old Man Prescott was speaking gently, as if it meant a lot to him to be understood. "On account of men like the Owens, and no law being around to handle them."

"I know that."

"You signed the articles, Walt. If you won't leave the boy we'll take him along. You got another horse?"

"I got a pony out on graze. They didn't see it."

"You get it. We'll wait." The old man looked at Walter and there was no anger, no condemnation in his face or voice, just patient confidence.

For a moment Walter held that gaze, and then he turned and went into the house. When he came out he was wearing his old Army blouse, faded, except on the sleeves where the chevrons had been. He saw Billy stare at it, open his mouth, and then turn his head away. Old Man Prescott gave Walter a gun and he went down and shot the drifter's horse. When he came back, riding a little paint cow-pony, the gun was stuck into his belt. He pulled up beside Old Man Prescott.

He said, "It ain't right to take the boy, Mr. Prescott."

"There's no choice."

Walter stood in his stirrups, his body inclined forward over the pony's neck. Then he settled in the saddle, and his voice was cold. "Anything happens to the boy, Mr. Prescott, I'll hold you for it."

"Ain't nothing going to happen to him," said Old Man Prescott. "Let's ride."

But Walter held Prescott's bridle. He spoke to the boy. "Billy," he said, "you want to ride with me?"

The boy stared away down the draw with his mouth puckered.

"Let's ride," said Old Man Prescott again, and he turned his horse to the southwest, with the others curving after him.

They rode until dusk, walking their horses for ten minutes every hour. The Cherokee tracker, Joe Loup, rode with Old Man Prescott, bending from the saddle, dismounting now and then to touch the trail with his finger. He grinned all the time. The trail was leading to the border, and the going was slow.

Once Old Man Prescott looked back where Walter James rode at the tail, his feet below the belly of his pony, his back straight like a cavalryman. Old Man Prescott pulled out and waited until Walter came up. He said, "You want to ride with your Paw now, Billy?"

"No," said the boy.

Old Man Prescott said nothing, but he looked across at Walter, chewed on the edge of his mustache, and then heeled his horse forward again.

They camped that night in an arroyo thirty miles from the border. It was a dry camp because Joe Loup said the drifters were not more than two hours ahead. Old Man Prescott grunted and said, "We'll catch up tomorrow." Joe Loup went out later, on foot, and he came back after three hours, grinning more than usual. He said the drifters were camped six or seven miles on, but they had not unsaddled. Some of the Regulators wanted to ride on then, but Old Man Prescott looked at them with contempt. "And lose them as soon as they hear us? 'Sides, ain't no sense in risking the boy." His chuckle was sardonic. "Wouldn't care to be around in the dark myself when some of you get to shooting."

The men stirred resentfully. One said, "Why'd you bring the boy, Mr. Prescott? We could've done without him and his paw."

"Walter James signed the articles," said Old Man Prescott.

The boy lay that night with his head and shoulders on the old man's saddle. When he was asleep Walter came up and placed a blanket on him, and hunkered there beside him, watching the still face in the moonlight. He sat there for an hour until at last he went over to where Old Man Prescott was sitting with his back against the crumbling bank of the arroyo, sucking on a cold pipe. They were silent for a while, looking up at the stars. At last Walter said, "What I said about holding you for it if the boy was hurt, Mr. Prescott—I'd be obliged if you forgot that."

Old Man Prescott took out the pipe and pushed it inside his shirt. He said nothing.

"What're you thinking of this, Mr. Prescott?"

"I'm thinking of them Owens boys," said the old man. "A sod-buster below the rim crossed them a couple of days ago when they rode in on him, just like they rode in on you. He tried to take a gun to them. They shot up his family before they finally killed him."

Walter breathed in deeply. "I had that in mind."

"I figured you did," said Old Man Prescott.

"You think it was that and nothing else?"

The old man moved a little in the moonlight. "My boy was with you in the war. . . ." Then he stopped. He went on slowly, "Maybe you was scared a bit too. You did nothing nobody else wouldn't do."

"How about the sod-buster!"

"He's dead," said the old man with sudden hatred. "And his boy too. Boy of Billy's age."

"You think," said Walter, trying to believe it himself, "Billy will see it that way? Some day?"

"Some day," said the old man. "You want he should ride with you in the morning?"

Walter stood up. "I guess he'll ride where he chooses. I'm grateful to you, Mr. Prescott."

"Good-night," said the old man.

The trail was broken by the river the next morning and Old Man Prescott split the Regulators into four parties to ride the banks. He took the south bank with Joe Loup and Walter and two of the others, and rode up it to the west. Four miles on Joe Loup trotted into mid-stream and found some horse-droppings and came back with his brown head nodding. Another mile and they found the hoof-marks in the mud where the drifters had come out on the south bank. Old Man Prescott called the other party over and they all rode at a trot to the southwest.

They were bunched up now, standing slightly in the stirrups, their faces set. Walter rode a half-length behind Old Man Prescott, watching the bobbing banner of Billy's fair hair. The heat was thick and it pricked the riders beneath their shirts. Old Man Prescott had tied his bandanna about Billy's nose and throat, holding the boy's body to him.

The trail led south to the mouth of a canyon, rising up then to the rocky shale where it was lost. The riders came suddenly on the bodies lying there and the leading horses shied and whinnied. One of the Regulators went back over his saddle into the dust.

Old Man Prescott looked up at the wheeling buzzards and then down at the bodies. The bodies of two men and two horses. Walter could hardly recognize what was left of his sorrel.

The Mexican and the half-breed had been shot in the back and had bled to death. The blood was black in the dust.

Old Man Prescott put his hand over Billy's eyes. "Joe Loup!" he shouted.

The Cherokee grinned pleasantly. He pointed up the canyon and shook his head.

The old man looked appreciatively at the canyon wall, the angry rocks, and the yellow candlesticks of the cholla. He almost smiled. "Box canyon," he said. "Man should know the country he runs through."

Then he chewed his thumb, looking at the bodies of the Mexican and the 'breed, working out the story aloud. Johnny and Virgil had been riding the dead horses, he said, and broken their legs most likely. So Johnny and Virgil had shot the Mexican and the 'breed and taken their horses. He went over the story again and again, and looked at the others for contradiction. Nobody said anything, and Joe Loup nodded his head.

"We got 'em," said Old Man Prescott soberly.

They rode on until the canyon turned and then the old man lifted Billy to the ground. "Stay there, Boy," he said. "You stay there, mind."

Walter James looked at his son, the smallness of him there beside the old man's great horse. His face white, and his eyes looking up at Old Man Prescott, looking at nobody but Old Man Prescott who shifted round in his saddle to call. "You want to stay with the boy, Walt?" Walter shook his head.

"Joe Loup!" shouted the old man.

"Sure, Mr. Prescott, I stay."

Then something hummed violently above them from the rocks ahead, and there was the bang of a Winchester, bouncing from wall to wall. They fell from their horses and scrabbled down behind the boulders. Old Man Prescott caught Billy and pulled him down beside him.

There was another vicious whirr, the bang of a Winchester, and Virgil Owens' insane laugh.

"Johnny Owens!" called the old man. "Johnny Owens! You and Virgil come on down!"

The only answer was Virgil's laugh, and Old Man Prescott

turned over on his back and pulled his hat-brim down over his eyes.

From where he lay Walter studied the rock-fall and the rise of it to the sky. He looked long at the south face and then he looked round at the Regulators where they were hunched behind cover, their faces turned in question to Old Man Prescott.

Walter pulled himself to his knees, held his body as if it were an aimed projectile, and in one quick roll flung himself across to the boulder where Joe Loup was squatting contentedly, eyes closed. The Cherokee's expression was noncommittal as he answered Walter's questions, and as he answered he pointed once to the south face and chopped his hand down in the air conclusively.

Walter went back to his rock and called, "Mr. Prescott!"

The old man came over in a queer, aged crouch, and Virgil's Winchester spat up the dust behind him and whanged an echo away against the rocks. Old Man Prescott swore.

"You figure you're too old and infirm to come over to me, Walt?" he asked bitterly.

"I don't want the boy to know."

"Know what?"

"What's your plan, Mr. Prescott?"

The old man looked reflectively at Walter's tight face, the firmness of his lips. He pushed his hat back, pulled his pipe from his shirt and stuck it between his yellow teeth. "Them Owens boys might have a good hand at that. They can't get out, but if we want them we've got to go up."

"They'll kill some of us."

"Maybe. Why?"

Walter James told him.

"You don't have to do that, Walt."

"Joe Loup says it could be done."

"If he was told to do it, he'd say it couldn't be done."

"I'll do it."

Old Man Prescott wiped his chin with his hand. "You doing this because of the boy, Walt?"

"I'm doing it because I thought of it first."

"No you ain't," said the old man savagely. "We're waiting for sundown and then going up."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Prescott," said Walter. He stood up suddenly, and ran into the open, down the slope to where the horses had strayed. He felt the nakedness of his position as if the temperature of the air had suddenly changed. He heard Virgil's high yell, and a bullet stabbed the dirt to the left and a little ahead. And then others. And one catching at his shirt-sleeve and ripping it. He reached the paint and gripped the saddle-horn, swinging himself up as the animal began to move. He heard Old Man Prescott shouting above the gunfire and then there was nothing but the sound of the pony's hoofs and the swing and the sway of it beneath him.

When Old Man Prescott got back to the boy he saw the expression on Billy's face. "Now look here, you young cuss!" he said, controlling the anger in him, and wondering why he was angry with himself and not with Walter James. "You know why your paw let them Owens boys whip him around?"

The boy said nothing. He put his face in the crook of his elbow.

"Darn it, boy, don't you know your own paw?"

Billy said, "He's run away, Mr. Prescott." His voice muffled in his arm. "He's run away now."

Walter pulled in the paint at the mouth of the canyon. His mouth was dry. It was not only dust, there was the old sensation that had been familiar enough ten years before. A man less familiar with it would have been ashamed of it. He lifted his canteen to his lips and then spat out the water. The sun was now two handsbreadths from the horizon and he could feel the sweat beginning to cool beneath his blouse. He passed his hand over his chin, over the rasp of stubble. For a moment the incredible foolhardiness of what he intended to do paralyzed his mind, and then he brutally drove away the sensation.

He looked back at the canyon. It went into the rock-face like an arm-thrust, crooked at the elbow. He tried to translate what he had seen of it, and what Joe Loup had told him of it, into a map's precise contours. The arm, from shoulder to elbow as it might be, ran from north to south, and the forearm from east to west. At the elbow the Regulators lay behind their cover, and somewhere on the steep south wall of

the forearm were Johnny and Virgil Owens, secure and confident.

Yet, if Joe Loup had been right, a man of courage could climb that escarpment until he looked down on those two men and turned their advantage against them.

Darkening against the sinking sun the high rock ridge ran like the turreted wall of an old fortress, and Walter remembered that the Cherokee had given it its old Mexican name—*Ciudad Coronada,* the crowned city. He looked up at it and felt his imagination stir unnervingly. Then he pointed the paint's nose off the trail and rode toward the shattered rise of shale at the foot of the escarpment.

At first it was a gentle slope, and the pony's plunging feet sent the loose stones down in little sibilant falls, but it ended suddenly at the foot of a red rise of rock that was almost perpendicular.

Walter dismounted. He unbuttoned the old Army blouse, pulled it from his shoulders and hung it on the saddle-horn. He pushed the handgun round to the small of his back, tightening the waistband of his Levis. He tugged his old felt hat firmly over his brow and walked up to the rock-face as a man might walk boldly up to an opponent.

The climb was deceptively easy at first, for the shallow strata, pushed out by their prehistoric cooling, formed a rough but adequate stairway, ledges of crumbling stone the width of a man's boot-sole. But as he went higher the strata became deeper, higher in places that he could reach with arms upstretched. He unstrapped a spur from his right heel, sweating fingers slipping on steel and leather, and with it he began to cut a painful hand-hold and foot-hold. Once he grasped a scrag of brush, which by some miracle of wind and germination was growing there instead of on the canyon floor, and as he grasped it he saw it slowly pull free from the thin soil that gave it life. He fell ten feet down the rock-face, spread-eagled, pressing his body against it, feeling the tearing of shirt and flesh on his chest, until his feet jarred on the ledge he had just left, and held him.

Then up again by kicking heels and jabbing spur, feeling the agonizing snap of his nails, seeing the blood oozing darkly be-

low the dust, a furnace breathing in his lungs. He lived a year of his life on the face of that escarpment, now climbing directly upward, now moving to the left or to the right in a ridiculous, slithering slide along the ledges, until suddenly there was no higher to climb and he was lying on his belly with his legs still hanging in space, sobbing in the air, indifferently listening to the faint ringing descent of the spur as it fell from his fingers and fell back the way he had climbed.

He pulled himself forward until his legs were no longer hanging free, yet still he lay there, unbelieving, until the report of a Winchester jarred through him. He lifted head and shoulders. The gunfire came up from his right, up from the purple shadows of the canyon below, and before the echoes had stopped he heard Virgil's laugh and Old Man Prescott's shout.

He lifted a hand to wipe the sweat from his face, and he saw the blood running down each finger from each torn nail. He pulled himself forward on his belly, and pretended that the drop of the cliff-face was no longer behind, yet fearing it, as if it still had the power to pull him down.

Away ahead of him stretched the hog-back of the ridge that lay along the south face of the canyon, and he realized that his climb, although it may have seemed perpendicular to him, had in fact carried him along the parallel of the canyon until he was now above the elbow. Below, to his right, the canyon was a black river, yet on his left the sun still rolled redly to the horizon.

A cat would have trouble walking along that hog-back, he thought, and he could not walk it. He must crawl, taking the cover of each boulder, and looking down always for a sign that would tell him where the Owens brothers were.

So he crawled. He crawled first to the shelter of an outcrop where he braced his feet and took the handgun from the back of his waistband. He broke it open and blew the dust from the barrel. He spilled the shells from the cylinder and spun it. Then he worked the action, once, twice, and then again. With a shred of his shirt he cleaned each shell, and because his fingers were still trembling from the strain of the climb the shells fell through them into the dust. One

bounced clear and went spinning down, a momentary yellow fleck before it was lost. He picked up the remaining four and with terrible care held them in his mouth while he wiped each and inserted it in the cylinder. Then he thrust the gun into his waistband once more, butt hard against his belly.

He crawled, marveling at the heat of the rocks beneath his hands and thighs, his throat closing in its dryness. He crawled, and he halted for long minutes, looking down into the quickening dusk of the canyon for a sign.

When it came it was sudden and ridiculously unexpected, the flare of a match that lit Virgil's cupped hands, his long nose and deep eye-sockets, the crouch of his body behind a boulder, the stroke of the rifle below his arm-pit. And when the match died there was still a sign, the faint white patch of the handkerchief that Virgil had tucked beneath that Confederate kepi to keep the sun from his neck.

He was thirty, perhaps forty feet below Walter, and there was no sign of Johnny Owens. He could be below Virgil still, or between Virgil and the rim.

Walter took the chance, since there was no alternative. He rolled silently over the edge and with torn hands that had miraculously found a skill in this sort of thing, lowered himself rock by rock until he found himself on the flat top of a rock slab fifteen feet above Virgil. He took the gun from his waist and lay there with his thumb on the hammer.

Now, away from the last glow of the sun, his eyes grew accustomed to the dusk of the canyon. He saw the floor, the stipple of greasewood, the boulders where the Regulators were hidden, and beyond them their horses, neck-stretched to the sparse earth.

Johnny Owens' voice came out of the rocks below. "Virgil, get them horses."

The voice drew Walter's eyes down to where Johnny Owens sat on his heels behind a rock, his hat hanging by its thong between his shoulder-blades, a white grin bisecting his black beard.

Virgil pressed his cheek against the rifle stock. He fired once and swore. He fired again and Old Man Prescott's yellow horse sat down suddenly on its haunches, and rolled over squealing.

"Try another one, Virgil," said Johnny.

In the dusk below Billy's tiny figure skidded out from the cover of the rocks and began to run toward the horses. Walter saw the muzzle of Virgil's rifle move from one of the horses and follow the crazy path of the boy. The spark of Virgil's cigarette glowed.

Walter stood up and leaped downward. The stones rolled as he hit the slope.

Virgil turned, bringing the rifle down. He opened his mouth. He shouted, *"Johnny!"*

He fired the rifle once, but it was in reaction to his surprise. He pumped it, and then vaulted on to the rock, bringing the stock up to his shoulder. Walter braced his feet, lifted the handgun until barrel and arm were a line from his shoulder, and he fired. The bullet took Virgil in the throat, twisting his body as it dropped.

As Walter threw himself down behind the rock that Virgil had left he listened to the rolling fall of the dead man going down to the floor of the canyon.

Then there was silence, a strange, unsympathetic silence, until out of it came the thudding of his heart. In the dust beside him Virgil's cigarette burnt acridly where it had fallen. Walter ground it out with a fierce satisfaction. He pulled back the hammer of his gun and spat the dust from his tongue.

"Owens!" he shouted. "Johnny Owens! You hear me?"

There was no reply, then the faint scrape of a spur on stone.

"Owens, this is Walter James! You hear that?"

A single stone rattled in the darkness below.

"Owens! I'm coming down!"

A cough. Then a harsh voice. It said, "When you're ready."

Walter looked back up the cliff face. Although the sky was red above, the wall of rock below it was black and formless. He had that advantage, the only advantage. The rock he leaned against was twelve feet across. He pushed himself to his knees and then to his feet, crouching on his heels, and moved as silently as he could to the left-hand edge, forcing his mind to remember that one glimpse he had had of Johnny Owens, hoping the gunman was still in that position, but only half-believing he would be.

He picked up a rock in his left hand and hurled it to the right. As it fell, unseating others, he stood up and stepped out.

He saw a shadow rise from the ground, the flash of a gun, firing to the right where the stone had fallen, and then the shadow turned quickly to meet him.

He plunged at it. The shadow became a body, a body crouched, the smear of a face with white teeth grinning. And he fired at it. He fired as Johnny Owens shot again, this time at a target he could see.

When he heard the first report of the handgun Old Man Prescott said, "The Lord be with him."

They heard the roll of Virgil's body falling and wondered. "Oh, Lord be with him!" said Old Man Prescott.

One of the Regulators called, "How about that, Mr. Prescott? You want we should do something?"

"Ain't nothing to do yet, Son."

He bit his yellow mustache, and then they heard Walter's shout. Old Man Prescott called, "Hear that, Billy? That's your Paw!" And he wished he could see the boy's face in the dusk.

Then there were three more shots, but the second and third so close as to appear almost one. And silence. One by one the Regulators stood up, staring into the darkness.

"Mr. Prescott, sir . . .?" said Billy.

"It's all right, Son."

They heard footsteps coming down, coming down in the way a tired man will walk when he knows there is no hurry. One of the Regulators pumped his rifle and Old Man Prescott shouted angrily, "Put that damn thing down!"

They heard the sound of a spur striking a rock, and a shadow came out of the dusk, long-legged, slowly. In its right hand it carried two gun-belts, and they were those that Johnny and Virgil Owens had worn.

Old Man Prescott yipped and slapped his thigh with his hat. "Walt, you did it! Darned if you didn't!"

Walter James did not look at the grinning Regulators. He dropped the gun-belts in the dust and walked over to his son. And nobody saw him smile as he picked up the boy, and only he saw the smile on his son's face.

WHY RUSTLERS NEVER WIN

By HENRY GREGOR FELSEN

Humor in the Western field can be a pretty tricky business, mostly because many writers rely so completely on heavy doses of dialect for their comedy that their stories end up being both unfunny and unreadable. Here's a humor story, however, which—like most good Westerns today—skips dialect almost entirely, and uses character and situation to become, in the editor's opinion, one of the funniest stories to turn up in a long time.

THE REASON that bankers is rich and cattle rustlers is poor is because bankers read them Eastern business newspapers. This can be proved by what happened to Curly Kid Montague.

Curly Kid Montague was what you might call a all-around outlaw. When he wasn't stealing cattle he was stealing horses, and when he wasn't robbing banks he was holding up stagecoaches. But poor Curly Kid discovered that a wicked heart and a crooked brain ain't no match for a good education.

Curly Kid learned this one time when he was drifting across Texas, looking for something to steal. He rode over a hill and all of a sudden he found himself alone with two hundred head of fat cattle.

He cocked his pistol and looked around for the cowboy who ought to be guarding this fine herd. But there wasn't any cowboy. It was a rustler's dearest dream come true.

Curly Kid examined the brand on the cattle. They was marked with a simple little Bar Zero. He unslung his personal branding iron, built a little fire, and pretty soon there was two hundred head of cattle that moved from the —O ranch to the +Q. Then Curly Kid drove his new herd toward the town of Taco, Texas, which was a shipping point on the railroad.

When Curly Kid reached Taco he drove his herd into the railroad corral and set out along the street to find the local cattle buyer. He saw a building with a great big sign out front: TACO INTERNATIONAL BANK, *Seth J. Sleamish, Owner, Pres. & Prop.* Underneath, there was listed other business that could be done inside: horses and mules swapped, wampum changed into greenbacks, mail orders accepted for spectacles and store teeth, and beef cattle bought.

Curly Kid dismounted, hitched up his guns, and went inside.

Now, it was the first time in his life that Curly Kid had ever went into a bank for any reason but to rob it, so he was kind of embarrassed. "I just drove in two hundred head of cattle," he said to the banker, "and I'd like to deal for 'em."

The banker shook his head. "I'm sorry, son," he said, "but I'm not buying cattle right now. The bottom has dropped out of the market. Why, it would cost me more in freight charges to ship those cattle than I'd get for them at the stockyards. Look here what it says in my New York financial paper."

Curly Kid looked at the paper, but all he seen was rows of initials and fractions that hurt his eyes to look at. "Well," he said, "if that's what the paper says, I guess it is true."

"My advice to you, son," the banker said, "is to take your cows back and keep them on your ranch until the price goes up."

Since the cattle wasn't worth anything, Curly Kid decided to leave them where they was and hit the trail. But when he reached the edge of town, he run into the sheriff and a posse. "Where do you think you're going, cowboy?" the sheriff asked.

"I am hurrying home to see my dear old mom and daddy, who I ain't seen for seven years," Curly Kid said. "That ain't no crime, is it?"

"No," the sheriff said. "Not as long as you take them two hundred head of cattle with you. Abandoning cattle is a serious crime in this part of Texas."

"Sheriff," Curly Kid said, "I'm going to give that fine herd of cows to this fine posse."

"You're a cute customer, cowboy," the sheriff said, "but you ain't burdening us down with your herd. Every man here has cattle of his own that he can't afford to feed."

Well, Curly Kid had to go back to the railroad corral, get his herd and drive them out of town. He figured to get out on the range, then duck away, but he didn't have a chance. Part of the posse kept tailing him, and at every ranch there was cowboys armed to the teeth, ready to shoot if he tried to abandon his herd on their place.

This went on for two or three days, and at last Curly Kid couldn't take it no more.

"All right, Sheriff," he said. "You got me. I surrender and I confess."

"Confess to what?" the sheriff asked.

"I confess I stole this herd of cattle."

Well, the sheriff looked at Curly Kid and begun to laugh. "If that ain't the biggest lie I ever heard in my whole life!" he exclaimed. "With cattle bringing a penny a pound, and feed costing two cents a pound, you *stole* the herd! Boy, didn't your mom ever tell you it wasn't nice to lie to sheriffs?"

Back in town, Curly Kid put his cattle in the railroad corral, spent the last of his money to buy feed, and then he crawled in bed to get some sleep.

At midnight he got up, put on his boots and guns, and went across the street to rob the bank. It was easy. The posse was watching the roads out of town, to keep him from running off, so nobody bothered him while he cleaned out the safe and took the money back to his hotel.

What he was to do, Curly Kid decided, was buy passage to Kansas City for his herd. Once they was gone he'd be free to leave, and maybe a few dollars ahead of the game.

Next morning when he went down to breakfast, the sheriff was waiting for him. "Son," the sheriff said, "I looked in on your herd this morning, and them cattle is hungry."

"I aim to buy 'em feed this morning," Curly Kid said.

"Is that so?" said the sheriff. "I seen you spend your last dollar yesterday, and I was wondering what you would use for money. The only man in this county with any money this morning is the *hombre* that robbed the bank last night. And if we catch *him*, half of us is going to shoot him while the other half hangs him."

Well, Curly Kid was a victim of fate. He had money but

he couldn't spend it. And meantime his fine rustled herd was wasting away.

"Why don't you see the banker for a feed-and-water loan?" the sheriff suggested. "Seth J. Sleamish knows ranching problems. He owns a ranch himself—the Bar Zero."

"*Borrow* from a bank?" Curly Kid was really shaken.

"It's your only chance to do your duty by that poor herd."

For the second time in his life, Curly Kid went into a bank unmasked. Seth J. Sleamish was all kind attention, but helpless. He'd be glad to make a loan, he said, but his bank had been robbed and there was nothing to lend with. So that night Curly Kid had to put the money back in the bank, so's he could borrow some of it out again.

The next day, with the money back in the bank, Seth J. Sleamish wasn't so anxious to make the loan—even though he knew, as well as Curly Kid knew, that the cattle had been rustled from him. "But, son, I like you," Banker Sleamish said. "And it's a stroke of good fortune that I own the feed store. I'm going to let you feed that herd on credit, and make a bank loan to the feed store. Whenever you sell your cattle you can pay me what you get and owe me for the rest.

"We'll consider the cattle as chattel," Banker Sleamish went on, "and I'll keep a record of the debt. I'll even compound the interest for you, at ten per cent per day."

"I sure appreciate that," Curly Kid said. He signed the paper the banker gave him and, sure enough, he had all the feed he needed for his herd.

Then one day Seth Sleamish paid Curly Kid a visit at the corral and saw how fine the cattle looked. "Son," Seth Sleamish said, "feed for these cattle has already cost you five hundred dollars. The longer you keep them the more in debt you'll be. Now, I can't pay you anything, but if you let me take them off your hands I'll foot their bills from now on. All you owe for is the feed and interest on the loan."

"Do you really mean that?" Curly Kid asked. "You mean I can give them back to you?"

"I like you, son," Sleamish said. "Now if you will just sign this paper . . ."

"As soon as I git five hundred dollars I'll pay you back," Curly Kid said.

"Five hundred was the loan," Seth Sleamish said gently. "I'm afraid with the interest it comes to three thousand, seven hundred dollars and eighteen cents. I'm only charging you half a day's interest for today."

Before Curly Kid could answer, there was a noise of thunder, and big herds of cattle come into Taco on the run from every direction. "What's happened?" Curly Kid asked Sleamish. "Why is everybody bringing in cattle?"

"It's all here in this new issue of my Eastern financial newspaper," Banker Sleamish said. "The cattle market has changed again. This week they're paying fifty dollars a hundred in Kansas City."

"Why, my herd is worth about fifty thousand dollars now!" Curly Kid said.

"Oh, no," Seth Sleamish said. "*My* herd is."

Well, Curly Kid trudged back to his hotel about the saddest and most forlorn cattle rustler that Texas had ever seen. He got his gear together and started out of town, but once again he was stopped by the sheriff. "Son," the sheriff said, "it would be a hardship on Banker Sleamish if you was hung before your debt was paid. I've got an honest job for you, so's you can pay it off. I've decided you're to be truant officer for the school."

Well, there was some folks who didn't think Curly Kid would stick very long at that job, but they was wrong. He became the best truant officer that had ever served in Taco, and his salary was raised to where he'd be free of debt in only twenty years.

Nobody quite knew why he was so devoted to his job, until one day the schoolteacher asked him.

"Ma'am," Curly Kid said, "I'm gonna see that them kids stays in school, and make sure that what happened to me never happens to them. Ma'am, when these mean, sassy kids grows up to be outlaws, they are going to be *educated* outlaws. And they won't ever have to suffer the awful disgrace of being euchred by a honest man."

THE ENEMIES

By HERBERT D. KASTLE

There's general agreement among editors and readers today that the onetime traditional detective story about the man who hunts down and murders another man who ruined him in business thirty years before is pretty spurious and illogical stuff, and the reason for this opinion makes plenty of sense: there are multitudes of minutes and hours and days in those thirty years, and other things happen and other interests develop, and rare is the man one-track enough to retain a hunger for revenge for thirty years. There are, however, exceptions to every rule; everything depends upon the facts and circumstances. There's plenty of logic and realism, for example, in this grim story of two men who spent their lives hating and hunting each other.

ELIJA MORRESON and Tall Man had hated each other for thirty-two years. Their enmity was no slight thing, no minor clashing of wills and purposes; each had destroyed the other's family. The white settler and Mimbreño Apache first exchanged shots on a spring day in 1875, and continued to hunt each other until, on a winter evening in 1907, they met face to face in the Texas wilderness. Shortly after this meeting, both were dead. And yet neither had fired his weapon, nor touched the other in any way. . . .

Elija Morreson left his native New Jersey at the age of fifty. He was a veteran of the Civil War, had a wife and two unmarried sons, owned a small farm and a great desire to go West. After careful consideration, he told his family of his plans.

"The Big Bend section of Texas is our best bet," he said one evening at the dinner table. "Mostly, it's what they call desert and no place for a farmer. But if we can locate near a water hole—" He finished by grinning widely.

His wife, Edna, a tall, ruddy-complexioned woman in her early forties, seemed doubtful. "What about Indians, Elija?" she asked.

Elija Morreson's narrow face tightened. "I took care of Johnny Rebs aplenty, and I can handle any sneaking redskin!"

That settled the issue and the Morresons were soon on their way.

Tall Man's reasons for coming to the Big Bend were of a different nature. He was the son of Wild Singer, an old subchief killed in a clash between Apache and whites. Wild Singer's body had been left on the field of battle when the chiefs decided there was no time to recover it. This embittered Tall Man, then forty-eight years old, who had been away with another raiding party. "My father's spirit will not rest," he told his sons. "We will leave the tribe and forget this dishonor."

The youngest son was silently obedient with the rest, but later he found his father alone and asked, "What about the Pinda Lick-o-yi—the white-eyes? They grow strong, and we will be alone."

Tall Man straightened to his full five feet eleven inches. "My knife is sharp," he intoned. "My arm strong. We are five men, the equal of many white-eyes. Get your pony."

He took his two squaws and four sons and left the tribe.

Elija Morreson and Tall Man arrived at the hidden arroyo and lush little valley within it, but not at the same time. The Apache was there first. His tepees, ponies, squaws and sons were established near the water hole a month before Elija's canvas-topped wagon announced its presence with heavy streamers of trail dust. Tall Man read the sign correctly, and gathered his sons.

"The Pinda Lick-o-yi deliver themselves to our scalping knifes. Arm yourselves, I will carry the gun."

Tall Man rode his pony ahead, leading them up through the

front pass. He circled wide, arriving behind the wagon with its trailing cows and bull, and continued until he was south of it. Then he raised his heavy, single-shot Sharpes buffalo gun, booty of an earlier encounter with whites, and drove a slug at the driver on the high seat. His aim was bad, even for an Apache, and dust jumped ten or fifteen feet in front of the four-horse team.

Elija had been excitedly following directions given him by a cowhand two days back along the way.

"We're almost at that valley," he said to his wife. "That's the arroyo up ahead, and down at the bottom should be that pretty land—" Just then the shot sounded, and Elija saw the Apaches. "Billy, hand me my Henry!" he shouted. "I'll teach those filthy Injuns something about shooting!" His youngest son responded quickly.

Elija's lever-action Henry repeater was as perfectly conditioned as it had been at Bull Run, and his aim was still excellent. He fired, and one of Tall Man's lean-muscled sons clutched his chest, coughed, and fell off his pony. Tall Man picked up his son, screamed his defiance, and retreated.

An hour later, the wagon stopped outside the arroyo. Elija Morreson and his two sons got down and advanced upon the trail leading into the lush valley.

Tall Man was still grieving for his son, so he packed the body on a pony and struck his tepees. He took his squaws and three remaining sons and left the valley by a hidden back trail. The Morresons moved right in and set up camp.

"Guess we showed them Injuns, Pa," Elija's oldest son, Timothy, said exultantly. "Bet they're still runnin'!"

Elija Morreson grinned and nodded. "Bet you're right, son. Now let's help Ma make some eats."

But Timothy was far from right. When the sun went down, Tall Man broke Indian custom by attacking an enemy at night. He and his sons came into the valley by the back trail and jumped the Morreson camp. It wasn't the complete surprise it should have been; Mrs. Morreson managed a bubbling scream as Tall Man's knife entered her throat, and the whites were well-armed with rifles and pistols.

The fight which followed was one of shadows—confused, terrifying, bloody. Tall Man finally left the valley and

climbed the cliffs of the arroyo, alone. His sons lay dead behind him, and his grief and hatred were so great that he never found time to admire his enemies for their courage and fighting skill. Not that he had any reason to decry his own fighting abilities.

Some two hundred feet below, Elija Morreson wept in the darkness, holding all that remained of his family—the pain-wracked body of his eighteen-year-old son, Billy. The next morning Billy's agony ended. Elija was dry-eyed and full of hatred as he buried his wife and two sons.

He set about dismantling the wagon, gathering wood and other materials, building his house. He worked insanely, the Henry at his side, his eyes searching the cliff from time to time. As the days stretched into weeks, and then into months, he began to pray that the Indian would return. He needed an outlet for his terrible hate!

Tall Man did return, many times. He watched from hidden spots on the rim of the arroyo, and saw how his sons were thrown together into a shallow ditch. He also saw the three crosses marking his enemy's dead, but it didn't lessen his hatred. He meant to attack when the white man relaxed his vigilance; he had never wanted anyone's blood so badly before!

In the meantime, he hunted, bringing meat to his squaws in the tepee hidden behind a malpais rock formation some ten miles from the arroyo.

Down in the lush and beautiful valley, Elija Morreson sat at a plank table and stared at his callused hands. He had a house, corral, vegetable garden, chicken run, fenced pasture for his three cows and bull, a field ready for planting. He had worked seventeen, eighteen hours a day, driving himself to exhaustion, and still the hatred burned deep in his vitals. The devil who had slaughtered Edna, Tim and Billy was alive somewhere. The thought was too much to bear. He got up, took his Henry rifle and walked out to the corral.

"Gonna do some riding," he muttered. "Gonna find me a red devil to kill!"

Tall Man decided to go on a long hunt. "I will not return

until my pony staggers under much meat," he told his squaws. "Then we will feast, and I will kill the white man."

He took two ponies and rode into the desert.

About a day from the tepee, he had a run of luck. He killed a steer, packed the choice cuts on his spare mount and headed back. When he reached the rock pile that hid his tepee from view, he kicked his pony into a gallop, glad to be near his squaws. They would be proud of his hunt, and he would talk to them. The old squaw had borne his sons, chewed his moccasins soft, been faithful through the long years. The young one was gentle, sweet of breath, fire in his arms.

Then he saw the old squaw lying in front of the pile of ashes that had been the tepee, her head a raw, red, terrible wound.

The young squaw's feet stuck out of the charred ruins; she, too, was dead.

Tall Man reached for his Sharpes as a shot rushed hot and lethal past his ear. He heard the white man screaming, and released his extra pony. The white man was running toward him, touched by the gods, levering a second shell into his repeater. Tall Man knew he couldn't raise and fire his heavy buffalo gun in time to stop the Pinda Lick-o-yi, and so he twisted the pony around and galloped away. He could hear the insane screaming for many minutes, then he was out on the desert.

That night he sat hunched against the chill winds and swore to avenge his squaws. Only now his vengeance called for brain-roasting, head down over a small fire.

Back at the farm, Elija Morreson washed his hands in a bucket of water. The squaws would have tried to warn the Indian, and so he'd killed them. Also, he'd wanted to do it. Wasn't his own Edna dead? And yet, it wasn't enough. He would never be at peace until that big redskin with the hatchet face lay squirming at his feet. It might take a year or two, but he'd gut-shoot the devil!

Both Tall Man and Elija were wrong. It was thirty-two years before they saw each other again. Tall Man left the area because many soldiers came. Elija Morreson didn't want the soldiers, but he had no choice. His farm was situated on the only water hole within two hundred miles, and a cavalry

unit used it as a base of operation now that the Apaches had united in an all-out war against the Pinda Lick-o-yi.

Victorio, Nana, Juh, Geronimo—the tribe fought, and Tall Man had to rejoin them or be shot on sight by any white. He found a different tribe, a desperate, vicious, unbelievably cruel tribe. It suited his own feelings toward the whites, and though he was aging he rode with them.

Years passed before Nana raided in the Big Bend, and Tall Man led three braves down into the valley one morning. He burned the house, but found nothing else. The white man was gone. Tall Man's heart raged helplessly. Had the white man died peacefully, without feeling vengeance? It was possible, and it was a sickening thought. He tried to ease the sickness by desecrating the white man's burial ground, but it didn't help. The three young braves watched him emotionlessly, waiting for him to finish.

"Ay," one said softly. "His brain is sick with hate."

The others said nothing.

Elija Morreson wasn't dead as Tall Man had feared. He was in El Paso, having been forced to leave his farm when the cavalry pulled out. There were too many hostiles ranging the desert for a lone man to survive, or so the young cavalry lieutenant insisted.

"I'm taking you to El Paso, Mr. Morreson," the lieutenant said firmly. "I've got a brother who owns a saloon there." He grinned. "Black sheep of the family, and only one who earns enough money to live decently. He'll give you a job on my say-so."

So Elija went to the city and got a job as bartender. He didn't mind the work, but his heart pounded painfully when he thought that the big red devil might be riding in and out of the valley where Edna and the boys were buried.

Eleven years passed before the Apache menace ended. Elija Morreson returned to the arroyo with a partner, a young man named Sam Everston who was willing to work hard for a half-share in the farm. Elija sat down and cried with helpless rage when he saw the uprooted graves and the bones bleaching in the sun.

"Injun," he choked, as Sam tried to comfort him. "Injun, I'll send you to hell yet!"

Tall Man was in the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico with the tiring Geronimo, raiding from there, trying to find some way of getting back to the arroyo and his vengeance. But bad times were upon the Apache. They lost skirmish after skirmish, were reduced to a handful of starving warriors, and finally surrendered.

Tall Man found himself a prisoner in a hot land named Florida. He lived there, and through the moves to Alabama and Oklahoma. He went on living until he was the oldest in the tribe and had forgotten the number of his years, his boyhood, his children's names—everything but his hatred.

Back in Texas, Elija Morreson was eighty-two years old, living in the arroyo farmhouse with his partner, Sam Everston, and Everston's large happy family. He was still able to get around, and still carried his Henry rifle with him when he went for a walk.

"Gotta find me a red devil with a hatchet face," he would mumble when the children asked why he carried the weapon. "Gotta gut-shoot that devil."

The dream of vengeance was about the only clear thing in his brain.

The powers-that-be decided to return the Apache to New Mexico. Tall Man found himself back in the land of his people, and one day he just walked away from the reservation, leading a pony. Then he rode for many days. He avoided all signs of humanity, and ate a little jerky and drank a little water.

He had lost his rifle long ago, but now had another—one he'd stolen from a young man who'd bought it from a whisky runner. It was a Sharpes single-shot buffalo gun, as was the one he'd had in the old days, and it might yet fire a bullet if his medicine were good. He rode until he reached the arroyo. He hobbled his pony behind some rock and went to the rim and lay there.

"White dog," he prayed, "be here for my bullet to find."

He saw many whites, but not the old one. He slept, and dreamt, and later moved back to where he'd left his pony. But he didn't reach it. In the deepening dusk, he saw a shadow that was not rock.

He stopped and the shadow stopped. He raised his rifle. Elija Morreson did the same.

They saw each other, and recognized each other, and stood there.

Darkness came, and the moon rose, and voices in the valley began calling, "Elija! Elija!" The voices ranged far, but didn't find the two enemies. And the enemies waited, knowing that each had but one shot—Tall Man because his gun held a single bullet, Elija because he'd never have time to lever a second shell into the chamber. The first to fire might be the one to miss, and the other could then kill at his leisure.

The voices had stopped and the moon had traveled a long way when both reached the same decision. They had looked long, and each had seen an old man with ravaged face, ruined body and trembling hands. The hatred passed, and each wanted to turn away and go back to his home to die.

The Indian turned first, saddened because there could be no victory. The white man was relieved, and yet also saddened, because he knew there was no longer any reason for life.

They parted. The Indian reached his pony, mounted stiffly, and rode away. When he was out in the desert, he began chanting his death song. The white man dropped his rifle and walked down the trail and into the house. His partner scolded him, but gently, because he could see the draining of life from Elija Morreson's face.

FOOTNOTE TO AMERICAN HISTORY

By RODERICK LULL

Good Western stories turn up, sometimes, in unusual places. Through the years of preparing these anthologies, the editor has found first-class stories in magazines otherwise devoted entirely to photographs of lightly-clad ladies, in magazines whose editors have stated in correspondence that they've never published Westerns and in magazines ostensibly devoted to other types of fiction, such as detective stories. So it isn't really surprising, therefore, that the story which follows was found in the erudite publication, *The Virginia Quarterly Review.*

IT'S TRUE, of course, that millions of words have been written by knowing people about how this country was built, and why. Many of them are fine and stirring words, too, full of the vigor of the great past, and sometimes they deal in detail with the impulses that made the pioneers accept the risks and the hardships and do what they did. But the thing my great-grandfather told me I have never seen in print, and that is why I put it down here. I know it to be a true thing, for I had the old gentleman's word for it, that winter he died. And he was known to everyone as a truthful man.

It could be said that he was so very old that his memory could not be trusted. And that would be reasonable enough if he had been talking of yesterday or last month or last year. He had little memory for the recent past, and when someone mentioned it he would look past them, chewing his pipe stem, his long white moustaches sagging. But the deep past, now, was a different matter. You could say, for instance,

"Where were you, sir, the Christmas of '74?" or "Was it the early spring of '88 that you were in the big storm?" and he was a changed man. He'd take his pipe out of his mouth, and his moustaches would rise up as if there were little springs hidden in them, and he'd start talking in the big, booming voice that didn't weaken until the very end. Then it would come out, the people and the places and the events, all of it clear and living in his mind.

And now about this thing that happened to him.

The first time, he wasn't sure whether it had really happened or he'd just dreamed it. That was when he was trying to decide whether he'd light out for the West or not. There he was, all full of stories about Indians and the Oregon Trail and the California gold rush and the rest of it. There were new stories filtering in about a place called the Comstock, where precious metals were as common as fieldstones in Connecticut. And on the other hand he had a fine home to live in and a splendid future all laid out for him and a girl he loved. He had a taste for the comforts of life and a few of the luxuries too, and those are not easy things to throw to the winds. He was twenty years old and his father was up there among the three or four most prominent citizens of the town, and he hadn't a real problem on earth.

He'd talked it over with his father. His father was wise enough to take it coolly. He was a stubborn man himself and he understood a stubborn son when he saw one. He just said, "There's a thousand men who fail for the one man who strikes it rich."

"But there's always that one man."

His father looked out of the window of the bank, at the wide street with its double line of fine shade trees. "And there's Martha Stewart."

"I'd be coming back for her one day, of course."

His father looked at the Seth Thomas clock that kept time like a ship's chronometer. "Some come back and some don't. Some live and some die, and for the most part no one ever hears of the ones who die. And then, some girls get tired of waiting when there are eligible young men around. Some girls want a husband and a home and no folderol. The Stewarts aren't the gambling kind, I'm happy to say."

He was properly respectful when his mother had her say, but he paid it little mind—women were all the same when it came to these affairs. He didn't talk it over with Martha just yet—there was no sense in making needless trouble when he wasn't sure himself. After all, it was a good town, and he'd be a big man in it. Home was a fine place, comfortable as they come. And, to frost the cake, there was no prettier or more loving girl than Martha Stewart.

Then here he was, lying half-awake in the middle of the night when this man appeared. The man was dressed outlandishly for modern New England—in worn Northern furs, with heavy boots, and a tasseled fur cap on his head. Another queer thing was the man's voice and manner of speaking—it seemed out of date, and not in tune with the times.

"You know, George Hanford," the man said, "it was a fine home I left too, but I had to see what was out there. And it was well worth the seeing, mighty well worth the seeing. Believe me or not as you please, but there's more wonderful sights out there than any man can describe to you in talk or in type. Let me tell you, George Hanford . . ."

The man was there for maybe a minute, maybe an hour, maybe the best part of the night—my great-grandfather could never be sure. But the man was dressed all in furs, and that was a fact, and his voice made you think of history.

He gave it straight to his father the next day. "I'm going. I want to see what it looks like out there."

And his father, being wise, didn't argue. "I'm sorry, but so it is. Write to us when you can, and if you need anything tell me."

His mother cried, but that was to be expected of a woman. Martha wept only a little and when he said, "I'll be back; I don't know when but I'll be back," she said at once, "I'll wait." So he kissed her with sadness—for she was lovely and many men wanted her—and said good-by.

He took the three thousand dollars an aunt had left him, and off he started for the Comstock, for all the accounts had said that a half-hundred new millionaires were made there each day and a full hundred on holidays.

There were many means of travel even in those days, and he used them all—trains and covered wagons and river boats

and driving horses and riding horses and his own two feet. He listened and kept his mouth shut and learned a little. He saw deserts and forests and the mountains of the Far West that made all other mountains of his experience seem like something built by children. After a long time he came into Virginia City, where the millionaires were made.

It was an odd place. Nothing grew except the sage brush, and there were pits and shafts everywhere, as if thousands of giant moles had been working without rest for years. Men lived in shanties and tents and coyote holes, and it cost a dollar to spend a night on a bunk in a reeking room with twenty others. But there was talk of gold and silver on all sides, and men spoke casually of fortunes of a size almost unknown in New England. In an eating place he met a big, laughing, open-faced man named Will Russell, who was a mining engineer from St. Louis.

"Excuse me," Will Russell said, "but aren't you one of the Lees of Virginia? There's a marvelous family resemblance."

"No, sir. I'm George Hanford from Connecticut."

He was a friendly man, was Will Russell, and he gave good advice. "Take my tip, Hanford. Wealth isn't as easily made here as some will tell you. Watch your company. Hold tight to whatever money you have. Trust no one. That may be cynical, but you'll find it sound. Remember that an honest face may hide a thieving soul."

"I intend to, sir. I've been about a bit."

"Good!" Will Russell shook his hand. "Perhaps we'll meet here again—this is as good a restaurant as any, bad as the food is. Right now I've got some business to attend to. My associates and I have title to a vein—but never mind."

Well, my great-grandfather always brought this little story to a quick close. In a week he was one of Will Russell's associates, putting in the twenty-six hundred dollars he had left. And in ten days Will Russell was gone like a vagrant wind, and all any of the associates had to show for their money were some legal-looking deeds as worthless as the sage brush that grew everywhere.

My great-grandfather slept that night in a burrow some miles out of town. He ate stale bread and looked at his spavined riding horse. He knew he had to go home and tell

them he'd thrown away three thousand dollars and the best part of a year of time and was all done with folly. Even to think of it put the taste of gall in his mouth.

And then it happened again, in the middle of the night.

This man appeared out of nowhere, and he wasn't dressed in furs. He had on old buckskins and you could tell he was a horseman by his bowlegged walk, and you could tell he was a marksman by the fine, easy way he carried his rifle. When he talked you knew at once that he was a man of no schooling at all, but there was the kind of confidence in his voice that made you listen.

"Hanford," the man said, and he drawled quite a little. "I been cleaned out too, and it ain't a thing you like to think about. The money ain't important, but being a damn fool is. But then, a man's got to pay for what he gets to know, and mostly the price is fair enough. What a man don't have to do, Hanford, is give up easy. Not when there's much to do and see."

The man bit himself off a chew of tobacco, and then he said a queer thing. "You know what I done, Hanford? Why, one time I sat on my horse and I fixed me a fishing rod with a tree branch and a piece of string. And I caught me a nice trout out of a stream that's the nearest thing to ice that flows. And then—never leaving my horse, mind you, Hanford—I just let my trout drop into a boiling pool on the other side of the trail. And I took him out and I et him, just sitting there in the saddle. You believe that, Hanford?"

My great-grandfather wasn't exactly sure whether he answered or not. He kind of thought he did, saying, "Yes, I've heard of that—in the Yellowstone. But most people wouldn't believe it."

"Most people don't matter," the man said. "Anyhow, you might think of what I told you, Hanford. All of us has been tricked one time or another. But we live to laugh about it. We know how luck runs—here today and gone tomorrow. And in the meantime there's some amazing things to see and plenty to do." With that he was gone himself.

My great-grandfather was glad and in a way grateful for what the man had said to him, though, under the circumstances, it didn't perk him up as much as it might have. But

it gave him a little something to think about besides his own troubles. He didn't think it particularly queer that these strangers should come by and have a word with him now and then. After all, as anybody knows, queer things happen to people all the time.

Well, there he was, broke as a man can be, in a rough, uncivilized country. But it could have been worse. He had a knack for making friends with people, he wasn't above work, and he got along. Too, he never felt sorry for himself, and that helped out in the pinches. He was an hostler for a time in a livery stable, and that taught him much about horses. He worked as a clerk in an assay office, and he learned things about metals and mines and claims he'd never known before. He was a handyman at a gambling hall—a thing that would have turned his father green as the fields of Ireland had he known it—and that gave him a new insight into people. And once, for a while, he was a professional letter writer, just like they have in China. Writing these letters for hire, he told me, taught him more about people than anything else he'd ever done, and he wouldn't have missed the opportunity for anything.

At long intervals he wrote and received letters himself. In his letters he said only that everything was going well, and he would be home for a visit one day. And the letters that came to him brought news of home, and sometimes it saddened him to see through the spare lines the people and the places he had left behind. But he was never homesick in the ordinary fashion.

"Because," he said to me, "I had had a choice and I had done what it was necessary for me to do. Home was a fine place to love and remember, but it wasn't the place for me."

Sometimes there was a letter from Martha Stewart, and she sent him her affections. He carried her picture in a locket, but he rarely looked at it. The picture he had of her in his mind was clearer and handsomer by far.

Well, it would take too long to trace his travels, and I have forgotten much of what he told me when he was a very old man and I was not yet a man at all. He saw the frontier towns of Kansas, and San Francisco and Santa Barbara and Santa Fe. He hunted buffalo and he fished the great trout from

the streams. And, for a while, there was a girl in the Southwest.

Her name was Conchita, and she talked to him in the soft language of the Mexicans. She poured wine for him and cooked him the hot food of Mexico. She smiled at him, and said they would always be together. "Johnny," she said. "Johnny mio. Johnny never leave his Conchita."

Well, it was a pleasant life, and she was a fine, affectionate girl. But she just wasn't the girl for him, and that was no one's fault. And it was time to think seriously of going home.

The trouble was, of course, that he couldn't bear to go back a failure. He'd gotten along well enough, but he'd never come anywhere near to making a strike. He sweated pounds off himself going over it from start to finish and back again, and of course he got nowhere. The thought of walking into his father's house dressed like a roustabout with hardly a half-dozen coins to rattle together in his pocket was enough to keep him awake at night.

It began to look as if this pride of his would never let him go home. Then one night another stranger appeared, and this man, in some ways, was the most remarkable of them all.

He was slim, and not very tall, but he carried himself in an imperial manner, like a man who had known royalty and would be at home at a court. He wore a circle of metal over his chest, like armor, and there was a sword at his side. When he spoke it was with a French accent, and he was clearly a man of education and position.

"Monsieur," he said, "I, too, knew failure, Monsieur. I knew it when I reached the Ohio and my men deserted me, and I had to return alone. I knew it when I sent the little vessel *Griffon* back to the settlements, and nothing was ever seen of her again. I knew it when I mistook an inlet for the mouth of the Mississippi. Oh, I knew many failures, Monsieur, and they were bitter."

His manner was polite, my great-grandfather said, but his voice was strong and hard. My great-grandfather, of course, said nothing, and just listened. Finally the Frenchman said, nervously raising and lowering the sword in its scabbard, "There is no shame in failure, Monsieur. There is shame only

in the acceptance of defeat." And those were the very last words he spoke.

The next morning my great-grandfather started for Connecticut. It wasn't the Frenchman's doing, he assured me; he'd undoubtedly have gone anyway, though he might have stayed a while longer in the sunshine with the Mexican girl. But the Frenchman sort of cleared things up and spurred him along.

He walked into the bank late one afternoon, dirty, in need of a shave, with his old clothes travel-stained, and nothing to show for all the time he'd been away except the pictures he had in his mind that no one else could see. His father got up from his desk and came to meet him as casually as if he'd been away on a week's trip to Boston or Philadelphia. He held out his hand and said, "Glad to see you, George."

That night my great-grandfather dressed in some of his old clothes—though they were terribly tight at the neck and shoulders and chest—and went to see Martha Stewart. He knew when he saw her eyes why she hadn't married in all this time, for all of her suitors. He knew it twice over when she kissed him and wept just the proper amount on his shoulder.

That night a curious thing happened. He made a quick movement, and his coat tore when the muscles strained at the thread and the cloth. Martha heard the sound and saw the tear, and her eyes widened. "Why, you've grown, George!"

"Yes," my great-grandfather said, and they laughed together.

So there he was back at home, with everyone glad to see him, and no one with a condescending word. He didn't make any promises, but he had to do something with his time so he went into his father's bank. There was a great deal he hadn't yet seen and meant to see—a whole continent full of strange and various things—but he wasn't in a hurry. And Martha Stewart, for one, never seemed to tire of listening to his stories of the West. When he stopped talking, she led him on with questions, and in time she heard almost all of it. There were, of course, a few things he left out—notably Conchita, the Mexican girl with the soft voice and the bright laugh and the love of guitar music.

"Martha would have understood, I'm sure," my great-grandfather said. "But a story-teller must always delete something.

Knowing what to leave in and what to take out is the art of it, as you'll learn for yourself some day."

George Hanford and Martha Stewart were married in a fieldstone church that was older by far than the United States itself, and that had nothing in common with the unpainted frame churches he'd seen in the West. A little later he became cashier of the bank, a man with an assured future.

Well, it was a good life. No man ever made a happier marriage, and no place was more ordered or more beautiful than Connecticut. Sometimes, of course, he thought he'd like to trade a part of the order for something rough and vital and new. But those moods passed, and became fewer as the years went by.

He read a good deal, because it was the next best thing to seeing the world with your own eyes. And now and then someone would come along who'd been to far corners of the nation, and there'd be an hour or so of talk. He'd break out the cigars and the cider—and, on occasion, Jamaica rum and English whiskey—and listen carefully and ask his questions. Some of the travelers had been to places he'd once seen for himself, and it was amazing how much they had changed in what seemed a very short time. There was nothing static in new country. It was forever in a state of flux, going this way and that by turns, until sooner or later it settled down into a natural pattern. It made him a little sorry to hear of the great changes, just as it makes a man sorry to hear that the home of his youth has been torn down, but that was the way it had to be.

When the travelers had gone, my great-grandfather would draw on his cigar and lean back in his deep rocker and look out of the windows with their clean white curtains and see the quiet street with its fine shade trees. Everything was ordered, just as it should be.

"Well," he'd say to Martha, "I had my look around when I was the right age for it, and here I am, where I belong." And it was true. He was a settled man in a settled town, and he had no complaint whatsoever.

The children came, three in six years. The oldest died, and it took a long while even to dull the sorrow. Little by little, the old days and the old thoughts got farther away from him, and

that was all to the good. He had a hard time even remembering what Conchita had looked like, and the memory of Will Russell, the mining engineer from St. Louis, dimmed to a small dark shadow. And the strange men who had come, at long intervals, to talk with him in the night never came any more. It made him smile to think of them now, and he never told anyone else, not even Martha, about them. Not until he told me, long after.

It was the homesteaders going out to the Dakotas, to what some people called the country of the straddle-bug, who made all the trouble.

They took an interest in the migration at the bank, because if the reports were true or even half-true the homesteaders were going to make a great new empire out there, and there'd be wheat crops such as the world had never known before. My great-grandfather talked money and finance with the other bankers, but with only a small part of his mind at work. He was thinking about the endless prairie, and about the way the ducks came down the flyways in their millions, obscuring the sun for days on end, and about how when you blazed a trail with a wagon you were going where no other white man had ever gone in all history. The bones of the vanished buffalo were there, men said, and the bones of great elk lay beside them.

He was thinking too of the little towns that would be growing up, and of the little stores and banks and newspapers the land-seekers would need to help them build their empire. He was no farmer himself, but he knew what farmers had to have.

And then, he was thinking mostly that here was a new world, bigger than all New England, and people who weren't afraid of new, strange things were thronging into it.

All this he thought and none of it he said. For he was past the right age for adventuring; he was a settled man in a settled place.

So he read what he could find and he listened to travelers when they came his way and he told himself he was perfectly content. Oh, there was a restlessness all right, but that is a natural thing and only fools let it move them. He told himself that, time and time again, and he was perfectly content.

And then, spoiling it all, this stranger came to him in the

middle of the night, just as in the long past times, and he was different from all the rest.

My great-grandfather could never remember clearly just what kind of clothes he was dressed in, though they were queer in some fashion—a mixture of pioneer's and hunter's and politician's clothes, if you can conceive of that combination. He spoke with a Tennessee accent and he was a good talker—my great-grandfather judged him to be a man who'd seen a great deal and traveled a long way and educated himself in the process. He had a practiced voice, too, sometimes soft and sometimes booming out like a drum—the kind of voice men in the Congress cultivated in the old days when they made an art of debate and a man's principles were his life and his life was his principles.

This man, like the others, was there for maybe a minute, maybe an hour, maybe the best part of the night. He had a good deal to say, but much of it my great-grandfather had forgotten. He talked about a bloody battle and a hated man named Santa Anna. And when Santa Anna's troops finally gained the fort, he said, the old colonel was lying crippled on a cot but he ringed the room with Santa Anna's dead before they got him. And then, this man said the thing that my great-grandfather remembered the way you remember the sound of a bugle in the night. He said, "Be sure you are right, then go ahead." He paused—a dramatic kind of pause, the kind actors use. Then he said it again, "Be sure you are right, then go ahead."

He was gone—gone the way the sound of a bugle goes in the night—but the damage was done.

The next morning my great-grandfather talked about the Dakotas to Martha. He beat about the bush a good while, pretending that it was just an impersonal though interesting matter like a big fire in New York or a hurricane off Florida. But he didn't fool her for a second. She got up from her chair and came over to him and looked him straight in the eye with her mouth smiling. She said, "All right, George."

And that was all that was needed—just Martha smiling and saying, "All right, George," in her steady voice.

Well, he wasn't a wealthy man by any means—he had comfort and security, but wealth belonged to the old in the New

England of those times, and you were a long time coming into it. But he had a fair stake when they left—he and Martha and the boy and the girl. He was better off than most, and he knew something about the handling of money.

It was spring when they left Connecticut, and it was still spring when they reached the Dakotas. There was never a finer spring anywhere than they found there. The sky went on forever, blue as a young girl's dress, with a few scattered clouds to make the pattern complete. Under the sky there was the prairie, and it was all and more than he had read and been told. As any man could see, there was no end to the prairie—it was a world in itself, eternal and infinite, and the loam was as black as a deacon's coat.

There were new towns here too, but they were different from the mining towns of years ago in the Far West. The buildings were of rough lumber, the roofs covered with tar-paper, but even so there was a curious feeling of permanence about them. It was as if they marked the start of something that was to last. It was as if men had said, "This is the beginning, and it is a small thing, but great things shall grow from it." Some day the towns would be cities, and wood would turn to stone and marble, but it would all be an evolution of what was being made here now.

That was what the people felt, my great-grandfather told me, and never on earth had there been a more mixed collection of people than in the Dakotas. They came of all races, and they spoke all tongues, but they all had certain things held in common, and one of them was faith.

There isn't much more of my great-grandfather's story. There was the store, and then the little bank, and then the newspaper. There was the house that started as one room and a kitchen and little by little became something it was a pleasure to live in, with flowers lining the walks and the grass rich and green in its season. Best of all, there were the times when he said to Martha, my great-grandmother, "Well, would you like to be back in Connecticut tonight?"

She laughed, for it was a familiar joke. "Connecticut's a fine place," she said, "but this will do for me."

It would take a real historian, a man with all the facts right at his finger-tips, to describe to you properly what happened

in the black year. My great-grandfather told me some of it, but part of what he said I have forgotten, and I don't think it was all clear in his own mind either. There was a great wind that year, greater than even the oldest settler could remember, and the wind picked up the ploughed soil as if it were so much fluff, and sometimes you couldn't see across the street or from house to barn for the soil blowing. Then there was a drought, and it too was worse than even the oldest settler could remember, and the crop perished. And back in the East, where the men with money were, there was trouble in the banks and exchanges and the West starved for credit and it had no cash.

That was the way it was, my great-grandfather told me. One day he sat down at his desk and added up his assets, and in another column he added up his debits, and in still another place he made a rough estimate of his prospects. The way the sum came out was as plain as the multiplication table. The country was broke, and he was broke along with almost everyone in it, and he was one of the lucky ones because he had a fine place to return to back in New England.

Well, it was a bitter walk home that evening. He went slowly, he told me, and every step of the way his mind thought overtime. It went round and round like a chipmunk on a spinning wheel, and it always stopped at the same place. Here he was, nearing his middle age, and he'd have to go crawling back to New England with everyone knowing he'd been both a fool and a failure. Being just one, my great-grandfather said, wasn't so bad, but being the two was certainly intolerable.

Now, you may be thinking that this night, when he was lower in mind and heart than he'd ever been before, another one of those strange men appeared and gave him the word that he needed. If you're thinking that, you're wrong. Someone talked to him, all right, but it wasn't a stranger and it wasn't a man. It was a woman, and she was as familiar and as close to him as his own hand.

She said, this woman did, with her voice soft and sure in the darkness, "We'll stay, George. We'll see it through one way or another. A bad crop and a black year and a panic in

the East are things you have to take in your stride. There'll be other times."

I don't know her exact words, but that was the gist of what she said. And suddenly, my great-grandfather told me, all the uncertainties went away, just as clouds pass after a storm, and the decisions were all made. There wasn't any more thought or talk of going back to New England.

I won't go into any detail about what happened to my great-grandfather after that. There were hard years and long years, but it all came out properly in the end. He never got as rich as he might have if he'd stayed in Connecticut, but he got as rich as he ever wanted to be. On top of that, he did what he knew he ought to be doing, and what man can ask more?

That brings me to the end of it, the point I've been running after. One time I asked my great-grandfather if he ever knew the names of the people who had come to him in the night when he needed them most. He looked at me, and he put his pipe down, and his white moustaches relaxed just a little. "Well," he said, "as a matter of fact, boy, I do. The last one—the woman—well, I guess you know who she was."

"Yes, sir," I said impatiently. She was my great-grandmother Martha, of course, and so there was nothing remarkable in that. I wanted to get on to the others, the strange men.

He looked past me, and his eyes were as brown as agate in the sun. "She had a lot in common with the rest of them," he said.

But here I was, all curiosity about the men, and he was keeping me waiting on tenterhooks while he talked about my great-grandmother!

"The men, now," he said slowly. "Yes, I know their names. You've probably heard some of them, and you'll hear the rest as you grow older and get along with your education. They were Jim Bridger and Davey Crockett. And La Salle—he was the Frenchman. And Meriwether Lewis—he was the first one who came. They had aliases, too—Daniel Boone and Kit Carson and John Frémont. They had so many other names I could never hope to remember them all, but that's who they were, boy."

I stood there looking at him with my mouth open, and then I said the only thing I could think of. I said, "Did you ever

happen to see them clearly, sir? Do you know what they looked like?"

My great-grandfather picked up his pipe and lighted it. He puffed along for a while, and he was looking right through me the way you look through a thin veil. Then, finally, he said, "As a matter of fact, boy, I kind of forget their features, but there's one thing I do remember that may strike you as interesting. They all looked alike, every last mother's son of them. Yes, sir, they looked as alike as peas in a pod, and that's the truth. Nobody could have told one from another."

Believe it or not, that was what my great-grandfather said. His eyes were as brown as agate, and he had his pipe going full blast, and his moustaches were raised up as if there were little springs hidden inside them. They all looked alike, my great-grandfather said, and he was known to everyone as a truthful man.

IT TAKES A TOUGH HOMBRE

By NOEL LOOMIS

Among the best writers in the Western field today is Noel Loomis, a onetime printer who is still so fast at linotype operation that he shuns typewriter and dictaphone and composes his novels and stories right on an old linotype machine. The famous Loomis novels to emerge from the machine include *Rim of the Caprock*, *The Buscadero* and *Johnny Concho* (the latter also a movie starring Frank Sinatra), and here is another top-level, authentic yarn from the same source.

WHEN BIG BLUE BUCKLEY was pushing steel through the mountains of Colorado Territory in the seventies, he had only one policy: "It takes guts to build a railroad." So when they wanted a man to lay track through Sonora in the Republic of Mexico in 1880, they said, "It takes Buckley to build a railroad."

They found him in a high mountain pass, driving spikes with his crew in ten-below-zero weather against a forty-mile blizzard from the northwest. They got him into his foreman's shack over a pot of hot coffee and told him, "If we can get three hundred miles of track from Guaymas, Mexico, to Nogales, Arizona, by the end of 1882, Porfirio Diaz will give us then a thousand dollars a mile. It's wild country and materials will be scarce. Think you can do it?"

Buckley looked straight through the tiny window at the snow streaming by outside. He could see a flatcar loaded with rails sitting on the length of track he had just spiked. The snow was filling up the spaces among the loaded rails.

He turned back to the officials. His pale blue eyes lighted up with the only kind of exultation he ever showed.

"I can build a railroad anywhere," he said. "With anything."

So they sent him down to Guaymas on the Golfo de Cortez, with the pick of his Kansas-toughened crews, to build a grade and spike rails through a desert infested with cactus, rattlesnakes, outlaws, and buzzards.

Big Blue didn't hesitate. Maybe he didn't know Sonora was outside of the United States. Maybe he didn't care.

He started asking for more help while the engineers were still hammering down a wharf on Ardilla Island out in the bay, and even before they started throwing a trestlework across a thousand feet of shallow water to the mainland.

Help was slow in coming. They told Buckley it was hard to get reliable men to go to Mexico. Buckley sent back a characteristic answer: "I didn't ask for reliable men. Just get me somebody who can handle a span of mules or is willing to learn. Get 'em out of the penitentiaries—anywhere. But get 'em fast."

He was already running grade toward Hermasillo, but it was too slow to suit him. He had a hundred Yaqui Indians on the picks and shovels, but the Yaquis were cousins of the Apaches; they were fighters by heritage and not laborers, and Big Blue found out he couldn't push them. When he bellowed at them, they stared back inscrutably and went on taking their time. Then one blistering hot day in October a windjammer sailed up the Gulf from a three-month journey around the Horn, and half a hundred men disembarked.

Big Blue was waiting for them at the railroad camp north of Guaymas. He was standing on top of the fresh grade. He was built like the trunk of an oak and his skin had the look of well-tanned leather. His eyes took in the men getting out of the wagons, and began to narrow. He strode back to meet them.

The first man was six-feet-one and lean but not thin; his sloping shoulders indicated strength. His dark face, much too sharply lined for a young man, indicated something Buckley didn't like.

"What's your name?" asked Buckley, stopping.

"Wade Gholson," said the tall man belligerently.

"Where you from?" Buckley seemed to be probing.

"East."

Buckley gave no sign. He looked over the others. "Are you all together?"

"All together," said Gholson. "All that's left of us. One man got his throat cut when we were off Brazil. Another fell overboard off Lima. There's only forty-five left." His black eyes watched Buckley.

Buckley ploughed down the loose side of the grade and stopped in front of Gholson. "Are you looking for work or for trouble?"

By that time the forty-four other newcomers were ranged alongside Gholson and back of him, but Buckley did not appear to notice. The Mexican Yaquis on the other side of the grade stopped work to watch.

Gholson said insolently, "I'm not afraid of trouble. I killed a man up in Maine with a spike-maul. That's one reason I left the States."

"What's the other reason?" asked Buckley.

Gholson's eyes became sharp like knife-points. "The other reason," he said, "is about my brother."

Buckley's pale eyes were boring into the man. "Who's your brother?"

"My brother was Vince Gholson," he said slowly. "You killed him with a spike-maul up in Indian Territory a couple of years back."

The hot desert air whistled in through Buckley's nostrils, and his chest swelled. He nodded as if to himself. "He looked like you," he said. "I knew there was something—" He recovered his alertness and looked at the men back of Gholson, at the men alongside. "You've had three months to tell these fellows all about it, haven't you?"

"I told them," said Gholson flatly. "And they're with me."

Buckley seemed to make up his mind suddenly. His face swelled and a blue tint swept over his mahogany skin as he moved.

Gholson must have known what was coming, but he didn't do something about it fast enough. Buckley's big fist flashed, and Gholson's head shot back with a crack of neck-bones. He

stumbled and fell. He got to his feet, swinging. Buckley went after him into the middle of the crowd. He hit Gholson again and Gholson fell again.

Gholson got up swaying, with murder in his eyes. He came forward drawing a knife.

Buckley's big fists exploded like dynamite on his jaw. Gholson went down. Then Big Blue jerked him to his feet by the collar of his lumberjack shirt. Buckley's fury was gone. "All I'm interested in," he said, "is can you skin a span of mules? Draw yourself a team of jugheads and see if this hundred-and-ten-degree sun will boil some of the trouble out of you."

Buckley didn't even take the man's knife. He spun him around and shoved him hard. Gholson's feet got tangled and he went down on his face in the alkali dirt. Buckley turned to the others. "There's work to do," he said. He waved a big arm and they scattered. Gholson was getting up. Buckley's back was toward him. Buckley climbed the grade and walked away.

He met a pair of mules pulling a dump-bucket and driven by a tough little Irishman wearing black work clothes that were grimed with white sweat-salt. The Irishman said out of the corner of his mouth, "You should of hit him harder. You only made him mad."

Big Blue Buckley snorted. "He can't drive mules if he's layin' up somewhere with a broken neck."

O'Connell muttered, "I've seen some tough gangs on the U.P., but this bunch off the boat is the cutthroatingest bunch I ever laid eyes on. They must have scoured all the toughest dives in China for 'em."

Buckley grinned at him. "Every last one of them is running from the law," he said. "You can see it in their faces. They took jobs to get out of the country. They figure they'll raise a lot of hell and I'll fire them, then nobody will go looking for them. But they're going to get a surprise," he said pleasantly. "They're going to learn how to build railroads. . . ."

Five hundred graders were working toward Hermosillo, ninety miles north of Guaymas. They grubbed out mesquite roots, they filled in cuts, scraped down rises, laid culverts, built up the grade and topped it with rock ballast.

The route was mostly over desert, but behind them, back

toward Guaymas, the powder-men were blasting a cut through the foothills of the western range of the Sierra Madres, and ahead of them, near Hermosillo, the engineers and steel-men were throwing a bridge over the Rio Sonora.

That first afternoon Wade Gholson sullenly followed a drag bucket behind a span of big Missouri mules. He had the reins over his shoulder. He tipped the bucket to scoop up a load of frosty-looking alkali dirt. He cracked his whip over the mules' backs, and followed them at a half-run as the bucket slid free. His feet sank ankle-deep in the loose dirt, and curtains of dust hung in the heat of the sun.

His mules came to the fill. He heaved on the big handle with both hands to dump the load. But he didn't run loose fast enough. He was thrown over the bucket onto the heels of the mules. He was kicked in the ribs but he rolled out of the way of the overturned bucket. When he got to his feet he glared maliciously at Buckley. He still had the whip in one hand, and he fingered it.

Buckley's eyes stayed flat and deadly. He knew what Gholson was thinking. The man wanted to wrap that blacksnake around his neck. But Buckley wasn't ready for a showdown. He had nipped off the first show of trouble; now he would let it grow a little under Gholson's leadership. Gholson had made an indirect threat about a spike-maul. Presently Buckley would give him a chance to prove up on it. . . .

The next three weeks went fast. Two hundred Mexicans, brown-skinned under big straw hats, worked leisurely but ceaselessly with pick and shovel to level the alkali hill, while the drivers dragged the loosened dirt away and filled it into a gully. Sun-parched men cursed the mules, lashed them with blacksnakes, tied red-figured handkerchiefs over their own noses, and followed the dump-buckets, while other crews beyond the gully were scraping and grading, and loggers were up in the hills cutting ties from the hard, dense wood of the fustic-tree.

Buckley strode up and down the grade, goading the Mexicans, swearing at the graders. His big body could be seen somewhere on the grade at any hour of the day.

In those three weeks he did not fight. Gholson and his crowd hung together. They became more sullen, more unco-

operative, but they avoided a break with him. That suited Buckley; he would give them an excuse to fight soon enough. One of them was killed by another over a card game in the middle of the night, but Buckley did not interfere, though O'Connell and the other veterans of the Union Pacific track crews looked at him questioningly.

"As long as they kill their own crowd," said Buckley indifferently, "it's none of my business."

Buckley seemed intent on one thing only: to push the grade to the Sonora River by the time the bridge-gang got through there. It was almost as though the grade were a physical extension of himself, and he would will it to be extended a certain number of miles every day.

He knew that Gholson would try to kill him. He could see it in the man's rebellious eyes, in the set of his jaw. He sensed it in the attitude of the forty or more men around the coffee-pot fire the night they were waiting for the supper call and he strode into the middle of the group and said, "Work tonight."

Nobody answered. Buckley looked at Gholson. Gholson took a deep breath, but he didn't get up; he leaned down and began to untie the rawhide laces of his shoe.

"From now on," said Buckley, "there'll be plenty of night work. That's why you're getting two and a quarter a day."

From the corner of his eye he saw Gholson hold up his shoe and drain the sand out of it. He left. Up at the cook-wagon, O'Connell was leaving with a plate of antelope steak and biscuits and a big tin cup of coffee. He said to Buckley, "Is that bunch going to work with us tonight?"

Buckley glared at him. "If I hadn't known you since 1867," he said, "I'd knock you over the cook-wagon."

But it was a real shock to him when O'Connell said, "You'd better save your strength."

O'Connell went on, found his spot in the sand, crossed his feet, and dropped back, holding his food far out to balance. Buckley took a big breath. So the Irish terriers were getting restless for a showdown. It had better come soon, then.

It came the next day. A message arrived from the engineer at Guaymas. Buckley read it and smiled with satisfaction. And that night he chose a moment when Gholson was at the cook-wagon getting his grub. Buckley stood with his back to the

wagon, legs apart like leaning tree-trunks, and bellowed, "I want eight spikers for tomorrow morning. We start laying track at Guaymas." He half turned. "O'Connell, you drove spikes on the K.P."

O'Connell, his mouth full, nodded. Buckley looked at Gholson. "I heard you can handle a spike-maul," Buckley said.

He saw the light rise in the man's dark eyes, and he knew that was what Gholson had been waiting for. Gholson nodded. "I'll drive with you," he said pointedly.

Buckley passed on. He asked for more, and counted off seven spikers and four helpers. Then he looked at Gholson and grinned, his sun-whitened lips forming a square. "I'll take a hand for a few days," he said. "I'm out of practice. . . ."

They worked until ten o'clock that night. Then the sun went down west of the opal-tinted hills. The daylight was gone suddenly. The Mexicans dropped their picks and shovels and began to walk back along the grade.

Buckley came striding after them. "You!" he yelled hoarsely. "You greasers! Where you going? Where's the mayor? Diego!"

A big, fat Mexican with an enormous straw hat and a dusty blanket over his shoulder walked out of the group. *"Si, señor,"* he said placatingly.

"Get your men back on the job!"

Diego temporized. "Meester Boss, the sun—she's gone. We no work no more today."

Buckley roared. "You're getting paid for it, aren't you?"

"We go home now to our *niños,"* Diego explained with an ingratiating show of white teeth. "We come back tomorrow morning—*mañana."*

Buckley exploded. *"Mañana,* hell! We've got a railroad to build. You grab that pick and start digging—now! *Pronto!"*

Diego turned back to his brown-skinned countrymen. They talked in high, excited Spanish, with many gesticulations. Then Diego turned back to Buckley. "We no work tonight," he explained patiently. "We go—"

Buckley hit him. They heard the smack of hard bone against the Mexican's face. Buckley hit him again and knocked the Mexican against the side of the grade. Then he yelled, "Get back to work, you sons-of-seacooks! *Andale!"*

They went slowly, muttering. Two of them helped Diego to his feet. A knife made a dull flash in the air and buried itself in Buckley's hat. Buckley caught the hat as it fell, plucked out the knife, and tossed it back across the grade.

He heard Gholson say plainly, "He can bat the Mexicans around easy enough. . . ."

Buckley looked at O'Connell and saw the same feeling expressed in O'Connell's face. Buckley sighed and began to stretch his great shoulders.

They were up the next morning before daylight. At four o'clock, thirteen of them got into a spring-wagon pulled by a span of mules. Buckley gave a last-minute order to his segundo: "Get that grade north!" He got a small bottle of mescal from the timekeeper's shack, and they set off for Guaymas.

It was afternoon when they pulled in. Buckley had killed the mescal and thrown away the bottle, while Gholson watched him with sardonic eyes.

In Guaymas a few scrawny chickens were picking up weed seeds, and small razor-backed pigs ran in between the adobe huts when the spring-wagon's wheels cut through the fetlock-deep dust. There was scurrying and muttered *"Gringos!"* as the wagon went through the town and down to the water.

The trestlework from the island was finished. It had no solid floor but was laid with ties and ready for rails. Buckley led the twelve men. They walked the ties to the island, where a windjammer was unloading rails with a steam winch.

A gang of Mexicans was at the dock, and Buckley organized them, five pairs of men to a rail. They set the first pair of rails on the ties, and Buckley lined them up. Two men went in and set the spikes. Then Buckley waved his big arm at the spike-maulers.

They nailed it down—all but Gholson, who was unpaired. He stood easily, leaning on the handle of the big steel-maul. Buckley had the Mexicans bring up the second pair of rails, while he stood at the far end and sighted down the steel and straightened it. Then he handed the width gauge to one of the helpers. "Keep 'em going," he said. "I'll spike."

He expanded his big chest and looked at Gholson. Gholson

looked back. Gholson's expression did not change. There was satisfaction in it. This was to his liking.

Buckley's pale blue eyes were flat and hard. He spat on his hands, hefted a spike-maul, and stepped into place. He faced forward and that left Gholson to face backward. They took alternate blows. Buckley swung fast, and Gholson had to watch to keep in time. Gholson was swinging right-handed. Buckley hardly changed his position over the rail. He swung right-handed on the outside and left-handed on the inside. He took the first swing and he didn't miss. It was always a good solid blow, and no spikes shot out from under the head of his heavy maul.

Steel went out on the trestle, and within an hour there was a flat-car on the rails alongside the ship. They piled rails on the flat-car and a dozen Mexicans rolled it out on the bridge to the spiking gang. They began to spike in earnest, for the flat-car was always just behind them and the Mexicans did not have to carry rails all the way from the ship.

The sweat began to pour out of Buckley and it seemed to loosen his muscles. It didn't sober him, for his voice was thick as he roared at the Mexicans, *"Andale! Andale!"* But the pace of his spiking did not ease; he swung, it seemed, ever harder and always faster.

Energies were drained by the blazing sun; empty stomachs were painful, but always there was the iron head of Buckley's maul, rising and falling, rising and falling, with the dull clank of maul-heads against iron spikes, and Buckley's hoarse *"Andale!"* which kept the Mexicans running forward, dropping rail after rail with crashes that shivered the trestle.

Gholson kept driving. He watched his aim. There was power in his long, solid blows, and satisfaction on his dark face as he watched Buckley's thick neck grow redder and redder.

By six o'clock they were three fourths of the way to the shore at Guaymas, and two Mexicans came from shore, picking their way across the ties, each carrying a big bucket in each hand. One of the Mexicans was the big-stomached Diego.

O'Connell and his spiking partner, at the end of the rail, laid down their mauls and went to meet the Mexicans. Gholson backed up two ties and finished driving the next spike with

Buckley. O'Connell was biting ravenously into a sandwich made of great slabs of heavy white bread and thick slices of burro meat.

Gholson started to lay down his maul, but a blast from Buckley froze him. "Where are you going?"

He looked up. Buckley was glaring at him. Gholson took a deep breath, and his face showed that he was ready. He straightened up slowly, still holding the handle of his spike-maul. The two Mexicans went past them. Gholson said, "I'm going to eat."

Buckley roared. "There's another spike to drive!"

Gholson spat out the words contemptuously, "Drive it!"

Buckley began to swell up. He said ominously, "Pick up that spike-maul and drive that spike or defend yourself."

Big Diego was standing just behind Buckley. Diego's white teeth were showing.

"Come on, tough guy!" Buckley roared. "What are you waiting on?"

Gholson recovered his spike-maul in one smooth motion that seemed to suck it up into his hands. He stepped forward onto the next tie and swung the heavy iron head in an arc that could have crushed Buckley's head.

Buckley stepped back heavily. He brought up his hammer and his face began to turn blue. He lashed out with the maul before Gholson had stopped his own.

Gholson sucked in his stomach as the iron maul-head whistled by. It grazed his belt-buckle. He stepped back, feeling with his foot for the tie behind him. Buckley roared and followed.

Gholson was off-balance for a moment. He dodged the next swing, but the maul caught him hard in the ribs. They cracked. He swung his maul back-handed and the handle caught Buckley across the forearm.

Buckley crowded him, stalked him along the ties, his face blue, his breath coming in stertorous grunts. The men on the spiking crew backed away with watchful eyes, saying nothing. Diego still stood back next to the flat-car watching.

The sweat squeezed out on Gholson's forehead. He swung the maul again and again, but it seemed to be getting heavy.

He put a solid blow on Buckley's thigh, but the man didn't even wince.

He stepped away and smashed Buckley's shoulder. Buckley grunted and his left arm fell limp, but he swung the maul with his big right arm as if it didn't make any difference. Gholson barely had time to meet the maul-head with his own. The steel clanged and the heads resounded sharply.

Buckley recovered first. His hand slid up the handle of the maul to shorten his grip. He swung at Gholson's neck. Gholson dodged back. Gholson tried to counter, but this time there was no strength in his blow. He was breathing harshly and unevenly.

Buckley's big arm was swinging the maul in an eight-foot circle. It whistled once around his head and went at Gholson's face. Gholson was moving back, Buckley after him. Gholson stepped on the handle of O'Connell's maul and stumbled. Buckley's maul went past his cheekbones.

Gholson was down on the ties.

He straightened with a surge of desperation and threw his maul at Buckley's face. Buckley ducked, and the maul went over his head, described a long arc, and splashed into the water. Buckley stood there, waiting for him to get up. His maul was cocked over his shoulder. He said, "Come on up, tough guy! If you're not whipped—you're sitting on a spike-maul."

Gholson took a deep breath. His sweaty face held a look of dazed surprise. He got up empty-handed. Buckley glared at him and slowly Buckley's face turned mahogany again. He said more quietly, "You find what you were looking for when you came out here?"

Gholson stood there on the ties and looked at Big Blue. Gholson's words came with difficulty, from hot and laboring lungs. "I'll drive that other spike," he said.

Buckley's pale blue eyes showed nothing. His face was expressionless. He waited, watching, as Gholson picked up O'Connell's maul. They drove the spike. Buckley watched Gholson as the man laid down the maul. Then Buckley said, "If you want to know about your brother, I'll tell you. Or ask O'Connell or anybody who saw it."

Gholson stood up straight for a second. His face was white

from exhaustion. He said, "I reckon Vince asked for it. That was a habit of his." Gholson's eyes were inscrutable as he added, "I reckon you gave him the same chance you gave me."

He turned and went slowly toward the buckets of food, while Diego, standing behind Buckley, grinned and showed his white teeth.

"It take a veree tough hombre," he remarked, "to build a railroad."

PAYROLL OF THE DEAD

By STEVE FRAZEE

Steve Frazee recently broke a record of some kind by writing three Western novels simultaneously, finishing them simultaneously, delivering them to his agent simultaneously and having all three sold to major publishers within a few days—and there is now a persistent rumor that he may abandon short stories and novelettes entirely and concentrate on book-lengths hereafter. This will be bad news, if true, to the editor of this anthology, who considers Frazee the "making" of any collection and has used a Frazee in every book in this series. But it's good news, of course, to just about every reader of Westerns in the world, to whom the only thing better than a short Frazee story is a *long* Frazee story. Here's a medium-size Frazee, and one of his best. . . .

WHEN JIM BENNINGTON knew for sure that the second Sioux was staying with him on the left bank of the river, he paddled his soggy boat closer to the heavy current on his right. The Yellowstone was running tawny from rains deep in the mountains. The surface of it was making a seething sound, and Bennington could feel the tremendous power of the river shuddering through his boat.

He was a poor swimmer.

The boat was made of singed buffalo hides lashed to a framework of wild cherry wood. He had started to pattern it along canoe lines and, more by accident than design, the boat had wound up tapered at both ends like the splinter of an angry cougar's eye. It rode low in the water but it rode well

—when it was not six inches awash inside, as it was now from leakage of the pitch-daubed seams.

Three miles upstream Bennington had thought to stop and remelt his supply of pitch for a fresh caulking job. He was swinging toward shore when the over-eager Sioux, painted black and red for the glory trail, rose in the willows and fired an arrow so close to Bennington's head that the feathered end whisked his neck in passing.

The Sioux had nocked a second arrow and the string was almost at his ear when Bennington caught him belly-deep with a rifle shot. The Indian's glory trail ended as he crumpled forward from the bank into the river. The boat spun with the current and was floating backward when the second warrior came leaping through the rust-brown willows. Bennington drove him flat with two shots, but he knew that the rocking and pitching of the boat had made him miss.

The second warrior's rifle shot ripped the apron of elk skin around the cockpit of the boat. By then the current was spinning Bennington. He had to drop his rifle between his knees and grab the paddle as the boat crashed sidewise into the curling wildness of fast water.

When he got straightened out Bennington looked back and saw the Sioux dragging his companion up the bank. Great store these Dakotas set by the bodies of their dead. Bennington hoped that the survivor had his belly full for one day; it depended on his mettle as an individual.

All the way from Sarsi country, bad cess to it, small groups of Sioux had kept Bennington jumping. For some reason the high plains were unduly astir. Bennington had hoped to save both work and trouble by sticking to the river.

Now he had a fair share of both. The mettle of the Sioux was tough; he kept coming. And the boat was getting so heavy that Bennington knew he would have to go ashore soon or sink. Leaping water swept him through a cut between bare hills. He saw the gray horse falling behind as it had to work its way across deep gullies.

Riding almost in the middle of the river, Bennington scanned the east bank for a good landing place. He did not like the looks of the wild water he would have to cross, but the thing

to do was to put the river between him and the persistent Indian.

He started to turn across the stream. A sudden rush of water came up around his thighs, above the lashed crosspieces of the seat. A seam had popped and there was no time to make it over to the right bank. With a landsman's distrust of water he had held himself ready to unload at any time: his cartridge bag and other items he could not afford to lose were around his neck on rawhide thongs and his Remington was between his knees.

The kayak still held together. He decided to make the west bank if he could, the near side, where a gravel bar of the color that gave the river its name came out like a long tongue.

There was a wide streak of bad water between him and the slow swirling pool against the bar, but that did not worry him as much as the position of the Sioux.

The bow of the boat came around stubbornly as he dug his paddle deep and leaned on it. He was taking water fast, and it gave him a moment of panic. The bow came around. He began to paddle with all his might. Once across that churning leap of white water, he could jump out and drag the boat ashore.

He saw the rock too late. The boat went into it sidewise and began to tip upstream. Bennington grabbed his rifle and kicked free an instant before the terrible weight of the Yellowstone filled the boat, snapped the cherry wood longerons and the lashed frames and wrapped the boat like a wet hide around the rock.

Bennington went under when he struck the water. The current twisted him in a helpless sprawl. He hit himself in the chest with the butt plate of the rifle as he flailed his arms in a wild swimming motion. He came up. His legs struck a submerged rock and the tawny waters knocked him under again.

Still clinging hard to the rifle, he dog-paddled with both hands. It was partly the swing of the current and partly his own effort that carried him out of the heavy surge of water into the quiet rim of the pool beside the gravel bar.

His feet struck bottom. He took two stumbling steps toward shore, gasping from the cold and the shock. The pool

was cutting a hard, chill line just at the V of his buckskin shirt.

The Sioux stepped to the edge of the gravel with his gun half raised. Bennington recognized it as an old English trade musket. The Sioux's round, hard eyes were both wide open as the rifle came against his shoulder. They did not change, but his lips went tight, and the start of that was warning Bennington acted on.

He ducked deep into the water. He could not hear. He had no way at all to judge the success of his timing, and so he had to come up almost instantly, either to meet the smash of a ball into his face, or to know that he had a little longer to live.

The warrior was just lowering the musket. A bloom of smoke was drifting away from the muzzle. Bennington brought his own rifle clear of the water. He allowed bare time for the water to run from the barrel before he pulled the trigger.

The hammer snapped and that was all.

He tried again. The second water-ruined cartridge was a brother to the first.

The Sioux, Uncpapa he was, dark and happy now, tossed his rifle aside and put an arrow to his bow. He made a motion of drawing it. He grinned when he saw how Bennington tensed himself to duck. Underwater Bennington had shifted his rifle to his left hand. His knife was in his right.

He said, "Come out and fight me here." If he could get closer he would throw the knife. He stepped ahead and felt the gravel bottom sloping sharply inshore. One more step and he would be floundering over his head.

The Uncpapa answered with grim humor. "I am not a beaver, White Rain, who loves the Crows."

Bennington thought, He knows who I am and he knows that I was camping with Stunned Elk's horse stealers. Neither of the thoughts was helpful. The small party of raiding Crows with whom he had camped a few days while building the boat had thought him crazy. They had sat in the shade shaking their heads as he lashed the framework of the boat together.

Two days before it was finished they had gone down the Yellowstone on their ponies. Their opinion of Bennington must be right. No doubt they were alive and dry and healthy;

he was up to his neck, fifteen feet out in the water, facing a war-smeared Sioux who didn't give a damn about counting coup on a live white man.

Bennington again invited the warrior to join him. It was only talk, and they both knew it. The Uncpapa's stone-solid eyes glinted as Bennington edged downstream and started to go under when he struck another sloped-off place. Bennington lurched as he regained his balance. He was trapped. The Sioux was well aware of it, or Bennington would have been dead before this.

Strong and seething the river ran at Bennington's back. He could feel it holding his buckskins tight against his body. He could twist sidewise and dive for the heavy current, let his rifle go, and try to swim out of arrow range. It was only a flashing thought; he was not that kind of swimmer. Before he was across the white water that had wrecked his boat, the Sioux would decorate him with arrows like one of the floating buffalo carcasses that Ree boys used for target practice on the Missouri.

Without raising his bow to full position the warrior sliced an arrow close to Bennington. He grinned with broad humor as the white man ducked. It never paid to curse a mortal foe in combat. You taunted him, insulted him, but you did not curse him. Bennington could not help it; he was too scared. He cursed the Sioux in English.

He brought his knife up toward his chest. It would not be an easy throw because the water would impede his arm during the final quick jerk and cast.

"White Rain who loves the Crows." The Sioux chugged another arrow close to Bennington and then at once laid another shaft on the twisted string. The first two had been flint-headed. This third was a steel point, well serrated, faintly shining with bear fat.

The Indian had enough of sport. It never lasted too long with any of them. The arrow lay flat across the bow while the warrior told Bennington that he, a white man, had killed High Wound upstream. Now White Rain, who loved Crows, was going where all the soldiers had gone.

Bennington threw the knife. He made the cast half blinded by the explosion of water from the sudden surfacing of his

arm. It might have been a good throw but the Sioux leaped aside with smooth, instinctive coordination of mind and coppery muscle.

He was done with humor now. He raised the bow and his lips began to tighten. Bennington saw the scars of the Dance on his broad chest muscles as the bow ends bent back.

Bennington drove sidewise into the current. He went under and felt the sudden rip of the wild, cold power against him. He came up in spite of himself. He heard the rifle shot as the current shot him downstream. He tried to look back and the white waves slapped across his face, blinding him, strangling him when he gasped for air.

In spite of his efforts to dog-paddle across the current, the river dragged him with it. He shot another desperate look across his shoulder and this time, before the leaping water whacked the vision from his eyes, he saw a white man striding from the willows with a smoking rifle. The Sioux was down.

He heard another shot as he paddled high, like a swimming hog, splashing toward the tip of the gravel bar.

Otis Dameyer made a fine figure of a man as he stood on the bank watching Bennington diving to recover his rifle. Dameyer was all the way from St. Louis on some kind of Army business that he had hinted at before he shut up, as if he did not trust Bennington.

Up from his third dive, Bennington rested, as well as a man could rest neck-deep in water with the cold soaked all the way into his marrow bones. Dameyer looked like an officer, all right, about a captain, Bennington judged.

He was big-framed and lean, with a cavalryman's flat-muscled legs. His eyes were a bold, staring blue. His hair was dark bronze. It appeared that he had trimmed lately with scissors the curling tightness of his short beard. He had a wide mouth with full lips, the kind that can go from ready humor to cruelty in an instant.

"You might have dropped it out in the current, Bennington," Dameyer said. "Try farther out."

He talked like an officer too, Bennington thought. Nobody was going to recover a rifle out in that current, but it was

not there; it must be closer inshore, somewhere in the deep pool just beyond the strip of high bottom.

Three dives later Bennington found it. He came up sputtering and cold-weary and splashed toward shore. Dameyer was dragging the dead Sioux toward the water.

"Leave him there!" Bennington reached the shore and staggered up. The sun instantly made him feel ten degrees warmer.

"Why?" Dameyer asked.

"It won't hide anything to dump him in the river. The Uncpapas will know we got him anyway." Give any dead Sioux a right to be borne away and scaffolded by his friends. Pushing the water from his shaggy black hair, Bennington watched Dameyer's face and knew instinctively that the man would not understand.

"How do you know he's an Uncpapa?"

That would be hard to explain to Dameyer too, so Bennington said, "I know," and let it go at that.

Bennington looked at the Sioux. That second shot had come from Dameyer's pistol, a wasted shot; and then Dameyer had started to throw the warrior into the river.

In the willows the big gray horse came forward to meet Bennington. The saddle was Sioux and so were the nose hitch and war rope. The brand on the hip was a big U.S. Bennington removed the saddle. Along the back and barrel of the horse the marks of a McClellan saddle were still worn into the hair. He raised the mount's feet one by one. They were still well shod.

"One of our horses, of course," Dameyer said. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if they got him when they butchered the paymaster's guard a few weeks ago near Bismarck. You heard about that?"

"No." Bennington put the saddle back on the horse.

"How long have you been out?"

"Over a year."

"I see." Dameyer smiled. "Then you wouldn't hear much about Army news, of course."

"Not a word." A poor year, unless you figured experience worth something. Bennington had been close enough to the Pacific to trade for a pack of sea otter skins that would have

put St. Louis buyers on edge. The Blackfeet had the furs now.

He led the horse from the willows. Out in the white water the rock was clean again. His rag of a boat had torn loose and floated away.

"Over a year, eh?" Dameyer said pleasantly. He lit a cigar. It was so out of place that Bennington stared at it resentfully. "You've really lost track of civilization."

"I'll catch up when I hit Fort Lincoln."

"Former Army man?"

"Yes."

"Confederate cavalry, no doubt?"

Bennington looked at the teeth of the gray. Six years old, he guessed. "So my accent still sticks a little, huh?"

"Quite a little. Louisiana or Mississippi?"

"I was a private in the Iron Brigade, the Second Wisconsin." The First Brigade of the First Division of the First Corps. Why was it every damned fool he met had to assume he had been in the Southern army just because he was a Southerner?

"No offense, Bennington." Dameyer was persistent. "You still act cavalry to me. After the war?"

"I was in the Seventh, yes."

"Fine regiment." Dameyer was relishing his cigar. "They were camped on the Heart River when I came out. I stopped with them overnight. I knew Colonel Benteen during the war." He found another cigar and gave it to Bennington. It was not manners; it was more like a bribe.

After the weird Indian mixtures Bennington had been smoking, the cigar tasted good. The gray horse pleased him; unlike the boat, it was transportation that would not go sidewise the instant he quit steering it.

"How did you like it?" Dameyer asked.

"Like what?"

"Service with the Seventh."

How indeed? Bennington had ridden since he was five. That part of it was fine, but that was very little of his service. Most of it was boredom, waiting, regulations that galled after the easy discipline and hard fighting unity of the Iron Brigade. For being drunk one night below New Fort Hays Bennington had been put in the guardhouse pit on orders of Colonel Custer.

Bennington remembered the pit, a hole in the ground, banked over with poles and dirt. He had spent five days there. That was part of service with the Seventh Cavalry too.

He answered Dameyer's question. "It was all right, if you like the cavalry."

"It so happens that I do." Dameyer studied Bennington from bold, blue eyes. "It's about mess time. Let's eat and talk something over."

Bennington was cleaning and drying his rifle when Dameyer brought two horses from the willows downstream. The way the packhorse was laden, it looked as if Dameyer intended to go all the way to the Columbia without shooting game. Twenty feet from the dead Sioux the two men cooked and ate.

"I'll stand obliged for some hardtack and bacon," Bennington said, "enough to take me down to Lincoln on the gray."

"You're not taking the gray. It's government property. You're not going down to Fort Lincoln anyway, Bennington." Dameyer was rock-tough one instant, and the next moment he smiled as if apologizing for his harshness. "I think you'll change your mind when you hear what I have to say."

The Army never changed wherever you encountered it. Bennington watched Dameyer recover his cigar from a log where he had placed it while eating. The end was chewed into a long, twisted mess. Dameyer cut it off with a hunting knife and relit the stogie.

"There was about twenty-five thousand dollars in the payroll wagon old Sitting Bull got a few weeks ago. At least it was some of Bull's warriors, we're sure. They may have thrown the money away by now. Again, maybe not. My job is to find out and to recover any part of it that's left."

"Some job," Bennington said.

Dameyer watched him coldly. "The Army thinks it's worth a try. The Sioux have no use for money, probably don't know the meaning of it. They killed the paymaster's guard and looted the wagon in hopes of finding arms, perhaps. At any rate, we know they carried off the money."

"Near Bismarck?"

Dameyer nodded.

"It's scattered from there to the head of the Missouri."

Bennington looked out at the river. He was anxious to be on his way.

"I'm ordered to go right to Sitting Bull himself to see what can be done."

"That was an easy order for somebody to give. Do you know where he is?"

"We heard the White Rain Mountains," Dameyer said. "I'll be frank with you. I had an Army scout with me until I told him what the orders were. He turned around and rode back." There was shrewd opaqueness in the round blue eyes. "It wasn't all chance that brought me here in time to save your hide, Bennington. I've been watching for you for two days."

It sounded like a lie to Bennington. "How so?"

"Two days ago I met the Sioux you were camped with when you were building your boat. Old Stunned Elk could talk a little English and I can work my hands fairly well. He told me you'd be coming down the Yellowstone anytime, if you lived to make it." Dameyer smiled. "You barely did."

If you were any good, you did not keep reminding a man that you had saved his life. Possibly Dameyer did not know any better. He certainly was ignorant in other things, almost unbelievably so. Stunned Elk's bunch were Crows. Dameyer had called them Sioux.

The Army certainly had chosen a green apple for an impossible task. Bennington looked Dameyer over carefully, as if he had not seen him right the first time. The man had a tough, sure cast to him, without doubt. That he had come this far alone proved that he was determined to carry out his orders, even if he did not know a Crow from a Sioux.

Army stubbornness was fine, but it also could get you killed in a hurry.

Bennington said, "Did you reload that rifle after you shot?"

Surprised at the sudden veering, Dameyer stared at Bennington, and then he colored slightly. "I didn't, for a fact." Then he defended himself. "I still had the Colt."

"Sure," Bennington picked up the war rope of the gray. "Sitting Bull may be in the White Rain Mountains, or on the Rosebud, or clear up on the Marias." He shook his head. "How about the hardtack and bacon, Lieutenant?" Dameyer was no lieutenant and Bennington was sure of it.

"Captain Dameyer," the man said gently, automatically. He watched Bennington's hand on the war rope.

He had not been a captain very long or he would not be so conscious of the rank, Bennington thought. Just how far was he going with that bluff about not letting Bennington have the gray?

"That's government property, mister. I'll need that horse." Dameyer did not reach toward his pistol. His voice did not rise. "The supplies I can spare you, but not the gray." He was cold-blooded and well poised; he was not bluffing.

Bennington could make a fight of it and take the horse. It would be a bad fight too. He might have to hurt Dameyer. He kept looking at the officer and knew it would be worse than that: he would have to kill Dameyer to get the gray. After all, the man was going in and Bennington was going out. It did not make sense to fight a fellow white man, and an Army captain in the bargain, over a government horse.

Bennington thought it over. When he was sure that he was not backing down, he dropped the war rope.

Dameyer showed no expression of triumph. "You've been out a year. Why not another week or two?"

"It's a crazy job. You're wasting time, Dameyer."

"Couldn't you find Sitting Bull's Oglalas?"

Uncpapas, damn it. "Sure, I could find Sitting Bull." Be taken to him, rather. You never *found* a particular Indian in this forbidding country.

"Well then?" Dameyer said.

It was all very simple to him. He was an Army officer acting on orders. Orders were all right when someone with sense gave them. Dameyer would go blundering on and get himself killed.

"I know that you can do it," Dameyer said. "Stunned Elk told me that you were one of the best—"

"Yeah, sure, me and Charley Reynolds and Yellowstone Kelly. No thanks, Dameyer."

"That's odd. Lonesome Charley Reynolds was the scout who turned back on me."

"He was smart."

Dameyer shrugged. "Take the gray, Bennington. I'll get along." He walked over to his packhorse.

The order-dedicated, Indian-ignorant idiot was going through with it. Maybe he was a fool but you had to hand it to him for having guts and determination.

And he hadn't tried to prod Bennington with any hints about being paid as a scout. Bennington looked at the captain's rifle leaning against a log, still unloaded. Wasn't that something? Yet, except for that rifle, Bennington would be lying dead somewhere along the gravel bar, with his legs in the water, with a round area gleaming on his skull.

Dameyer was digging into his pack.

"Never mind," Bennington said. He got on the gray and started upriver.

Captain Dameyer came along behind him without a word. Dameyer showed no triumph. He acted as if he had known from the first that Bennington would go along with him. With brass and confidence like that the man would be a brigadier before his hair was gray.

The Sioux that Bennington had plumped through the stomach was not dead. He lay where his companion had dragged him, and his horse, a mean looking blue pony, was still close to him.

"Well, by God!" Dameyer said, when he saw the Sioux's eyelids flicker over the gray haze that was beginning to deaden the dark brown of his eyes. He drew his pistol.

"Put that away." Bennington got down and knelt beside the dying Sioux. The glazing eyes cleared for an instant as hatred swept the cloud away. "Sitting Bull. Where is he?" Bennington asked in Sioux.

The Indian's eyelids flickered. He got his hand on his knife, and there was still a little strength in him as he struggled to keep Bennington from taking it out of his hand. When his wrist failed, the Sioux tried to bend his head down to bite Bennington's wrist.

"No use, Dameyer." Bennington stood up.

Dameyer still had his pistol in his hand. He shot the Indian in the chest, and the warrior gave a small, convulsive jerk.

Bennington swung around angrily.

Dameyer said, "He could have crawled away and got well. Look what happened when they shot Gall and bayoneted him and left him for dead—"

"You'll listen to me from now on, or I'll take that pony and you can go it alone."

Dameyer began to reload his pistol. "You're the scout. I'll listen."

Bennington led the pony close to the Sioux. As a gesture of respect to the warrior, he wished to kill it, but he didn't like the idea of another unnecessary shot. He tied the pony to the willows. Other Sioux would be here before long; the land was swarming with them.

Until dusk Bennington set a fast pace. They were between the Rosebud and the mouth of the Big Horn River. Just before dark they crossed the Yellowstone, went over two long ranges of dry hills and camped at Red Springs. Bennington was uneasy then; they had not seen an Indian all afternoon, or any fresh sign.

Dameyer wanted a fire. Bennington said no, and there was no fire. In the dark, making a long tour around the camp, he almost stepped on a rattlesnake that sent its dry warning as Bennington leaped sidewise in the deep grass. The incident shook him out of all proportion to its importance.

Dameyer was in his blankets when Bennington went back to camp. Dameyer was not worrying about anything. He yawned and said, "All quiet, huh?"

"Quiet enough for us to lose our horses. I'll stand the first four hours to midnight."

"Fair enough."

"Where did Lonesome Charley turn back?"

"About twenty miles out of Lincoln. Why?"

"Was he all right? He wasn't sick, was he?"

"No," Dameyer said. "He told me it was a fool's mission."

It was too. "Who assigned him to you?"

"Colonel Custer, of course." Dameyer yawned again.

Charley Reynolds was not the kind to turn back for anything less than extraordinary reasons; but maybe he had thought Captain Dameyer was reason enough. No Army scout was forced to take idiotic orders like a soldier. Still, it worried Bennington.

It did not worry Dameyer at all. He went to sleep in five minutes, snoring like a fat hound. Bennington kept thumping him with the toe of his moccasin, making him turn over. Be-

tween going out to the horses and trotting back to keep Dameyer's snores from being heard by every restless Sioux in Montana Territory, Bennington spent a bad four hours.

He did not trust Dameyer after the first watch was over. For a while Bennington lay unsleeping in his blankets. But Dameyer stayed alert. He went out to the horses. He moved around without too much noise. Bennington went to sleep. Four hours a night was about all either of them would get from now on.

At four in the morning Dameyer was ready to go on. Whatever else he lacked, he had toughness and an eagerness to do his job.

They quartered away from the rising sun, riding the long, rolling hills. It was a big and lonely land they crossed, and sometimes for weeks it seemed to be uninhabited. Bennington had seen it that way at times, but he had never accepted a clump of trees, a thicket, the willows beside a stream or any other cover at face value.

"Who said Sitting Bull was in the White Rains?"

"Scouts. Bloody Knife and some of the others Custer seems to trust so much."

It did not matter. The White Rains were as good a place as any to head for. They would find Sitting Bull when they ran into Sioux who were disposed to, or who could be persuaded to, take white men to him. Some of it depended on the fact not being known that the two of them had killed High Wound and the other Uncpapa.

In the afternoon they were fifteen miles from the Yellowstone, going southwest toward Tullock Forks. Bennington held it unlikely that they would reach the Little Big Horn without running headlong into Sioux.

He kept wondering about the marks of wood cutting he had seen late yesterday afternoon. While they were still on the west bank of the river he had looked across the swift water and had seen where trees had been chopped on the east bank, even cottonwoods that burned poorly in steamboat fireboxes. Dameyer had been ducking branches and hustling the packhorse along. Bennington doubted that he had observed the marks across the river.

"How long were you at Fort Lincoln?" Bennington asked.

"Several days."

"Did any steamers go up the Missouri?"

"I heard that the *Far West* left from Fort Buford sometime last month on Army business."

"To the Yellowstone?"

"*Up* the Yellowstone, they said."

The *Far West* was nearly two hundred feet long. It could be handled on the Yellowstone, Bennington guessed, but it would be a mean and dangerous task. He asked, "Where was it headed?"

"I haven't the least idea," Dameyer said. "I'm only a dumb captain."

"What outfit?"

"The Sixth Engineers."

Engineers! Bennington said it under his breath like a curse. They could corduroy a road through a swamp or maybe get some sort of boat bridge across a river, but what did they know about Indians?

If Captain Dameyer observed Bennington's disgusted reaction, he gave no sign of it. Dameyer rode along in obvious enjoyment of the country, relaxed and easy, smoking a cigar. He acted as if the sight of a hundred Indians rocketing down suddenly from the next bare ridge would not even give him a start.

I'll find out about that pose before this is over, Bennington thought.

He found out soon.

There were about twenty-five in the bunch. Dameyer and Bennington came upon them unexpectedly, if you could call a quarter of a mile of distance coming-upon. It was close enough. There were men, women and children in the bunch. Immediately there was a furious stirring of movement.

The women and kids went at a run up a ridge. Bennington saw a child fall from a travois. An old squaw with her gray hair streaming dropped off a calico pony and scooped up the child, running with him.

Bennington saw a headdress blossom suddenly on one of the warriors milling between him and the fleeing squaws. Two of the bucks cut off at a high lope to gain the top of a knobby hill. The others seemed to be racing aimlessly, kicking dust in all directions.

It was a heap of activity for the size of the alarm: two white men sitting their horses quietly on a ridge. Bennington made the peace signal. He said, "Just sit, Dameyer. They're coming."

"Good!"

Bennington shot the captain a quick glance. The man was not scared. Maybe he didn't have sense enough to be scared. Bennington watched the signals of the two warriors who had gained the knobby hill to see what kind of support lay behind the white men. They sent the truth down to the others. The others let out long, quavering cries and came on in a rush.

"What kind of Sioux?" Dameyer asked. He might have been asking for information to put in a report, for all the emotion he showed.

"Don't know," Bennington answered. He swallowed slowly. He and Dameyer had excited the band far too much for normal circumstances. He saw the feathers in the tails of the ponies as the Indians came charging.

"Sit quiet," he said, "don't get excited."

Dameyer's voice held an amused tone, "Take some of that medicine yourself, White Rain."

The Indians split their charge, winging out on both sides of the motionless white men. In the center the chief with the headdress shouted, "Hi-yi-yi!" in a drawn-out, trembling call that carried far across the hot, dry hills.

"Musical bugger," Dameyer said, and Bennington wished he would keep his mouth shut.

Bennington looked from side to side. The flankers were obeying; they were watching their chief. For the moment at least everything depended on the man with the headdress.

The chief slowed his pony from its flashing run. He shifted his rifle and raised his arm, and then he dropped down to a walk and came up the hill toward the white men.

They were Cheyennes, Bennington saw then. The chief was Blue Buffalo. Three years before Bennington had seen him in the camp of the Oglalas, with whom the Cheyennes were strong brothers. Bennington dropped his hand and made the signs, and said, "I am glad to see Blue Buffalo once more."

For just an instant his use of the chief's name raised little sparks of surprise in the Cheyenne's eyes. The warriors crowd-

ed in, dark with suspicion and hatred. Magnificent physical specimens they were, the tallest and most clean cut of all plains tribes.

One of them reached out to snatch Dameyer's rifle. Without moving the weapon, Dameyer shook his head, smiling. His eyes were like round rocks and there was no fear in him. The warrior wheeled his pony back. His companions laughed. The warrior raised a Springfield carbine.

Blue Buffalo said harshly, "We have seen too much blood."

The warrior lowered the carbine and rode to the outer edge of the group. Across the hills the squaws had stopped and were looking back, with the dust of their flight settling around them.

"We are in peace," Bennington said. "We would speak with Tatanka. We have heard he is in the White Rain Mountains."

Blue Buffalo was willing to parley, but he did not get down to go through the usual ceremonies. Urgency was in him. It might be, too, Bennington thought, that guilt was riding him. At least he was not at ease. His eyes moved with a sharp kind of worry as he followed Bennington's casual glances at certain equipment of the warriors: five or six Springfield carbines, shot boxes of Army issue, a sergeant's chevrons on a patch of torn blue cloth tied in the tail of one of the ponies.

"Tatanka is gone," the chief said.

"Where has he gone?"

Blue Buffalo pointed. "Down the Rosebud, beyond the Yellowstone. Far away."

Another warrior slammed his pony in close to Dameyer. He held a knife before the captain's face. With that and the dark stare of glittering eyes he tried to strike terror into Dameyer.

Dameyer grinned pleasantly. "Put that away, bucko, or I'll drop your guts in your lap with it."

The warrior did not understand the words but he understood the fearlessness of the captain. Blue Buffalo grunted angrily and waved the buck aside. Blue Buffalo said to Bennington, "You are scouts for Man Without Hip?"

For General Terry. Bennington shook his head.

"For White Whiskers?"

General Gibbon. Bennington shook his head. "Alone we seek Tatanka to speak with him."

Once more Blue Buffalo pointed north and east toward the Rosebud. He started to turn away.

One of the Cheyennes said angrily, pointing at Bennington, "He rides the horse of Stab Bear!"

"Before that it was the horse of the Great White Father," Bennington said, "and now it is his again." He gave the Cheyenne a hard stare. It was a bad moment. There were no rules to judge Indian behavior. The Cheyennes could catch fire and rub him and Dameyer out in moments. Bennington slid his hand back and rested his thumb on the hammer of his rifle.

Blue Buffalo put his pony around again. Fury glittered in his look as he watched Bennington, and then the heat began to die. He became sullen, discouraged, almost afraid. He waved for his warriors to follow him.

They did not have to obey him. They put their savage hatred against Dameyer and Bennington. A small, quick move, a tiny crack of fear in the white men and the thing would have exploded. Lacking provocation one of the warriors might have boiled over anyway.

Dameyer threw contempt like words from his odd blue eyes. Bennington sat quietly with his hand on the rifle, with his face grave and steady, with all his fear jammed down where it did not show.

"There has been too much blood," Blue Buffalo said.

The Cheyennes listened to their chief. As they rode away one of them smashed in close to the white men and lashed the packhorse so that it jumped and tried to break loose. The warrior who had turned back from grabbing Dameyer's rifle swerved his pony and struck the captain across the shoulder with a string of scalps.

Dameyer smiled faintly. "The next Sioux I shoot in the guts won't get a mercy shot."

It was not worth saying that the band was Cheyenne, not Sioux. For a man who knew little about Indians, Dameyer had stood up to their bullying tactics like a veteran. Maybe it was not so important to know one tribe from another. Maybe the Army was smart, after all, when it sent Dameyer.

But Bennington was not obliged to like him; a man without fear was inhuman.

"What did they say about Sitting Bull?" the captain asked.

"We're going the wrong way."

"Maybe they lied."

"Maybe they did." Bennington turned the gray and started across the hills toward the Rosebud.

Dameyer followed him. "They'd been in a scrap against our cavalry, did you notice?"

Bennington grunted. How could he have missed noticing? Springfield carbines, odds and ends of cavalry equipment; but there had not been an Army horse in the bunch. Blue Buffalo was headed toward one of the reservations. Before he reached there, the carbines and other Army gear would be well concealed.

Beyond doubt, the chief had been ill at ease, with guilt underriding his repeated statement about too much blood already, but whatever kind of skirmish the Cut Arms had been in, they must have won, or else they would have been twice as hostile.

Over his shoulder Bennington watched the Cheyennes riding across the brown hills. Suddenly he asked, "Did the Sioux burn that payroll wagon?"

"No. What made you ask that?"

"I'll bet they burned it. There went the money, Dameyer. We're risking our hair over nothing."

"They *took* the money, be sure of that. All we have to do is find out how much of it they hung onto." Dameyer squinted at the distance ahead. "How far to the Yellowstone?"

"We ain't even to the Rosebud yet." For some reason Bennington wanted to quarrel with Dameyer. He could not name the quality in the man's character that irritated him. It was not entirely Dameyer's bold, almost insolent, disregard of danger, nor his flashes of arrogance. Mainly he was a pleasant man.

It must be, Bennington decided, a coldness in him that was difficult to describe and not always easily apparent.

Bennington remembered something that had flashed in and out of his mind while they were waiting for the Cheyennes to come up. "Where'd you get my name—White Rain?" He used the Sioux words.

"From Stunned Elk's bunch."

"Tell me something about Stunned Elk's braids, Dameyer."

"One of them was turning gray. The other was still mostly black." Dameyer chuckled. "It gave him a lop-sided look."

That was Stunned Elk, sure enough, but the Crows had their own name for Bennington. *Cha,* Wolf Hair. "You didn't get my name from Stunned Elk, Dameyer."

Dameyer gave the impression of shrugging. "Where are we likely to run into Sioux again?"

"Anywhere," Bennington answered curtly. The Uncpapa Dameyer had killed by the river had called Bennington by name, at least twice, but Dameyer was not supposed to understand Sioux.

Bennington tested that supposition. "You heard Stab Bear use my name, Dameyer."

"Stab Bear?"

"The Uncpapa you killed."

"Stab Bear, White Rain," Dameyer chuckled. He found two cigars and tossed one across to Bennington. "Sure, I heard him. I understand enough Dakota to catch a few words now and then. It's like letting people think you're stone deaf. You hear a lot that you wouldn't catch otherwise."

"If you were that near you sure shaved things close before you shot him."

"Didn't I?" Dameyer met Bennington's angry stare with good humor. "It was a funny sight, you'll have to allow. You up to your ears in the water, the Sioux slapping arrows at you . . . I got him in time. What more do you want?"

They struck the Rosebud the next morning. Bennington had gone up it in June the year before when the delicate odor of wild roses filled the whole valley. Now there was the biting smell of hot dust raised by the horses. Suddenly Bennington asked, "What month is this?"

"July." Dameyer calculated. "The thirteenth. July 13, 1876." He smiled to himself.

Of Indian sign there was plenty. All along the way the grass had been grazed down by ponies. There were campsites where lodge poles still stood. The staked circles and the fire pits were weeks old, but the enormity of the campsites, strung for miles along the river, made Bennington uneasy.

Thousands of Sioux had ridden here this summer. The un-

shod hoofs of their ponies had pounded a trail hundreds of yards wide beside the stream. There were marks of shod horses, too, widely dispersed among the more blurry outlines of the plains ponies. Cavalry even under the most careless of lieutenants on scout did not spread out like that.

Bennington rode with a tingling down his spine. He was not positive about the picture he was reading here, but it had an ugly look. When they stopped to rest the horses at noon, he found an Army canteen under a bullberry bush.

"Some careless recruit will pay for that," Dameyer said. "I'd say he already had."

As usual, Dameyer switched his position when there was no point in carrying on pretense. "The Indians have run off a batch of Army horses, for certain, wouldn't you say?"

Bennington looked out at the marks of plains cavalry that had passed in numbers greater than the strength of some corps he had seen during the war. He was tired of jostling words with Captain Dameyer of the Sixth Engineers, who said the obvious or lied beyond comprehension.

They made twenty-five miles that day and were still about twenty-five miles from the Yellowstone when they camped.

Again Bennington took the first watch, sitting in a clump of bushes far enough from the Rosebud so that the sound of it neither lulled him nor dulled his ears. Tonight Dameyer slept silently. Even the horses were unusually quiet.

It seemed to Bennington that the host which had passed up and down the valley was all around him now in the ghostly starlight, not threatening but riding by in endless strength, going to some appointed place.

The pale-set stars and a sensing of time slipping through the barrier of midnight told Bennington when to rouse Dameyer, who came from his blankets instantly alert.

Dameyer pulled on his boots. The breech of his Springfield made light metallic sounds as he put in a fresh cartridge. Then for a moment he was stock still. "It's strangely quiet, isn't it?" His voice was a murmur.

"The Indians are long gone from here." Bennington believed it, but still he felt the presence, the ownership, the flowing splendor and the dark savageness of a people whose mark would be forever on the land.

"Tomorrow we'll find them," Dameyer said.

"We're weeks behind this migration." Suddenly Bennington had a hope and a wish that Captain Dameyer would give up when they reached the Yellowstone again.

"Weeks then," Dameyer said. "We'll find them." He rose and made a tall, broad shape against the night. He walked confidently into the hushed darkness to take his post.

PART 2

IN THE MORNING Dameyer was eager to move on. Bennington had never seen a man so anxious to find Sioux. Bennington himself had lived among them when circumstance forced him to do so, but he had never considered them blood brothers or even been entirely at ease in their camps.

Captain Dameyer was fairly busting to get right in the middle of the most bitter of all the Sioux, the bands from all the seven councils, the fiercely independent dissidents who would have no peace on white men's terms, who followed the harsh counsel of Tatanka, Sitting Bull.

All the way down the Rosebud Bennington looked moodily at the fat U-marks of steel-foot horses sprinkled among the tramplings of thousands of ponies. It was no small scout detail the Sioux had rubbed out to get those horses. Of course it was possible that each horse did not represent a dead cavalryman; the Indians might have stampeded the mounts of several companies engaged in a skirmish.

He asked, "Did soldiers go up the river from Buford with the *Far West?*"

"I think so," Dameyer said. "A few companies of cavalry pacing along on the bank, some of the Sixth Infantry on the boat itself. Why?"

It was always *why* with Captain Dameyer. Bennington did not answer. He kept searching out the marks of shod horses in the wide trail.

"That's not our business," Dameyer said. "Forget everything but the orders."

Now it was *our* business and *our* orders as Dameyer assumed that Bennington was solidly stuck with the detail. That was

not the case at all; Dameyer just might lose a second scout when they came to the Yellowstone.

Out in the chopped swath where the Indians had ridden Bennington stopped to look down on torn strips of faded blue cloth. Squaws had used them as diapers for their infants. The sun pressed hot upon his back. The land was big and empty.

Those pieces of cavalry blue, used like an insult, cast here in the dust, seemed to express the shocking hatred of the Sioux for white soldiers.

Dameyer said, "How far to the Yellowstone now?"

"We'll get there soon enough."

They came upon a dead horse, a cavalry mount with the McClellan still on it. Bennington got down and walked around it. The horse had been shot in the head at close range. He stepped close and lifted the canteen on the saddle. It was empty. The horse had bloated and popped and now the flesh was sagging away and the yellow teeth of the animal made a long snarl.

Dameyer gave it a glance and said, "Let's get on." A mile farther on he pointed to the left. "Let's cut across the islands. We can make an easier ford there, rather than following the Rosebud all the way down."

That was so but how did Dameyer know it? He had given the impression of being lost ever since Bennington met him. "The Sioux stayed with the Rosebud," Bennington said.

"Bully for them. Let's cut off toward the islands. We'll find the Sioux if we just keep riding in their general direction." Now he was the martinet condescending to explain his order.

He was right but Bennington still wanted to be stubborn. His dislike of the man had grown to where it overshadowed his puzzling about Dameyer's character.

"Is there any particular advantage in staying right in the middle of this Indian pike?" Dameyer asked.

Bennington led the way off to the west, toward the islands in the Yellowstone. They came to the river and Bennington stopped to cool the horses before making the crossing. He said, "We've gone in a circle, almost. How'd you know these islands were here in the bend?"

Dameyer broke off a handful of willow tops and tried to rub

the dust from his high Wellington boots. "Good Lord, man, I rode past the island on the way to find you. Besides, I've got a map."

"I might let you depend on that map from here on."

Dameyer smiled. "Another boating expedition, eh?"

"No, I'll ride."

"Do so if you wish." Dameyer squinted across the river. "What's the best route for me to take after I cross?"

He could be bluffing but it did not seem so. With a singleness of purpose that was at once admirable and enraging, the captain was going on with his assignment. Money taken from a paymaster's wagon. Dust scattered on the wind.

Bennington felt like cursing but he knew he was going to stick. At the first, if he had known how much of a liar Dameyer was, he would not have gone with him. Clever liars were generally also clever cowards, but Dameyer was a combination that utterly stumped Bennington.

"We reach Sitting Bull, say. All you're obliged to do is get some report of what happened to the money, is that it?"

There was a hard challenge in Dameyer's stare. "Are you suggesting something else?"

"You don't expect to recover any of the money, do you?"

"I do, if they've got any of it. Every note goes back to the government. Were you hinting at something else?"

Bennington had not been hinting at anything else. He had been trying to estimate the length of their stay in Sitting Bull's camp, in case they ever got there. For his part he wished to visit the Sioux as briefly as possible.

Dameyer had taken a different meaning from the question. Just how genuine was his outrage? Bennington said, "You'll see that I get paid as a scout?"

"I'll try. That's all I can promise."

No amount of money was worth the risk that lay ahead. If Dameyer had made at any time glib promises about Bennington's being rewarded for his services, Bennington would have distrusted him; but now the officer's blunt honesty in the face of his own need of help settled Bennington's mind.

Sun glint from the water bounced in Dameyer's crisp bronze whiskers as he mounted. Bennington studied out the first island. It was covered with a dense growth of willows, and the

upstream end of it was strewn with debris from floods. Most of the heavy water was on the far side, for the stream between here and the island was shallow enough to show bottom.

The river was less than belly deep on the horse as Bennington approached the island. He was turning to see how Dameyer was coming with the packhorse when he saw a small movement in the willows.

There was one Sioux, crouched low. He rose as Bennington turned his rifle to bear on him. Then there were a dozen Indians who rose suddenly to full height from the willows. Bennington saw the rifles, the war arrows steady on the bows, the grim, dark faces.

Even devoid of paint they were the most murderous looking band of Oglala Bad Faces Bennington had ever encountered.

Their coppery skins were gleaming wet from the swim to the island. The white men had stumbled into the trap with no resistance, so that for a moment the Sioux were at a loss. It would not last long, their lack of design.

Fear rocked up and down in Bennington, but his face was grave as he rested his rifle across his thighs and said, "We seek Tatanka Watanka." Most of the fierce dark eyes were on Dameyer. The Indians were hoping he would try to fight or run. Without turning Bennington said, "Don't try anything, Captain."

Dameyer's answer was as cool as the river. "I guess we found them, didn't we?" He came splashing on and several warriors waded out to meet him. They cut the tow rope of the packhorse. They punched at the pack, testing for loot, as they brought Dameyer ashore.

A brawny warrior grinned at Dameyer. He said, "Friend," and reached his hand up, and like a fool the captain reached down to meet the gesture. The next instant the Sioux jerked him from the saddle. They pounded him brutally while they were taking his weapons. They kicked him to his feet at last and turned to Bennington, closing in around him.

"We are in peace. We are not scouts. We have come from the White Father to speak to Tatanka," Bennington said.

"Tatanka does not speak to mice."

"Tatanka sets the hoofs of his pony on mice."

"And on white man soldiers."

"Tatanka does not know the White Father."

"He will speak to us. The White Father has sent us. We are only two. We are here," Bennington said. That they were still alive was because it had pleased the Oglalas to let them walk straight into a trap. The Sioux were not given to making captives of grown white men. Bennington and Dameyer would die here, or they would go to Sitting Bull's camp as visitors.

Still on his horse, Bennington knew that he held a small advantage. When they dragged him from it the gates of savagery would swing wide open, and he and Dameyer would die quite simply. He glanced down at Dameyer. The captain's face was bloody. The roughing he had taken had roused a horrible temper in him and now with attention centered on Bennington, Dameyer was sizing up the chances more from the standpoint of the anger in him than from logic.

"I will not argue with children," Bennington said. "We have come to see the Water Pourer, whose medicine is powerful. He has dreamed already of our coming. He will be displeased if his dream is violated by careless children."

One of the warriors growled, "Hear the big words of this white man, this mouse, whose heart squeaked with terror when he saw us."

"Let the white scouts swim to the next island while we shoot our arrows at them."

That suggestion fell sensibly among the Oglalas; there was little sport in clubbing to death two enemies who had offered no fight. Several warriors grunted approval of the idea.

"White Rain has said his words." Bennington gave the warriors a contemptuous look, and then he raised his eyes to look above their heads, as if they were miserable objects who did not concern him; but from the edge of his eye he watched Dameyer.

Dameyer was not as hurt as he had pretended. Dameyer was reaching under his shirt. The idiot had some kind of small handgun there. He was pulling it free when Bennington swung his rifle. The barrel cracked down on Dameyer's head and the captain buckled at the knees.

The sudden move startled the Sioux. The warriors close to

Dameyer fell back. Bennington dropped from his horse quickly and took the wicked little handgun away from Dameyer. A big Oglala stepped in to crush the captain's head with a war axe. Bennington shoved him back with an open hand.

"My friend is a child too," he said. Bennington tossed the handgun down. "We have come to see Tatanka!" he shouted. "We have had enough of your foolish acts!" He glared around him savagely, letting anger hide his fear.

The Sioux went into council. Two of them had recognized the gray horse. They were in favor of killing the white men without further delay. Older warriors ruled against them. After all, White Rain had spoken of a dream. Tatanka had many dreams. Perhaps White Rain had spoken with a split tongue, but it was not safe to disregard dreams.

Better to let Tatanka Watanka decide if the white men were liars.

Dameyer lurched to his feet. All the heat was out of him and the shrewd determination was in his face again. "I almost ruined it, didn't I? Are they taking us to old Bull?"

"We'll see." You could not figure the captain out. He was the strangest mixture of fire and cold Bennington had ever known. At least his head for once had been put to a good use.

The Bad Faces took the white men's weapons. Two of the younger warriors started to loot the pack and were stopped by Clouds Floating, a scarred Oglala who seemed to have the most rank. It was he who told Bennington, "We go to Tatanka."

"What did he say about Sitting Bull?" Dameyer asked quickly.

"They're taking us to his camp."

"We did it!" Dameyer's confidence was back with a surge.

Three warriors took the horses across swift water to the next island. Dameyer was a miserable swimmer. Bennington saw him plunge in without a trace of fear but a moment later the captain was in trouble. Two young Sioux rocking along in the current beside Dameyer laughed at his spluttering and his frantic efforts to stay afloat. They let him almost drown before they grabbed his hair and towed him ashore.

Dameyer choked and gasped but when he was able he looked at the two warriors and grinned.

In the cottonwoods on the west bank five young boys were watching the ponies. Angry because he had missed the fun, one of them jabbed Bennington in the rump with a knife choked down at the point between thumb and forefinger.

Bennington knocked him heels up in the air and turned away before the youth landed. The Oglalas laughed.

Dameyer said, "I see there *is* a proper time to lose one's temper, after all."

Bennington glanced at a bugle hanging on the saddle of a young Indian's pony. There were two blood bay horses in the bunch, shod horses with government brands.

"You know what, Bennington, I'm going to pay you directly one hundred dollars from the payroll money. That's a whole month's pay for a scout."

Bennington gave the captain a narrow, disliking look.

For three days they rode northward with the Sioux. They crossed the Missouri and continued on into country that Bennington did not know. When they crossed the trail of a Crow war party, five of the warriors and three of the young boys went after their ancient enemies.

Late on the fourth day Bennington saw the Sioux camp ahead. It was the largest he had ever seen. Clouds Floating let out a shout and went zig zagging ahead on his pony. The rest of the escort, stolid with their importance, took Bennington and Dameyer on at a steady pace, ignoring the shouted questions of young men watching the pony herd.

Bennington held to a solemn expression as he made a quick estimate of the number of big cavalry horses in the herd. There were at least two hundred. He gave Dameyer a bitter look, but the captain's eyes were on the camp.

The excitement Clouds Floating had raised by his approach, the signal that he had found white men, was dying away as the Sioux escort took Bennington and Dameyer past lodges of the Minneconjous, Brule and Sans Arc. On ahead, set apart from all the others, Bennington saw a yellow council tent.

A group of chiefs stopped the escort and asked questions. Bennington recognized Gall, in whose camp he had once spent a month. Black thoughts were sitting behind Gall's face as he looked at Bennington, who gave the signs that he was glad to see the chief again.

Gall turned away. Behind him banks of stone-faced warriors stood silent, their faces bad. And it was that way as the escort took the white men on through the camp, an evil quiet and a hatred showing starkly in all the Sioux. The chiefs now walked ahead of the cavalcade and the crowd closed in behind.

They passed lodges of the Cheyenne. Bennington saw Little Chief, the tall, thin-lipped orator, who folded his arms and stood impassively, giving Bennington no recognition. When they came to the Uncpapa lodges a young squaw and an old gray-haired woman pushed forward. They put their hands on their mouths as they stared at the horse Bennington was riding, and then they both broke into a loud wailing, sawing the air with their arms and rocking their bodies forward.

The keening lament of the women of Stab Bear, dead beside the Yellowstone, broke with a rawing effect on Bennington's nerves.

Captain Dameyer swung his head from side to side and watched the camp with high contempt. It was the right thing to do, but he was not acting, and therein lay another dark bundle of worry for Bennington: the Sioux understood acting and could admire it, but a genuine contempt of them was a deadly mistake.

Two hundred cavalry horses were in their pony herd at this moment because someone had shown contempt of them.

They came to the red and black lodge of Sitting Bull. Tatanka stood before it with Rain-in-the-Face, whose eyes were glowing with cruel, sharp intelligence. Rain-in-the-Face was standing by aid of a stick crutch and Bennington saw the queer hanging of his foot, as if the toes only could touch the ground.

Bennington said, "The White Father has sent a soldier and White Rain to speak to Tatanka Watanka." He gave the marks of respect to Sitting Bull.

The down-drooping lips of the Sioux's greatest medicine man tightened. The deep lines running from the corners of his bold nose grew stronger. His cloudy eyes looked at the white men as if they were pieces of spoiled meat. Sitting Bull had grown gray listening to the broken words of white men.

He turned his back and went into his lodge. Hobbling on

his crutch, Rain-in-the-Face followed him. A feral rumbling came from the Sioux.

"That was the old boy himself!" Dameyer said excitedly. "Tell him to come back out here. Tell him—"

"Shut up," Bennington growled. He watched Gall and Bad Hip and Little Wound go into an impromptu conference. Clouds Floating stood aside, glowering, angry, as if he had been reprimanded for bringing the white men into camp. Sitting Bull had turned his back upon them, and now their position was worse than precarious.

Dameyer did not observe this at all; he started to complain again about Sitting Bull. He stopped when warriors grabbed the bridles of the horses and led them away. Bennington took a deep breath. Gall had saved their hides, Pizi, the irreconcilable, the white man hater, the true, hard man of the Sioux.

Inside a lodge guarded by the *akecita,* the Indian police, Bennington stood between the door flap and the fire pit and fought down a desire to kill Dameyer with his bare hands. From what he had learned from Clouds Floating, from what he had seen in the camp, the cavalry horses, the great number of wounded Sioux, Bennington had pieced together a grim and ugly picture.

Dameyer sat down on a pile of buffalo robes. He started to pull off his boots. "Give me a hand here, will you?" When Bennington did not move, Dameyer lay back on the robes and sighed with utter relaxation. "You wouldn't believe it, but I'm a little tired. When will we have the council with old Bull?"

"We never will," Bennington said. His voice was calm. "You start telling the truth, or I'm going to kill you."

Dameyer started to smile, and then he gave proper assessment to what he had heard, and his face grew sober. "I think you've guessed the truth, Bennington. You came along of your own free will, so don't act like a Puritan now."

"You'd better talk, Dameyer!"

The captain bunched a robe under his head to gain more comfort. "The cavalry had a couple of scraps with the Sioux. Crook got his nose bloodied. Custer lost half his command, about three hundred men, over on the Little Big Horn. He got killed himself, by the way."

"I said I wanted the truth!"

"You're getting it. You damned fool, do you think any man is immortal? Custer lost five companies of the Seventh, right down to the last man. Reno and Benteen took a bad mauling, but the infantry came up the river in time to save them."

The casualness of Dameyer's words made Bennington say, "You're no officer."

"That's right," Dameyer said agreeably. "I'm a man looking out for himself, the same as you. There was no paymaster's wagon robbed near Bismarck. You guessed that before we started to cross the Yellowstone the second time."

I didn't, Bennington thought.

"But don't fret yourself," Dameyer went on, "there's money here for us. All we have to do is talk Sitting Bull out of it, and that can be done."

"What money?"

"The Seventh was paid about a month before the fight. They never had a chance to spend a cent. Most of that money is right here in this camp, Bennington. Figure the privates at thirteen dollars, about three hundred of them, average the officers' pay at . . ."

Bennington turned away with a sickness in him. He stumbled to the door of the lodge and looked out directly at a Fox warrior standing guard twenty feet away. Beyond the Sioux a group of curious children were watching the tent. One of them had a rag on a willow stick.

It was the lower bar of a swallow-tailed pennant, a blue bar with the handles of crossed sabers standing against it in white. Bennington had seen it many times, George Custer's personal pennant.

Dameyer was still talking ". . . even half of it thrown away or lost, we still can figure on several thousand dollars. It's nobody's money, Bennington. The Indians have no use for it. I've got an idea of what to tell them about it, but you'll have to make the spiel of course."

The warrior waved the children away. They trotted off, shouting, and the blue bar waved and flapped on the stick.

Bennington grasped the sides of the opening, gathering the hide in a grip that made his knuckles stand white. He looked over his shoulder at Dameyer. "You filthy, miserable bastard."

Dameyer began to search under his shirt. "Right at the start I saw you were soft inside, Bennington."

Bennington walked as far as the fire pit before the sounds of the village around him brought him control.

"That's right," Dameyer said. He relaxed again and his fingers began to tug at something under his shirt. "We're stuck. We've got to work together. What we think of each other has nothing to do with the problem." His smile was engaging. From under his shirt he pulled two cigars wrapped in oiled silk.

"These are the last, Bennington." Dameyer tossed one cigar across the lodge. It struck Bennington's shirt and fell into the fire pit.

"Here's what you tell them, Bennington: those green pieces of paper they took have the names and identification of the soldiers they killed. They chopped the dead to pieces—you know how Sioux perform. Tell old Bull that the White Father" —Dameyer's mouth curled with dry amusement—"has to know who his dead soldiers are, so that he can do them honor. The only way he can tell is to have the pieces of green paper."

Dameyer lit his cigar. He lay back on the robes again with his hands behind his head. "It ought to work, don't you think? The Sioux honor their dead enemies, and we're not asking for anything that's useful to them."

With all his anger drained away and only a sense of helpless wonder left, Bennington stared down at Dameyer. Who spawned such men? What kind of blackness was inside them? "It might work," Bennington said tonelessly.

"Good! Then we're agreed. A third of the money goes to you. That beats a hundred dollars, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does." Bennington walked over to the door flap again.

"When do you suppose they'll have a council? Tonight?"

"Likely." No matter what kind of slime had been forced on him, Bennington wanted to stay alive. He would use his wits and lie with a grave expression, assuming that the Sioux chiefs granted him the right to speak before them.

He looked through the doorway, past the *akecita* guards, on to the free hills beyond the stream where the camp was set. On the Little Big Horn . . . Custer wiped out? It was not

possible. There had been fighting, yes, and the cavalry had been hurt, but . . .

A tall Cheyenne came by with a hunting party that was blood-smeared. The Cheyenne stopped to ask one of the guards what was going on. Bennington kept staring at the horse the tall Cut Arm rode, and when the hunting party went on, Bennington stepped out to follow the horse with his eye. A Fox warrior forced him back inside with a lance.

Bennington had seen enough. The sorrel was one of Custer's favorite horses, white-stockinged all the way around, a blazed forehead. Its name was Vic.

Bennington looked at Dameyer. With the cigar gone dead in his teeth Dameyer was sleeping peacefully.

Somewhere in the valley of the Greasy Grass near the bright blue loops of the river, was it? Bennington knew the country well. He and Dameyer had been almost there when they turned back to the Rosebud after meeting the Cheyennes.

In the evening an old squaw whose hands were mutilated from mourning her dead brought food to the lodge and went away without ever looking directly into the eyes of the white men.

Dameyer roused, refreshed and confident. He retrieved the cigar that had fallen from his mouth while he slept. He picked the other cigar from the fire pit and put it inside his shirt. "Well, they're not trying to starve us, eh, Bennington?" He ate with his fingers and sucked the juices from them afterward and once more asked when the council would be.

Darkness came and there was a council. Bennington heard the crier going about the camp, an old man with a deep voice. "Two white soldiers who fought against us on the Greasy Grass have come into the camp to speak to Tatanka, who will not hear their words. The chiefs will council. High Wound and Stab Bear, of the great Uncpapas, have been killed by these two white men."

The crier went away. A silence came upon the camp. Bennington heard but faintly the distant councilling of the chiefs. Quite likely Sitting Bull was not with them, or else he listened in silence, for he was no longer a warrior. His power came from dreams, from the slyness of a great intelligence; but in

the end life or death for Bennington and Dameyer, would be largely Sitting Bull's decision.

After two hours the council ended. No one came for the white men. Dameyer said angrily, "Tell these guards we want to talk to Sitting Bull."

"You tell them." Bennington pulled off his moccasins and went to bed.

He had never slept completely relaxed in an Indian camp. He knew when the guard changed, and later he was aware of the man who came toward the lodge and held a low-voiced conversation with the *akecita*. The flap scraped back and the man came into the darkness of the lodge. He spoke Bennington's Sioux name.

"I hear." Bennington threw off the robes.

"Why are you here?" the man asked.

The darkness gave gravity to the lie Bennington told about the payroll of dead soldiers on the Greasy Grass. At first it was all a lie and then it became mixed with truths which fell simply from Bennington's lips. He told the visitor that the quarrel of the White Father with the Sioux was one thing, and that the honoring of dead on both sides was another thing.

"The White Father did not send us to say that there will be no more fighting, or to ask the Sioux not to fight again. We are not chiefs. We are only men. With the pieces of paper we will know the dead. We will honor them. This is all we ask of the Sioux, who also honor their warriors who die bravely."

There was a long silence from the man who stood before Bennington. Meager starlight came through the smoke hole of the lodge but it was not enough to reveal more than the gloomy outlines of the Sioux. Doubt rode the Indian's silence.

"These pieces of paper are traded among white men as ponies are traded among my people," the visitor said.

The man was making sure that Bennington did not mistake him for a simpleton.

"It is so," Bennington said. "The pieces of green paper are used among white men to buy what they wish from each other, but if the paper is returned to us, it will be used only to honor the soldiers who were killed."

Again the long silence ran before the dark figure spoke. "Five suns ago a dream was told in this camp. In the dream

four white men were seen riding to the camp. They came to say that the White Father wishes peace, that the soldiers even now hunting for the Sioux will be sent away. You have not said this. You are only two. Where are the other two?"

This time it was Bennington who was long silent, with his mind racing over the implications of the statement and the question. When the visitor first spoke he had been reasonably sure of his identity, and now he was certain. Bennington asked a bargaining question of his own. "Will White Rain be heard by the council?"

The visitor grunted in the affirmative.

Bennington took his time. His next words would trap him hopelessly if he had guessed wrong, or they would save both him and Dameyer. He said, "The dream was good. There were four white men sent. One turned back from fear. The other grew so sick with boils upon his back that he would not ride. Two are here. The others were chiefs, and the White Father had told them to speak to the Sioux, to say that the soldiers would be sent away, to say that peace would be.

"I am not a chief, and my friend is not a chief. We were to ask only for the pieces of paper to honor our dead, but I know what the others were to say, and so I will say it to the council. The dream was good."

After a moment Sitting Bull turned swiftly and ducked through the lodge opening and was gone.

"What was that about?" Dameyer asked quickly.

A bargain? Yes, surely it must be a bargain. Tatanka was no chief. There were Sioux who said he had no heart for fighting. It was known that he never went into battle. And yet he was the strong man of the Sioux and ruled a large number of them through a mixture of intelligence and medicine.

Dameyer said, "Who was that? What did he say?"

"I thought you understood some Sioux."

"Not the way you two grunted it. Who was it? Did you ask him about the money?"

"It was Pte. He said he would see about the money."

"Pte?" Dameyer asked. "Sitting Bull is the man we want."

"Pte is sacred to the Sioux." Buffalo were not only sacred but very useful to the Sioux. Bennington got back into his blankets. It was not luck that he had struck upon an Indian

dream as an argument when Clouds Floating and his bunch had taken him and Bennington. Indians lived by visions.

Sitting Bull was full of dreams based on logic, or one might say that where the dream ended and logic began, a fine line lay almost indiscernible. After the great victory of the Sioux over the Seventh was it not natural that white men would come to the Indians to talk? Sitting Bull had seen that this would be so, and if he had presented it as a result of a vision, rather than the work of a shrewd mind, that was his business.

Let him stand secure as a man of true visions. After all, he had missed but slightly the number of emissaries presumably sent by the White Father. Bennington was willing, even quite anxious, to establish the lie that Tatanka had not missed the number at all.

In fact, Bennington's life depended on it.

"Did this Pte say we would get the money?" Dameyer asked.

"He said the council would hear us."

They were taken in mid-morning to the meeting of chiefs outside the yellow lodge. The Sioux war leaders had already passed through their ceremonies. No pipe was offered the white men, no gestures of respect. They came as beggars to be heard.

Bennington had a long bad moment when he looked at the hostile faces, Rain-in-the-Face, Kicking Bear, Gall, the great, straight man of the Sioux, Crazy Horse, Bear Rib, Bad Hip, Little Chief of the Cheyennes, and many others.

Sitting Bull was there, dressed in a black and white calico shirt, his strong legs wrapped in leggings of black cloth, his cloudy eyes showing nothing, his gray hair running down to frame his broad face into narrowness.

The Sioux gave Little Chief the honor of speaking all the wrongs long held against the white man by the Sioux and Cheyennes. The list was long, his voice was good and when he made a killing point, the ranks of Sioux standing in hard quietness behind the council growled their approval like a chant. After a long time Little Chief wanted to know why two white men had come here.

In the strong daylight with the unwavering eyes of a fierce

people upon him, Bennington found the lie hard to tell, but he told it with all the power and imagery he could muster.

The council listened. They were not impressed by the White Father's need of small scraps of green paper to tell the names of his dead soldiers on the Greasy Grass.

Bennington knew that he had to do much better. He spoke of the dream. "When we left the fort on the river we said among ourselves that our coming was known. Tatanka Watanka sees that which others do not see, and so we were sure that he would know of our coming. There were four of us. One grew sick and fear overcame the other. Two of us are here.

"The other two were to speak of peace. I do not know everything they were to say, and so I will not make up words, but I do know that they were to speak to Tatanka and the chiefs about peace."

Bennington saw belief come to the faces of the Sioux. It was simple for them to believe what they had heard already from Sitting Bull. Behind the chiefs the listening warriors shifted their eyes to the medicine man, paying respect.

Sitting Bull showed nothing. His eyes were drawn down tightly. His thin upper lip jutted slightly over the lower. He sat with his arms crossed, and he gave the impression that he had heard nothing.

There was no more for Bennington to say. He looked above the Sioux, beyond the pony herd, out to the tawny hills. He was sweating. He waited.

Kicking Bear said, "We will consider the words of the white man." He looked to Sitting Bull, who held his withdrawn pose.

Gall motioned to the picked warriors of the *akecita.*

They escorted Bennington and Dameyer back to the lodge.

Dameyer was in a raging worry. "Sitting Bull never opened his mouth! What happened? Do we get the money?"

Bennington sat down on his robes. "We'll see."

"You're cool enough about it. Did you purposely foul up everything? I wish to God I'd brought somebody I could trust!"

"What really happened to Charley Reynolds, Dameyer?"

"He was killed on the Little Big Horn. You didn't swallow *all* the lies I told you, did you?"

"I'm afraid so." Bennington rose and strode to the lodge door. Once more he found himself gripping the tepee hides so hard that his wrists and forearms began to ache.

The guards went away before noon.

A short time later the procession started. No warrior or even a toothless old man joined in it. Squaws and children walked past the lodge, throwing money through the doorway. There were handfuls of notes crumpled like the sprouting leaves of rhubarb. Some of the money had been smeared with filth. An ancient squaw with a face like a frost-wrinkled apple stopped in the opening, spat upon a bill, and let it flutter to the dust.

The fire of a wolf pup burned in the eyes of a young boy who swung back his arm and hurled a piece of colored cloth wrapped around a rock. It struck against the back wall of the lodge, a cavalry guidon, crumpled and dirty. Bennington picked it up, looking at the bloodstains on the circle of gilt stars.

A Cheyenne girl who could have been no more than three threw down a toy pony made of buckskin, with a ten dollar bill tied on it as a saddle blanket.

Dameyer's eyes were alive and darting as the money began to litter the lodge floor. He snatched up a wallet with worn gold initials on it and a ragged bullet hole through it. There was money inside, a thick sheaf of notes stuck together with dried blood. Dameyer took the notes and dropped the wallet into the fire pit.

A hag with live coals for eyes thrust her withered face inside and started to hurl a scalp with a five dollar bill tied in the hair. Dameyer snatched it from her hands before she had a chance to throw it.

The long line ended. Indian boys brought the white men's horses before the lodge, with all their possessions on them.

Dameyer was on his hands and knees scrabbling around the lodge. "Gather it up! Let's count it."

The amount was a little more than two thousand dollars. Dameyer cursed. "They held out on us, that's what they did! Go tell Sitting Bull we won't leave until—"

"We're leaving," Bennington said quietly, "while we have

the chance. They haven't got any more money. They told me they threw most of it away right at the battlefield."

"Over three weeks ago!" Dameyer said savagely. "We'll go there just the same."

"Sure."

Dameyer was stuffing the money into the big pocket inside his shirt. A map and an Army tinder kit took up too much room. He threw them into the fire pit. "I'll give you your share when you get me back to one of the forts, Bennington."

It was another week before they found the battlefield. Between tufts of reddish-brown grass the soil was white and ashy on the hills above the blue loops of the Little Big Horn. The wolves and birds had been here, and the wind and rain, so that the fluffy earth heaped in haste upon the bodies of the dead was mostly gone now.

Bennington got down and led his horse through the litter of rotting equipment scattered widely on the hills. Here and there were small heaps of McClellans and rifles with broken stocks, all partially burned; and the bottoms of cavalry boots with the tops cut off, already starting to curl in the sun; and horses sinking into the earth; and empty cartridge shells spilled in the grass.

He did not count but he knew that he had seen almost a hundred bodies that had been covered with sagebrush only as a burial gesture. There were soldiers here that he had known, but there was no way of knowing them now.

Higher up the hill Dameyer was searching furiously for money. Bennington went up to him and on beyond him to where the basket from a *travois* was staked down over a grave, the only real grave that Bennington had seen.

This would be the burial place of Custer, the Yellow Hair.

"Keep looking, don't stand around!" Dameyer shouted. He plunged away toward a pair of pants hanging on a bush.

Across the basket of the *travois* Bennington looked down at the Sioux campsite on the other side of the river. It ran for miles. Someone had burned the lodge poles. Grass was already rising in the charred marks. "There were too many of us," Clouds Floating had said.

Bennington led his horse down the hill to Dameyer.

"The Sioux lied," Dameyer said. He was hot and sweating. "I haven't seen a single bill. You can't tell me that the other soldiers picked them all up. They weren't here long enough even to bury their dead. I tell you the Sioux lied, and you—"

Dameyer was looking into the muzzle of Bennington's pistol. With his free hand Bennington was pulling the cavalry guidon from under his shirt.

"What's the idea?" Dameyer asked.

"I've been wanting to kill you for a long time."

"You fool! I'll give you your third of the money."

What made a man like Dameyer? What was left out of his insides, or so badly twisted that he was incomplete? Musing, staring, with the pistol in his hand, Bennington shook his head.

"Half the money then!" Dameyer shouted.

With a slow motion Bennington tossed the guidon to Dameyer. "Pile it on that." He watched the notes tumbling from inside Dameyer's shirt. He watched the man counting. "Put it *all* down there."

Dameyer was like a cornered wolf, but he saw the curious listlessness in Bennington's eyes. He obeyed.

The money lay on the stained guidon and on the ashy soil around it. Bennington tossed down his tinder kit.

"You're crazy!" Dameyer shouted. "No, I won't!"

"Burn it."

"You're crazy!"

"Burn it."

"That's senseless, Bennington!" Dameyer flung his arm in a wide gesture. "It won't help them. It won't help anybody." Crouched on his knees he stared up at Bennington. "You've gone Indian. You're starting to believe that story you told the Sioux about honoring—"

Bennington cocked the pistol.

Death was all around Dameyer and death was looking at him. His hands trembled as he ignited the tinder. The guidon turned brown, then black. A small, red-edged hole appeared in it. The hole spread but there was no flame until the money caught fire. It burned with an orange flame, with little smoke, charring away slowly.

Dameyer stared down in anguish. His heart was truly on the

ground, where the wisps of smoke were dying away. "Why did you do that, Bennington?"

With the pistol Bennington motioned for Dameyer to walk away from him. The man started. He swung around and cried, "To think that I saved your life!"

"I just saved yours. Get out of my sight, Dameyer."

Bennington rode away from the mutilation and horror. From a hill above the high bluffs on the river he looked back and saw Dameyer going toward the Indian campsite. He would look there for money. He would look forever for money.

When Dameyer was completely out of sight Bennington began to feel free and clean once more. He turned the tired gray horse toward the Rosebud.

CIVILIZED MAN

By OWEN CAMERON

George and Hetty had strong opinions about the visitor—strongly opposite opinions. As far as George was concerned, he was just a killer. But to Hetty, the visitor—in a strange sort of way—was a gentleman.

AS A BOY, it embarrassed me to go to the movies with my grandfather. He refused to see anything but Westerns, and he argued with the actors. Once he stood up and yelled at Gary Cooper, "You're a dang liar!" Now and then he was put out of a theatre, but not often, because even at ninety he was a rugged customer.

Grandfather insisted the Old West had been a civilized place and that the movies were downright slanderous. He should know, he said; he had been there. The pictures in our album showed a tall, knobby young man addicted to wide-brimmed hats, vests and rifles. Except for the gun, he didn't look like my idea of a man of the open spaces. He said the hat held water like a bucket, the vest was for pockets and the rifle only for coyotes and such. Still, he broke up the Crowley gang while still in his teens, killing two men and seriously wounding Wild Bill himself.

When reminded of this incident, Grandfather would shout that there were more desperados nowadays, and if every honest man packed a rifle, the country would be a sight more civilized. At this point my grandmother would remark that Mr. Crowley had been more civilized than certain others she could mention, and at least knew how to treat a lady and didn't have to be reminded to take off his hat in the house.

Grandfather would jerk off his hat and bellow, "Maybe you should've picked him!"

"Imagine—me a queen," my grandmother would murmur.

"He was a killer," Grandfather would yell. "An outlaw! I should've finished him when I had the chance!"

Grandmother would give him a queer smile, and he would go off growling to himself. He made more noise, but she won all the arguments, and he never convinced her that the West was civilized. She was born in New York State, but had been visiting cousins in Kansas City when Grandfather—he was George, then—arrived there with some cars of sheep. Her name was Hetty Van Denk, and she was no bigger than a minute and twice as quick. Grandfather said her big blue eyes made his flesh creep. The romantic phrase was not his specialty, and it took a year of letter-writing about the weather, the civilized West and sheep, before he got up nerve enough to propose to her.

Hetty's folks wept when they put her on the train, sure she was going to her death. The Sioux had killed Custer a few years before. Apaches still raided in the Southwest and everyone knew the country was barbarous, no place for a delicately reared girl like Hetty.

Grandfather—George, I mean—met her train at the county seat, a dusty little town of six hundred inhabitants. His greeting was, "Ain't this as nice and civilized a town as you'll find back East? You hungry?" Romantic, you see.

Before Hetty could reply, a man in shirt-sleeves shot another man who had just stepped off the train. Hetty had hysterics.

Later, the man who had done the shooting apologized, explaining that she had not been in the slightest danger, and it had not been a chore he could postpone and continue living. When Hetty sobbed that it was a cruel, wild and uncivilized country, George was shocked. The man in shirt-sleeves had been a marshal, and obviously the other had been an undesirable type, and where in the East were law and order upheld with such prompt efficiency?

Some girls might have turned back, but Hetty had come out to marry George. They were made one by a justice of the peace and spent that night at a hotel. This was their honey-

moon, and next day they started in a wagon for George's distant ranch. George showed her points of interest: dry creeks, distant barren hills, lone trees and places where people had been killed by Indians. But long ago, he said—five or six years, anyhow. He did admit that even now a drunken Indian might be troublesome, but a sober one was harmless as a preacher. Hetty had her own opinion about this and about the local state of civilization.

It was a long journey through an empty land. At dusk, Hetty heard a wolf howl and flung her arms around George's neck, but he told her it was only a coyote and not to act the fool. Hetty thought he was merely trying to reassure her. There was a rifle on the floorboards of the wagon, but George said that was a custom of the country, like carrying an umbrella back East. She didn't believe that, either.

One of her uncles had given her a blackjack and instructed her in its use. He had said a woman with a gun was sure to hit everything but what she aimed at, and a life-preserver was as effective for defending life or honor, as the case might be. Hetty opened her purse and closed her small fingers about the leather and whalebone handle, prepared to go down fighting, but to her incredulous relief they reached home safely.

Home was a neat wooden house, much better than Hetty had expected. She had been prepared for a wigwam or at best a log cabin. Next morning she was up to cook breakfast by lamplight, and George said the hotcakes were as good as he could make himself, which was his idea of high praise. Then he kissed her and went off in the wagon to carry grub to his sheepherder.

Had she stopped to think about it, Hetty would have been lonely enough to weep. There was not another house in sight, and the vast land appeared deserted, with her abandoned in the middle of it, and the future misty and frightening. But this was her own home now, and all her life work was the medicine for trouble or sorrow, so she got busy on the part of the future she could get her hands on, sweeping and dusting and setting things to rights.

After noon, she decided to surprise George with a cake, and about the time she had the stove drawing well, the door opened and in walked an Indian.

He just stood there, looking at her with his beady eye, and Hetty asked tremulously, "You want food?"

The Indian grunted and sat down, but he was tense, as if ready to leap. She had read about this situation: the settler's wife, usually with a babe or two, is trapped by three hideously painted Indians. Here was only one, dressed pretty much like anybody else except for the long knife at his belt—but still an Indian. In the stories, the wife saves herself by pouring boiling water over the savages, or locking them in the washhouse. But the water in her kettle was not yet lukewarm, and there was no washhouse. She must have George build her one, first thing.

Hetty's fright made her slightly hysterical, and to keep the Indian from thinking of what he obviously was thinking, she talked a blue streak—about George and civilization, and how her mother had warned her, and what a short marriage it had been, but thank God there wasn't a baby, anyhow, and about a woman her mother had known, bald as an apple, who everyone knew had been scalped, though the woman herself denied it, though goodness knows what there was to be ashamed of, and. . . .

The Indian stared as if she had gone crazy, and she had a moment of hope, remembering that Indians were supposed to respect insane people. But judging from this one's glittering eyes, he wouldn't respect his own mother if she were crazy as a coot, and George had said he would not be home until sundown, so she was on her own.

This went through her mind in seconds, as she walked past the seated, staring Indian to the cupboard and took her purse from a drawer.

"You want money?" she asked.

"Huh?" grunted the bloodthirsty savage.

With one hand inside, Hetty upended the purse. A coin rolled onto the floor, the Indian leaned over to pick it up, and Hetty hit him with the life-preserver, exactly how and where she had been taught, with gratifying results. The Indian did not even groan.

She ran out for woolsacks and rope, and made a mummy out of the Indian. Then she relaxed to have hysterics, but the mood had passed, and she went ahead with the cake. After a

while the Indian began to struggle and curse, but there was little air in the woolsack, and he soon lay quiet.

Finally the wagon creaked into the yard. Hetty ran to meet George, who frowned at her tale, then rushed to unwrap the Indian, whose language made Hetty cover her ears. Questions and answers passed between the two men, and George threw back his head, bellowing laughter. This made the Indian angrier than ever, but between whoops George repeated what Hetty had told him, and the Indian began laughing, too. Sputtering and wiping his eyes, George told Hetty that the man was a distant neighbor, Fred Jeunes, come to help with the shearing. He hadn't even known George was married, and he'd been afraid of Hetty. He had thought she was crazy.

"Not even Indian!" George whooped.

"Louisiana French!" gasped Fred, and this seemed the funniest part of all to both of them.

Tight-lipped, Hetty prepared supper. Fred ate with them and turned out to be a pleasant fellow, but every now and then his eyes met George's, and they brayed like a couple of jackasses.

That was the first day, a fair sample. The West turned out to be less wild than she had imagined, though hardly as civilized as George claimed.

Weeks passed. Hetty got some chickens and built a coop for them, and had a cow to milk, and a garden, and in general worked as if she were three days behind and the inspectors due at midnight. Incidents that seemed extraordinary became a normal part of life. The first time the temperature hit twenty below, she took George's long underwear off the clothesline, tried to fold it, and it broke squarely in half. A freak blizzard struck at lambing-time, so the house was packed with newborn lambs. Once warmed, they would survive, and Hetty worked all night in the bitter storm beside the men, to save what they could.

Spring came, and with it Hetty's baby, ahead of schedule. When Mrs. Gibson, the neighbor who was to help Hetty, arrived, George was in the kitchen, drunk for one of the few times in his life. He burst into tears and told Mrs. Gibson she was too late. Expecting the worst, she hurried into the bed-

room, to find Hetty proudly nursing her manchild. It had been a wracking experience, but when Hetty saw how unstrung George was, she pretended it had been as simple as rolling off a log. It made a good counter to his story about the Indian.

They never agreed about the local state of civilization. Mrs. Gibson took snuff, and her husband played the bagpipes at breakfast. Did George call this civilized behavior? George dodged the question. On the other hand, Hetty subscribed to Mr. Bennett's *Herald,* and George could point out how much more crime there was in the East, though Hetty retorted that there were more people.

Summer came. Hetty built herself a washhouse and painted everything in sight. The baby was three months old, and Hetty's shape about back to normal, said George, imagining he was paying her a compliment. George himself was not too civilized.

One morning in late summer a stranger rode into the yard. Hetty came to the door to find him dismounted, hat in one hand, revolver in the other. She looked in surprise at the weapon, approvingly at the hat. Most men here doffed hats only when going to bed.

The stranger asked, "Is George home?"

"No," said Hetty, looking at the horse. The richest ranchers dressed like tramps, and saddle-rigging told you more about a man. This one's tackle was expensive, but without the gaudy silverware so generally affected.

The stranger slipped the revolver back into its holster and said, "They told me that George was married, but they didn't tell me he had such a lovely wife. Some men have all the luck." The way he said it, it wasn't fresh at all.

"George doesn't believe in luck," Hetty said, her eyes smiling at her first real compliment in a long time. "He says a man gets what he deserves."

"Sometimes," said the stranger, without smiling. "I want to see George about an old debt I owe him. My name is—uh—Williams."

The name was not familiar to Hetty, who told Mr. Williams that George was with the sheep, west of Dead Woman Creek,

but that only narrowed it down to twenty square miles, so she suggested Mr. Williams wait at the house. He thanked her courteously and put his horse in the barn.

Mr. Williams admitted that he had not eaten breakfast and extravagantly admired Hetty's pancakes and pie. His table manners were perfect (George hadn't any), and he was handsome in a strong way, with a neat mustache but smooth cheeks. (George shaved once a week.) Mr. Williams also had an interesting pallor and a fine, cultured, baritone voice. A fascinating man, thought Hetty.

Mr. Williams helped her with her work, which George never did—he said housekeeping was her job—and wiped dishes, carried water from the well. He could listen or talk, as circumstances indicated, and in twenty minutes Hetty felt that he was an old friend. For his part, he let her see, in a gentlemanly way, that he thought her a most extraordinary woman. She weighed just under a hundred pounds, and her early life had been spent in genteel surroundings, but there was nothing she hesitated to turn her hand to, from gardening to carpentry. George took all such things for granted, but Mr. Williams said enviously that she was a jewel.

Mr. Williams was a well-read man, and she guessed he was a traveling professor, but he said he'd had no schooling, which made him all the more remarkable. He was on his way to South America, he said, but he would not feel right if he left without settling an old debt with George. Hetty said cash money was always welcome, fishing for information, and Mr. Williams replied, a little evasively, that he had several thousand dollars in gold coin in his saddle-bags. Hetty asked if he was not worried about robbers in this uncivilized land, and he smiled tightly and said he would do whatever civilizing was necessary. She had the feeling that anyone who meddled with Mr. Williams would regret it. He was a dangerous man.

He paid her extravagant but sincere compliments, but he was a true gentleman and understood where to draw the line. So interesting was his conversation that Hetty forgot the baby's feeding time, until a howl from the crib reminded her. George Junior emptied his bottle in a businesslike manner,

burped and fell asleep again. Mr. Williams said he was a remarkably handsome baby. George said his son looked like a pig and slept all the time.

The more they talked, the more fascinating did Hetty find Mr. Williams, and it was obviously mutual. There was a bond of understanding between them, a mutual respect and admiration, as though they understood and liked one another at first glance. The afternoon passed like a dream, and Hetty positively sparkled.

When she started supper, Mr. Williams said he would not stay for the meal, but pay George and leave, but Hetty insisted and set three places. When they heard the wagon, Mr. Williams suggested they wait in the kitchen and surprise George, and Hetty could think of no objection.

George came in, saying as he kicked the door shut, "Company, Ma?" This was another one of his uncivilized habits, calling her "Ma." "The brand on that horse is a new—"

He broke off as if he had been hit in the ribs, staring at Mr. Williams, who said pleasantly, "Surprised, George?"

"Wild Bill Crowley," George said in a flat voice. "You all right, Hetty?"

She said primly, "Mr. Williams is one of the few truly civilized men I've met out here. Crowley? Oh!"

"That's right," said the guest. "Sit down, George."

His revolver pointed over the edge of the table, but Hetty looked at George's face and cried, "George! You behave yourself!"

George was pale and sweating, but he wasn't cowed. He said, "Shoot, damn you! But if you touch Hetty—!"

Hetty cried, "No! What do you mean? Mr. Williams—Crowley—is a gentleman."

Crowley said without taking his deadly stare from George, "Eight years in prison I owe your husband. I'm a man who pays his debts. And he killed my brother. You have a brother, Hetty?"

"One," she said absently. "He's a fine organist. What would you gain by shooting George?"

"Satisfaction. For eight years I've dreamed of it. I broke out, dug up the coin I'd hidden and came straight here. Meeting you was unexpected, but a pleasure, and you know I'd

never harm you, unless"—his voice became harder—"you forced me to. You must know I admire you, but I'm a man who doesn't turn aside for anything."

Hetty knew that; there was steel behind his charming manner, and under certain circumstances a woman might find assurance in it, but not now. She said in a small voice, "They'll hang you."

"No. I have good friends here and in South America. But if I knew I'd hang, that wouldn't stop me."

"Thief and murderer," George grated.

Hetty turned on him. "Will you keep a civil tongue? At least, Mr.—uh—Crowley, we'll dine first. Sit down, George, and try to act like a gentleman."

George gave her a stunned look and sat down. Wild Bill Crowley said admiringly, "You're a girl in a million! Steady as a rock, beautiful as sunrise."

Hetty set the food on the table. She was a wonderful cook, and Crowley appreciated it, but George did not touch his food. Once he picked up the saltcellar, hefting it thoughtfully, and Hetty read his mind and told him sharply to put it down.

Crowley said, "George thinks I'm so busy admiring you that I've forgotten him."

"George is a numbskull, but I'll make something of him."

To that Crowley said nothing, but slid an amused glance at George. After the meal, he asked if she objected to cigar smoke. Lighting up took both hands, and George tensed, then groaned when Hetty leaned across the table for something, blocking him.

Crowley said, through smoke, "How George won you will always amaze me. Don't you think it was a mistake?"

"He's far from perfect," admitted Hetty.

"Listen to me," Crowley said. "This isn't the way I'd choose, but in a few minutes I'll ride on, and I've learned that big chances don't come twice. And this is the biggest. Hetty, I'll be a great man in South America, after the rev—after our business goes through. You know I'm not just blowing, don't you?"

"You'd do most anything you set out to do, I think."

"Just so. You're wasted on George, wasted here."

"Give me a gun, and we'll see who's wasted!" George cried, and for a moment Hetty was afraid he would lunge at Crowley, gun or no gun.

"George, act civilized!" she cried.

"Even you could never make anything of him," said Crowley. "He's too stubborn. Hetty, I'll be a millionaire. I'll make you a queen, if you want that. We'll take over a country for ourselves down there. The two of us could do anything!"

"I'm flattered," Hetty said. "But I'm a married woman, you see. People would talk."

"I'll make you a widow!" cried Wild Bill Crowley, the revolver jerking forward like a snake, and George sucked in his breath sharply, as if he'd felt the bullet.

"Wait!" cried Hetty, and the moment hung balanced on the very edge of violence. She stood up and backed to the sink, Crowley glancing warily at her, but never taking his attention from George.

When she picked up the heavy butcherknife, he said, in a voice sharp as the knife itself, "Don't come at me, Hetty."

She shook her head, looking at him, her eyes clear and steady, deep blue as the sky after a storm. "You are a remarkable man, and under different circumstances I'd go with you and never regret it, come what might. But a woman is an odd creature, whose heart isn't hers to control, and George has mine. He's not overly civilized, or handsome, or clever, but—it's that way, and if he dies, so do I." She put the point of the knife under her heart.

George and Crowley stared at her, and there was no doubt that she meant it. Crowley said, "Your baby?"

"You're a gentleman," she told him. "I can trust you to stop at the next house and send someone for him." She looked steadily at George a long moment, and then whispered, "Now, I'm ready."

Crowley sat still as a rock while time stretched tight. Then he sighed. "Checkmate. If you'd come at me with the knife or anything else, I'd have acted first and felt sorry for you later, but . . . Hetty, I couldn't make you any more of a queen than you are now. I won't harm George, if you'll come with me."

Without hesitating, she shook her head. "You're a man who doesn't turn aside. Neither can I. It's George, for better or worse."

Crowley pushed back his chair and said gloomily, "Well, I always was lucky at cards. Where's a rope? I'll have to fix George so that he won't start shooting as I ride off."

"Do you think I'd let him?" Hetty demanded.

Crowley studied her face. "No. Give me an hour, if you can. For his own sake."

George growled, but neither of them paid any attention to him. Hetty stood straight and proud and silent, and Crowley looked at her hungrily. Then he shook his head, like a man shaking off a dream, and said in a puzzled voice, "I'm a man who never turns aside, but you turned me. How much of—of today was deliberate? Did you guess from the first who I was, and start charming me?"

Hetty shook her head, but he insisted. "I have a right to know, and I'll think no less of you. How much was for *me,* how much for the man come to kill your husband?"

Hetty shook her head again, but she smiled faintly, and whatever that implied, it satisfied Crowley. Still covering George with the gun, he picked up his hat, bowed at Hetty, and was gone. George lunged toward the bedroom, where there was a rifle, but Hetty was quicker, and tripped him, so that he fell on the stove and burned both hands. It was his own fault, she told him as she greased his blistered palms.

Afterwards, she often said that Mr. Crowley was a true gentleman, and George would retort that he was a thief and killer. She'd point out that Mr. Crowley had appreciated her, and said so, and it was interesting to speculate on how things might have turned out in South America. At this point George usually began shouting about flighty women who fell for the first slick-talking stranger who came along.

The argument lasted, off and on, for sixty years. I heard it often, though I was too young to understand the story. Later I did and remembered how Grandmother had the last word. She died first, quietly and cheerfully, holding George's hand. Wearing an old-fashioned, white cotton nightgown, her

hair in neat pigtails, it was astonishing how like a little girl she looked, even to my young eyes.

Almost the last thing she said was, "Don't feel bad, George. I'm only going on ahead a little, and I'll be waiting for you." She smiled the faintest of smiles and added, "Even if that nice Mr. Crowley is there. You know I never wanted to be anyone else's queen but yours."

A THIEF BY CHOICE

By BENNETT FOSTER

Bennett Foster has a quality, a sort of *tone*, in his stories which few other writers have been able to duplicate. You get the feeling, reading his stuff, that this is a man who really knows the West; you get the feeling that this is the way it really *was*.

ONE TIME in Alesnado Canyon, Harvey Miller told Bill McFarland how he'd got a start in cattle. Harvey's uncle raised him and when he was fourteen put him out by Palo Grande, looking after a string of steers. He had a tent, plenty of horses and four hundred two-year-olds in a big, open country; he cooked and kept his camp clean; he rode and held the steers where they belonged.

"I figured I was on the payroll," Harvey said, "but it turned out I was wrong. The steers sold good and I'd held them together, but when I went to draw my wages I didn't get a dime. Uncle Otto said he'd fed me and bought my clothes since my folks died. He claimed if anybody owed money, I owed him."

"So then you pulled out?" McFarland asked.

"Not then." Harvey shook his head. "I went home with Uncle Otto and watched my chances. The first time he was gone, I butchered the fattest dry cow I could find and sold the meat in town. I got twenty dollars for the hide and carcass. That's when I left."

McFarland tilted back his head and laughed. "Why," he said, "you're nothing but a cow thief. I never figured to hole up with an outlaw. What did you do then? Blow the money?"

No one could get very mad at Bill McFarland; even the re-

ward notices said he was a "well-met, personable man." Harvey began to bristle, then relaxed again. "No," he answered. "The L Cross ran a wagon all year long and I caught on with it. I'd always aimed to have an outfit of my own, so I used the twenty bucks to buy a heifer." He grinned at Bill McFarland, and Bill grinned back at him. He'd come to think a lot of Harvey Miller; he liked the boy just fine.

Happenstance put McFarland in Alesnado Canyon. After the Guardcastle bank robbery, he split off from Jack Kusch and Alec Perry and headed south. It was chancy business, but he dodged the towns, carried a blanket roll on his saddle, and to all appearance was just another cowboy laid off after fall roundup. Steady travel put him through Trinchera Pass; all the state of Colorado was behind him, his horse was legweary and he began looking for a place to stop.

A ways below the pass a crew built a railroad grade, and skirting wide around, McFarland came to an old road that dropped off in a big canyon. There was scrub oak and cedar; red walls towered on either hand, a second canyon entered and McFarland's horse watered at a little stream. Then, as dusk came on, he came to a hay meadow and then to a rock house. A man was working at the house, building a fireplace and a wall.

McFarland watched awhile before he spoke. "It won't draw if you fix it that way. You got to build a kind of shelf before you start the chimney."

The laborer turned deliberately. Young, dark-haired, dark-eyed, he sized up Bill McFarland. Then, "Put your horse in the corral and throw him down some hay," he ordered. "I'm looking for a man that can build chimneys."

McFarland went on to the corral. When he returned, the other had built a fire and was heating a Dutch oven. He was, he said, Harvey Miller, and they would eat as soon as the bread was baked. Just as casually, McFarland said his name was Johnson—Slim Johnson—and that if he had the coffee mill he'd grind the coffee.

When the meal was ready, they ate in companionable silence, and afterward they smoked a final cigarette and went to bed. It seemed to Bill McFarland he'd found the place he had been looking for.

Morning came mighty early. Just at daybreak Harvey's horses came in to be fed, and after breakfast McFarland laid rock. Harvey carried supplies, mixed the adobe mud they used for mortar and gave out information. This was an old Spur line camp; the Spur was out of business and Harvey was homesteading the place. Amadeo Casaus had cut and stacked the hay on shares; Amadeo lived over east, out on the flats. Favora was the closest town, thirty miles by wagon road, but nearer across country. Stone by stone, the wall went up, and when night came McFarland was weary; he had not worked so hard in years.

When wall, fireplace and chimney were finished, they patched the sagging roof, and with that done they mended the corral. Time slid by until a week was gone; then company arrived. Returning down-canyon with a load of poles, they found three callers, Linc Boston, Dolf Neverseek, Tom Neverseek—Harvey named them. All three watched Bill McFarland as warily as he watched them. They placed no trust in strangers, and having made this estimate, McFarland let down a little. These three were not the kind that went running to the law; rather they stayed as far from it as possible. Harvey asked the callers in, and McFarland took the empty water bucket to the spring. When he returned, Dolf Neverseek was talking about the Guardcastle bank robbery.

"It was a Wild Bunch job," he said. "The word is that Bill McFarland and two others done it. One held the horses, and the other two walked into the bank and out again with thirty thousand dollars. The whole thing was slick as a greased gut, only they had to shoot the cashier making their getaway."

"Then it wasn't McFarland." Harvey was positive. "McFarland never shot anybody; he's got that reputation."

"Maybe one of the others done the shooting," Neverseek admitted, "but anyhow the cashier's died, and there's hell to pay about it. The whole of Colorado's on the warpath; Wyoming too. We heard in town the Pinkertons had been called in and there's posses riding every place."

Harvey had built a fire and put the coffee on. McFarland, watching the blaze, noted how well his chimney drew. Thirty thousand dollars! There had been less than seven in the Guardcastle bank. And the cashier was dead. A man was crazy, try-

ing to defend money that was not his, and Alec, the fool was too quick on the trigger. Now Pinkerton detectives were at work, and that bunch never quit, and Colorado and Wyoming were upset. Doubtless the territory of New Mexico was upset too.

"It's a wonder the Wild Bunch ain't been down here," Linc Boston drawled. "There's eighteen, twenty thousand dollars in old man Puryear's bank whenever they make up the graders' payroll. That bank would be a cinch if I ever seen one!"

"They've got guards," Harvey reminded.

"Guards!" Boston scoffed. "Two old soaks that stand around wearing guns, telling how big they are. If three or four men made up their minds to take that payroll, there's nothing in Favora that would stop them."

Tom, the younger Neverseek, had taken no part in the talk. Now, "There won't be no payrolls for a while," he said. "The ground's froze on the mesa and the contractor's laying off his men. They can't work till it thaws. . . . Your coffee's ready, Harvey." They drank coffee, then Linc Boston and the Neverseeks left. When they were gone, Harvey answered McFarland's questions. Boston and the Neverseeks lived in the Yegua, the big canyon that entered the Alesnado from the north, and each had a little bunch of cattle. After that, Harvey was uncommunicative for a while; he had been pondering something all day long.

Presently he broke silence and came at McFarland with a proposition. There was a lot to do around the place, for he had just moved in the month before. He couldn't pay much, but if Slim Johnson could help him out awhile—

McFarland's horse was rested, and there was money in his saddlebags—his part of the loot from the Guardcastle bank. Fleshpots beckoned, he was due for a drunk and a good time, but Pinkerton detectives and the sheriffs of two states were looking for the bank robbers, and any stranger moving through the country was sure to be suspect.

"I guess I can accommodate you," McFarland answered, "only I've been traveling pretty light. If I stay, I'll need some clothes and bedding."

"Sure," Harvey agreed. "We could go to town tomorrow.

You buy what you want and, if you're a little short, I can let you have—"

"I'd better not go in," McFarland interrupted. "I'll give you a list and you can get the stuff. I'd better stay and work on the corral."

So Bill McFarland worked on the corral, and Harvey Miller took the wagon to Favora, a two-day trip. When he returned, late in the evening of the second day, he led a tall gray horse beside the wagon. McFarland, carrying supplies into the house, was eager to have the news from town, but all Harvey talked of was the horse—nothing about bank robbers, nothing about sheriffs. They were short on horses, Harvey said, and there was a trader in Favora with a bunch of them. He'd got the gray horse cheap, and when he said what he had paid, McFarland grunted.

"Horses ain't worth much," McFarland said, "but that's too cheap. There can't help but be something wrong with him."

In the morning they found out what was wrong with the gray horse. They had to tie up a foot to get the saddle on, and when Harvey mounted, the gray bucked wickedly across the corral, whirled, kicked at the fence, then reared and fell over backward. Harvey jumped clear and caught the reins as the horse scrambled up.

"Let's try that over," Harvey said. "Maybe you didn't mean it."

But the gray horse did mean it. Three times Harvey mounted, and each time the horse fell backward with him. That was enough, and Harvey lost patience.

"Get to the gate," he told McFarland, "and open it when I'm ready. I'll try to keep this baby right side up long enough to put him through it."

"He'll stampede when you do," McFarland warned. "Wait till I get a horse."

When McFarland had saddled and assumed position by the gate, Harvey tried once more. This time he did not mount, but caught the cheekpiece of the hackamore, pulled the gray's head to him and, holding cheekpiece and saddle horn, left foot in the stirrup, hung monkeylike beside the horse. Now, when the gray reared, Harvey's booted foot and leg thudded against

side and belly. Methodically, remorselessly, he kicked the gray, and each kick brought a grunt.

No horse can take that sort of punishment for long. The gray quit trying to fall back, Harvey forked the saddle, McFarland opened the gate, and the horse stampeded. Out through the gate he went, bawling as he ran, across the little flat, through rocks and brush on the slope behind the house. Then, as suddenly as he had bolted, the horse quit.

"You've got yourself an outlaw," McFarland said as he reined in by Harvey. "What that horse needs is a good trading off."

Harvey's nose was bleeding, for the gray had thrown his head and hit Harvey in the face. Harvey's jaw was squared and his eyes sparkled.

"What he needs is riding," Harvey said, "and that's what he'll get!"

November had nearly ended when Bill McFarland came to the Alesnado, and now, in mid-December, the days were short. In the brief daylight, Harvey and McFarland shaped things up for the winter. They rode the flats east of the canyon, called on Amadeo Casaus and threw back a few strays. They worked the Yegua, visited Linc Boston and picked up four old cows. They gathered thirty-two heifer calves, brought them to the meadow and fed a little hay to keep them there.

Those little heifers were Harvey's pride. He had bought them that fall and had high hopes for them. They were foundation stock and would add the quality he wanted in his cattle. Harvey talked about the heifers, and he spoke, too, of other things; of his Uncle Otto and the camp by Palo Grande; of the ranch he meant to build in the Alesnado. And he talked about the gray horse, for, true to his promise, Harvey rode the gray.

"That horse has been abused," Harvey told McFarland. "Somebody sure mistreated him. His mouth is so scarred I can't use a bit on him, but he works good with a hackamore. You know, if the right man had got hold of that horse he would of made a dandy."

McFarland was skeptical. The gray horse was big and stout, and there were days when he behaved. But mostly he was purely vicious. He had not forgotten that first lesson and no

longer tried to fall back, but Harvey had to watch him constantly. The gray never bucked on a flat place or in the open, but always downhill, through rocks and brush, where he had advantage of his rider. When he stampeded, it was along a rimrock or through timber. That big gray horse had murder on his mind. McFarland said as much to Harvey, but Harvey just laughed.

For Christmas dinner they had wild turkey, cooked in a Dutch oven, and on New Year's Day Harvey hung a calendar on the wall by way of celebration. They were caught up on the riding, and McFarland believed that it was time to go. Surely by now the first excitement of the Guardcastle bank robbery had died, and the necessity to hide out was over. But he dreaded telling Harvey and kept postponing the day.

So far, the weather had been clear and cold; now came a morning when low clouds banked in the north presaged a storm. Harvey, surveying the cloud bank, commented that the hay supply at the corral was low; they'd better haul a load or two up from the meadow. Accordingly McFarland caught the work team. While he harnessed and hooked to the wagon, Harvey roped the gray. The gray had been bitten in a fight—a deep gash on the withers. Harvey doctored the wound, rubbing in gall cure, and dropped the box top. He bent to retrieve it.

For an instant, as he stooped, Harvey was off guard, and the gray horse, always watchful, whirled and kicked him. Harvey struck the fence, rebounding from it, and the gray kicked again, then moved away. McFarland reached him.

"My side!" Harvey gasped. "Every time I breath a knife sticks in me!"

"Lie still!" McFarland ordered. "Let's see how bad you're hurt."

McFarland knelt and his big hands were deft and gentle. His face was grave as he stood up, looked at the waiting wagon, then back to Harvey.

"I think he broke your ribs," McFarland said. "The best thing is to get you to a doctor."

Blankets, a tarpaulin, and hay under them padded the wagon box. McFarland helped Harvey in, covered him, and started, the wagon jolting on the rough road. The wagon would

not do; McFarland knew it, and headed for Amadeo Casaus'. Six miles down-canyon, six more across the flats—it took three hours to make that meager distance. Amadeo had a spring buggy and a good fast team. He sent his oldest son to get them ready and helped McFarland carry Harvey in. In spite of the coverings Harvey had chilled through. His face was gray with pain, but his first concern was for his cattle.

"You've got to go back!" he told McFarland. "There's a storm coming; if somebody ain't there, those heifers will scatter and we'll lose them. Amadeo will take me to town. You get on back!"

McFarland wanted none of that—his idea was to see Harvey safe in a doctor's care—but Amadeo sided Harvey. He would, Amadeo said, have Harvey in Favora in two hours; three men would crowd the buggy and there was no need to slow the team with extra weight. McFarland gave in reluctantly, and Harvey, warm and well bundled, was loaded on the buggy seat and hot flatirons tucked in at his feet. Amadeo buttoned the storm apron and had the team trotting before they left the yard. When the buggy was out of sight, McFarland climbed back into the wagon.

It was about two o'clock when he reached the house in Alesnado Canyon and stopped to unload tarp and blankets. From there McFarland drove on to the meadow, fed the waiting heifers, piled the wagon high with hay and hauled to the corral. All the time he worried about Harvey Miller. Surely by now Amadeo had Harvey in Favora, under a doctor's care, but still McFarland was uneasy, believing he should have gone along. He looked up at the leaden sky, and the first big snowflakes struck his face and melted.

At first the snow was scanty, by dark the ground was hardly covered, but in the night the blizzard struck its pace, and when daylight came McFarland realized the value of the canyon. Outside the rock house the snow sifted down or whirled in little eddies, but above the canyon walls was a blurred white fury and he could hear the high, harsh keening of the wind. McFarland fed the horses at the corral, went to the meadow and pitched down hay; beyond that he could do nothing.

For three days, that was his routine, but on the fourth the weather broke, turned still and bitter cold, and with a lead

horse, bucking the drifts he could not circle, changing mounts as needed, McFarland went to Amadeo Casaus'. Amadeo was cheerful. He had returned home before the snow set in and he had good word of Harvey. Harvey had three broken ribs and was bruised from leg to shoulder from striking the corral fence, but the doctor had strapped him up and taken care of him.

"How long will Harvey be in town?" McFarland queried. "Or did the doctor say?"

"Who can tell?" Amadeo shrugged. "A month, maybe. Maybe longer. Until he gets well, anyhow."

McFarland had planned on leaving the Alesnado. He'd figured to ride south, perhaps to San Antonio, where he was not known and where there was warmth and pleasure, but in all his life Bill McFarland had never quit a partner in a tight spot.

"I'd better get back home," McFarland said. "I've got cattle to look after. Thanks for everything, Amadeo."

The cow business is always a gamble, and in winter the game gets tough; no one knew that better than Bill McFarland. In Alesnado Canyon he had hay stacked on the meadow and long, grassy slopes and ridges that the wind kept clear of snow. He had, too, the shelter of the canyon, good saddle horses, horse feed in the shed and a sure wisdom concerning cattle. These were chips to shove into the pot, the cards he held. He played them carefully.

Following his return from Amadeo Casaus', McFarland rode the canyon every day, checking on the cattle. When he discovered a weak cow or one with a calf sucking, he surveyed her with calculating judgment, and if her condition warranted, brought her to the meadow to be fed. He could not bring too many—he had to stretch the hay—but he was prodigal of himself and of the horses. No ride was too long for him to take, no weather too cold to venture out in. Day followed day and McFarland lost all track of time.

There were a few breaks in the monotony. Linc Boston and the Neverseeks came down and were surprised to learn of Harvey's hurt. Amadeo Casaus rode over and spent the night. Amadeo had been to town and brought news of Harvey. Harvey had had pneumonia, but was recovered from it; the sickness had set back his return. McFarland looked blankly at

Amadeo. Pneumonia? Harvey? He turned to the calendar and was amazed at the time elapsed since Harvey had been hurt.

Save for these visits, McFarland was alone. He worked and slept and ate and worked again in never-ending round. The tall walls of the canyon hemmed him in; at night the rock house trapped him. He was caught, and an angry resentment grew in him. It centered on Harvey Miller. If Harvey had listened, if Harvey had not been hardheaded and a fool, if Harvey had let the gray horse be, all this would never have happened. McFarland asked himself what business he had here, and answered, savagely, that he had none. These weren't his cattle, he had no stake in them, and yet—

Returning up canyon in late afternoon, McFarland found a cow with a newborn calf. He'd missed that cow someplace in his riding; she was old and weak and pitifully thin. The cow turned slowly to look at McFarland and offered no objection when he got down, caught the struggling calf and loaded it across his saddle. Mounted again, McFarland nursed the cow along, and each step she took was a victory. She fell twice, and twice he tailed her up, reloaded the calf and humored the cow along. When it grew dark, McFarland left his charges in the shelter of a cedar clump, rode home, filled two sacks with hay and brought them back.

"You'll die anyhow," he told the cow as he threw down the hay. "I'm wasting time on you."

But in the morning the cow was still alive, and with the calf across McFarland's saddle, they resumed their halting progress. It was near noon before they reached the meadow, and when McFarland put down the calf it butted vigorously against its mother's flank. A good warmth filled McFarland as he watched.

The little heifers, strong and thrifty, had not moved when he arrived. They watched McFarland with mild, inquiring eyes as he looked them over. They had the quality, all right; they'd bring good calves when they were old enough to breed. Looking at the heifers, watching the calf and the old cow, a vague dissatisfaction stirred in Bill McFarland; a faint desire that had no definition and that bothered him because he could not name it. He scowled at the placid heifers.

"To hell with you!" he said. "I won't be here to see what kind of calves you bring!"

At the end of February, Harvey Miller came back to the Alesnado and Bill McFarland changed his mind. In the long weeks he had planned just what he'd do when Harvey came; he'd give Harvey a start, then go about his business, but one look changed all that. This thin, pale fellow who had come back from Favora could never stand the gaff; he might fold up and die if left alone. Amadeo Casaus had brought Harvey over in his buggy, and McFarland got Amadeo aside.

"He sure looks awful peaked," McFarland said. "Do you think he's all right?"

"He'll be all right," Amadeo assured. "Pneumonia's tough; it takes a long time to get your strength back after it. Harvey will be O.K. if you look after him."

When Amadeo was gone, McFarland fussed around fixing things for Harvey. He kept at it until Harvey stopped him and asked about the cattle.

"You've done good," Harvey said, when McFarland had made his brief report. "Real good, but you must of worked yourself to death. It's a good thing I'm back to help you."

That worried Bill McFarland. He knew Harvey, knew that Harvey would try to take his share of the load and that he couldn't swing it. Still, there was no use in arguing—not now—but in the morning McFarland took a stand. Harvey's intentions were plain when they went to the corral, and McFarland had to tell him.

"Harvey," he said earnestly, "I've got all I can handle. There's calves all over and more coming every day. The bunch grass is sprouting, and these old cows are wearing themselves out hunting it. You've got to take it easy. If you get down I'll have to let the cattle go."

Mixed emotions raced across Harvey's face, and then he laughed. "All right," he agreed. "I'll take it easy for a while. Doc said for me to. But you're a hell of a looking boss to be giving orders."

McFarland joined the laughter because what Harvey said was so. McFarland's hair was long and shaggy, he hadn't shaved and his clothes were about worn out. But mainly he

laughed because he was relieved. He made his ride, and when he came in a meal was ready, and after it Harvey dug up a pair of shears—the curved kind brand inspectors use—and trimmed McFarland's hair and beard.

"You're kind of scalloped," Harvey said when he surveyed the job, "but you look blamed near human."

For a while then they rubbed along. Harvey grew stronger every day and presently began to ride a little; short trips at first, that got gradually longer. As he bettered, a change came over him. At first Harvey had been so glad to be back that nothing else mattered, but now he would lapse into spells of moody silence, and there were times when he snapped at Bill McFarland. Something was aching Harvey, and McFarland wondered what it was. Then, a full four weeks after his return, Harvey dumped his load. He was, by that time, riding every day, fully recovered from his sickness and injury. They had gone down to the meadow, and when McFarland bragged on the little heifers, Harvey stated that he meant to sell them.

"I have to," Harvey said. "I've got a note due at the bank the tenth of April. The heifers are all I've got to sell."

Worry and rancor were pent up in Harvey; he had to talk and went on from that start. He'd borrowed from the Favora bank to buy the heifers, giving a six-month note with assurance that he could renew it. Now Puryear, who ran the bank, had backed out on the promise.

"I went to see him before I came home," Harvey said, "and he sure put it to me. There was a lot of stealing last year, and now that the graders are working, it's started up again. All the big outfits have lost cattle, and they all do business at the bank. Puryear thinks Linc and the Neverseeks are doing it, and he asked me to spy on them."

"So?" McFarland prompted.

"So I told him I wouldn't do it, and he got sore," Harvey continued. "He said if that was how I felt, I could pay my note when it came due. He tried to crowd me, and I told him to go to hell. I won't spy on Linc Boston. He worked for the L Cross when I caught on with them, and he was good to me. Besides, like I told Puryear, I live right against those fellows, and I've got to get along."

Again Harvey paused, and then, his voice bitter, "There's

no use trying to be honest! It doesn't pay! A man no sooner gets his head up than somebody kicks him in the face. I'm going to the Yegua!"

Harvey left and McFarland began his own ride down the canyon. He could understand the thieving. Graders were hearty men who ate a lot, and the camp commissaries would make a tempting market for stolen beef. And he could understand the banker. Linc Boston and the two Neverseeks were just the kind to do a little rustling; from his talk, Harvey had that same idea. But Boston had befriended Harvey when he was just a kid, and Harvey was no man to forget a favor. McFarland scowled. Harvey had seen a lot of that bunch lately; they came down frequently, and most of Harvey's rides were to the Yegua.

A cow had got into the creek bottom and McFarland stopped to look at her. Deciding that she was all right, he started on; then stopped again. Harvey was right about his cattle; nobody would buy cows and calves at this time of year —a man could hardly move them—but did Harvey need to sell the heifers? McFarland's saddlebags, back at the rock house, contained two thousand dollars, and surely Harvey didn't owe the bank that much. Why not take the money and buy in with Harvey?

McFarland dismounted, rolled a cigarette and debated the idea. There had been Wild Bunch riders who dropped clear out of sight, just quit and disappeared. Bill McFarland could do that, too, and the Alesnado was a fine place for it. The canyon was isolated, few came there and nobody asked questions. That part was good, but what about Harvey Miller? Harvey would know the money wasn't honest and would be curious. The banker might be curious, too, but there were ways around the banker. It all came down to Harvey. McFarland had ridden back trails a long time, and distrust was ingrained in him. Bill McFarland wanted to trust Harvey Miller, but could he?

That night McFarland hardly spoke, but his preoccupation went unnoticed, for Harvey had troubles of his own. So for two days, then coming in on the third day, McFarland stopped on the meadow. There were cattle all around him—the cows he had brought in; the little, sturdy heifers; the old cow he

had saved. He knew them all, and knew, too, that he did not want to leave the Alesnado. There on the meadow he made up his mind. He would trust Harvey. He'd go in and lay it on the line. After supper, when they were loafing, he'd say, "Look, Harvey. I've got a little money, enough to pay the bank. How would it suit you if we threw in together?" He had no doubt of Harvey's answer..

McFarland's horse threaded through the cattle and splashed across the creek. From the south bank McFarland could see Linc Boston and the Neverseeks riding up the canyon. They waved but did not stop, and he went on to the corral, unsaddled and turned his horse loose. At the house, Harvey sat beside the rickety table, figuring on a piece of paper. He glanced up as McFarland entered.

"Sit down, Slim," Harvey said. "I want to talk to you."

There was an excitement about Harvey; he was wound up tight as a clock spring. McFarland sat on the old packing box that served him for a chair, wondering what came next.

"I hate to do it," Harvey said, still looking at the paper, "but I've got to let you go. I can't afford to keep you any longer. Tomorrow's the thirty-first of March and you've been here four months, but I bought some stuff for you when you first came. I figure I owe you fifty dollars." He pushed the paper forward. "Here it is, if you want to look."

Anger, so hot and bitter he could hardly speak, welled up in Bill McFarland. "I'll take your word for it," he grated.

"All right, then." Harvey stood, pulled out a thin roll and peeled five bills from it. He put the money on the table. "There's your pay. I saved some grub for you. I've already eaten." He moved from the table, pausing by the door. "I'm going to feed the horses," Harvey said, and went on out.

For a while McFarland sat stock-still, staring at the money on the table. Harvey was broke; he must have borrowed from Linc Boston. Picking up the bills, he pocketed them; they were his wages. He had fought snow and cold and ridden every day, saving Harvey's cattle, and this was what he got; no thanks, no nothing. And he had decided to trust Harvey, to bail Harvey out, to save his worthless neck. How wrong could a man be, McFarland wondered.

It was dark when Harvey came back in, and McFarland was lying on his bed. Neither spoke. Harvey took his rifle—he had no other gun—to the fireplace and put wood on the fire. The fat pine blazed and by its light Harvey cleaned the weapon and loaded it. When that was done, he laid the rifle on his bed, sat down and pulled off a boot.

At daylight they were up and stirring, but there was no talk, and Harvey would not meet McFarland's eyes. He dressed and, taking the rifle, hurried out. Presently McFarland heard him ride away. Evidently Harvey had kept a night horse up and was after the *remuda*. McFarland built a fire and put on coffee. He ate a good breakfast, for he meant to travel and wanted something in his belly.

Afterward, when he was making a slim blanket roll, he heard Harvey pound by with the *remuda*. McFarland latched on his gun belt, the heavy holster sagging at his hip, picked up the blankets and his saddlebags, and went to the corral. Harvey had roped the gray and put on a hackamore.

The gray was an easy keeper. For six weeks he had gone without a mouthful of grain, but he was strong and sleek. His ears were cocked and he blew softly as Harvey led him over to be saddled.

"You going to ride that horse?" McFarland asked.

"Why not?" Harvey brushed dirt from the gray and did not look around. "He's my horse, and I ain't going to argue about riding him. I've got to meet some men."

Harvey's rifle, in a saddle scabbard, leaned against a rock. McFarland took two steps and was between man and weapon. "Harvey," he said. His voice was low, but Harvey turned to stare, wide-eyed, at the big gun in Bill McFarland's hand. Things had all fallen into place for Bill McFarland: Linc Boston's big talk about the graders' payroll. Harvey's tension, the rifle he had cleaned. Harvey was sore at the Favora banker, and he struck back when he was mad.

"You're figuring to hold up the Favora bank," McFarland said. "You and Linc Boston and the Neverseeks."

Harvey's face was proof of McFarland's statement. "What's it to you?" he demanded. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm Bill McFarland," Bill McFarland said, "and I don't

give a damn about the bank. But you ain't going to ride that horse. Now get on over by the fence and sit down!"

Six-shooter and hard eyes enforced the order. Harvey sat beside the fence, and Bill McFarland watched him and watched the canyon. Harvey had said he was to meet some men, so likely Linc Boston and the Neverseeks weren't coming for him. But then again, they might.

Harvey stirred restlessly. "How long do I have to sit here?" he asked.

"Until I tell you to get up," McFarland said.

Time drawled by, unbroken. The horse stood, hipshot, and dozed. Harvey sat by the fence, and Bill McFarland waited. Once Harvey asked if he could get a drink; McFarland told him no. An hour went by, and then another. Harvey wanted a cigarette. That was allowed; McFarland rolled one too. The sun had climbed, and it was hot in the corral. Linc Boston and the Neverseeks weren't coming, and it was time to leave.

"How much do you owe the bank?" McFarland asked. "I've wondered about that. You never told me."

"Nine hundred dollars." Harvey's voice was sullen. "The calves cost six hundred and I borrowed a little more to run on. What do you care? You—"

"Shut up!" McFarland bent, opened a saddlebag, and, lifting out a sheaf of bills, began to count them. When he had finished, he folded the money and stuck it in a crack between two poles. "That's a thousand dollars," he announced. "I'll buy into your outfit. I'll be your silent partner." His laugh held no mirth. "Damned silent; and you be quiet too. Get up now, and put my saddle on that gray."

"Are you going to take him?" Harvey got to his feet.

"I've got to. If I leave him here, you'll ride him, and he'll kill you. Now put my saddle on him."

McFarland's saddle was in the shed. McFarland took the rifle and watched while Harvey brought the saddle out and laced it on. He added blanket roll and saddlebags himself. Then, still holding the rifle, he looked at Harvey.

"Don't get no fool ideas," he warned, then cheeked the gray and, still holding the rifle, mounted slowly. The gray horse stood for it. The gray had had one lesson in that pen; he did

not want another, and he sensed that this rider was prepared for trouble. Firm in the saddle, McFarland spoke again. "So long, kid. I'll leave your rifle on that big white rock around the bend. Now open the gate and turn me loose!"

Harvey opened the gate, and McFarland circled the pen, driving the other horses out before him. A man who rides the back trails takes such precautions automatically. He drove the horses on across the little flat, left them and went on. At the turn he looked back. Smoke eddied from the chimney he had built and Harvey still stood at the corral. Beyond the turn, McFarland placed the rifle on the white rock, then he pushed along.

At the mouth of Alesnado Canyon, he turned a little north, aiming to miss Amadeo Casaus' and then swing east again. The sun, noon-high when he left Harvey, had slipped toward the west. Six miles passed underfoot, and then McFarland saw a rider on the Favora road. It looked like Amadeo, and it was. They reined in, side by side.

"Leaving?" Amadeo asked, eying the blanket roll.

"Just going to town," McFarland lied. "What's new?"

"Plenty!" Amadeo's grin was white in his brown face. "Lots of excitement in Favora. Linc Boston and the two Neverseek boys tried to hold up the bank this morning and got caught doing it. A guard shot Linc through the leg, and Dolf Neverseek had his horse killed under him. They got all three of them in jail. You'd better come home and eat with me. I'll tell you all about it. I was there."

McFarland glanced at the sun, then shook his head. "No thanks, Amadeo, I'd better get along."

Amadeo did not insist. He said, "So long," and went on down the road. McFarland turned the gray horse east, thinking as he traveled. Linc Boston and the Neverseeks had tried it without Harvey. Linc had a bullet through the leg, and all three were in jail, but that did not mean the bank could not be robbed. McFarland had a thousand dollars left. When that was gone, he'd get Jack Kusch and Alec Perry. They'd look Favora over, and if the sign was right, they'd take that payroll. Eighteen or twenty thousand, Linc had said, and—

The gray horse topped a rise and, seeing the brushy, rock-

filled slope below, bogged his head and bucked down it with wicked, twisting jumps. McFarland rode him. At the bottom of the slope, the gray horse ran away, crashing through the cedars. It was a favorite trick, one he had played on Harvey, but McFarland reached down the right rein, wrapping it around his hand, taking a short hold. He stuck his right leg out and used his weight and pulled. The gray horse, turned halfway inside out, forgot about stampeding. He almost fell before he stopped.

Bill McFarland laughed, his shoulders squaring as regret slid from them. He'd been a fool back there in Alesnado Canyon; crazy to think he could stay there, contented, punching cows. Now he was free again. He sent the gray horse on, riding alert and watchful, knowing the gray was watchful, too, waiting for the next opportunity that came his way. Regretfully, Bill McFarland shook his head. The gray horse was big and stout, and he could surely travel, but McFarland couldn't use him. Someplace along the line he'd lose the gray; sell him, trade him, get rid of him someway. For outlaws need horses they can trust; not horses that are outlaws.

OLD MEN'S PLANS

By OLIVER LA FARGE

Here is Oliver La Farge, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Laughing Boy*, with a perceptive, penetrating story of Indians and the strange, special way they lived and thought.

FOUR PRAIRIE SCHOONERS and a spring wagon had already been brought down the slope at the head of the canyon and stood in line at the bottom. Near them the caballada of some seventy horses and mules was bunched in charge of two armed riders. Half a dozen pack animals stood near the line. Up on the rocky slope, in dancing heat waves, the last schooner was being slowly lowered and pushed down to where its mules were waiting at the bottom.

In the spring wagon sat a man and a woman. The woman was young, good-looking, well-dressed. She protected her complexion with a sunbonnet. The man was in his late fifties but still active. His grizzled beard was trimmed square, he was handsome without charm, and he affected a military carriage to fit his militia title of "Colonel." He wore a felt sombrero and a broadcloth coat. He kept glancing around, but mostly he watched that last wagon being eased down.

He was nervous, and he would remain so until they were clear of this dangerous place and out in the wide part of the canyon beyond. He concealed his uneasiness as well as he could, for the authority of the captain of a wagon train is no more than his personal prestige, but he had never imagined that José Gonzales' short cut would involve anything like this. He looked ahead, to the five mounted men, their guns across their saddles, strung out across the canyon, then back, to the five more he had placed at the head of the descent where they

could cover the rear and dominate the rims of the canyon walls.

He had not planned to take his ward beyond Santa Fé, nor to leave there until the big wagon train with its escort of dragoons was made up. Even letting Susannah come with him across the Santa Fé trace from the East had been unusual enough, but somehow young people can force a man's hand. His eyes drifted to the man in fringed buckskin at the center of the line of advance guards. Beaver Jack. *Beaver Jack.* Dammit, as if he didn't have a last name. She didn't even know his last name when she began to be infatuated with him in Santa Fé. That "Mountain Man."

Colonel Hoyt had made up this little train, taken the plunge of letting her come with him to the silver mine, and at the last minute Beaver Jack had turned up on the trail, bound for Tucson, he said. The wagon owners had voted him in enthusiastically, since he was a famous scout; there had been nothing to do but accept him.

In the shadow of the high cliffs above where they were struggling with the wagon, a turtle dove called twice; cool, liquid notes mocking their labor in the parching heat. A man took time off to curse the bird. Over on the other side of the canyon another dove answered.

It was a perfect place for an ambush, the Colonel thought. He had made his dispositions with great care, in reluctant consultation with Beaver Jack; he thought them sound, but he felt the uncertainty of a man who had no real experience and could judge the situation only by guesswork. The last wagon was down, and they were hitching up its six mules. He sighed with relief.

Three more camps and they would reach Crowley and the mines; there he could make sure that Beaver Jack continued on to Tucson. Susannah was a good girl; the infatuation would pass off. In the East and safe once more, she would forget him and marry young Ardsley. An excellent young man, a sound marriage and very sound business.

He said, "I'm glad that's over. Frankly, I fully expected the Apaches to appear while we were coming down." He looked around once more. "But since they did not," he went on, "I am satisfied that they are not following us. The hunting

grounds of the Navajo Apaches, Gonzales tells me, end here at the edge of the lower country. Surely this is the spot where they would have attacked."

The girl said, "That's good, Uncle George." (There was no blood relationship between them.) "Of course, I'll feel easier when we get to Crowley. And I do think you handled it so cleverly, the way you posted the men and all."

Her admiration soothed him. The driver of the rear wagon shouted, "All's set!" The other wagons repeated the cry. High up on the right a turtle dove gave its monotonous call again, and another answered from near the rear guard. He gave the signal to move, feeling lighter at heart than he had in many days.

At the rim of the cliffs on the south side of the canyon, Circling Warrior, old, leathery, supple, stared down. The sun beat on his bare back, but he paid no attention to it, lying as still and bright-eyed as a lizard. From near the bajada, Hurries to War gave a turtle dove call, and, farther away, Heavy Man answered him. That meant that the last wagon had passed the ledge by the yucca bush. That Hurries to War, well named . . .

When you can muster only twenty-four warriors, one having been killed and three injured in a brush with White Mountain Apaches, and six being off on a private raid toward Zuni, and you are faced with a wagon train having nineteen men all armed with rifles—if you counted the boy, and he seemed handy with a gun—there are two normal procedures. You can send out some of your best young men to follow and wait their chance to pick off a straggler, to run off a few horses, to take what profit they can without risking open battle. Or if you want to teach these new people, the Americans, not to go cutting corners through the Navajo country, you can send word to Ute Killer at Sunset Spring and Broken Hand at By-the Red Rock, gather an army, and at the right moment lay siege to the train and in the end, with luck, destroy it without too much loss of life.

But he was doing neither of these things. Instead, with twenty-four men, only three of whom had guns, he was attempting the single, spectacular stroke of taking the wagon train unaided.

That Hurries to War—he meditated briefly on the irritating

situations that can develop out of the ardors of young men and women. That spring two of his slaves had died. His wives were growing old. He had taken another twenty head of sheep from the Mexicans near Cubero. He needed a young wife in his hogan, and there was still sap in him to rise up when he contemplated Grey Man's daughter. But Hurries to War was interested in her, too, and Grey Man and his wife had hesitated. Circling Warrior was growing old. Hurries to War had leadership in him, too; he would be the one to bring in horses, sheep, slaves, in time to lead the Cottonwood Valley people. Grey Man and his wife had more than hesitated, so that when the news of this trespass came in, it was necessary for him to propose something stronger, more striking, than anything Hurries to War had thought of.

The thought of that young woman intruded even now, when his mind should be clear for war. He was hampered by concern, worry, for it was not enough merely to make a brave attempt, he had to succeed or become nobody. He looked once more with regretful approval over the dispositions the American chief had made; it would have been foolish, too costly, to attack them as they came down the bajada. He reviewed what he had learned—that the Mexican now herding the caballada was a bad shot, but the other one was a marksman; that the man in the buckskin shirt was a real scout; that the man in charge of the second wagon was quarrelsome; that the scout was courting the white woman and the chief man did not like it—the store of intimate details gathered by himself and his men watching the train over eight days, lying close in the darkness, following, listening.

The train was ready to move. He uttered a turtle dove call, and Hurries to War answered it. They would camp at Treeless Spring. They would feel safe now, they would relax; on that his campaign was based. In the next two days and nights some little carelessness would bring his moment. In his stomach fluttered a pulse of eagerness, anticipating the moment of release from the long, slow patience, the instant when the war cry went up and it was all speed, conflict and danger.

José Gonzales, riding with the advance guard, lifted his voice in song. He felt fine. El Coronel Hoyte, he had noticed, had been angry about the bajada, but then, el Coronel was not

really a western man. Now that they had reached the wide part of the canyon it was all plain going. He was being paid solid round dollars for this trip. In another month he'd be back in Santa Fé with a sackful of them. Then at last he would buy Uncle Miguel's field under the acequia by Cerro Gordo. He would also get his wife some printed cloth from Saint Louis, but above all he would buy the irrigated land.

He rode over to Santiago, the big, dark-haired Americano, the only man in the outfit he recognized as a better scout than himself.

"Now our worries are over, as it seems to me," he said in Spanish.

The Mountain Man looked around the canyon and nodded. "Perhaps yes. But we'll keep on watching just the same."

"How not? The Apache might decide not to co-operate."

Beaver Jack laughed with him. Jack himself had relaxed enough to be thinking almost wholly about Susannah. By God, he was not going to let Hoyt take her back with him to Franklin and marry her off to a merchant.

Somewhere between here and Crowley he would take her away. There he planted his stick. Wah. The defiance was all very well, but how to do it? A delicately raised girl like her might not be willing to cut and run. That depends on if she really loves me, he decided; the gentlest woman is a she-bear when she really loves. If she loves me, no other man will have her. He repeated the Plains Indian formula, there I plant my stick. Wah. He was determined, sure of himself, but still something in him was doubtful, hating the heavy established power of old men.

Hurries to War, riding with his band along the top of the mesa, studied the old chieftain ahead of him, the sinewy back, like a young man's, belied by the rather sparse hair, tinged with gray, that fell over his shoulders from under his blue turban. Hurries to War could not bring himself to wish that this venture should fail; he could only hope and scheme for his part in it to be crucial and distinguished. It was a mad plan, you would never have expected the old man to propose it, yet it was well conceived; all these days he had been seeing why Circling Warrior was a chief. It was on account of Cedar Girl, of course, and if it succeeded, Circling Warrior would

get her. Desire moved in him, and violent resentment at the power of skillful, wise old men.

He shook off the evil thoughts capable of harming the whole party. To distract his mind, he meditated sympathetically on the courtship going on down in the wagon train between Buckskin Shirt and American Chief's daughter. American Chief did not like it; he tried to keep them apart. He felt a vague parallel between that young man's situation and his own. Hurries to War wished luck to the young couple, provided he and his band did not wipe out the train.

Behind Treeless Spring there was a wide, box-like break in the canyon wall. Some water seeped along its edge, and the grass grew knee-high or higher. The stock, save for the personal mounts the men kept picketed near their fires, could all be turned loose in there under a single herder. The wagons were placed in a semi-circle near the spring, with a sentry at each end. From their positions these men could command all approaches well enough. The ground was fairly open, with moderately high grass, clumps of chamisa, and a few, scattered piñones and junipers.

Circling Warrior personally inspected the Colonel's arrangement at nightfall. The precautions were mechanical, rather than alert. The people in the camp were gay, the young woman had wandered some distance outside the wagons to pick flowers, the herder was inattentive. He told his young men that if nothing better offered, they would probably run off the entire caballada before dawn. Then they could deal with the wagons at leisure. The camp had carelessly been placed so close to the cliff that they might even be able to drop rocks on it.

Beaver Jack had the first watch at the east end of the semi-circle. His post was about twenty yards outside the wagons. He made himself comfortable in a spot where his head would not show against the skyline. He did not feel entirely easy. The camp was too close to the cliffs, he thought, and they were a little too sure there were no Indians.

About two more camps after this and they would reach Crowley, and still he did not know what he was going to do. He was not yet sure of her. He heard a step behind him and lay flat instantly, peering upwards. Susannah's sunbonnet was

clearly silhouetted against the sky. He saw her turning her head about, looking for him, and was afraid she would call out. He sat up.

"Here I am," he said softly.

She came over to him.

"Sit down. You don't want to show yourself like that."

She settled herself beside him with a swing of her full skirts. "Do you really think there's still danger, Jack?"

"The man who's only careful when he's seen enemy signs is the man who gets his hair lifted one day because the enemy didn't make any sign."

She did not answer. When he referred to his life with the Indians, she remembered that he had lived with an Arapaho woman for two years. In that thought there was something grotesquely immoral and something romantic. She wondered what that woman had been like, how he had gone about leaving her, and if she mourned him. She resolved that at the right moment she would make him talk about her.

"You hadn't ought to be here," he said. "I've got to keep my eyes peeled."

His speech was a mixture of good and bad grammar. He had had some education, back there in Ohio, before he left the settlements and headed west. You could not very well imagine him on a farm. He belonged to this wild country, an adobe house on the edge of Taos, the trackless mountains and deserts.

"We have so little chance to talk," she said simply.

In the cloudless starlight she could see him nod.

"We'll be in Crowley pretty quick," he said. "You better tell me right now if you really love me." His words came out with a little difficulty, as if he were short of breath. "Do you really want to marry me?"

Here it was. Up to now there had been a safe indecision, there had been "understanding," there had been the unspoken word, but now he thrust the hard knife-blade, decision, toward her. Crowley was nothing but the mines; there Uncle George was king. He thrust it toward her, and there was no time for putting it aside.

He said, "I reckon you know what it means to marry a Mountain Man."

She knew. Little by little he had been telling her, without ever driving home the point. The sparsely furnished Spanish house, the outpost town, the long trips without news, or the alternative Indian-haunted struggle of ranching. She wondered if it would be hard to learn Spanish. Yes, she knew; and she knew, too, that she did not care a straw.

"Yes, Jack," she said.

He took his left hand off his gun, reached out, and touched her hand.

"Then we got to clear out of here. Tomorrow we'll pass about ten miles from San Martin. It ain't but about twenty miles from us right now. They got a priest there. Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day, maybe when we hit Crowley, I'm goin' to come to you. Likely I won't give you any warnin'. I may come up with a spare horse saddled, and I may just say 'Get on behind.' Whichever way it is, will you be ready?"

"Of course."

Their language was simple, without love talk, but the questions and answers carried the pure distillation of love. No years of Indian training could quite master that moment. Jack put his hand on her shoulder, turning her, and they kissed.

Hurries to War pressed his face to the ground for a moment as he mastered the quake of laughter in his stomach. Never had he dreamed of anything on the warpath as diverting as watching these two Americans making love. He lay revelling in it for a moment, then he turned his head cautiously to look at Black Horses. They made even the least motion with supreme care, because that scout had watchful eyes—but now his eyes were blinded. Black Horses' eyes were shining with amusement. He made a scooping gesture.

Hurries to War thought hard. It was a chance to do something that would be talked of from camp to camp. They could kill the man and capture the woman; an American woman slave would be a distinguished novelty. But the force of the old man's plan held him back. There might be noise, a cry, putting the whole camp on guard, and then he would have lost face entirely. He signaled "No," with his hand, "wait."

If they went on kissing, this might be the opportunity Circling Warrior was waiting for, the thing for which they were all on watch. He lay perfectly still and completely alert. A

small part of his mind slackened to remember rare moments he had been able to steal alone with Cedar Girl, but his sympathy for these two was lessened by his contempt for a man who made love on guard.

Colonel Hoyt came back from a talk with Bighorn, the horse trader. It was almost time for the change of watches. Seeing that Susannah was not by his fire, he looked around. There was no sign of her at any of the fires. Taking up his rifle he went directly to Beaver Jack's post.

Jack heard his heavy tread as soon as he left the wagons, and let go of Susannah. There was nothing to do but wait for him; useless for her to run off.

Susannah whispered, "Keep your temper, darling."

"I'll try."

Colonel Hoyt's anger was mingled with a profound sense of satisfaction. In brief, direct words he pointed out to the Mountain Man that his conduct was unworthy, that he had risked the safety of them all to carry on an illicit flirtation, and that in the army he would be shot for it. He called himself a scout, but he showed himself no more trustworthy than a drunken farmhand. He must see that, of course, after this his presence would be unwelcome to the whole train. Tomorrow they would pass near San Martin; he trusted he would take that opportunity to relieve them all of his company.

Jack took it quietly, save that he jerked slightly at the remark about the farmhand. Susannah uttered a faint "Uncle George" at his last words. The strain of the journey had been long endured; once started, Colonel Hoyt found it hard to stop.

"Of course I know," he said, "that many of your habits were formed among the savage Indians. But you need not expect me to tolerate an attempt to apply their loose, coarse methods of courtship to my ward."

He checked himself, somewhat startled. At least he managed to avoid the word "seduction," but when Beaver Jack stood up, he was fully expecting violence.

"That's enough, Colonel. That's a-plenty and then some. You won't have to worry about my company. I'm leavin' for San Martin as soon as my turn on watch is over."

"For the camp's safety, your turn on watch is over now;

I'll take this post myself. However, I will not send any man alone through Indian country. You may remain with the train until we pass close to San Martin."

"You ain't sendin' me. I'm goin' and that's that." He turned sharply and left them.

Colonel Hoyt said, "Susannah, go to our wagon and wait for me there. I must ask you not to speak to that fellow. The watch will be changed shortly, then I want to have a talk with you."

She said, "Yes, Uncle George," more meekly than he had expected, and walked to the wagons.

Hurries to War and Black Horses had watched with relish. This was how white men kept a lookout. Now the chief of the wagon train was alone, and his manner of watching was to stand up and from time to time pace about. Hurries to War touched his comrade's shoulder, made a quick gesture, and wriggled away among the shadows to where Circling Warrior lay waiting.

Beaver Jack had saddled up and was just finishing tying his pack when Susannah came to him.

"You can't go tonight, Jack," she said urgently, "it's too dangerous."

"Don't worry, it ain't dangerous. Barrin' there's a war party followin' us, and that sure seems unlikely, it's the safest thing I can do. By ordinary, Injuns sleep at night like we do, and I'll be in San Martin easily by sunup."

"Then if it's so safe, take me with you."

This was a different voice, a different Susannah. He looked at her a long time. "Do you mean that, darlin'?"

"Certainly."

"Is your saddle heavy?"

"No."

"Get it and meet me outside Preston's wagon."

He tied his animals to Preston's wagon wheel, then he got his other two from where they were picketed. Susannah came quietly through the darkness. Her breathing was excited. For a moment they stopped to kiss.

He said, "You sure, darlin'?"

"I'm sure."

"All right." He threw her saddle on the black. "This horse's

mouth is a little hard, but he's gentle," he whispered, "and he's got a good trot."

He tied the cinch. Down the canyon ahead of them, not far, a coyote howled, paused, howled again. Behind them an owl hooted. Jack froze.

"I don't like that," he said.

"What's the matter?"

"I ain't just sartain that was a coyote. Nor an owl. Wait a minute. If it's all right, we'll start."

They listened, hand in hand.

Colonel Hoyt stared at the shadows around him. Save for the camp at his back, the canyon seemed utterly empty. He should not have been so intemperate in his language. The strain he had been under must have been heavier than he had realized. At least they were rid of that young fool. Forever, he hoped. He also hoped nothing would happen to him between here and San Martin, for that would make an ugly story. He thought of going to the wagons and urging him to wait a day, then put it aside. A Mountain Man, a scout—he presumably knew what he was doing.

He stood awhile, then resumed pacing, remembering his brief militia service. There had been something deeply satisfactory to him in the precision of the military way. He established a beat, from a rock between two chamisa bushes, to a yucca, and back, setting his feet down with a little extra crunch as if by that tread he endowed himself with a uniform. He carried his rifle at the trail. Somewhere on the other side of camp a coyote howled. He hoped it would not continue; those animals could keep one awake all night. Then from fairly nearby an owl hooted. It gave the night a quality of mystery.

He passed between the chamisa bushes again. A hand seized his right wrist, and his gun was snatched away; a hand went over his mouth, his throat was caught, his left hand, his legs. He was flat on the ground and helpless, with the feel of bodies pressing against him, before the full shock of fear and the leaden, helpless realization of it caught up with him.

José Gonzales woke when Preston shook his shoulder. "Que hay?"

"Wake up. Our turn to stand watch." José sat up and yawned.

"Listen, things are happening. El Coronel and Santiago had a row, the Coronel's out there on watch now, Santiago has saddled up and the Señorita is out there with him. *She took her saddle.*"

"Por Dios! They're running off, then?"

"To San Martin, I guess. Listen, amigo, they need a little time to get away, and the Coronel's out there until you relieve him, entiende?"

"How not?"

They grinned at each other, two black-bearded men, one with blue eyes, one with brown.

José yawned again. "I go to watch his watching."

He took his gun and sauntered quietly past the wagons to where he could see his employer. El Coronel seemed to be playing soldier. It was amusing; it was also foolish. Now he was marching between two bushes. The bushes seemed to shift; in the darkness it looked as if the sentry became several people. There was a rustle and a thump, and he was gone. José dropped flat to the ground and wriggled a few paces forward. He lay silent, rifle ready.

Circling Warrior looked close to make sure. It was the American chief, one could hardly mistake him. He had made his plan of attack swiftly, with fine detail. Each of his young men knew what to do, the three with guns were waiting now on the other side of the camp. He felt the flutter of the war-whoop in his belly, the moment of release about to come. They could not keep a prisoner now; they could spare no one to guard him, and there must be no risk of an alarm. He signaled to Heavy Man. Heavy Man drove the spear home, the American chief jerked and lay still.

He thought of Grey Man's daughter, he was full of the foretaste of multiple triumph. He stood up cautiously, risking the silhouette of his head against the sky to make sure that the camp was quiet. There was not time enough for his consciousness to take in the flash of a rifle, the crack; oblivion smashed into his skull instantly, and his wise skill, his plans, his leadership were ended.

José ran for the wagons shouting, "Los Apaches, los Apaches!" Two arrows came after him.

Jack said, "Inside, quick." He and Susannah dragged their

horses in past Preston's wagon. The men were turning out, picking up their rifles. José came up to him, reloading as he talked. Bighorn joined them, and then Preston ran in from the other post.

José said, "They have captured el Coronel. I think I shot one of them. They are right out there."

Susannah asked, "What does he say?"

"Looks like an attack." He'd tell her about her guardian later. There was no time to lose. "You three," he said in a tone of certainty yet free of the quality of ordering, "you better saddle up. One of you take my horse here. Stand by on this side in case they go after the horses. Maybe you better help Johnny bring 'em in."

They nodded agreement and went into action. Jack knew that if Bighorn and Preston accepted his command, the rest would. He looked out to the east, nothing to be seen there. He circled the camp, making sure that everyone was ready and well placed, and telling them to bury their fires with dirt. He would have to tell Susannah. He dreaded that.

They dragged Circling Warrior's body back about a hundred yards, and there lay quiet in a group. Hurries to War knew that this was his chance; if he could seize this moment he would be war-leader from then on. As he lay with his head close to the ground, he heard the horses milling in the setback under the cliffs. He saw just how to go after them; this was an old, familiar skill, needing but little planning. He spoke in a low voice, quickly. The Indians spread out.

Johnny, the one herder, had been startled out of a doze by the shot and José's shouts. First he did nothing, then he rode at the caballada too hard, so that the animals opened up instead of bunching and he was scared. He looked towards camp. Against the low fires, he saw three men saddling up. Then an owl hooted, a lot of yelling and shooting started on the far side of camp, and the men by the horses stood still. He rode the harder, urging the herd in. The animals developed a sudden will of their own. They swung in a bunch together, the wrong way, and then in the darkness he saw a rider on one of the horses, then another, a dozen of them. *Oh God,* he thought, raised his rifle, and fired blindly.

Three mounted men came out on the run. The caballada

was full of yelling Indians. Where the white men reached it, it split; half of it they held back, the rest stampeded down the canyon.

Jack and the other leading men agreed they dared not go after the horses in the dark. There was too much chance of an attack on the camp next. They brought the rest of the animals close into camp, and kept alert.

The night became oppressively quiet. After a time he took five men out to the chamisa bush, and recovered the Colonel's body. Save for a very brief word with Susannah when the tension was highest, he had not spoken to her. The very fact that he was not truly sorry for the old man's death made him feel guiltier. When the body was laid beside the wagon with a canvas drawn over it, he remained behind to face her.

She said, "Poor Uncle George. You know, he never could bear to have anyone know more than he did. As much as anything, he wanted to show me that he knew how to run a wagon train, and he didn't at all. He wasn't an Indian fighter." She put her hand on his arm. "It's my fault, Jack."

"Don't say that, darlin'. It's just as much my fault. If I hadn't 'a come along, he'd be all right now. It was me."

"If you hadn't come along, the Indians might have got all of us by now."

That was unreasonable. Intuitively he recognized in it the partisanship of a woman who loves and did not deny her.

"Everything's different out here," she said. "If something like this had happened at home, I don't know what I'd have done. Out here, you accept things you never dreamed of. It's so strange. The Indians have killed him. It's something that happens, that's all, something that can happen to anyone."

He felt tremendous happiness, not only because everything was still clear between them, but because in what she said he could see a woman who belonged in this country, a frontier woman, a Mountain Man's wife.

When it was light, he rode with six men after the stolen animals. About a mile down the canyon they found where they had been held for a while, then driven up the cliff by a trail he would have hesitated to ride in broad daylight.

"They've lit for home," he said.

Bighorn agreed and cursed. "Got two o' my stallions."

As they rode back, the men agreed to go by San Martin and pick up a few mules if they could. They were short on spares now. Jack wondered if she would marry him right after the Colonel's death, if the priest was there. He hoped she would. The Navajo Apaches . . . Perhaps they had solved his life for him. If the priest's at San Martin.

Hurries to War lay on his belly, watching the white men, tiny down there in the canyon. They, too, were burying their chief. Buckskin Shirt and the woman stood together. He had no thought of further attack, not only because of their leader's death, but because there was too much pattern in the way things had gone, his fate and Buckskin Shirt's, the two old men. To attempt more might not be what the Divine Ones intended. Now he was leader and Cedar Girl was his. The way was clear. They were going back to the wagons down below, Buckskin Shirt and the woman, arm in arm. Hurries to War wished them a clear trail and happiness all around them. Then he drew back and went to his horse, meditating on an idea for running off some cattle from near Cubero.

KILLERS DIE YOUNG

By ROBERT TURNER

Back in 1947, the editor read the story which follows and couldn't forget it, but a copy just couldn't be found when the time came recently for re-reading and consideration for use in this collection. The author didn't have a copy; the original publishers didn't have a copy; none of the many back-number magazine dealers in New York City had a copy. The story was found, finally, after extensive correspondence with sixteen other back-number dealers throughout the country. Hope you'll agree that Robert Turner's little gem was well worth the effort.

LENNOX tossed on the narrow iron cot, with his thin arms flung out at his sides and his mouth holding a brown paper cigarette that sent up a straight streamer of smoke. The window of the small hotel room was open but no breeze came in —only the street sounds—a rataplan of hoofbeats, the creak and rumble of ore and freight wagons and the cries of their drivers; the clangy discord of saloon pianos.

He was a long and bony man, Lennox, stripped to dingy underclothing, his head a cap of rust-colored curls. In the glow of the dresser oil lamp, perspiration sheened his face, which seemed to be all nose and stubbled chin and high, arched forehead. Highlights and shadows made him look older than twenty-nine.

On the chair next to his bed were his clothes, a cartridge belt and a holstered .44, the boned butt cracked but worn smooth. On a table was a bottle of Mountain Echo whisky, half full.

It was funny, Lennox thought, that he didn't feel the liquor. It usually keyed him tight as a guitar string. It was funny, too,

that he didn't feel anything, really, not jumpy, not sick-scared, not nervous even. Always before, he'd known some such sensation. This time it should be worse because this was Gold City, the part they called The Flats, with Rudy Wilkes not very far off. And pretty soon he was going out after Rudy.

He took the half-smoked cigarette from his mouth and dropped it to the floor where it smoldered and started another of a pattern of black scars already on the rough wood. He moved to a sitting position and reached for the whisky bottle but didn't tilt it to his mouth. He poured some of the rotgut into his cupped palm and rubbed it on a welted red bedbug bite. It stung but stopped the itching.

A moth fluttered through the open window and joined a small cloud of insects batting about the hot glass chimney of the oil lamp. The moth didn't last long. It flew into the heat from the top of the lamp and dropped to the floor.

"Damned fool," Lennox said. "You ought to know better." Then the thought came that maybe the moth figured *he* ought to know better than to go batting himself against Rudy Wilkes. Maybe old Zanda, the mystic, the fortune teller, had summed it up right.

He remembered the afternoon three months ago in the musty little room up over a Barbary Coast deadfall. Zanda, with her wrinkled, walnut-colored hag's face, had said: "It's the fates. Destiny." Her thin shoulder shrugged under a soiled crimson shawl. "One cannot fight it."

Later, Lennox wished he had not gone to Zanda. The things she had told him had upset him so that all that night he kept awaking, covered with sweat.

Julie, a darkly beautiful girl he'd met at Madame Hatpin's place, had sent him to Zanda. Julie had looked at his palm and told him it held strange lines for a man, and he should go to the old palmist and mind reader.

He'd laughed but Julie told him how wonderful Zanda was. All the girls and even Madame Hatpin herself consulted her. A lot of her predictions had come to pass, including the death of a girl in a Saturday night shooting, a weird accident that Zanda had predicted exactly.

"She will tell you the bad with the good," Julie said. "If Zanda sees evil in your hand, she'll warn you of that, too."

He'd laughed at Julie, but later when he left Madame Hatpin's, Lennox thought about it and took too much to drink and decided to go to Zanda.

She was a small crone of a woman with black button eyes and ratted raven hair piled high on her head. She huddled at a table in a dim and filthy room, the heavy scent of incense fighting the odors there.

Lennox edged in awkwardly, feeling like a buffoon, all hands and feet, and the mystic made a sound in her throat like the crackling of parchment. "C'min, dearie," she said. "You ain't the first man come up to see Zanda. You'd be surprised the men visitors I get. Sit down, dearie, and let Zanda tell you about your life and your loves—and mebbe sumpin about your death, eh?"

He slumped into the rickety chair, wiping the palms of his hands up and down his levis, then holding them out. The old woman's tongue clacked against her gums. "Cross my palm. Come, come, dearie." She cackled. "An old woman must eat."

He dug a silver cartwheel from his pocket and placed it in her withered hand. Then she turned up his palms, cupping them toward the yellow glow from a candle that was the only light. She turned his palms this way and that for long moments before she finally spoke.

"There is so—so little to tell." She shook her head sadly. "It has all happened already. I cannot forecast any future. There is no future."

He pulled one hand away as though she'd burned it with the candle flame. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged and lowered her face over the other hand. "The life line is cut short," she said. "Zanda is not one to hold back what she sees. I'm no charlatan, dearie. The life line does not reach the age of thirty. You will die as you have lived, by violence. And soon. At the end of the life line is a letter, an initial. It looks like W. Do you know anyone——"

He pulled that hand away, too, and stood up. His mouth twisted as though he was in pain. "Old woman!" He spat it at

her. "Foolish old woman!" He thrust his hands behind him as though to hide them.

The cackling sounded in her throat. "We are born and we die," she told him. "It is all there in the hands. It is the fates. Destiny. One should not try to fight it."

Lennox backed toward the door. "You think I pay any mind to that talk? Save it for the silly girls at Madame Hatpin's." He opened the door and went out, and the door slammed behind him, shutting off the dry sand sound of Zanda's laughter.

Later, in a saloon, Lennox looked at his palm, and if you turned it a certain way, you *could* see a sort of W at the end of one of the lines. When she'd told him that, he'd thought instantly of Rudy Wilkes, because the New Orleans gambler was the one man he was in awe of—the only man. He'd watched the gambler kill and had known, instinctively, that if any man could beat him to the draw, it was Wilkes.

Lennox had always made it a point to avoid Rudy Wilkes. If he came into a town Wilkes was working, Lennox left fast. It was not so much fear as respect. Lennox had refused big offers to try and kill Rudy. A gun fighter takes chances for his money, but he likes the odds a little in his favor. With most men, they were. With Rudy Wilkes, Lennox knew, the odds were even at best. It wouldn't pay.

So when old Zanda made her grim prophecy, it was natural that Lennox should think of Rudy Wilkes. The symbol that cut off his palm's line of life looked like a W, she said. And Wilkes was the one man who could kill him.

It bothered Lennox all that night but morning chased the nonsense of Zanda from his mind. Coincidence and superstition. Witch-woman chatter for the gullibility of females and fools but not for him.

Now Lennox swung his legs off the iron cot and set down the bottle of whisky. He rubbed at his palms as if to try and erase even the slightest evidence of Zanda's prediction that was there. He told himself it was a fool thing he had done the night before, sure, but not part of any preordained plan. He had been drunk and mouthy, that was all. His bragging had

enabled Little Moke, the saloon owner, to get him across a verbal barrel.

Not even knowing the name of the man in question, blinded to reason by whisky and the huge sum Little Moke offered for the job, Lennox had committed himself. Then Little Moke told him the man to be killed was the gambler, Rudy Wilkes, who had been breaking Little Moke's games night after night. So then it was too late. There was no way out for Lennox.

That was all to it though, and now Lennox would make the best of it. Rudy Wilkes was only a human being, not invincible. Perhaps he had even overestimated Wilkes. This could be his easiest job yet.

Too, with the money he was going to get for it, Lennox could retire. Maybe Zanda was part right, in that if he kept on with this work, he would die young. That made sense. He *was* getting old for this sort of thing. With the money Little Moke was paying, he could buy a small spread and settle down. All he had to do was be careful and make this one sure.

He got up off the bed, tall, stooped and big across the shoulders for all his skinniness, and picked up his levis from the chair, still sweat-damp and limp. He stepped into them and shrugged on a faded blue work shirt. He went to the fly-specked, cracked dresser mirror and buttoned the shirt, looking at himself.

It was time for him to take on a job, anyhow, he thought. If it wasn't Wilkes, it would be somebody else. What was the difference? He said to the mirror, "Look at me, rumpled and poorly like some broken down saddle bum." He had gone longer than usual since the last job. He had always waited until he was well down and out but never this bad.

He met the gaze of his own eyes in the mirror, and their hooded gray blankness reassured him. He finger-combed his reddish curls and went over and perched on the edge of the iron cot. He squeezed his feet into dust-caked old boots and stomped them on, calmly and coolly, no rush. Just as though he was going for an evening of drinking, not as if he was going to his work at all. It gnawed at the back of his mind that he shouldn't feel like that.

Outside the window, on the street, there was the flat slap of

a six-gun shot, sharp through the other noises, and Lennox jerked and almost fell off the bed. He grabbed the iron rungs at the end, his big-knuckled fingers freezing to them so that he couldn't pull them loose. His head turned so hard toward the opened window it hurt his neck. Inside of him his heart tried to vault over his ribs and his stomach pitched.

Then he heard a loud whooping and hollering and knew the shot for what it was, some drunk wrangler potting at the moon. He let his breath out slowly, got his fists away from the iron rungs of the cot and stood. For a few moments his knees had trouble holding him.

He wiped his moist palms on the front of his shirt, and now the keyed-up feeling began to take hold and spread over him, and the panic of a moment ago subsided to a tautness of nerve ends that would stay with him until it was all over. The familiar sensation made him feel better. He strode to the chair and picked up the gun belt and put it on. He blew out the lamp and left the room.

The main street of The Flats was crowded and ablaze with lights. A loaded ten-team ore wagon, headed for the stamp mills, thundered past, and Lennox shouldered through miners and half-drunk gold camp riffraff that clogged the plank walk, until he came to a great barn of a saloon, with kerosene flares blazing wildly against the night.

He paused there, ignoring the bawling into his face of the barker in his tattered, foppish attire, and loosened the .44 in its leather. He sucked in his gut and squared his stooped shoulders. A group of laughing miners came up behind him, and he allowed himself to be swept with them, through the wide doors of Little Moke's saloon.

The place was gaudily lit by secondhand chandeliers that had seen better days. There was the usual long bar along one whole side of the room, men three deep at most of its length. To the right were crowded gaming tables. Lennox saw Rudy Wilkes sitting in on a poker game, and his eyes took in the men with Wilkes, and they looked all right. His gaze switched to surrounding tables and up to the balcony that ran around the back of the saloon upstairs. He looked along the

mob at the bar carefully but didn't see the man he was searching for.

Wilkes sometimes had a hired gun siding him when he was playing in a place he wasn't too sure of. He knew he had a lot of enemies and didn't chance getting back-shot while engrossed in a game. A fat, deadly little killer, the hired gun was, with a greasy face and a pencil-line mustache. Lennox couldn't recall his name at the moment, Hunter or Tanner, something like that. But he would know him instantly if he spotted him.

Satisfied that Wilkes was alone tonight, Lennox pushed between the tables crowded with men and girls drinking and laughing and making love. Some of them stared at the tall, lean man in his dirty, ill-fitting levis and blue work shirt, hatless, with thumbs hooked in his gun belt.

As he passed one table a percentage girl said: "Long George Lennox. In a place I once worked I saw him kill two——"

Lennox missed the rest and passed another table where Little Moke, owner of the saloon and his employer for the night, sat. He was a small, round-shouldered man, with diamonds on his fingers and dark, purple pouches under his eyes. His pallor deepened and his eyes followed Lennox's progress as though he was hypnotized.

Lennox didn't look at Little Moke. He didn't look at anybody now except Rudy Wilkes over there at the poker table. He felt an increased throbbing of the pulses in his wrists and his intestines seemed to loop and knot inside of him. His thumbs unhooked from the gun belt, his left hand dropping to his side, the right hovering over the holstered .44.

Five yards from Wilkes' table, he stopped. Wilkes saw him and knew immediately. Shuffling cards, he suddenly cascaded them in all directions across the table. He stood up, and his chair went over backward.

A hush came over that part of the room and spread through the rest of the saloon. Lennox planted his feet apart, his body bent a little forward as though leaning into a wind. Through his mind sluiced memories of eighteen other times like this. He recalled every little detail. The blur of hands, the sound of his own .44, the smell of gunsmoke and the look that came

over the other man's face—surprise and hate and pain, all mixed.

He's no different, Lennox thought. *He's like the others, just another man with a gun and I'll take him. No different.*

Watching Rudy Wilkes come to his feet, come around the table, watching him get set, Lennox wondered though. Here was another killer as good as himself with a gun, and you could toss a coin on the outcome.

Memory of Zanda and her prophecy moved through his mind and was gone. He remembered stories about Rudy Wilkes and the men he'd killed. He remembered the one fight of Rudy Wilkes he'd witnessed, the lightning gunswift of the man.

Wilkes was tall and thin, too, but not in the gaunt, rangy way of Lennox. He was almost scholarly looking in his frock coat, with his aquiline nose and silky brows over the soft brown eyes. He had a sharp fox face and a perpetual smile on his slash of mouth, with the lines like parentheses grooving each side of it. His hands were the small, supple, well kept hands of a gambler, and they flashed under the coat to his holster now as he said quietly:

"A boy on a man's errand, Lennox. I thought you had more sense."

The lights filmed against Lennox's staring gray eyes and his own hands moved like something apart from the rest of his body, even though he could tell by the slap of his splayed fingers against the .44's butt, the way they curled around it and pulled and squeezed the trigger all at the same time, that he'd never made a faster draw. He had that satisfaction. He'd done his best.

There was the sound of the shot, and smoke wisped from Lennox's old gun, and he looked at the shining silver pistol Rudy Wilkes held. Wilkes' fingers came loose, and the pistol fell. Lennox heard the clatter of it to the floor, and for a moment dizziness took him.

He watched Wilkes' brown eyes squinch and saw the gambler's thin features seem to come apart as he clutched at his chest and half twisted. Then his legs caved and took him down.

Just like the others, Lennox told himself, and all the nerves and tightness flowed out of him. He felt as though he was floating. He stifled a screaming laugh that came to his throat as memory of Zanda and her words and the foolishness about the brevity of his life line and the W mark at the end of it came briefly back to him. *Foolish old woman,* he thought.

It was over and he'd beaten Wilkes. He was finished with gun fighting, with this last big-paying job. If he died from here in, it would be like any other man, from sickness or getting thrown by a horse maybe. Not from the bullet of a man he was being paid to try and kill.

. . . The sound of another shot was like a delayed echo of the first. Lennox heard it, and then he felt something like the lash of a lead-tipped whip against his middle. He looked foolishly down at Rudy Wilkes, curled on the floor, still, dead, and he didn't understand. His eyes swept the tables and the people at them but he didn't see a sign of a gun. Then he saw the eyes of several men, the direction they were turned, and he raised his own glance.

He saw the fat little man with the greasy face and the pencil-line mustache up on the balcony. Rudy Wilkes' hired gun, his protection. It came to Lennox now that he'd been too hasty. Or perhaps just unlucky that he had come in while Wilkes' man was upstairs with some girl. The fat man had his wrist on the railing of the balcony, and his six-gun in his fist was still pointed at Lennox.

Pain, tearing at all of his middle at once, hit Lennox, and he felt his fingers grow weak. The .44 slipped from them. He put his hand to his stomach, and when it came away again, he stared dully at it. Through the red smear on it he saw plainly, in the bright glow of the chandelier overhead, the lines of his palm and the W-like mark near the heel of it.

The last thing that came to his mind as the darkness rolled over him was the name of Rudy Wilkes' hired gun, the man who had killed him. It was not Hunter or Tanner or anything like that at all. It was, he remembered now, Warner.

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