

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

DECEMBER



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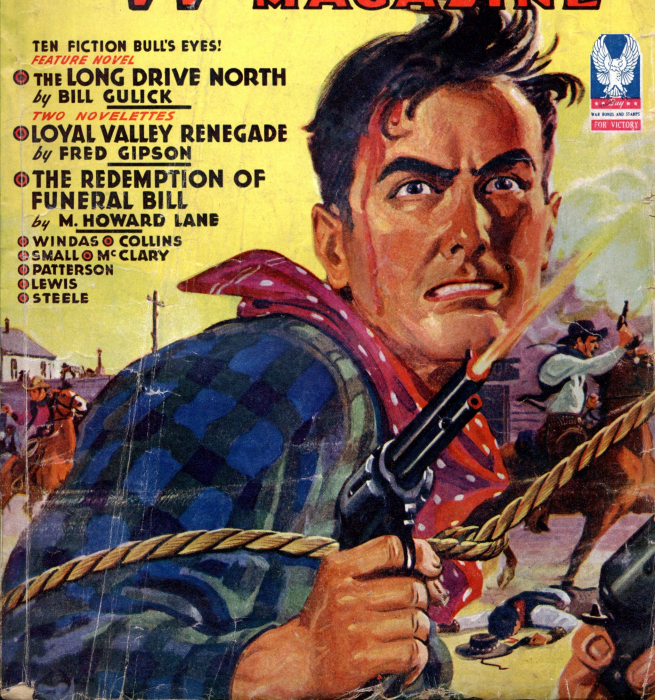
- ❶ THE LONG DRIVE NORTH
by BILL GULICK

TWO NOVELETTES

- ❷ LOYAL VALLEY RENEGADE
by FRED GIPSON

- ❸ THE REDEMPTION OF
FUNERAL BILL
by M. HOWARD LANE

- ❹ WINDAS ❶ COLLINS
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
DECEMBER 9TH

VOLUME XX

DECEMBER, 1942

NUMBER 1

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WHO WANTS TO WIN?

A LOT of things are going on these days. The greatest battle in the history of the world is raging at Stalingrad, as this is being written. United States soldiers, sailors and marines are driving a wedge into the Japanese lines in the equatorial islands north of Australia. A great American army is massing in the British Isles, poised for a mighty offensive to reclaim the Nazi-held continent. By the thousands each day, men of the United Nations are dying in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and on the high seas, in the glorious, noble, world-wide struggle to smash the gangsters of the Axis.

That's one part of the picture. While these momentous, world-shaking events are taking place, here in the United States our football teams are playing before capacity crowds, the race tracks are drawing record-breaking throngs, night clubs and saloons are booming. Some Washington observers report that many of the nation's Congressmen and Senators are giving a lot more thought to politics than to the urgency of war measures.

A lot of us act as though our country's war is a sort of game that we are watching from the sidelines. Newspapers that play up stories of United Nations successes are sold like hot cakes. We complacently welcome the good news from the front lines, and discount the bad. We'd rather not hear about the losses and defeats. We'd rather hide our heads in the sand, and close our minds to the grim realities when the going is tough.

Survivors of the heroic last stand on Bataan Peninsula who have returned to the continental United States have been shocked by the *unawareness* of Americans at home. Those veterans remember all too clearly the sleepless, bloody, devastating siege when they were fighting their delaying action to give America a little more time. They remember the fellow soldiers and sailors they left buried in Philippine soil. And it is hard for them to accept the selfish, self-assured, smug attitude they find among us at home.

They recognize the seriousness of this war. And they know that we may not

win. They knew that the enemy has a strong, well-equipped, admirably trained fighting machine that may be better than the best we can stand up against him.

One thing we seem to forget is that the United States, far back from the roaring guns and dying men, is the fighting arsenal, the fountain head, of the war. Russia and Great Britain lean just as heavily on us as we lean on them. If we fall down on our end of it, the collapse of the United Nations armies cannot be far off.

We are turning out the material and trained men, under government direction. Much has been accomplished, with factory production ahead of schedule and continuing its speedup at a startling rate. But that's not all that is needed.

Our thinking is faulty. We are sitting on the fence. We want to win the war, yet we don't want to sacrifice anything for victory. Unless or until we are drafted, we want to make as much money as we can and have a good time. Thousands of volunteer workers are needed for hundreds of Civilian Defense jobs that contribute directly to the winning of the war, but most of us are inclined to duck out of them and rely on the other fellow.

We'd rather make and spend money. We'd rather not think of the dead of Bataan, and the Solomons—or of the mountains of dead on our allies' side. Our thinking, when we hide our heads in the sand, is tragically like that of France before her fall.

(Concluded on page 8)

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**...and I'll prove
I can make you
a NEW MAN**

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other men in only 15 minutes a day! The answer is "Dynamite Tension," the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

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Actual photo-
to of the
man who
holds the
title, "The
World's
Most Per-
fectly De-
veloped
Man."

(Continued from page 6)

It is like the thinking of a man of the 1850's who wanted a share of California's golden riches, yet couldn't bring himself to face the difficult, dangerous reality of an overland trip through Indian country. Or the man who hated the injustices of a lawless, gun-ruled community, but didn't have the stomach to risk his life in fighting against them.

It is not the thinking of Americans who want to remain Americans. What we have to decide, each and every one of us, is whether this war, and America's future, are sufficiently important to us for the sacrifices they call for. Why beat around the bush about it? Be honest with yourself, and find your answer to the question: Would you rather take the easiest way today, avoiding unpleasantness and sacrifices so far as possible, or win the war?

You can't do both.

It isn't sufficient to figure that the government will tell you what to do. You know better than anyone else just what you can do that will contribute to the war effort. And if you aren't doing it, by your very lassitude you are declaring yourself on the enemy's side.

Maybe these words sound tough. Maybe you can honestly answer that you are doing everything in your power for victory. If you love the West and the glorious traditions of the old frontier—as you probably do if you are a regular read-

er of Western stories—the chances are ten to one that you are doing your part.

But there are plenty of people in America who aren't. There's an alarmingly large number of fence-sitters who think they are perfectly loyal Americans just because they *hope* America will win. And maybe this will reach a few of them. We hope so.

Let them declare themselves—either for or against. With our country engaged in the most critical war in history, they are not loyal Americans unless they are doing something to help us win.

Hitler is best at a psychological war. Most of the territory he has won has been gained by "dividing and neutralizing." Political dissension and indecisive thinking have brought about more defeats in the last few years than superior armies. He knows that we have resources in this country that will beat him—unless we sit on the fence too long.

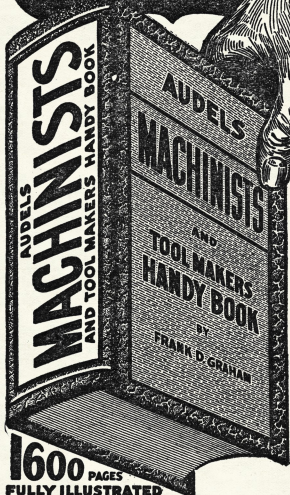
If a large portion of our populace drifts along in its peacetime ways, spending our money at bars and racetracks, carrying on with business as usual, we are sunk, and Hitler knows that, too. If, however, we all wake up and snap into the line of service, he hasn't a chance.

Which will it be? It's for each one of you to decide. You know the issues. You can balance the present against the future. You can guess what will happen if Hitler and Hirohito win. Which will it be for America—victory or defeat?

THE EDITOR



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THE LONG DRIVE



A high-powered rifle slug dug up dirt six inches from his feet. "Look out!" he snapped at Ann.

The end of one long, hard trail was only the beginning of another for young Jim Savage, that year the bottom dropped out of Dodge City's beef market. And neither posse, stampede, tornado, nor the man-made Death that struck in the back from the rimrock must break a Texan's blood-sealed contract with Montana . . .

NORTH

A dramatic cattle-trail novel

By BILL GULICK



CHAPTER ONE

Slow Gunmen Die Young

JIM SAVAGE, lean, hard-bitten young trail boss for the Bar Eighty spread from down Brazos way, stood at one end of the long bar in the Silver Dollar Saloon watching his boys have their fun. They had a right to celebrate, he mused. They'd driven three thousand head of longhorns up-trail to Dodge across desert and plain and treacherous river. They'd done a damned good job. Now,

at trail's end, they had a right to their fun.

The fat, sweating bartender shook his head wearily as he opened another bottle. "Ain't you boys had a drink since you left Texas?"

"Nothin' but river water," Jick Andrews said. "An' damned if I don't believe it was stronger than this belly-wash."

"Si," Ramon sighed wistfully. "I would geeve your right arm, Jick, for one leetle drink of tequilla."

The boys drank up again. Jim Savage put down his glass and turned toward the door as skinny, gangling Idaho Jones came in. Idaho was a couple of inches over six feet when he straightened up, which was seldom. He could work the legs off a brass monkey when he wanted to, which was also seldom. And he could play tunes with a guitar—or a sixgun—that made your insides feel quivery.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, gazing lazily around the room. Hans Donwetter and the Parson yelled for him to come have a drink, but he shook his head.

Jim smiled at him. "Looking for me?" "Yeah," Idaho said. "The skipper wants to have a palaver with you. He's over at the hotel."

Jim nodded in satisfaction. That must mean that Jackson Partridge, owner of the Bar Eighty spread, had found a buyer for the herd. Good news, he thought. Reaching in his pocket, he peeled two ten dollar bills off a sizeable roll and tossed them to the bartender. "See that the boys' throats don't get dry," he ordered, and left the saloon.

The afternoon sun was beating down on the crowded boardwalk as he walked leisurely toward the hotel. Half-drunk, laughing cowpokes, shaved for the first time in many months and with brand-new haircuts, called to him good naturedly. A leather-faced deputy marshal wearing a palm-smooth gun on his right hip nodded to him and called him by name.

He smiled to himself. Around Dodge the Bar Eighty bunch had the reputation of being one of the hardest-riding, straightest-shooting crews that ever swam a river. Jim knew it was a deserved reputation. Those lean, laughing Texans

whom he ramrodded could ride herd on anything from jackrabbits to grizzly bears.

Crossing the street, he started to push open the hotel door, then stopped and stepped aside as three men came out. His face hardened.

"Hello, Jim," the man in the lead said. "What are you doin' in Dodge?"

"Nothing." Jim's glance flicked over the man's neat, well fitted black suit, his smooth-shaven, too-white face. From his looks, Jim thought, Lance Harding was doing all right by himself these days. Last time Jim had heard of him he'd been run out of Dodge for running a crooked poker game in his two-bit gambling hall.

The two men with Lance Harding were of a different mold. They were tanned, blocky men whose carriage and dress showed they had spent most of their lives in the saddle. Jim knew one of them—Big Bill Racine. Big Bill used to be Harding's right-hand man, probably still was. He was a blusterer, a hard man on horses, and as tough as they came.

Jim did not know the other man. He was dark, hard-faced, with the look of a professional gunman about him.

"Still punchin' cows?" Harding asked. "Off and on," Jim answered. "You still running crooked card games?"

Harding smiled slightly. "I'm in the cattle business now. Got a ranch up in Montana."

"Glad to hear it." Jim moved around the three men and opened the hotel door. "I've got business now, gentlemen. Maybe I'll see you around."

"Yeah," Harding said. You probably will."

Jackson Partridge was sitting at a table in the hotel cafe eating lunch when Jim found him. His daughter, Ann, was with him. She was slim and well tanned, and could ride as well as any hand in the crew. Jim took off his hat and nodded to her, then said to Partridge, "You wanted to see me, skipper?"

Partridge gestured at a chair with his fork. "Sit down. I'll talk to you soon as I finish this steak."

Jim took the chair and sat watching Partridge enthusiastically attack the steak. That was the way the skipper did everything, Jim thought. Enthusiastically.

He was a big man, iron gray of hair, with a deep, heavy voice and a face like an image cut out of red sandstone. He'd ridden a rough string all his life, and though he was getting on in years now, he still rode it, still played a whole-hog-or-none game.

Which was one reason why the Bar Eighty was in deep financial water. Partridge had made a bad guess or two. But he'd played them all the way, and when he lost on one he only played the harder on the next, hoping to take up the slack of his losses when he won. So far he hadn't won.

Ann smiled at Jim. "How's Dawn?"

"In fine shape," Jim said. "She's down at the livery stable. Would you like to ride her?"

"Could I?"

"Anytime you want. That mare is as crazy about you as you are about her."

Jackson Partridge swallowed the last bite of his steak, wiped his mouth with a napkin, and leaned back in his chair with a sigh of satisfaction. "Feel better now," he boomed.

"Did you sell the herd?" Jim asked.

Lighting a cigar, Partridge frowned. "Yes and no."

"What do you mean?"



A WORRIED light came into Partridge's eyes. "The Dodge market is glutted," he said. "Prices shot to hell. I'd lose money if I sold here. Jim, do you know where the Blackfoot Indian Reservation is?"

"In Montana someplace. Why?"

"Do you know the agent, Bill Snowden?"

"No."

"Well, he's here in Dodge. Wants some prime beeves and wants 'em in a hurry. He'll pay me a price that I can come out of the red on."

Jim nodded. It was a long way to Montana. It was late in the year to be starting a drive that far north, but by pushing the herd they could make it before fall killed the grasses and the snows set in.

"Reckon we can deliver them if he wants them," he said.

Partridge blew a smoke ring across the table. "I knew you'd say that. Fact is, I've closed the deal already. There's a catch, though."

"What?"

"We've got to make delivery by September first or it's no deal."

Jim did some rapid calculating. On the face of it, it seemed impossible. They'd have to make a damn sight better time between here and Montana than they had coming up to Dodge and they hadn't let grass grow under their hoofs on the way up from Texas.

"Well?" Partridge said.

"It's a long-shot gamble."

"It's one we've got to play—and win."

Jim stared down at the tablecloth for a long moment. Looking up, he saw Ann's eyes upon him. He knew she understood that all her father's possessions depended on getting the herd through.

He said evenly, "We'll make it. We'll deliver on September first if we have to run every steer three-legged."

The tension broke suddenly. Ann laughed with nervous relief, then flushed as she saw Jim looking at her. He wondered if she knew what he was thinking. He started to get up from the table.

"Just a minute," Partridge said. "Lance Harding is in town."

"Yeah, I saw him."

"Did he tell you what he was doing?"

"Said something about a Montana ranch."

Partridge nodded. "Yeah. He's come up in the world, Jim, since he was a tin-horn gambler. He's dabbled in politics, played around with freighting for the Army. Now, he's in the big-time—selling stuff to the Indians."

"Cattle?"

"When he can. He's got some scrubby stock up in Montana. Bill Snowden says he won't touch it at Harding's price—not if he can get anything else. But he's got to have cattle by September first for beef issue to his Indians. It's our herd or Harding's. Do you see what that adds up to?"

Jim nodded. So that was why Harding was in Dodge. That was why he was curious as to what Jim was doing. Jim stood up. "He's liable to cause trouble."

"'Liable' ain't the right word," Par-

tridge boomed. "Watch yourself, son."

"I'll go round up the boys. We'll hit the trail this afternoon. Where'll I see you again, skipper?"

"Laramie, probably. Ann and I will keep in touch with how things are going. Good luck."

Jim shook hands with Partridge, started to turn away, hesitated. Ann had stood up and was smiling at him. But it was the kind of a smile, he thought, that the daughter of the boss reserves for the boss's right-hand man. Suddenly she put out her hand.

"Good luck. Tell Dawn hello for me."

Jim took the hand, pressed it for a brief moment, released it. "See you in Laramie," he said evenly, then turned and left the room. He wondered why words always came so hard when he was around Ann. And why in the hell couldn't she be as crazy over him as she was over his horse? He laughed shortly. Damned if he wasn't getting jealous of his own horse!

When he entered the Silver Dollar he noticed that the boys had practically taken over the place. No other customers were there. The fat bartender was in a jollier mood than he had been a while ago, and there was ample reason for the change. He was sitting atop the bar, drunk as a lord, singing at the top of his voice. Hans Donwetter had donned his apron and was behind the bar serving drinks. Idaho Jones was plunking his guitar while the bartender sang.

"Hey, Jim!" Squint-Eye called. "You're way behind us, son. Step up an' dampen your throat."

Jim shook his head. "Sorry to spoil your fun, boys. We're hitting the trail."

There were long groans of anguish from a dozen throats. The men crowded around, asking questions. Briefly Jim explained the way things were. Ramon was first to break the silence.

"Eet ees a good thing we must go," he muttered thickly. "*Por Dios*, if I stay here much longer, I get very drunk." He took a hitch at his pants, started toward the door, and fell flat on his face.

Laughing, the boys picked him up and carried him out the door. Jim stood inside the saloon with Idaho Jones, listening to the sound of their horseplay fade

off down the street. They'd sober up in a hurry. For that matter, drunk or sober, they could do their jobs twice as well as any other crew he knew.

Idaho Jones said mournfully, "Just when me an' Fatty here was gettin' strung out on a little music."

"Tough," Jim sympathized. "Let's go."

♦ ♦ ♦

THE door opened inward suddenly and Lance Harding, followed by Big Bill Racine and the dark-faced gunman, came in. Harding nodded to Jim.

"Just saw your boys ridin' out of town like all hell was after them. Did you sell the herd?"

"Can't see that it's any of your business," Jim said quietly.

Harding shrugged. "It isn't—if you sold it in Dodge. But I've got a hunch you didn't."

"Don't ever play your hunches, Harding. That's bad gambling."

Something flickered in Harding's eyes. Jim thought he saw an imperceptible movement of the ex-gambler's shoulders, then the man moved past him and went to a back table. Big Bill Racine followed him. The dark-faced man stayed where he was, blocking the door.

Jim frowned. There was something pat about the set-up that he didn't like. He moved forward. "If you'll excuse me," he said, "I've got to be runnin' along."

The dark-faced man shook his head. "You can walk around me if you want by."

"I'm not in the habit of walking around anybody."

"Then it's time you were learnin'."

Something clicked in Jim's brain. He sensed a movement behind him and whirled. "Look out, Jim!" Idaho shouted suddenly.

Acting blindly, Jim dove to one side, whirling back to face the dark gunman. Gun-roar blasted his ear-drums. A slug screamed past his face. On one knee, he clawed for his gun, lifted it, squeezed the trigger.

Smoke blurred his vision for a moment. Then through the blue haze he saw the dark-faced man lurch backward,

stumble, fall heavily to the floor. He lay there very still.

Shaking his head, Jim stood up and turned around. Toward the back of the room, Lance Harding and Big Bill Racine were standing behind their table, guns half out of their holsters. But they were standing frozen. Idaho Jones' big Colt covered them menacingly.

"Don't get any ideas," he said. "I'd admire to kill you both for that trick. You all right, partner?" he asked Jim.

"Yeah," Jim said.

He was all right, he thought, only because Idaho had been smart enough to figure out the play before he had. He knew now that Harding's gun ranny had been instructed to pick a quarrel. That's why he had stayed at the door. If it hadn't been for Idaho, Harding and Racine would have cut down on him from behind before he could have fired a shot. "Let's get out of here," he snapped.

He and Idaho started toward the door. A lean man wearing a city marshal's badge stopped them. "Not so fast," he grunted. "What's goin' on here?"

Jim said nothing.

The marshal flicked a quick glance around at the four men and the drunken bartender. He stared down at the dead man.

"Who killed him?" he snapped, and looked at Jim. "You?"

Jim nodded. "Yeah."

"Self-defense?"

Jim nodded again, and the marshal grunted, "They all say that."

Harding walked forward. "It was murder, officer."

The marshal stared narrowly at Harding for a moment, then snapped, "You're Lance Harding. I run you out of Dodge once. Maybe you're tellin' the truth, maybe not." His gaze shifted to Jim. "You're bossin' the Bar Eighty herd, ain't you?" "That's right. And I'd like to keep the record straight on this, Marshal."

"There'll have to be an inquest. But I won't hold you. I know you Bar Eighty boys. Your word that you won't run out is good enough for me."

That herd had to be started this afternoon, Jim thought. He asked somberly. "When will the inquest be?"

"Tomorrow or next day." The mar-

shal turned to go. "I'll fetch the coroner. See you at the inquest."

Jim and Idaho followed him to the street. On the boardwalk, Jim hesitated, staring after the retreating figure of the officer. "Well?" Idaho said.

Jim shrugged. The marshal had said that the word of the Bar Eighty boys was always good. Maybe it was so. But he'd already given his word to somebody else. It was a question of which promise he was going to keep.

"C'mon," he grunted. "We're headin' for Montana."

Together, they went to the livery stable, saddled their horses and rode swiftly out of town to the west.

CHAPTER TWO

Hell From the Clouds

THE golden-red mare ran effortlessly, as if there were clouds under her hoofs rather than the tough, resilient sod. Jim knew she could keep up the gait all day and never breathe hard. She was tough as an ironwood sapling, sensitive as an expensive violin.

She was small of build but well made, her lean, narrow muzzle and fine, clean-cut lines showing the Arabian blood in her veins. It was unnecessary to touch her with rein or spur. Jim sometimes thought that she could read his mind, for often she obeyed his wish without waiting for any kind of command.

Ahead, Jim saw dust rising from the dry plain and knew the boys were moving the herd off the bed ground toward the north-bound trail. Dawn snorted. She didn't like the dust of a trail herd.

Jim called to Idaho, who was riding beside him, "Give the boys a hand. I'll send Cookie on ahead with the chuck wagon. We ought to be able to make ten miles before we bed the herd down."

Idaho nodded and spurred off toward the front of the herd.

Cookie, a sour-faced, mustached man, was hitching a span of mules to the chuck wagon when Jim rode up. "Doggone critters!" he was muttering. "It ain't enough that I got to cook for the orneriest, fightin'est crew of no-goods that ever swallowed a biscuit—I got to mess with you too!"

Jim grinned. "What's for supper, Cookie?"

Still grumbling, the cook mounted the seat of the chuck wagon and picked up the reins. "Mule meat!" he snapped. "How d'ye like it—fried er boiled?"

"Try barbequing it. We'll bed down about ten miles north. Fix up something special, will you? The boys deserve it after having their celebration in Dodge cut short."

Cookie slapped the reins on the mules' rumps and the wagon leaped into movement with a rattle of tin. "I'll fix somethin' special, all right," he called back. "I'll serve 'em up my own special brand of arsenic. Giddap!"

Jim swung around to the south of the herd, away from the boiling cloud of dust, and watched the animals string out onto the trail. The herd leaders had surged forward and taken their places in the lead, stepping out with the long, tireless stride of the longhorn, following the deep-worn trail to the north over which so many cattle had passed before them.

Lifting his eyes, Jim stared beyond the tossing horns, across the dry flat plain toward the endless line of the northern horizon. There was a long, hard drive ahead. Yet he'd given his promise to the skipper and Ann. Back in Dodge, he'd soon be a wanted man, he knew. Well, it didn't matter. He had his job to do first, and all hell wasn't going to stop him until he'd seen it through.

Smiling grimly, he clucked to Dawn, and the spirited mare headed north at a swift trot. . . .

Cookie did himself proud that night. He served the crew big, tender steaks of fresh beef, hot biscuits that melted in a man's mouth, and fresh vegetables that were a welcome change after a diet of canned food. He poured steaming coffee till the world looked level, the kind of coffee, Squint-Eye said, that'd make you fight your own grandmother. Then he brought out the "dee-sert"—a fourth of a gooseberry pie and a big red apple apiece for each man. It was a meal fit for a king—or a hungry cowpoke.

Finishing the last bite, Hans Donwetter leaned back and let out his belt a couple of notches with a sigh of satisfaction. "Cookie," he said, "you sure can

sling the hash. You know somethin'? I'd marry you if it wasn't for just one thing."

Cookie cursed, and threw an empty tin can at him.

A few of the men squatted down around the fire and started a pitch game. The Parson got out the well-thumbed Bible which he always carried, and started reading. Squint-Eye joined the pitch game and commenced on one of his long, rambling tales that always began, "Once when I was in Kansas City. . . ." and wandered all over the West, ending only when it was bedtime.

Idaho lounged back against the chuck wagon, away from the other men, as was his habit, and strummed softly on his guitar, playing tunes made up in his head and never playing the same one twice. Jim walked over and hunkered down beside him.

Idaho opened one eye lazily. "Somethin' botherin' you, partner?"

"There's going to be trouble over that shooting today."

"What d'ye mean?"

"They'll come looking for me when I don't show up at the inquest. And probably for you too, as a witness."

"An' we got no time to waste sleepin' in a Dodge jail. That what you're drivin' at?"

Jim nodded. He turned and called to Jick Andrews. "Come here a minute, Jick."

The cowpoke rose from the pitch game and joined them. "What's up?" he asked.

Briefly Jim told him what had happened in the saloon that afternoon.

Jick whistled softly. "What happens now?" he said.

"The law will be comin' for me and Idaho soon," Jim answered. "We'll keep an eye peeled. When a stranger shows up, we'll disappear for a while. You tell them you're bossing the herd. Tell them you haven't seen us since you left Dodge."

"Good enough," Jick said, and nodded solemnly.

Idaho said, "Sounds like you an' me are goin' to spend most of our time playin' ground squirrel."

"Only until we get out of Kansas," Jim told him. "After we cross the line, we should be safe."

THE days ran into one another with long, hot, dreary monotony. The plains seemed endless, stretching flat and bleak in every direction until at times Jim almost forgot what a tree or a hill looked like.

He kept a close watch on the back-trail, and twice, at the sign of dust, he and Idaho rode off to the west and stayed clear of the herd until Jick sent a man out to tell them it was safe to return. One of their trips was a false alarm; the rider had been a local rancher looking for strays. The other time the rider was a deputy marshal from Dodge carrying a warrant for Jim's arrest. Jick said he didn't know whether the officer believed the story he was told or not; but he did not come back.

Jim breathed a little easier when they crossed the line into Nebraska. He needn't worry so much about the law now. Later, after he'd delivered the herd to the Blackfoot Reservation, he'd have to go back and face the music, of course, and it might not be pleasant music. But that could wait until the time came.

There had been no rain for many weeks. The smaller creeks and watering places were often found dried up and the herd had to be bedded down dry or else driven far into the night to reach water. Morning and evening Jim searched the sky for clouds, hoping for rain. He knew that beyond Laramie they would have many miles of barren, waterless country to cross, and he wanted the cattle to be in the best possible shape before reaching the region.

The second day after they had crossed into Nebraska Jim halted the herd at noontime for a few hours' rest. It was insufferably hot. Idaho rode up, mopping his face with a big bandanna.

"Hell, this is worse'n the Rio Grande country. Wish I had a tank of ice cold beer to take a bath in."

Jim laughed. "Don't know whether it would feel better on the outside or inside. I'd like to try it both ways."

At two o'clock, they put the herd onto the trail again. The sky was glassy, a shimmering, murky blue. The sun hung unshrouded by protecting clouds, beating

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down on the dry earth with almost tangible force. Not a whisper of breeze stirred.

Jim kept watching the northwestern sky throughout the long afternoon. He sensed something in the air, he had a definite feeling of tenseness, like a tight band around his forehead, pressing in, cutting off the blood.

An hour or two before dark he saw what he had been looking for all afternoon. To the northwest a white thunderhead was building up, rolling over the horizon with incredible speed. The clouds were of an unusual color of whiteness—a sickly, unhealthy shade, white tinged and darkened by yellow here and there, darkened still further by blackness behind the thunderhead front.

Ramon, the horse wrangler, rode up. His swarthy face was beaded with sweat. For a moment he stared at the gathering clouds, then lifted a warning finger. "Señor, there is wind—much wind—in those clouds."

Jim nodded. "Maybe they'll bring rain."

"Or tornado. I do not like it."

An unearthly stillness lay over the plains. There was no sound but the bawling of the cattle and the dull, steady *clop* of their hoofs on the ground. The clouds covered the whole northwestern sector of the sky now, rolling swiftly southward. Jim caught himself listening for the sound of wind, for some warning of what was to come.

Far away he heard the dull, heavy rumbling of thunder. Glare lightning flashed behind the cloud bank, lighting up the dark background with a weird, pale glow. The cattle began to notice the approaching storm and lifted their heads to sniff the air. The tone of their bawlings changed, became nervous, anxious.

The sun disappeared as the clouds rolled across it and a dim semi-twilight closed in over the plain. Still there was no wind, not the slightest whisper of it. Jim rode back to the rear of the herd, snapped out orders.

"Keep the cattle on the move. Keep 'em bunched as much as you can. They'll run if the storm breaks, and all hell can't stop 'em, but maybe we can keep 'em runnin' in the right direction."

He pulled over to the chuck wagon. "Don't bother about supper tonight. We're not bedding down. Fix some coffee if you get a chance. And stay behind the herd unless you want to lose a chuck wagon."

Cookie nodded laconically. This wouldn't be the first prairie storm he had gone through.

Suddenly, from what seemed a long, long way away, Jim heard the sound of wind. It was a steady, earth-shaking roar, like surf breaking on a rocky shore. It seemed high up, far above the earth. To hear that wind, yet not to feel it, gave him a chill, unreal feeling.

The sky was completely black. Lightning leaped and flared. The wind struck suddenly, a savage, biting cold wind that seemed to come from every direction at once. Jim leaned low in the saddle, buttoning his slicker around him, pulling his hat low to protect his eyes. A lightning bolt hit somewhere close by, crackling and spitting as it rolled along the ground.

The sudden thunder of three thousand sets of hoofs came to Jim's ears. The cattle were running, stampeding, and it was useless to try to stop them. He could only hope that they didn't scatter too much and didn't get too far off the trail that wound toward Montana.



THE first drop of rain hit his face. Then the sky seemed to open up. He could not see, could barely breathe through the blinding torrent. The drops were heavy and solid as ice. A few big stones of hail fell. He tried to turn tail to the torrent, but it seemed to be coming from every direction at once. Dawn halted after a few minutes, bewildered, and stood weaving this way and that as the storm tore at her.

Jim dropped to the ground and seized her bridle. He had never seen such a storm. The wind screamed, lightning crackled, thunder rolled, and above it all came the roaring sound of the cattle stampeding.

After a time the storm abated. The wind died and the rain ceased almost as suddenly as they had struck. To the south,

he could hear the roar of the wind fading away, could see the rain sweeping across the plain in a gray, murky blanket. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was all over.

Quiet fell. The prairie was a sea of mud. Every depression ran brimful with water. He shook his head. That one had been a rim-twister while it lasted. He started to mount and had one foot in the stirrup when his eyes turned to the northwest. The sight he saw froze him.

A huge yellowish-black cone was roaring toward him. It extended far up into the sky and came to a narrow point where it touched the earth, and that point was twisting viciously, tearing at the earth like a savage, monstrous beast. Jim didn't need to guess at what it was. He knew. *Tornado!*

For a moment, a feeling of helplessness seized him. Then with a savage downward jerk on the bridle, he pulled Dawn to her knees, flopped her over on her side. There was no shelter of any kind nearby. They'd have to face the twister here on the unprotected plain and hope for the best. Breathing a fervent prayer that Dawn would not try to get up and trample him to death, he huddled down beside her.

Then the tornado struck. The unbelievable violence of it blurred his senses. He never knew how long he lay groveling against the earth. Each second seemed an eternity long. The wind roared in his ears until all other sound was obliterated. He felt himself tossed and buffeted around like a chip in a mountain stream. He wondered if it would ever end.

The fury of the tornado passed on at last, and he sat up groggily, wondering how many bones were broken. Mud streaked his face and hair. His hat was gone. His clothes were torn as if slashed with a sharp knife. His body was so bruised that every movement caused him pain.

To the south, the storm had disappeared. Dawn found her feet and stood shaking and trembling. Jim soothed her with quiet, even words until she calmed down. Then he mounted. For a moment he hesitated, not sure of his directions. Then he saw the setting sun behind the clearing cloud banks to the west, and putting it on his left hand, he turned and rode north at a slow trot.

He hoped the full force of the tornado hadn't struck the herd. If it had—he shook his head and refused to think of the consequences.

It was long after dark when he saw the light of a fire far off to the right. He rode toward it. Coming up, he saw that the fire was close to the chuck wagon. A group of men squatted near the flames drinking steaming coffee from tin cups. Swiftly, his eyes went over the group.

Ramon was fishing a coffee pot back from the flames. Jack Andrews was there, so was the Parson, so was Hans Donwetter. Idaho limped out of the shadows and set down the bucket of water he was carrying.

Jim moved forward. "Looks like you boys came through all right," he said.

Idaho shook his head and jerked a shoulder toward the chuck wagon. "Cookie's hurt. So's Squint-Eye. We put 'em in the wagon."

"Bad hurt?"

"Squint-Eye's got a busted arm. Horse fell with him. Cookie's still out. Something hit him on the head when the chuck wagon turned over. He may be hurt bad."

Ramon poured a tin of coffee and handed it to Jim. "It is not very good. Not like Cookie makes. But it is hot."

Jim drank the coffee. Ramon was right. It wasn't very good, but it was strong enough to walk on its own legs and it put new life into him. Setting down the empty cup, he crawled into the chuck wagon to see what could be done for the injured men.

Squint-Eye's right arm was broken just below the elbow. The cowpoke was sitting upright, trying to roll a cigarette with his left hand. Jim rolled it for him, lit it.

"How's she goin'?"

"Okay," Squint-Eye said. "If somebody'll make me a splint—" Pain caught him as he started to shift about, and he cut off his breath with a clack of teeth. He was silent for a moment, then said softly, "Reminds me of when I was in Kansas City once. . . ."

A groan from nearby interrupted him.

"Doggone mules!" Cookie snorted. "Stubborn, ornery sons . . . ought to of stayed in hell where they was born. . . ."

Cookie kept cussing the mules with the most eloquent language Jim had ever heard. Jim smiled. No man who could swear like that could be bad hurt.

He climbed out of the chuck wagon and started whittling a splint for Squint-Eye's arm. As soon as the moon came up, he and the boys would go see where the cattle had scattered to.

They might lose a day or two because of this storm, but they'd make it up. They had to make it up.

CHAPTER THREE

Wanted For Murder

IT TOOK two days to round up the scattered cattle. Just before hitting the trail on the third morning, Jim made a tally and counted himself lucky when he found they had lost only fifty head. Some of those might have been rounded up if more time could have been taken in searching for them, but time now was more valuable than the missing steers.

The two days of rest had given Cookie time to recover from his injury and he was once again his usual grumbling self. The boys took his grumbling and liked it. After eating Ramon's cooking, they were ready to put up with anything so long as they got a decent meal.

Squint-Eye never lost a day in the saddle. Jim set the broken arm for him and put a tightly wrapped splint on it. He asked the cowboy if he didn't want to be driven into a nearby town where a doctor could do the job up right, but Squint-Eye shook his head.

"Just tie her up good and tight an' put a sling on her an' I'll be as good as new. I ain't never been to a doctor in my life an' I don't intend to go now. Docs are for sick people."

Day by day the herd moved north, traveling at a swifter pace now that the rain had broken the long drought and finding water was no longer a problem. When they were a half day's drive south of the Platte, Jim rode on ahead with Idaho to look over the crossing. The river, filled from bank to bank with tan, muddy, swift-flowing water, looked ugly. Shifting quicksand in which a steer or a

horse could disappear in a matter of seconds waited treacherously. Whirlpools and sink-holes were a frequent danger.

Jim spent the entire afternoon searching for the best place to cross, at last choosing a spot where the bank sloped gently down to the water and where the bottom was fairly firm. The first third of the way across was shallow enough to be waded, but the rest was swimming depth, and difficult swimming at that. It wasn't a pleasant prospect, but it was the best they could do.

"We'll put 'em in fast," Jim told Idaho, "and hope they keep moving."

Early the next morning, the lead steers were driven into the rolling torrent. At first, it looked as though they would turn back and throw the entire herd into a circling, terrified mill. Then a big bay steer whose mother—so Idaho said—must have been a muskrat, tossed his horns with a savage bellow and struck out strongly for the far bank. The rest followed him, and from then on it was no trick at all to keep them going.

The last laggard steer clumped up the north bank long before noon. Watching, Jim felt the tension in him melt. He allowed himself a brief smile. He could start breathing again now.

Jim decided to give Laramie a wide berth. He broke the news to the boys after supper that evening.

"We can't afford to take chances," he said. "Lance Harding will probably be in Laramie waiting for us. The first thing he'd do would be start trouble. We'll stay way to the east of town and play it safe."

Idaho looked up from his guitar. "Thought you were goin' to meet the skipper in Laramie," he said.

"I am. I'll ride in after dark some night."

The boys drifted back to their pitch game. Idaho picked out a couple of minor chords, hummed a melancholy tune which Jim had never heard before. He said quietly, "If there's goin' to be trouble, I'd like to go with you, partner."

Jim shook his head. "I don't want any trouble. That's why I'm going alone."

Idaho's lean fingers played carelessly over the steel strings. He kept looking out past the orange glow of the campfire, out toward the dark, rolling horizon.

"Will Ann be with the skipper?" he asked laconically.

"Yeah. Why?"

Idaho kept picking out chords on the guitar, kept gazing at something beyond the circle of light. Jim wondered what was going on inside the lean cowpoke's head. Idaho wasn't an easy man to understand. He was friendly enough and always ready to swap talk, yet he never seemed to get around to talking about himself.

Jim rolled a cigarette and lit it. Flicking the match away, he said, "Reckon I'll take a turn around the herd before I hit the hay."

He had walked two steps when Idaho spoke. "Jim."

Jim stopped. "Yeah?"

"When you see Ann, tell her howdy for me."

"Sure, Idaho. I'll do that." Feeling there was something else Idaho was wanting to say, Jim waited. It never came. Softly, like the rising of a prairie wind at night, the notes of a mournful cowboy lament came from the guitar, a tune Idaho had made up.

Sucking deep at the cigarette, Jim walked slowly away. Idaho was a puzzle. A deep one. But he sure could pick tunes out of that guitar.



AS JIM pulled the cinch tight under her belly, Dawn snorted and took a playful nip at his sleeve. Because he'd wanted her fresh for this night's work, he hadn't ridden her in two days and she was in high spirits.

Ramon, who was standing nearby, sighed.

"That horse, she is one leetle sweetheart, Señor Jim. When will you be back?"

Jim swung into the saddle and glanced up at the afternoon sun. There were two hours of daylight left. By hard riding he'd reach Laramie by ten tonight.

"Sometime before daylight tomorrow you better move the horses on ahead. There's good water in a creek a few miles north. Might be a good idea to keep the cavvy pretty well hidden in the timber. No telling what'll happen if Harding gets wind of where we are."

Ramon's dark eyes gleamed. "*Por Dios*, I will cut his throat if he comes near me. Ride with God, Señor."

"Be seein' you," Jim said, and rode off to the west. For the first couple of miles he let Dawn work off her excess spirits, then settled her down to a long, easy run that swiftly ate up the miles. He was taking a chance riding into Laramie, he knew, but he had to see the skipper. And Ann. He shook his head and wondered why he kept remembering the way she had looked when she said goodbye back in Dodge.

The sun set and darkness fell, a thick, moonless darkness in which there was no light but that of the stars. The silent night, the wide, unfenced plains, and the rhythmic feel of the mare's hoofs pounding the resilient sod gave him a weird sense of being utterly alone in an uninhabited world. It was a strangely pleasant feeling.

After a time he saw the lights of Laramie lift above the horizon far ahead. He approached the town carefully, avoiding



the traveled roads and the lighted farmhouses. Once inside the town's limits, he followed down back streets until he reached the hotel where he knew Partridge would be staying.

The hotel was a three-storied frame building set in the middle of the block. Dismounting, he dropped Dawn's reins to the ground and moved silently down the narrow passageway between the hotel and the saloon which flanked it on the east. Right hand resting lightly on his gun, he stopped when he reached the boardwalk and looked up and down it.

Nobody was in sight. He entered the lobby of the hotel and asked the clerk if Jackson Partridge was registered.

"Second floor," the clerk said. "First door to your right from the head of the stairs."

Jim thanked him and crossed the lobby toward the stairs. Half a dozen men were sitting about, reading, smoking, talking. Two, from their dress, were obviously traveling salesmen. The others wore rough clothes, high-heeled boots, and guns. Jim didn't recognize them but realized that any one or all might be working for Harding. He'd just have to take his chances on that.

At the head of the stairs he knocked on the door. "Come in," a voice said.

A moment later he was shaking hands with Partridge. Ann was there, and he shook hands with her too, feeling the old awkwardness come upon him as he did so.

"It's good to see you again," he mumbled.

"We were wondering if we *would* see you again," she answered.

Jim frowned, wondering what she meant.

"Well," Partridge said, "how's the herd moving?"

"All right. We've had a little trouble, but nothing serious."

"Are you goin' to make delivery on time?"

"I promised I would, didn't I?"

Partridge nodded. He was silent for a moment, then said quietly, "Lance Harding is in Laramie."

"I figured he would be. That's why I steered the herd around town and slipped in to see you after dark."

"Something happened back there in Dodge just before you left, I hear. Do you want to tell me your side of it?"

Jim shook his head. "There's nothing to tell."

Ann looked at him intently for a moment, then crossed the room and picked up a piece of paper from the lamp stand. "You mean that this tells it all?" she asked, her voice strangely tense.

Jim took the paper, stared down at it. WANTED FOR MURDER struck him in the eyes.



QUICKLY he scanned the printed dodger. He had expected this, but seeing it in cold print, reading the description of himself as a killer for whom a thousand dollars was offered "dead or alive," made a cold chill run up his spine.

His eyes were somber as he raised them to Ann's. "Do you believe this?" he said softly. She kept looking at him and did not answer. He repeated, "Do you believe it?"

Suddenly a knock came upon the door. Jim whirled. Ann crossed the room, put her hand on the knob.

"Don't open it!" he snapped. She hesitated.

Abruptly the door swung inward, shoving her back. Jim froze. Lance Harding and Big Bill Racine were standing on the threshold, leveled Colts in their hands. Jim cursed himself for a fool. One of Harding's men must have spotted him in the lobby.

Harding smiled. "This is an unexpected pleasure. We were coming up to pay a visit to Partridge."

"With guns in your hands, I suppose," Partridge boomed sarcastically. "Is that the way you call on people?"

Harding shrugged. "The guns were just in case your trail boss was here. After all, there's a thousand dollars on his head. Dead or alive."

Jim kept staring at the two men. He was trapped like a coyote in its den. He knew if he left this room with Harding he'd never be turned over to the law—alive. Harding wasn't interested in seeing justice done; he wanted to stop that

herd, and figured the best way to do it was to get rid of James Savage.

Keeping his hand well away from his gun, Jim glanced quickly about the room. Partridge was standing at his left. Ann stood by the lamp table at his right. Behind him was the one window of the room, but it was on the other side of the bed. Harding and Racine blocked the door. He knew they were waiting for only a hint of a false move from him to gun him down.

He look at Ann. She was white-faced, silent, watching him. He thought he saw a question in her eyes. He wondered if she knew that he wouldn't live an hour if he walked out that door with Harding. Harding waved his gun.

"Do we collect that thousand dollars with you still alive, Jim? Or do you want it the other way?"

Jim shrugged. He'd rather make a play, take a long chance on killing one of them before he checked out, than die with a slug in the back. But he couldn't even do that—not with Ann and Partridge in the room.

"Can't see that it makes any difference one way or another," he said.

Ann was still looking at him. Again he thought he saw a question in her eyes. He noticed that her hand was resting against the lamp table. Suddenly he knew that she understood exactly the way things stacked up. And he knew what that silent question was. Imperceptibly, he nodded.

Harding and Big Bill Racine were moving toward him, watching his gun hand. Suddenly, beside them, Ann gave a shrill scream to distract their attention, and pushed over the lamp table. The light fell to the floor with a crash, went out. Jerking at his gun, Jim leaped forward.

He didn't dare risk shooting. He swung the heavy Colt downward crushingly, felt it land on bone. A figure crumpled. A terrific roar blasted at his face. Then he felt a man's shirt front brush his left hand and his fingers clamped down upon it. Again he swung the Colt. The man went down.

Then he was out of the room, staggering blindly into the hallway. Behind, he heard Big Bill Racine cursing and knew that he'd be charging after him in a moment. He shook his head to clear the blindness from

his eyes, praying that that closeup gun-flare had not destroyed his eyesight completely.

Staggering down the hallway by feel, he reached the head of the stairs. Dimly he began to distinguish between light and dark. The lobby below had come alive. Men were standing up, staring at the stairs. Clutching the railing to hold himself up, he half ran, half fell down the stairway. He waved his gun in a general semi-circle around the room.

"Don't move, anybody! I'll kill the first man that does!"

His feet touched the level floor and he shuffled sideways across the lobby, waving the gun. He was still so nearly blind that he could not have known if anyone had drawn a gun, but something in his voice, something in the threat of the Colt, held everyone motionless.

He breathed a short sigh of relief as he reached the street.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death From the Rimrock

FACING toward his horse, he heard shouts in the lobby behind him.

The mob would soon be on his heels, he knew. He smiled grimly. Let him get on Dawn's back and there wasn't a horse this side of hell could catch him.

She snorted and shied away as he approached. "Easy!" he muttered and swung into the saddle. Down the dark alley he pounded until he reached the street. Then he turned boldly into it, not bothering to use caution now, and headed out of town. A shot came screaming after him.

He laughed. "Shoot and be damned to you."

Once clear of the town, he pulled Dawn in to a slow canter and rode toward the northwest. He wanted the mob to pick up the sound of her hoofs, wanted them to start on a false trail. He had no intention of leading them to the herd.

Minutes later he heard the pursuit. He kept riding to the northwest, riding slowly, until he could see shadowy forms outlined against the skyline behind him. Then he leaned forward in the saddle and touched Dawn with his knees.

"Now, old girl, show 'em your heels!"

She did just that. Two hours later all sound of pursuit was gone from behind. To make sure they did not track him, he rode for half a mile down a shallow creek bed where no hoof prints would show, leaving the water to take a rocky trail to the east. Then he set a course for the bed ground at a swift, distance-eating trot.

Toward midnight the moon came up. From time to time he stopped to listen for sounds behind him, but heard nothing except the whispering of the night wind and the occasional melancholy cry of a coyote.

He was an hour's ride away from the herd when he stopped to listen for the last time. The moon was higher now, flooding the quiet plain with an eerie, flat white light. For a moment he heard nothing. Then, just as he was about to ride on, there came the faint clink of steel on rock. He stiffened.

Reining Dawn into a narrow arroyo, he dismounted and walked back a hundred feet to a spot where he could see the approaching riders without being seen. He drew his gun and cocked it. From the sound, there weren't over two riders. He hoped those two were Lance Harding and Big Bill Racine. He'd settle up with them right here and now.

The hoofbeats grew louder. Against the western sky two riders loomed up, coming fast, coming directly toward him. His hand tightened on the walnut stock of the gun.

He shouted in an icy voice, "Stop—our make your play!"

A man cursed, and the two horses jerked to a halt. Jim thought he saw a hand move toward a hip, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"You're askin' for it!" he snapped.

"Jim!" The feminine voice chilled him like a sudden plunge into icy water. It was Ann! Holstering the gun, he stumbled toward them. He hoped they never learned how near to death they had been.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

Partridge, fighting his frightened horses, jerked his head back toward Laramie.

"Headin' for the herd. Figured you was goin' to need all the help you could get."

"But I didn't tell you where the herd was."

"I'd be a hell of a cowman if I couldn't find three thousand head of cattle in open country like this."

Jim laughed, and went after Dawn. Mounting, he joined the skipper and Ann, and together they rode toward the camp. The skipper was right. You couldn't hide a big herd from anybody who was interested in finding it. And Harding, he knew, would be mighty interested in finding it soon. It might take him a day or two to spot them, but spot them he would. And when he did . . . Jim shook his head.

"You and Ann should have stayed in Laramie. There'll be trouble."

"Trouble?" Partridge laughed harshly. "Son, I was raised on trouble."

"But Ann . . ." Jim protested.

Partridge's laugh was softer this time, but there was still a hard ring to it. "She's my daughter, ain't she?"

Jim glanced across at where she rode, man-style, alongside them. In the moonlight he could see the light yet firm smile on her lips, the sure, capable set of her chin.

"Yeah," he muttered softly, "I reckon she is."



DAY by day as the herd moved northward, Jim felt the tension building up among the crew. Everyone knew they would have to ride their luck hard to make delivery of the cattle on time. They knew, too, that Harding would be bound to make another play. When and where it would come nobody could guess; they knew only that come it would.

Jim was glad now that Partridge and Ann had joined the herd. Their help proved invaluable. Both endured the hardship of long, gruelling hours in the saddle without complaint, doing a full-time job as well as the best hand in the crew.

Too often, Jim's mind went back to that night in the hotel in Laramie, to the memory of the way Ann had looked when she showed him the dodger. He kept wondering if she believed what that dodger said, but his pride wouldn't let him put the question into words. So far as he was concerned, the matter was closed until he got the herd through.

On evenings after supper, Idaho would get out his guitar and play. He'd lean back against the chuck wagon and pick out tunes that made you think of lonely, starlit nights down on the Rio Grande, of a big yellow moon coming up over the mesquite trees in the Texas brush country, of the sun setting behind some distant sentinel mountain in the badlands. Jim had never heard him play so well.

"You never played like that back at the ranch," Ann told the lean cowboy one night. "Have you been taking a few lessons?"

Idaho shook his head. "Seems like, lately, my fingers are reachin' down into my head an' pullin' out tunes that never would come out before. Dunno why."

Day by day the herd neared the end of the trail. The tension did not lessen. The men always rode with watchful eyes, keeping their sixguns on their hips and their Winchesters in saddle boots under their knees. The country grew rougher, cut by deep canyons and frequent streams.

Toward the middle of one afternoon, Idaho rode up beside Jim and gestured at the jagged rimrock ahead and off to the right. "Somebody's mighty interested in us."

Jim stared across the badlands, unable to spot the man for a moment. Then he saw him, a dim black figure sitting motionless atop a crag. Sunlight glinted on a bright object.

"Binoculars," Jim grunted, and reined Dawn about. "Let's go see if he'll talk to us."

They had ridden only half a mile toward the rimrock when the man disappeared. Jim halted. "About what I figured. He's not interested in talking to us."

"One of Harding's men?"

"Who else?"

That evening Jim called Partridge, Jick Andrews and Idaho into a palaver. "If my geography is correct," he said, "we're gettin' close to Harding's ranch."

"We'd be smart to give it a wide berth," Partridge grunted.

"We will. No sense giving him any kind of an excuse to start trouble—even though he won't need one."

"What do you suppose he'll do?" Jick asked.

Jim drew his pocket knife and scratched

a rough map on the ground. "We're comin' into some broken country. Lots of narrow canyons and rock slides. Now, if I was going to delay a herd, the thing I'd do would be start a good stampede. If I picked the right spot, it'd take a week to round the cattle up again. By then, the deadline for delivery would be past." He looked up at Partridge. "Am I right?"

The big man nodded. "You've hit it smack on the nose. What do we do about it?"

"Be careful where we bed down. Set double watches. Keep a couple of men out ahead scouting the country. And, in case Harding still wants to mix with us—fight like hell."

Idaho stood up and yawned. "Been a long time since I had a good fight," he murmured. . . .

They bedded the cattle down a couple of hours before dark next evening in the wide, grass-covered mouth of a long, twisting canyon. It was an ideal spot, Jim thought. To the southwest, the canyon widened into a broad flat plain; to the northeast, it narrowed, flanked on each side by steep walls which towered up to the flat rimrock above.

It would be next to impossible for anyone to approach the herd from any direction but the southwest, Jim knew, so he posted four guards on that side. Squint-Eye and the Parson rode slowly around the herd itself, keeping the cattle from scattering out too much.

While Cookie prepared supper, Jim leaned back against a wheel of the chuck wagon and watched the sun set behind the hills to the west. A gentle summer quiet settled slowly into the valley. The wind died. From the herd came the peaceful, contented bawlings of tired, well-filled beasts.

Ann came over and sat down beside him. Taking off her hat, she looked down at her hands and smiled. "I'm brown as an Indian. Don't you think I make a good cowhand?"

"One of the best," Jim said. He noticed a long red gash across the back of her arm and leaned forward to inspect it. Frowning, he started to ask her how she had got the scratch when the sudden flat roar of a Winchester some distance away froze him.

He leaped to his feet. That sound had come from the rimrock off to the right. Once again the rifle roared. He spotted a tiny puff of smoke up yonder and cursed under his breath. This was it!

"Idaho! Jick!" he snapped, and ran toward Dawn.



AS HE rode rapidly across the valley he could see that the cattle had been disturbed. They were milling about, bawling nervously. A riderless horse was galloping wildly away.

Idaho, Jick and Partridge were beside him when he found the Parson. The tall, kindly cowpoke lay face downward on the green sod, one extended hand clenched as if in pain on a fistful of earth. A dark stain was spreading across his shirt in the middle of his back. Tenderly Jim turned him over.

For a time, Jim felt only the numbness of disbelief. He seemed to see again the Parson's amiable, gentle face as he sat hunched over his Bible at an evening campfire, straining his eyes to read the words he knew by heart. Those eyes would see no more now.

A hand touched his shoulder. "Dead?" Partridge said. Jim nodded and stood up. He moved very slowly, very quietly, to his horse and mounted. He kept staring up at the rimrock.

"That shot came from up there," he said flatly, and pointed.

"What good does it do Harding to gun down an innocent cowpoke?" Jick said.

Jim shook his head. "None at all. Reckon he saw the herd was too well protected, and shot the Parson just because it's in his blood to shoot whenever he sees a man's back."

"I guess," Idaho said softly, "that he ain't got a right to live much longer."

Jim kept gazing at the rimrock. Harding wasn't going unpunished for this. "Fetch the boys. All of them except Ramon and Squint-Eye. Tell 'em to bring rifles and cartridges."

Jick rode off to carry out the order. Partridge asked, "How about the herd?"

"It'll be all right till we get back. And when we do, we won't have to worry about Harding bothering us again."

Partridge nodded grimly and laid a hand on the butt of the Winchester under his knee. "I'd like to lay the sights of this across him."

"Don't," Jim snapped. "He's mine." He wheeled Dawn about as the rest of the boys rode up. "Let's go."

Atop the rimrock, he found where the sniper had lain. His eyes picked up the trail where the man had walked back to his horse and mounted. Other horses had been waiting there. A dozen or fifteen, at least.

"Looks like the whole crew was along," Idaho said.

"Yeah. Probably saw the way we were set for them and decided to leave us alone for the time being."

The bunched horses had moved to the north, away from the canyon rim. Eyes on the trail, Jim led his men at a swift trot. He guessed that Harding and his crew had headed back to their ranch. Harding wouldn't expect to be followed. Jim reckoned the ex-gambler was due for an unpleasant surprise.

Dusk was a thick haze over the prairie when Jim saw the ranchhouse ahead. He halted his men and rode forward a ways alone to look things over. All was quiet. A dozen or so saddled horses stood by the corral a short distance away from the house but no men were in evidence. The house itself was dark. He wondered if unseen rifles waited at those darkened windows.

Riding back to where the rest waited, he told them what he had seen. He gave orders to surround the house. "Pick spots where you won't be exposed. Wait till they fire, or make a break for it. We've got to get them in the open if we can."

Idaho and Partridge stayed with him in a clump of trees a hundred yards east of the house. It grew rapidly darker. In the east, a huge yellow ball of a moon pushed its way above the horizon, lighting the scene with a weird orange glow. Jim thanked his luck for the light. The terrain in front of him would be as brilliant as daylight in an hour or so.

That hour passed. Still there was no movement, no sound, from the house except an occasional nicker from one of the horses. "They're sure layin' low," Idaho said.

Jim nodded. "I'll Indian up and see what they're doin'."

"You must be wantin' to die."

Jim didn't bother to answer. Laying aside his Winchester, he drew his sixgun and started easing across the open space between the trees and the house. His nerves were on edge for the first sign of movement up ahead. The hundred yards lessened to fifty, to twenty-five. Still there was no movement, no sound.

He couldn't understand it. He knew the men were there, the trail had been plain, the horses stood outside. Frowning, he paused for a moment. Something was wrong. Suddenly he cursed and leaped to his feet. That trail had been too plain!

Ignoring caution, he ran toward the back door of the house, kicked it open.

Jim nodded. "C'mon. Maybe we can get back in time."

He kept hoping as they pounded back across the prairie toward the canyon where the herd was bedded down that they would make it in time. Ramon and Squint-Eye and Ann wouldn't have a chance against Harding. And the herd—hell, by now it was probably stampeded to the four winds. It began to look like Harding's jackpot.

The moon was two hours high when he reined up on the rimrock above the canyon. Deep shadows lingered in the chasm below, but enough light filtered in for him to see a strange sight. The cattle were on the move, all right, but they were not in the wild, aimless stampede he had expected. They were being herded to the

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The dark interior was empty. He raced through the rooms, stumbling over chairs and tables in the gloom. His suspicions became sure knowledge. He'd been tricked, taken in by an old ruse. Harding wasn't here, hadn't been here for hours. Chances were he was at the herd now, and only Ramon, Squint-Eye and Ann were there to protect it!

CHAPTER FIVE

A Debt to Pay—In Gunsmoke

FINDING the door, Jim stumbled out into the moonlight. He called hoarsely, "Idaho! Skipper! Jack!"

They came on the run. "What's up?" Partridge snapped.

"We've been followin' a blind trail. The horses were a plant. One man must have led them back here, leaving a plain trail for us to follow, then skipped out."

"That's why they shot the Parson!" Idaho interrupted. "Because they knew we'd come ridin' after them."

northeast, up the narrowing part of the canyon, at a slow, orderly walk.

A flicker of hope burned within him. Harding's greed had evidently overcome his caution. He was not stampeding the herd—he was stealing it.

Far away, back in the wide valley where camp had been made, rifle fire flashed. The sound of shots drifted up to Jim and, watching, he saw three different spots of flame come almost simultaneously from the direction of the chuck wagon. He felt a wave of relief. That meant that Ann and Ramon and Squint-Eye were still all right. Evidently they had barricaded themselves in the chuck wagon.

But the cattle—suddenly his eyes narrowed. The scheme was wild, fantastic. He wondered. . . .

"Idaho," he snapped, "did you ever stampede a herd of longhorns?"

Idaho frowned. "Stampede?" He stared down at the narrow file of moving beasts in the canyon below. Suddenly he whistled softly. "I'll be damned! It might work, at that."

It took only fifteen minutes to put the plan into operation. Riding silently along the canyon rim, the crew found a place to descend. They picked a spot where the canyon turned abruptly and waited behind that turn until the lead steers had rounded it. Drawing his sixgun, Jim clamped his jaw tight and shouted, "Now, boys! Give 'em hell!"

Like a band of war-mad Apaches, the whole crew swept toward the startled herd leaders, firing sixguns into the air, yipping like insane men. A big steer stared at them in amazement for a moment, then wheeled in panic and piled back into the beasts coming toward him.

In ten seconds the entire front of the herd was a milling, bawling mass of fear-crazed animals. Dust rose in a choking cloud. From the rear, the cattle tried to push forward; in front, they tried to turn back. A tight pressed, surging mill formed.

For a time, it was even money which way they would run. If they turned back upon Harding and his men, they would stampede toward the open plain, where it would be no job at all to round them up. But if they didn't, if they ran down the canyon toward the Bar Eighty crew, there would be hell to pay.

It was like a huge game of tug-of-war. The cattle surged this way, then that. Small bunches would start to run toward the Bar Eighty crew, only to be turned back by shooting, yelling cowhands.

"We got 'em!" Idaho was shouting beside Jim suddenly. "We got 'em on the run!"

Staring through the dust, Jim saw that it was so. The herd was moving back down the valley. The canyon echoed and re-echoed to the roaring of their hoofs, to the click of their tossing horns. It was a mad, wild stampede, one in which he knew many cattle would die. That couldn't be helped. Better to lose a few than to lose them all.

He wondered bleakly if Harding's riders had been caught in the irresistible rush. No horse could stem that tide. The canyon would be swept as clean as if a gigantic broom had been at work.

Jim pounded around a bend close on the rear of the herd. He breathed a prayer that the three back at the chuck wagon had managed to get in the clear. A mile farther

on he saw that his prayer had been answered. The cattle had cut off to the right of the widening valley, and the wagon still stood unharmed, out of the way of the charging herd. Jim rode up to it and tumbled off Dawn.

"Ann!" he called.

"Here, Jim. I'm all right."

He found her crouched behind the chuck wagon. She was kneeling, holding a cup of water to a man's lips. The man was Ramon. Jim dropped down beside him.

"Hit bad?"

Ann started to answer, then a sound from the wounded man stopped her. "Si, Señor Jim, I wrangle no more horses. Ramon, he is done for. . . ."

A silence fell. Jim could hear the wrangler's labored breathing. "That Dawn horse, Señor Jim, you take good care of her. . . . She is one leetle sweetheart . . . like the señorita here. . . ."

The labored breathing ceased. Ann's eyes glistened as she looked up at Jim. "He's gone."

Jim nodded and stood up. Something heavy stuck in his throat. The Parson, Ramon—he had a debt that could never be paid in full, yet he'd collect what he could of it.

The sudden scream of a high-powered rifle slug that dug up dirt six inches from his feet, jerked up his head. "Look out!" he snapped at Ann and shoved her behind the chuck wagon.



A GAIN the rifle screamed. Across the valley Jim saw the glint of moonlight on steel. Feeling a surge of grim joy, he vaulted onto Dawn's back and wheeled her around.

Harding or one of his men had lingered behind and, tempted by the sight of an unprotected back, was up to his old tricks again. Well, if Jim's luck held out, he'd settle part of the score for Ramon and the Parson.

Ahead, in the shadow of the rocky canyon, he saw the figure of a man on foot. The man started running, scrambling up the wall. It was Harding. Evidently his horse had fallen or thrown him when the stampede began. Jim gave a short, hard laugh. His luck was holding.

Harding was a hundred feet up, climbing swiftly, when Jim dismounted at the base of the wall. Above, he heard a rock dislodge and glanced up in time to see Harding pause and lift his rifle. Swiftly he threw himself to one side, clawing at his sixgun. The slug struck a rock beside him, threw blinding splinters into his face. He pulled the trigger of his gun without seeing his target.

There was silence for a moment, then a metallic clatter. Harding's Winchester came bounding down across the rocks, fell at Jim's feet. Jim wiped the dust from his eyes. Harding was crawling upward again, apparently unhurt. Jim's shot must have knocked the gun from his hands.

Seizing his sixgun in his teeth, Jim scrambled recklessly upward. The rocks tore at his hands. His high-heeled boots slowed him down, so he slipped them off and went on without them, moving more swiftly and surely on bare feet.

Harding crawled over the canyon rim and disappeared. Jim was only a few seconds behind him. He hesitated in the protection of a large boulder, knowing that Harding would be waiting for him, knowing that lead would blast at him the instant he showed himself.

He caught a glimpse of Harding, a dark figure hunkered down a dozen yards away in the moonlight. Then gun-roar blasted at his ear drums. A blazing iron seared across his ribs. Stumbling forward, he lifted his gun. He took his time, was sure and deliberate. He wanted this shot to count. A blow spun him half around. He kept moving forward.

His gun was up now, centered on that crouching figure. Coldly he squeezed the trigger. The gun leaped, roared, then became silent. Weaving, he stared ahead, watching Harding. The man half rose to his feet, stiffened for an instant, then crumpled into a heap.

Jim smiled weakly. The gun in his hand felt very heavy. He couldn't understand its sudden weight and frowned as he stared down at the fingers which gripped it. He saw those fingers relax, saw the gun drop to the ground. Shaking his head in bewilderment, he sighed, and toppled silently to the earth. . . .

It seemed that he had taken only a brief nap. Yet when his head began to clear,

when the dull red haze of pain had gone, he discovered that he was lying in bed in a strange room. The skipper was there and so was Ann. Some of the boys were standing around.

"The cattle?" Jim asked.

"Delivered and sold," Partridge said. "Thanks mostly to you."

Jim tried to raise up. The pain in his chest was no longer there, but a strange weakness and dizziness made him fall back on the pillow. Ann smiled at him.

"You've been pretty sick, cowboy. Better take it easy for a few more days."

Jim tried to answer, but found himself too tired to form the words. He drifted off to sleep again.



THE doctor let him up three days later. It took him a while to learn to walk again. He spent the afternoon loafing around town, absorbing the sun, feeling life come back into him. Then, toward evening, he went looking for Ann.

A cool breeze had sprung up from the south. He walked slowly, getting the thing he was going to tell her clear in his head.

As he approached the hotel in the dusk, he saw her sitting on the veranda. Someone was with her. He paused a few steps away.

Voices came to him. The person with her was Idaho. He was talking to her now, speaking in a tone that could mean only one thing. Jim felt numb and dizzy again inside. He didn't mean to stand there so long, didn't mean to see her kiss him. But he did; he just couldn't help it.

He turned away at last, unseen, and stumbled back down the street. He hadn't known that Idaho felt that way about Ann. He should have known, he guessed. He should have seen it long ago.

His hand shook a little as he lit a cigarette. It took a while, he guessed, for a fellow to get over something like this. Yet maybe it was better this way. He was a wanted man with a price on his head. He had to be riding back to Dodge to settle up. Settling that, clearing it up or taking his medicine, had to come first. And if Idaho and Ann—well, he wished them luck.

It was some time later when he returned to the hotel. Ann was still sitting on the porch. Idaho had gone.

"Hello, Jim," she said, and invited him to sit down.

He didn't. He stood by the porch railing, looking down at her, wadding his hat in his hands. There was a silence for a time. From downstreet, came the sound of tinny music from a dancehall, softened and mellowed by distance.

Finally Jim said, "Reckon I better be ridin' back to Dodge tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I've got something to clear up." He stared down at his hat. "Listen," he mumbled, "maybe they'll clear me, maybe not. Either way, I want you to have Dawn. There's nobody I'd rather see her belong to than you."

She stood up. "But Jim—"

"No. That's the way I want it. She can be a sort of wedding present."

The silence fell again. Jim kept staring down at his hat, sensing that Ann's eyes were upon him, looking at him, looking through him. Suddenly she whispered, "Oh, Jim!" and threw herself into his arms.

He was too dazed to understand it. So, for a moment, he just held her close the way he had wanted to hold her for so

long. Then, after another moment, he kissed her. She drew back a little.

"I've been waiting and hoping for so long. But what a strange way to propose to a girl."

Jim's tongue was like a big clod of earth in his mouth. He managed to mumble, "I thought you and Idaho—"

She shook her head. "I like him—a lot. But. . . ." She broke off. "He's leaving. Says his itchy foot is bothering him again and he's headed west tomorrow. He came to tell me goodbye tonight."

Jim felt a pang of regret. He'd miss the lean cowpoke, miss his lazy, easy-going ways, his melancholy tunes that he made up in his head. Yet he could see now how it was with Idaho. He'd never settle down anywhere, ever. Not with his itchy foot.

The thought of going back to Dodge returned to him suddenly. Gently he removed his arms from around Ann. "I've got to start for Dodge. I've got to settle things."

She moved close to him again. "I know. But it will turn out all right. Dad and I will go with you. We'll make it turn out all right. Meantime. . . ." She lifted her face to his. "You don't have to leave till tomorrow, do you?" she murmured.

Jim's hat dropped from his head. "No," he said slowly. "No, I reckon I don't."

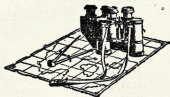
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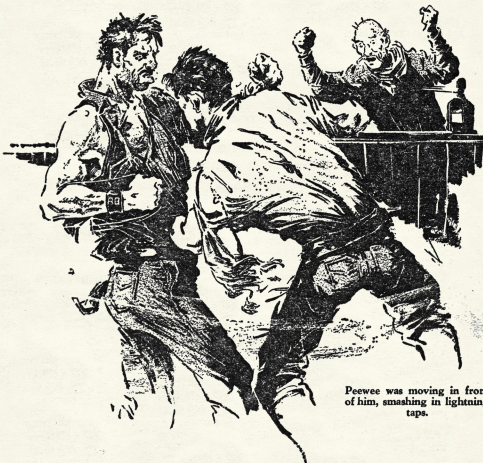
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HALF PINT OF HELL

By **THOMAS CALVERT McCLARY**

Peewee Cairo and Wild Horse Burke each wanted the same woman, but Peewee weighed only one-thirty-five—and he was gun-shy—while Burke was a giant and the best shot on the range!



Peewee was moving in front of him, smashing in lightning taps.

PEEWEE CAIRO stood with a rope-scarred hand as tight as a taut lasso upon the porch post, watching the pale oval of Malvina Roy's face against the murk. She had tried hard not to show it, but the return of Wild Horse Burke had made a difference. He sensed this, and the knowledge was a black, corrosive thing, filling him with gall.

He said huskily, "I never thought anything would come betwixt us, Malvina."

She made a woman's gesture of uncer-

tain confusion, and cried, deeply stirred, "Nothing has . . . yet, Peewee! But something's cropped up, and I can't settle it!"

He stared down at the boards between his feet. He was barely taller than the girl. He thought of this, and that he never wore a gun, and cursed bitterly to himself. Burke was big and tough drawn and reckless, a top gun hand. And he had made it clear that no other man was going to get Malvina.

After a space Peewee murmured, "It's jist that? Nothing's changed betwixt you and me otherwise?"

"Nothing," she answered, "except that Burke came back, and I've not told him to ride along." She wheeled straight at him. Her wide skirts swirled, catching the moonlight and reflecting an instant of pure silver light in her wide black eyes. "I can't tell him that, Peewee! Even if I wanted!"

"No," he agreed. "Every jabbermouth in the country would say you had to front for me!" He gave a dismal smile, touched her hand with understanding and scuffed out to the corral.

Old man Roy was sitting on the top bar, a huge and rugged shadow against the lesser moon-washed shadows of the hills behind. He spat and growled, "Peewee, I might as well come clean. I been listenin' on you."

Cairo felt the blood tingle hotly down his neck. The old man had the right, but that did not lessen the shame.

Ray added gruffly, "I knew yore pa, and I know the color of yore innards, Peewee. I know why you can't tote a gun. And I know things like that can get inside a man, and he can't cut 'em out any more'n he can his heart."

Not many people knew why Peewee didn't wear a gun. It was because, in one of those sudden and violent flare-ups of roundup time, he had shot his best friend dead, down Bonita way, his first year riding range. He hadn't been able to shoot a pistol since. The feel of one stiffened his muscles and froze his blood.

Peewee said grimly, "The reason don't matter. A man can't hide behind a woman's skirts."

The old man made noises of irritation and grumbled, "The hell o' the cow country, a woman can't jist marry a man for what he is. When she ties up with him, she's hitchin' what the whole damned community thinks of him as well!"

"I'll do some studying on it," Peewee mumbled. He got his horse and rode toward town, and left the old man cursing bloody murder to himself. He liked Peewee, but what could a man his size do without a gun, no matter how much innards he had. . . .

Peewee rode into Gallup, and turned through the glaring sheets of smoky yellow light that slanted from the bars along Puerco Street. He spotted the sable horse with white fetlocks and a white moon upon its face in front of Silver Bill's. On the steps he ran into Sheriff Tim Higgins.

Borrowing a match from him, he said, "Sheriff, I aim to make a mite o' trouble hereabouts, but I know what I'm doin'," and struck the match.

The sheriff regarded him shrewdly as the flame flared upon his face. He said, "An ounce of brain and an ounce of guts makes a powerful big package o' trouble, sometimes, Peewee! Take care I don't have to horn in."

They looked at each other, and passed their ways. Inside the bar the air was heavy with the smell of stale liquor and tobacco juice, and already thick with slowly heaving layers of blue-gray smoke. The usual racket was well under way. Through it all came the clear, boisterous laugh of Wild Horse Burke. He stood midway of the bar, with an arm draped over the bare shoulders of a girl named Lou.

His eyes were bright and hard with drink, and now, falling upon Peewee, they filled with a devilish humor. Peewee had stopped with his boots planted wide, his gaze hot with anger upon the way Burke held the girl. Even married men rode in to see the girls like Lou. But they didn't flaunt their weakness in front of a whole country right when they were waiting on a decent woman's answer.

Burke darkened at the unspoken rebuke. Letting his arm slide, he half turned and called out, "Well, if it ain't the half-pint whangaroo who don't tote a gun!"

Peewee's face set with dangerous quiet. He said on a flat, challenging note, "I hear tell you been claimin' you'd stop me ridin' west o' Lost Mule canyon, Burke!"

Burke's eyes lost their humor. His voice thickened on a cruel note. "Why then, half-pint, you been hearin' right! Ya got an idee I can't do it?"

Silence swept in a solid wave across the noise. Peewee dropped his cigarette and mashed it out without moving his gaze. "I got me that idee, and I got a better one, Burke. I got me the idee I can whip you off this range!"

BURKE stared. For an instant his face was torn between unholy anger and wild humor. Then his harsh laughter blasted out and filled the room. He turned and winked at grinning men and hitched his belts. He asked jubilantly, "Why now, half-pint, that is a right big order for most any man, but maybe not for one the size of you. What you aimin' to use, a slingshot?"

"My hands," Peewee stated.

The laughter washed off Burke's face, and he flamed with this affront to his pride. For an instant, his mouth tore into an ugly line. He glared at Peewee, and his body moved as if he would step forward and rip the little man to pieces. Then his pride felt the eyes of the crowd hard on him. He swung on it with an angry bafflement and rasped, "How can I fight that runt? Let him go get an equalizer!" He turned back to the bar and poured a drink.

Peewee had not budged, and now he asked softly, "Afraid of gettin' that purty face o' yores scraped up from sawdust, Burke?"

Burke had lifted the glass to his lips. His heavy teeth came down upon it with a force that split it. He pivoted, spitting splinters of glass from his bleeding lips and cursing violently. Peewee was making him look like a fool. Him, Wild Horse Burke, the flashiest and fastest gun hand on that range, being forced to fight a sawed-off runt with fists!

His eyes blazed with fury. He unbuckled his gunbelt and tossed it on the bar. "All right," he growled hoarsely, "yo're sot to get chewed up, ya'll get yore chanct!"

He came across the floor, fast and hard. Peewee waited without moving, then ducked his head forward and rammed with the full force of his hundred and thirty-five pounds. Burke felt the wind go out of him. He realized he was sitting in the sawdust, and the whole honkatonk was roaring with laughter. He came to his feet with a snarl. Peewee was moving in front of him, smashing in lightning taps. Some of those taps hurt more than he'd expected. But the great hurt was to his pride, that this little bantam could touch him at all!

He let go a terrific roundhouse that missed, and felt Peewee's high bootheel jam down upon his toe. An instant later he took a blow between the eyes; then a jab smashed open another place upon his lip. Peewee was dancing in front of him and howling insults. The cruel viciousness came up in Burke like an unleashed river. He moved out with arms wide and grabbed the little man.

They crashed into a table and rolled onto the floor. Burke let out a roar of savage malice and started methodically battering the smaller man to a pulp. Peewee fought like a cat; making each blow find its mark on Burke's face. When he got the chance, he dug his spurs into Burke's seat. He got Burke's neck under the rung of a chair. It was his chance, and the whole place shook to the roar of men cheering him on. The popularity of another man with the crowd was like a horse file across Burke's pride. With a thick howl, he lifted Peewee and chair in one violent upthrust of his arms. Holding him there, he scrambled to his feet and smashed him against a wall.

Peewee lay without making a move. Shouting murderously, Burke took a running jump to plant both heels in Peewee's back and crack it. The sheriff caught him around the middle in mid-air. He jerked him back, and put the quieting barrel of a gun into his middle until he cooled.

"You've beat him, Burke," the sheriff said flatly. "There'll be no murder here!"

Burke glared at him savagely, but the authority of a gun with a star behind it was clear. He wiped the back of his hand across his swelling, bloody lips and gave a rough, hard-breathing grunt. "Sure I beat him!" Angrily he stalked upstairs.

His face was a chopped-up mess, and his body a mass of roweling cuts, and the sympathy of the crowd was strong as a smell. The smaller man had put up a damned game fight. He was half pulverized, but his face didn't look much worse than Burke's, at that. As he went upstairs, Burke heard Waggoner of the Wheel-X growl, "Well, Burke beat him, but I'm tee-totalled if I think he licked him at that!"

They sloshed a bucket over Peewee and brought him to, and Waggoner piloted

him down-street to another bar to find his legs again and get some beefsteak on his face. Three hours later, Peewee came back into Silver Bill's. The smoke was heavier, the smell rawer, and the noise louder. Burke was mid-way down the bar again, his face discolored and swollen, and in an ugly temper with the girl.

Peewee tapped slowly down the room. A curious silence ran along with him. He stopped directly behind Burke and said, "Mister, you forgot somethin'!"

Burke spun around as if Peewee had been a rattler. The two glared at each other through half closed eyes. Burke rasped, "What?"

"You forgot to break my legs."

"I'll do better this time!" Burke bawled, and again threw off his gun.

The two men locked and swung loose and circled. Burke's thick arms smashed the smaller man with flailing, strength-taking blows. Peewee was dead white beneath his bruises, but he fought doggedly, each blow aimed at Burke's right eye. Burke smashed him down, and let him get to his feet, then smashed him down again. He bounced Peewee against the bar like a rubber ball. The half-pint man got in only three blows, all on that eye.

In a burst of savage malice, Burke held him against the bar and swung punches at him that should have cracked his jaw. Burke's face was bloated and distorted with fury. Killing lights came up in his eyes. He came in like a steer, and put both fists into Peewee's stomach.

The blow lifted Peewee up and dumped him on the other side of the bar. Burke started to follow, and got the sawed-off end of Silver Bill's shotgun in his chest.

Bill said impersonally, "You beat him again. You can't do more."

"I can't?" Burke roared. "I can gouge his damned eyes out!"

"Not in my bar!" Bill said, and gave the shotgun a suggestive nudge. "When a man can't get off the floor in here, he's safe, Wild Horse! Them's my rules."

Burke was half across the bar. He snorted angrily, "Yore sidin' him!"

"If I were sidin' him," Bill said. "I'd busted the fight up when he first come back for more! He looks like a stampede struck him!" He looked squarely into Burke's flaming eyes, and in his own were

glacial lights. He said heavily, "Burke, if you ain't satisfied with the beating you can give a man that size on his feet, you better start dry-gulchin'! You've half crippled him. That's enough!"

"It ain't enough!" Burke growled stubbornly. But he was cooling now, and he knew where he'd stand on that range if he attacked an unconscious man the size of Peewee. Every gunman in the country would consider it his special duty to teach Burke manners.

Growling and cursing and finding his lips thick, Burke slid off the bar and went back to clean up a second time.



THAT was on Monday night. On Wednesday, Peewee was back, and made another fight with Burke. He got smashed unmercifully, but he got in sharp, ripping punches at Burke's right eye again. He repeated this on Saturday, and three times the following week. Each time he took a crippling beating to get in punches on that one eye.

By the end of the week he was an unholy mess. His face was swollen beyond recognition, he could barely hobble on one leg. He moved in the way of a man with things busted inside of him. But that last time he managed to come in with a grim smile on his battered lips.

Sweat popped out on Burke's brow. It was getting so men grinned the minute they saw him. He had a cavvy of horses out on range, but he couldn't even stay out to work them for fear it would look as if he were afraid to meet up with Peewee again. His eye was too bad to go calling on Malvina Roy. He was becoming the laughing stock of the country.

That thought was like a scorpion sting inside of him. He had beaten this halfpint six times as badly as a man could be beaten. But he hadn't half *licked* him yet!

Burke banged down his gun, and moved out in a calculating fury to do the job final this time. He raked Peewee with slashing blows as he would rake a wild horse to break it. Peewee was half dead on his feet. Burke knew it, but the incredible thing was that Peewee didn't know it! Standing off for breathing, Burke had the horrible thought that this

might go on indefinitely. He kept winning, and yet somehow, he was losing, and suddenly he felt a thing he had never before known—he felt afraid!

He tore in with fresh savagery to cover this fear. He used every dirty trick he knew that could be pulled on a man in a fight, and when he dropped Peewee, the small man looked ready for Boothill or the dogs. But standing over him, Burke realized he couldn't see from his right eye at all, and scarcely from his left, and the fear flowed back through him with a smashing realization of a fact. Peewee meant to ruin his sight. Maybe his sight was ruined already!

His hand went to his eye, and he could feel only enormous, painful soft bump of mashed flesh. His fear turned to utter terror he could barely control. He swung on the room, and he could just make out men's faces through the blood haze of the other eye.

He shouted, "You tell this hombre to get out of this country, or next time wear his gun! I aim to shoot him on sight!"

He turned and made for Lou's room with lurching strides. He stumbled into chairs and tables he didn't see, and things in front of him had a flattened look, without any third dimension. The stairs looked as if they were painted on a wall. He was sobbing when he staggered into Lou's room and told her, "Go get Doc Storey pronto!"

She couldn't get Doc Storey because the Doc had loaded Peewee in a wagon and was driving him out to soak in Stink-ing Mud Creek.

Peewee came back into town two days later, hobbling stiffly along the street. The sheriff came up with him and said, "Peewee, this is yore last fight. You better wear a gun."

Peewee shook his head. "I won't be needing it, Sheriff."

"I'll walk along then," the sheriff said. "There ain't going to be murder here."

Peewee came into Silver Bill's, and the whole town had already dumped in there on the run. Burke was standing alone at the bar, his right eye a slit through a bump bigger than his fist. Half the bottle in front of him was empty, and rivulets

of sweat were running down his face. He knew Peewee had been coming from the way the crowd poured in, and he knew from the hush when he came through the doors. He swung around at the bar, and there was a wild haunted look in his one good eye. He yelled, "He can't come after me! I've licked him!"

He sounded like a man trying to convince himself a ghost isn't there at all.

Peewee stopped where a cone of shadow fell over him from the lamp above, leaving a circle beyond that of streaming yellow light. He laughed with a flat metallic note. He called out, "Kinda looks like yore the one's been licked, Burke! I still ain't wearin' a gun!"

Burke went ash gray, and his nostrils pulled in thin. He fell into a kind of animal crouch, and began to mutter to himself. The light in his eye changed, and his face went reckless with fright. "No!" he muttered thickly. "I ain't goin' to do it agin! Yore trying to kill my eye! I told ya to wear a gun next time, and now by God I mean to shoot ya anyhow!"

Peewee gave the thin notes of his laugh just as Burke's hand flashed toward his gun. The sheriff was hollering, and his boots pounding across the floor. Through the noise, Peewee's words dropped with the clarity of a gong. He said, "Burke, you can't aim . . . yore sight's gone!"

Burke's hand flashed out and he fired and missed. For an instant, he stood staring down at the gun with his good eye. Then with a strangled animal cry, he dropped the gun, and was lunging with great uneven strides for the door. A moment later, he was galloping out of town.

The sheriff still had his gun in hand, and was looking at Peewee curiously. He asked, "Why'd you waste time tellin' him about his eye?"

Peewee's damaged face broke with a grin. "How else could I stop him hittin' me, Sheriff? You ever know a good gunman to sight with his eye?"

The sheriff thought about that, and chuckled slowly. "You made him forget it himself. He tried to sight and missed!"

Silver Bill grinned behind the bar and boomed out, "Drink up, boys, to the half-pint whangaroo!"

Loyal Valley Renegade

A driving, heart-smashing novelette of justice on the hang rope trail

By
FRED GIPSON



Luke Mead's only friends were an old hound-dog and a fox squirrel . . . but he hoped to have more, if he could el himself out of the airtight Bootbill trap which made him fair prey for his former rustler mates and his God-fearing, fairweather rancher neighbors as well.

The ball opened then. Gunfire
ripped the canyon open.



CHAPTER ONE

Damned Son of Loyal Valley

THE sun set and a cow bawled at the pens, wanting to be milked. Purdy Cole kept talking and talking. But I couldn't see it his way.

"Purdy," I told him, "it's no use. I ain't helping you fellers rustle Loyal Valley horses or no others. I'm through with

that game. You know how Pa felt about it."

Purdy Cole was a lean, hungry old wolf of a man with a wolf's caution about him. He kept twisting in his saddle to look behind and all around him, his puckered blue eyes not missing a trick. A man gets that way riding the owlhoot—or he don't live long. And Purdy had lived a long time for a horse rustler. Long enough for his shaggy mane of hair to show gray and his sunken cheeks to take on the color of old saddle leather. He looked down over the corral bars at me now and his look went right on through, like it always done.

"Luke," he said, "you don't fit in here. I've taken the trouble to find out. Here, in Loyal Valley, you ain't a young gent trying to get an honest start. You're the son of old Ben Mead, a horse thief. You've rode the owlhoot with your old man and you'll ride it again. That's the way Valley folks look at it.

"They're just setting back on their hunkers, waiting for you to make a slip. Then the whole self-righteous bunch'll be at your throat. There ain't a man of 'em what'd bother to kick over a stick if he knowed it would save you from hanging. You ain't got a friend to your name, Luke!"

Purdy was throwing his rocks straight at me, and they was big enough to make me dodge. But I stood my ground. Purdy still didn't understand, and I sort of wanted him to. Purdy was a horse thief and a cattle rustler, but I knowed him to be a white man.

"Look, Purdy," I said. "You're right about these Loyal Valley folks. I ain't one of them. But I've got friends, all right. I've got an old hound-dog, here. Me 'n him work together a heap and we like it. I've got some good horses, and they ain't just something to pack a saddle. Them horses like me. There's a fox squirrel in a holler liveoak down yonder by the creek that barks at me every morning. There's a couple of mockingbirds in that mesquite at the corner of the saddle shed what'll let me feed their young-uns. And there's a covey of quail coming up every day for my feed. These ain't human friends, Purdy, but they're good uns. They'd miss me if I left."

A man can think things like that, but I reckon they don't sound like much when he puts them into words. Purdy went right on talking, like he hadn't heard.

"You might have a chance if you shifted ground," he said. "If you'd hunt new range, where nobody could look down your backtrail. But you've let a petticoat and a head of blonde hair waltz you around like a pet 'coon on a rope—"

He stopped to look down the muzzle of my gun. A hot, blinding rage burned through me. I never thought I'd want to kill Purdy Cole, a gent I'd rode the dim trails with, fought with and gone hungry with. But the kill-craze had taken hold

of me right there for the first time in my life, and I'd of shot Purdy for a thin dime.

His hands moved quick, but away from his guns. Purdy had schooled me in the use of guns and he knowed I could handle them. He jerked his hands above his head and his face went white. But the hurt, begging look in his eyes was what kept me from letting the hammer drop.

"Don't, Luke!" he begged. "Don't shoot! I'll get mine one of these days, but I don't want to get it from you!"

How can you shoot a man that talks to you that way? I couldn't. I let my gun sink down. But I was still brim-full of the cankering bitterness that had been piling up inside me for months now, and I couldn't be myself.

"Purdy," I said, and I was choking hoarse. "Purdy, Bess Ringer don't figure into this!"

The old owlhooter was quick to take back-water. "I didn't know it was like that, Luke," he said. And the way he said it made me think he hadn't.

He taken a quick look behind him and then added, "I reckon I'll have to lay my cards on the table, Luke. We're fixing to rustle Loyal Valley clean. And when we do, we'd like to have a man heading the outfit that'll use his head, like old Ben used to. Somebody that knows how to do a quick, clean job that don't need no bloodshed. You could do that. You got the same sort of savvy old Ben used to have."

"What's wrong with El Younger?" I wanted to know.

Purdy's face taken on a hard, grim look. "The way El Younger's rodding things, it's a killing every time we make a haul," Purdy said. "And then a scrap between ourselves over the take. El's got nerve, but he's mean and hoggish. He's too long on gun play and too short on head work. We're needing you, Luke!"



IT MAKES a man feel better inside to know that somebody believes in him and needs him. Even if it's just a cut-throat gang of horse thieves. But there was no use in letting Purdy know how much weight his talk carried. I couldn't go back now. There wasn't a

man in the Valley what believed in me, but I still couldn't go back.

"Purdy," I pointed out, "Pa wanted hell at the end of a hangrope to put me right with the law. He give himself up and tromped thin air swinging from a pecan tree on the Llano here, trying to convince me and these Loyal Valley ranchers that I didn't belong to ride the owlhoot. There's bound to be something in leading a straight life, or Pa never would have been that dead set on clearing my name. Maybe he didn't convince this hard-headed bunch of ranchers that I can foller the straight and narrow, but he sure did me. I ain't going back on Pa."

Purdy's restless eyes searched the Valley rims again and then he started fiddling with a saddle string. "Then I reckon it's goodbye, Luke," he said.

There was something in the way he said it that sent an icy chill crawling up my backbone.

"What's on your mind, Purdy?" I asked.

He set there and sucked in a deep breath and let it out mighty slow and he didn't look at me. Then he said, "The fact is, Luke, we'll have to get you if you won't join up again. Can't have one of the old gang running loose here in the Valley where we're fixing to operate. Too dangerous. You know our hide-outs. You might give us away."

Coming from Purdy, that hurt more than a man might expect. "Purdy, you're lying!" I shouted. "You know damn well you can trust me!"

Purdy snapped at me like a cornered wolf. "Maybe I do and maybe I don't. What's the difference? El Younger don't trust you. There's others in the bunch that side with him. You'll pull your freight out of the Valley quick, or you won't never get out. That's what I come to warn you about!"

His puckered old blue eyes caught and held mine for a minute, and I knewed he was handing me the straight goods.

"And you're sticking with that kind of a bunch?" I asked.

"There ain't no other place for me now, Luke," he said. "I'm one of the bunch."

The thing I had been dreading had come, then. Not only was I kept at bay like a mad wolf by the Valley ranchers,

but now Pa's old loafer gang was fixing to close in from the back and hamstring me. It wasn't right, and the bitterness boiled up into my brain.

"What the hell's to keep me from getting you right now, Purdy?" I snarled. And I brought up my gun again.

But Purdy just handed me a twisted grin and turned his back. "Luke," he said, "you could of drilled me center a minute ago and I'd of deserved it. But you can't shoot a man in the back. You're too much like old Ben. Goodbye, Luke. I wish you'd of come with me."

And he swung his horse around and rode up a slant into the red of the setting sun.

He was right. I couldn't shoot him in the back. . . .

When my little bunch of saddle horses didn't show up for their regular feed a couple of mornings later, I could feel the trap closing. Spring had come. The grass was getting long in the pocket draws up Lost Creek. Maybe the horses was hanging with it, liking green grass better than dry feed. But after Purdy Cole's visit, I was jumpy and nervous, half sick with dread and worry. I wasn't looking for nothing but the worst.

Maybe that's how come me to pitch into Bess Ringer like I done that morning. But I don't reckon that was all. When a man's as full of want for a woman as I'd been for months now, he can sometimes get mighty ringy and cruel without aiming to.

Anyhow, I was throwing a saddle on a dun I kept to wrangle horses on, when Bess rode up to the corral. She rode a paint horse and a fancy rig. She wore a blue corduroy suit and benchmade boots. She pulled up at the gate and set there with the lights from the rising sun dancing in her blonde hair. There was Christmas in her eyes and the half shy look on her face belonged to a kid who hopes he's welcome, but ain't right sure.

Seemed like it was that look, coupled with the freshness of her, that snapped a rope somewhere inside me.

"My God, girl!" I lashed out. "Can't I make it plain enough that you don't belong to come here!"

I never meant to be insulting like that. I don't know exactly what I meant. I was

just all bottled up inside and I couldn't hold it no longer.

If a kid was to hand you a sack of candy and you slapped its jaws, you'd know how Bess Ringer looked. She didn't say a word. She just stared at me, like she didn't believe it. Then she swung her paint away from the gate and started away.

A man gets hard that's led the life I've led, but not that hard. "Wait a minute, kid!" I called.

I stepped across the dun and spurred up beside her. But I didn't know what to say. All I could do was set and cuss silent and stare down at the toe of my boot.

I could feel her smoky eyes on me, but I couldn't meet them. Finally she said, "Sometimes, Luke, you try to fight things too hard!"

That was Bess Ringer for you. One minute a shy, eager kid. The next a woman with a deep quiet sort of wisdom that was baffling.

In spite of all I could do—or old Whet Ringer, her pa, could do—Bess would show up there at my little outfit every now and then to ride with me or play with the wild things I'd tamed for company.

Mostly, she was just a happy kid, laughing at the tricks of a fool squirrel or coaxing a covey of quail to come in closer. Maybe hunting out a new bird's nest to wonder about while we rode along together.

But let the pent-up desire for her start running too wild in me, like it will in a man, and she'd sense it as quick as an older woman. She'd color a little then. But she knew how to handle me. She'd hand me a warm smile and a look that said she was convinced I could be trusted. And what could a man do?

Me, twenty-seven, hard, lonesome and bitter. Her, eighteen, mostly just a kid. And still she handled me like a pet 'coon on a string!

I'd come close to killing Purdy Cole for saying that, but now I knowed he'd called the turn. I was hog-tied with an apron string and tied to stay!

I couldn't look at her now. I couldn't trust myself.

"My horses didn't come up this morn-

ing," I said. "We'll ride out and see if we can locate them."

I led out and she followed. I kept scanning the ridges, watching for tracks, anything to avoid looking at her. But all the time I could feel her closeness and warmth. It was like a heavy slug of sweet wine taken on an empty stomach. It made my blood run hot and wild and I rode gripping the saddlehorn so tight it hurt the tips of my fingers.

CHAPTER TWO

Two-Way Rustler Trap

A LONESOME man can try to fool himself. He can make believe that all he's wanting out of a girl like Bess Ringer is a little companionship and understanding. That he don't aim to let it go no further. But Nature don't work that way. There's more to keeping the race alive than companionship and understanding. There's the little pulse that throbs plain in a woman's neck. There's the swell of her breasts. There's a blue corduroy pants leg, stretched tight over a rounded thigh and rolling with the sway of the saddle.

Call it lust or love or any damn thing you want to, but Bess Ringer was my woman and I had to have her!

But the hell of it was that I couldn't. Old Whet Ringer had made that plain the night I'd taken my courage in hand and crashed a barn dance at Jim Ferguson's, where I knowed I'd find Bess.

Old Whet had showed more confidence and willingness to help than any man in the Valley after Pa give himself up for hanging on the condition that I could come back to the old home place and start life over. But Whet changed sides quick when he caught me dancing with Bess that night. He marched me out at the point of a gun and told me, with his old blue eyes ablaze and mustaches quivering, to get out and stay out.

"I agreed to let you live in the Valley, Mead, as long as you stayed on the right track," he told me. "But making a play for my girl ain't keeping on the right track. No daughter of mine's getting mixed up with a horse rustler, if I have to shoot you from ambush!"

That done it. Not that I wouldn't have waded through hell barefoot to get Bess Ringer. But I could see the old man's point. I might be honest as the day is long, but any woman I married would be the wife of a horse thief and a horse thief's son. She'd be treated that way.

I could take her away, maybe, but where to? Down the owlhoot, hunted like a wild dog, dragging a broken-hearted girl from one hell-hole to the next. I'd seen others try it and I'd sworn I wasn't letting Bess Ringer in for nothing like that. But I knewed that if she kept riding with me that's where she'd wind up. A man can hold out against public opinion just so long. Eventually there's bound to come the time when he can't take it no longer, and he cracks.

It was Bess who located the horses. We rounded a bend in the creek and a pocket draw come in sight. I saw her start suddenly and pull up. A puzzled look spread over her face.

"Luke," she said, "you've picked up some stray horses."

It was a hot day, but I was suddenly cold. I looked. A quarter of a mile away the herd was scattered over a walled-in mesquite flat. A black horse grazing in the middle caught my eye. There was a couple of extra bays, too, and a flea-bitten gray. Also, I could tell at a glance that the herd wasn't big enough.

I knowed that it had come. I didn't have to read a brand to know that leggy black belonged to Jim Ferguson. I was willing to bet I could guess the brands on the rest. Them two bays belonged to old Ringer, himself. Others would be wearing the irons of other Valley ranchers. And they hadn't strayed in here. Lost Creek was too far off their home range.

I reached and drew my Winchester out of its scabbard and twisted in the saddle to scan the ridges. The hair was crawling at the back of my neck.

"Get that paint out of here quick, kid," I ordered Bess. "And ride!"

But she didn't. "What is it, Luke?" she wanted to know. "What does it mean?"

I wheeled on her, speaking savage. "Dammit, girl! Can't you ever listen to reason? Them's rustled horses and I

don't rustle them. They're here because El Younger's bunch has set their trap for me, like Purdy Cole warned. And I've rode square into it, like a blind fool, with you riding with me. Clear out now, before she snaps shut!"

Instead, she giggled the paint up close. "We could run them off, Luke," she said. "Then the trap wouldn't catch anything they could hold against you."

What the hell could a man do? You can quirt a kid, maybe, and make it listen to reason. You can't use a quirt on a grown girl.

There wasn't time to argue. I set spurs to the dun and headed for the herd. If I could manage to cut this stolen stuff out and get it away in time . . .

"Don't ride close to me, kid!" I warned.

The set-up was easy to read. El Younger, that rattlesnake renegade who had taken over the reins of Pa's old rustler gang, had come through with a bunch of stolen horses during the night. Him and his riders had picked up my best horses and cut out their cripples and slow ones and shunted them off into what was left of my saddle stock.

It was a master stroke. The posse would be riding close behind this morning. They'd find stolen stuff in my pasture, with my horses, and it would prove what Loyal Valley ranchers wanted to believe. That I had taken to long-roping again.

All the time I didn't think I'd make it. And I didn't. It taken too long to cut the stolen stuff away from the rest. And there wasn't no way out of the box draw except the way we'd come in. We were in a tight.

Bess worked with me, riding hard, using her head like a man, reefing her paint down the sides with the double of her rope to put the spring in his step. But when we shot-gunned the running strays out of the mouth of the canyon, the posse was waiting. It closed in on both sides of us.

We was caught with the goods. Fear cut down through my bowels and there was murder inside me again. I'd thought I was done with the wild bunch I used to ride with. But I wasn't. Somehow, some way, I'd have to get El Younger before I was finished.

IT WAS a cold-eyed, grim bunch. There was pot-bellied old Jim Ferguson, with his face flaming red and his saddle gun lifted and ready. There was Dude Whitman, rigged out in flashy clothes, with his hat cocked at a jack-deuce angle and his silver-mounted spurs glinting in the sunlight. Ples Barker, setting hunched in his saddle like it hurt him to ride. Ike Tillman, Beans Hammer. Pinto Wyman. A gent named Carson. Young, sleepy-eyed Nels Handsome, a Ferguson rider, who looked upon the world with a sort of detached weariness—the quickest and most dangerous man I ever seen. A lot of riders I didn't know. And old Whet Ringer.

Sight of his daughter riding with a horse thief made Whet's craggy old face look like he'd seen a ghost. Whet would have shot me out of the saddle right then, without a word. I could see it in his eyes. But Bess crowded in too close.

"Get away from that rustler, girl!" old Whet commanded in a bleak voice.

But Bess didn't answer him and she didn't get away. I tried to pull off from her before the shooting commenced, but she only crowded closer, begging me in a half whisper: "Don't shoot, Luke!"

She was crying a little.

The rest circled us, pushing in, wary, guns ready, eyes hard and bright and condemning. They didn't say another word. They just closed in.

I didn't have a Chinaman's chance, but their hide-bound intolerance made me mad as hell. It would have been suicide, but if I could have got away from the girl, I'd have taken on the whole damn bunch, if they shot me to rags. I was that mad—and scared.

I tried to make my voice sound calm when I spoke. "Don't I even get my two minutes worth of talk?" I asked.

Old Whet Ringer had his teeth bared like a bayed wild hog. "It'll take just about that long to swing you to a mesquite," he said. "You can talk then if you ain't man enough to take it quiet. Old Hob Tart can't hear you. He's shot full of holes. We don't aim to hear no more than Hob Tart does."

Dude Whitman laughed his ugly, insulting laugh.

So that's the way the land lay. Here

they were, doing just what El Younger had calculated they would. Playing his string right out for him. Fixing to hang me and save El the trouble. They'd stood by their promise to Pa as long as they could. They'd let me live alone on the old spread, let me start from nothing and build it up without giving me a helping hand anywhere. But they'd watched me all the time. They hadn't trusted me. And now their suspicions were justified and they didn't want to listen to my defense.

It was Nels Handsome that saved me. I was easing my dun away from Bess' paint again. If I ever got far enough away from the girl, they wouldn't never hang me. They might be honest ranchers, doing what they thought was their duty, but by God they wouldn't hang me like they hung Pa!

But I didn't get the chance to make my play. My gun jumped suddenly out of its scabbard and I wheeled to face it—in Nels Handsome's hand.

"The little lady said not to make a fight of it," Nels said softly. "So you don't fight, see!"

For a kid of twenty-one, that lazy-eyed Handsome was the coldest proposition I ever seen.

The rest crowded in quick then. Dude Whitman jerked me off my horse and slammed me in the face with a sledgehammer fist.

"That's for thinking you're such a hell on wheels-with the women," he sneered.

I tasted the salty blood of my busted mouth and I knowed then why Dude Whitman hated me so. Sometime or other, he'd shook out a loop for Bess Ringer and had to draw it back in empty.

A dozen hands kept me from falling. They gripped me hard and tight. I couldn't move. All I could do was stand there and stare back into the circle of hate-filled eyes and smell the rank hot scent that angry men give off.

Whet Ringer shoved through to wrap my hands with a piggin' string. Old Jim Ferguson was tying a hang-knot, careful-like, in his catch-rope. I was sick with cold fear and bitter helplessness and the pain of my busted mouth.

"The little lady claims Luke never done it."

That was the soft voice of Nels Handsome again. It switched attention from me to where Nels and Bess had pulled their horses off from the rest.

Nels' eyes crawled indifferently from one man to the other. "She claims she knows," he said.

"'Course she'd claim it!" sneered Dude Whitman, with contempt strong in his voice. "What'd you expect of a horse thief's wench?"

Old Whet Ringer's face turned a livid purple. He come around from behind me, cocking his six-shooter. But Nels Handsome had made another of his quick moves. Already he'd shoved his horse up beside Dude, leaned over, and slapped that fullfaced gent clean out of his saddle.

Dude come to his feet, his black eyes full of hate, and dragging his gun. He found Nels setting quiet in his saddle and picking his teeth. Nels kept right on picking his teeth till Dude suddenly let his gun slide back in its scabbard and shivered.

"Dude," said Nels Handsome, "one of these days some good man's going to pin your belly button to your backbone with hot lead. I hope it ain't me!"



THE scare was plain in Dude's white face and he backed off without a word. Nels Handsome's colorless eyes could do that to a man.

"The little lady," Nels continued, turning to the bunch again, "claims Luke knows the rustler hide-outs. Claims he's told her he does. She says how come we don't let him lead us there and prove he

ain't guilty. She says we could clean out the rustlers and get back the main bunch of saddle stock they run off if we throwed in with Luke and trusted him."

They was quiet for a minute, staring at Nels Handsome and Bess and then back at me again. Out in the mesquites an old rooster quail whistled loud and lusty.

Rage had old Whet Ringer shaking like a dog in the wet. But there was a calculating look in Jim Ferguson's eyes.

"How about it, Mead?" he asked. "You've rode with 'em."

The blood was clotting on my lips and making them draw and itch. I had to lick the clot away before I could answer.

"Yeah," I admitted. "I've rode with 'em. Long enough to know they damn seldom use the same hide-out regular."

"But if you was to set out to find 'em, you could, couldn't you?" Barker spoke up. "You could find 'em, if you knowed it would save you from a hanging"

"Maybe," I answered. "If I *knowed* that!"

Old Whet Ringer stared hard at me for a long time. I stared right back at him. Finally, he said, "Take it or leave it, Mead. You lead us to this rustler hide-out and show us how to clean it out—or you swing. You ride with your hands tied. And one crooked move gets you a slug in the back. Make up your mind. We're wasting time!"

I knowed how the old man felt. I was as bitter about his girl Bess as he was. He just didn't know it.

The girl's smoky eyes were on me. They were begging me to accept. She was trying to give me a break. She actu-

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ally thought I could lead this bunch to a rustler clean-up. Men and guns were just men and guns to her. She didn't realize the difference between a horse rustler and an honest rancher in a fight to the finish.

It was a hell of a choice for a man to make. It was hang now, or double-cross the old outlaw gang—and likely hang later. I didn't have no confidence in these suspicious ranchers turning me loose. They'd been waiting too long for just this chance. I was set to stretch a rope. But at the same time, playing out my string on their side might give me a shot somewhere at squaring accounts with El Younger. El was the lone wolf kind what looked out for himself and to hell with the rest.

"Do I get my chance at El Younger?" I asked.

Whet Ringer shrugged. "When we get him," he said.

"All right," I said. "I'll make a try."

"It better be a damn good one, Mead," Jim Ferguson warned.

They tied my hands to the saddlehorn in such a way that I could still handle the reins a little. I set and watched old Whet pull Bess off to one side. He talked low, but I could tell by the expression on her face that he was giving her hell.

But she wasn't flinching. She was setting straight in her saddle, looking up at the old man, and taking it. She was still crying a little, but holding her stand.

When I pulled my horse around to lead the posse toward the Eagle Rock country, I heard old Whet wind up his talk with: "And now, by God, you ride home and stay there!"

But she didn't. We topped out a ridge a mile away and I looked back and caught a glimpse of her riding through the brush toward my spread. I didn't like that. But there was a whole lot I didn't like here. And what the hell could I do about it?

CHAPTER THREE

Reward of the Righteous

I DIDN'T know that El Younger and his bunch would hole up in the Eagle Rock hide-out. All I had to go on was my experience and hunches. I

knowned what I'd do if I'd been making the steal. If El Younger figured the play different, then all I could look forward to was a shot in the back from old Whet Ringer's gun. I rode with my mind circling like a dog chasing its tail, trying to figure some out. There wasn't any. I couldn't even work my hands loose. They watched me too close. The prospects for getting a chance at El Younger didn't look bright.

The sun was setting in a high crotch of the Eagle Rock ridge when I halted them at the edge of the brush. Open ground lay between us and a series of bald, hog-backed ridges that was cut deep by steep-walled canyons. Shinnery brush choked the canyons.

I pulled up and told them if I'd guessed right the rustler bunch would be holed up in that canyon to the left. They'd be boogering brands on the horses. I told them if I hadn't guessed right, I'd as soon get shot in the back here as anywhere else. I said I didn't know of a damned reason a man would want to live anyhow. Not when his neighbors wouldn't trust him out of sight.

I was lying, of course. I had a reason. But a bitter man don't talk and think straight.

Whet Ringer was the accepted leader of the posse. "My idea is," he said, "to hide out here till dark. Then we'll belly up as close as we can. Get most of them on the surprise rush and mix it with the rest."

For the first time since I'd known him, I saw Nels Handsome's lazy eyes open up and show light. I thought he was going to kick up a protest, but he didn't. He just twisted his mouth in a sour grin and looked tired, half-sullen and indifferent again.

My cracked lips was still salty and I kept running my tongue over them.

"You didn't ask for my advice," I said. "But if you try that move, we'll be lucky if anybody gets out alive. Them rustlers has got guards out and they'll warn the main bunch. They'll trap us and cut us to pieces. The pass is open at the far end. If we was to split up the party and send one bunch around to the other end, we might manage to starve them out in a week or two. That's the

only chance I see to clean 'em out."

"Week or two, hell!" sneered Dude Whitman. "He expects us to set here watching an empty hole a week or two!"

"You wouldn't be trying to give your pards a long lead, would you, Mead?" asked old Jim Ferguson.

"If you think that hole's empty," I flared, "just grab up a handful of guts and try follering them fresh horse tracks through that gap!" I'd gone this far and there was no backing out. But part of my temper was from nervousness at leading a practically strange posse against the outlaw gang I knew. Some of those men were hard and mean. Some of them I'd hate to see killed. And there was Purdy Cole. I wouldn't let myself think of Purdy Cole. I had to get El Younger. He had this coming to him.

"Cut me loose and loan me the use of a gun and I'll show you the way in!" I told the posse.

"I'll be looking down the sights of any gun I hand you," Dude Whitman said.

Whet Ringer said, "We'll take them from this end, like I said. We ain't splitting up in no little bunches they can wipe out easy."

He ordered them to dismount, claiming they'd take it afoot when dark come. The way he was giving orders, he might not have even heard me. He got down and taken his catch-rope and backed me up to a hackberry tree.

"Hold it a minute!" I yelled. He was fixing to tie me up. "Don't I get my chance at El Younger?"

"You've had your chance, owlhoot!" Jim Ferguson said.

"But you promised!" I flared.

Dude Whitman laughed his ugly laugh again. Whet Ringer remained silent. He just went right ahead, lashing me tight against the trunk of the hackberry till I could hardly get my breath.

I stood there till dark, cussing them for cheats and liars. I snorted at their so-called honor and honesty. I told them a half-breed sheep rustler's word was better than theirs. They set silent and taken it, while I cussed them for dirty-livered, yellar cowards. Then I reckon I cried a little when old Whet Ringer finally gave his orders and they went down into the

canyon to stick their heads in that rattlesnakes' den. They'd promised to give me my chance at El Younger if I double-crossed the outlaw bunch and now they were cheating me out of it.

It was a hell of a surprise attack. A deaf armadillo would have been spooked out of his hide up ahead of their sneak. I heard them from the time they left till the first shot was fired. And they didn't fire it. I recognized Pinto Wyman's yell when the slug got him. Pinto didn't yell a second time.

Then the canyon busted wide open with a hell of gun thunder and the echoes slapped back and forth between the walls. Now and then I could see a spurt of gun flame. The screams of wounded men made my blood turn to ice water.

It lasted about a minute. Then I heard the rumble and clatter of running horses and the wild, high-pitched laughing yell of El Younger. The owlhooters were sweeping out through the far end of the canyon, stampeding the stolen herd ahead of them. It wasn't funny, but I laughed a little.



THIRTEEN men went down there into that rustler hide-out. Seven came back. Old Whet Ringer was one. He had only one finger shot off, but his shoulders were slumped with defeat.

Jim Ferguson got out alive, but with blood running down his neck and dripping off a mangled ear. Dude Whitman looked like he'd been dragged through hell by the hair of his head. Carson made it back and so did Barker.

Nels Handsome come in picking his teeth.

Without a word, old Whet started a fire to see by. Then he ordered the rest to take horses down into the canyon and bring out the dead. Nels Handsome ignored the orders, though. He come over to squat beside me and start untying the rope from around me and the hackberry.

Whet come to his feet with a snarl at this. "What the hell you mean, Handsome?" he roared. "You leave that damned rustler be!"

Nels didn't even look up. "The little lady said this gent was on the square, Whet," he said. "I didn't want to believe it, but now I've got to. And you've got to!"

"I've got to play hell!" old Whet charged, coming away from the fire and dragging his gun. "Don't Mead lead us into this death trap?"

"You've done played hell, old man," Nels said. "And you led yourself into the fix we're in. *Now shut up and listen!*"

Nels Handsome was back on his feet with a quick movement and the way he said that last stopped old Whet in his tracks. It curdled my blood, too. The kid was hard. But he was talking easy when he started again.

"Like I say, the little lady claimed all along Luke Mead was righter than a rabbit. I didn't like to believe that. Mead had the inside track with her and I wanted it. I kept hoping like you buzzards, that he'd take to the owlhoot again, then I'd get a showin'. But he never. And tonight he told you how to trap this bunch of horse rustlers, but you was too cagey and suspicious. You led us into a slaughter, like he warned."

He stopped for a bit to let his words soak in, then went on. "Luke Mead carried out his end of the bargain to the letter, and we'll carry out ours. He goes free from now on and I'm backing him till his belly's hammered blue!"

He jerked the rope away, freeing me, and turned to face old Whet again. The green-peach fuzz lining his young jaws was plain in the firelight.

"If you think I'm going to trust that horse thief again, you've blowed your top, Handsome," old Whet growled.

Nels' mouth jerked down at one corner. "You've got to trust this horse thief, old man," he declared. "You ain't got no choice. Down yonder a while ago I knocked over a rustler in the fracas. He went down cussing Luke Mead for a traitor and swearing El Younger and the bunch would hit Mead where it'll hurt the worst. You know what that means. They'll try to get the little lady now. But they won't. Because Luke Mead's going to stop 'em. And we're going to help him do it. Now give him back his guns and holler up that crew out of the

canyon. We've got to be movin' fast!"

Like Nels Handsome told him, old Whet had to trust me now. Nobody else could run that rustler bunch down. It had been tried too often. Maybe I couldn't, but I was the only hope.

Whet saw the picture and was quick to bring me my guns. He looked broken now and there was a pleading look in his hard old eyes.

Whipping the others in line, however, was a horse of another color. I never could have done it myself. Not even after I had my guns back. But when they come up out of the canyon, bringing the dead men and the horses the rustlers had lost in their get-away, the fuzz-faced Handsome stood there in the firelight with his feet wide apart and a gun in each hand and handed it to them straight. He cursed them for a pack of damn fools and invited anybody who wasn't satisfied to take my orders to draw on him. He wasn't a lazy, sleepy-eyed kid now. He was a hard-faced, cold-blooded killer.

"Give 'em their orders, Mead," he said back over his shoulder. "They'll take 'em."

And they taken 'em. That bunch was afraid of this kid. I was afraid of him, too.

If what Handsome had told me was true, then there wasn't no time to waste. I left Barker with the dead and left him horses to bring them in on. I cut out two horses to each man and told them to saddle the freshest one. Then I led them straight back toward the old home spread in a run that shook the night with the hammering of shod hoofs against the ground.

It was like the old rides I used to make with Pa and Purdy Cole and the rest of the wild bunch. Traveling fast and far with the night wind cool in our faces and stolen horses shoving along ahead of us. But I got no lift out of this ride. There was the threat against Bess Ringer to think about. There was the chance I'd figure the play wrong and trip up. Bess had rode back toward my outfit when we left her. But had she stayed there?

Old Whet Ringer crowded in close to me once and wanted to know why I wasn't heading straight for his Mill Creek spread. I didn't answer. I didn't have

no reason. All I had was a hunch, or a dread, that led me straight for my Lost Creek outfit.

I kept the run on fast ground and we drifted. But daylight was showing in the east when we dropped down into Loyal Valley and the rim of the low hills marking my Lost Creek spread stood against the skyline.

A thick blue-white blanket hung above the ridges and the dread that had rode with me all night turned to near panic. There hadn't been any fog banks anywhere along the ride. Why would there be any yonder?

There wasn't. It was smoke. It hung above the burning buildings of Pa's old ranch site. The house and barns and sheds was all in flames, too far gone to put out.



WE RODE down without slackening our pace. I pulled up, sick and reeling in my saddle. There wasn't much left. Fire had swept down past the creek and burned off a field of ripe oats and was still follering along the watercourse. Dead cattle, shot between the eyes, lay inside the smoking corrals. And where the graves of Ma and Pa lay side by side under the chinaberry tree back of the house, the ground had been trampled and the grave stones roped and dragged off their bases. My old hound-dog lay dead at the head of Pa's grave.

"By God, they didn't leave much!" Jim Ferguson exclaimed.

"Sure swept this nest clean," Dude Whitman agreed.

That was the sum of the comments. No sympathy among this bunch. What did they give a damn about my loss? A horse rustler's nest had been cleaned out, so what the hell?

"Comanches, you reckon?" old Whet Ringer asked me.

"Comanches, hell!" I flared. "This is the price I pay for leading you against El Younger and his bunch!"

"Gawdamighty!" Whet exclaimed, bad scared now. "Then maybe Handsome was right. Maybe they *are* after you. Hell, if that's the case, they'll be after

Bess!" He flung up a hand to the bunch. "We've got to ride to Mill Creek, men!" he shouted. "If they get my girl—"

"They done got her, old man!"

It was Nels Handsome. He'd been riding a wide circle around the burned layout and now he come up with a blue corduroy jacket in his hands. Old Whet clawed for it, but I was quicker. It was a soft piece of goods, soft and warm and fine, like the soft, warm fineness of its owner.

I gripped the jacket and stared at Nels Handsome. But I wasn't seeing him. I was seeing the heavy, ruthless hands of El Younger pawing over Bess Ringer. I was seeing those black predatory eyes of his that could run over a woman and strip her bare the first look. The hate that flared suddenly in me then was a blinding thing. I stared at Nels Handsome till he swum before my eyes and I could feel my entrails tying themselves up in hard, cold knots.

"I'll get El Younger," I swore, talking to nobody but myself. "I'll get that damn hound in my hands and I'll cut him till he quits hollering!"

Nels Handsome brought me back to earth. "Easy, Luke," he said. "We've got to catch Younger first. And maybe this'll help. I found it in one of the jacket pockets."

He held a tomato can wrapper toward me. On the blank side, printed in a shaky hand with the blunt end of a lead-nosed cartridge, was "Burro Springs. P. C."

"Purdy Cole!" I gasped, and I felt the first bit of hope. If Purdy Cole was still on my side, there was a chance. Purdy was a white man. He was a horse thief but he wouldn't hold with kidnapping a girl. He'd left me a lead to foller in Bess' corduroy jacket. I had something then besides a trail to go on.

"Letter from a friend?" Dude Whitman questioned.

"From a damned good friend," I said.

"That's what I figured," he said. "And I also figure your friend wouldn't have burnt you out and left you a letter without reason. The reason, I'd say, is that they figured you was forced into this manhunt and they wanted to get you loose from us. So they burnt you out, Comanche style, expecting us to fall on your neck,

weeping with sorrow. But it's too damn thin, Mead. We don't fall for it!"

"Mead!" cried old Whet, crazy with hurt. "If you've sent my daughter off with that gang, I'll kill you!"

I looked at him once and he knewed he was talking crazy and shut up.

But the hell of it was that Dude's suspicion showed plain in the eyes of some of the rest. The hard-headed, bungling fools. A girl like Bess Ringer in the hands of El Younger's outlaw bunch, and them still wasting time, trying to hang a horse-rustling job on me!

It made me cold mean inside, and ugly, and I cussed them like Nels Handsome had cussed them the night before. I told Dude Whitman that he was a yellar-bellied snake and I dared him or any of the balance to give me any more trouble till this manhunt was over.

I was begging for a gun-fight. I wanted something I could come to grips with. And Dude Whitman was raking up guts enough to satisfy my wants when Nels Handsome stopped the play.

"You gents heard Mead," he said. "You're every damn one what he called you, so dry up. We're follering Luke to hell, if he has to go there, because he's still the boss. I'm seeing to that!"

I taken the trail and they follered. But I knowed as well as the rest who the boss was.

CHAPTER FOUR

Big Round-Up

I RODE a good horse to death that day. It was the dun. I rode him till he dropped in his tracks and lay there with the whites of his eyes turned up and the blood streaming out of his mouth and nostrils.

It was a sickening, ugly thing to do, but I had to do it. I swapped horses as often as I could, but I had to cover close to double the distance the others did. Purdy Cole had give me a lead on Burro Springs, but I had to run the trail to make sure Purdy was right. I knowed El Younger. El got jumpy when he run rustled horses and knowed a posse was riding on his tail. He might change his mind about Burro Springs before he got

there and pull off to some other hide-out.

I had to ride the trail and still try to close up a gap of better than an hour lead the rustlers had on us. Nels Handsome worked between me and the balance of the ranchers, keeping them headed in the right direction.

Whet Ringer aged ten years on that ride.

El Younger knowed how to cover a trail as good as Pa and Purdy Cole used to. Pa and Purdy had learnt him. But Pa and Purdy had also learnt me how to foller one. And when the dun dropped from under me up in the cedar brakes toward the forks of the Llanos, I knowed I was gaining. The wind was quiet in the cedars and there was dust hanging above the tracks where the horse herd had tore across hard-pan openings in the brush. Having to keep a trail slows up a run, but so does driving a band of sixty or seventy loose horses.

El Younger was headed for Burro Springs, all right, but he never made it. Luck rode with us. We caught them making a crossing on the South Llano, right under Lover's Leap Point.

The water was shallow there, but the stream bed was a nest of round, slick boulders the size of a man's head and bigger. A horse wants to take his time with footing like that. Them horses was. Purdy Cole had taken the lead in making the crossing and horses was picking their way along behind him. Stepping light and careful, in spite of the hollering and crowding of the rustlers.

On our side was a pecan-tree bottom, with trees standing tall, so that we couldn't see much of the rustlers gang and the main herd. But we had rode up over high ground and could see Purdy and the leaders above the tree-tops. The river bottom was open on his side for a hundred yards or better, before the ground slanted up sharp to the brush-tangled ridges standing away from the river.

Brush hid me when I first topped the rise and halted to let the balance of the riders pull up. The outlaws hadn't seen me. I looked first for Bess Ringer, but I couldn't see her through the trees. I had a wild urge to wade right on in and

mix it with them, but I knowed that wouldn't do. I had to use my head. We had to split up here and work down, through the timber, above and below them, so they couldn't get out on us. Handled right, we had them sewed up tight down there in the river bed. A slip, and they'd scatter like wild gobblers.

Whet Ringer pulled up beside me and his old eyes glinted like a gunsight with the sun on it. Jim Ferguson rode next to him. Ferguson caught sight of Purdy Cole above the timber and dragged at his Winchester.

"Watch me center a ball where his suspenders cross!" he growled.

Nels Handsome halted the upswing of the gun before I could reach it. "Just a minute, old Red Face," he said easily. "*Luke Mead's still running this show!*"

The red flared up in Ferguson's sun-peeled face, but he didn't argue.

"What's the play, Mead?" questioned Handsome.

"You lead half of them down through the timber to the right," I told him. "I'll take the rest down to the left. They'll sight us before we make it to the river, but don't let that stop you. Take cover by the water before you stop, so they'll have to stay in the open. Then hand it to them. But look out for the girl!"

"I'll ride with Luke Mead," offered Dude Whitman. "He's one horse thief I don't aim to let duck out on his party."

Nels Handsome's lazy cold eyes crawled toward Dude and Nels said, "You'll ride with me, Dude. You'll lead the way. I know one damn fool it won't hurt me none to see get shot!"

Dude Whitman rode with Nels Handsome.

We quartered off into the brush on either side of the trail. We used the brush and tall timber and upflung boulders to screen us part of the way. Then there was a sudden shout from the outlaws. The whipping report of a saddle gun cracked loud in the timber. I heard a man scream and go down on Nels' side.

The ball opened then. Gunfire ripped the canyon open. Men shouted. Panicky horses reared and plunged, their feet popping the rocks and knocking water high in the sunlight. Some went down under a general stampede and took part

of the owlhooters into the shallow water with them.

I'd done quit my horse by then and was leaping down a series of rock ledges making for the water. I didn't aim for that outlaw bunch to get past us on either side. We had to keep them in the open. If that band ever got holed up in a tight nest, nothing short of dynamite could smoke them out.

A bullet slapped into a pecan at my head and shattered bark into my face, blinding me for a second. I threw myself down on the ground, wiped the tears out of my eyes in time to see a rustler spurring his stumbling horse straight up the middle of the stream toward me. I knocked him out of his saddle. His horse lost its footing in time to fall on him.

The horse came to his feet, but the rustler didn't. The water was swift here and rolled him over and over.

On my hands and knees, I made it to a drift log, lodged behind a cottonwood. I could see better here. I could see Breed Hanson, the rustler gang's main tracker, come out from under a downed horse and walk through the water toward Nels Handsome's side of the fight.

Breed's hat was gone and water streamed out of his black hair and down over his bared teeth, but he had a gun in each hand and he was firing as deliberate as he would at a coyote. You didn't scare Breed Hanson. All you could do was shoot him.

I shot him.

I could see old Purdy Cole, who was already out on the far bank when the fracas commenced, spur his horse straight ahead. He'd fell out of his saddle and was hanging off, Comanche style, firing back under his horse's neck. I didn't shoot at Purdy. I hoped he'd make it.

But he didn't. There was too much open ground to cover. A Winchester snarled back and above me and Purdy's horse went down in a scramble. Purdy landed on his feet, running like an old boogered gobbler. But that rifle cracked again and Pa's old partner rolled in the sand and lay still.

Boogered horses were scattered and running every which way now. Some cut around and swept back through the timber, their manes and tails flying. Oth-

ers made it across to the far side and beat it for the brush. They kicked sand on Purdy Cole's body as they tore by.



ONE rider made it to the brush with these runaways, but he was done shot through, I reckon. He spilled out of his saddle and hung in the fork of a mesquite a long time before he slipped to the ground.

All this I seen at a glance. The rustler gang going to hell, one by one. Shooting and hollering and falling in the shoals. Runaway horses churning the river into white foam and spray, clambering and scrambling to the banks and tearing through the timber in all directions. But nowhere could I catch a glimpse of a smoky-eyed girl with blonde hair. Nor of El Younger.

It was a hard, quick fight. Quick and rough and merciless. The firing broke off for a second and behind me I heard a big horse running.

I wheeled, half recognizing the sound of those hoofs. The first thing I seen, though, was old Whet Ringer, laying face down behind a log with his arms throwed out wide and one hand still gripping a Winchester. The second was a blur of a runaway horse coming through the timber.

The horse was running hard, running wild. But he broke his stride to jump over old Whet's body. And I recognized him then. He was a stocking-legged bay of mine, called Ranger. The big fractious devil Bess was always wanting to ride, but couldn't because I wouldn't let her get on him.

But she was riding him now. Riding him bare-backed and without a bridle. And holding her on his back was El Younger. El had one arm hugged tight around the girl and the other hand clutching a fist-full of Ranger's mane. He was spurring the big horse hard, trying to go out behind us, using the girl as a shield.

Ranger was the best horse I'd ever own, but I didn't hesitate. I caught a quick bead on his neck, moved up to where I knowed I wouldn't touch the girl, and let him have it.

He dropped like you'd hit him between

the ears with an axe. He went down, all in a heap, and it seemed like old Death reached out and clawed my insides with ice-cold fingers as I saw Bess Ringer and El Younger dive over his head.

But Bess was the first one to her feet. El come up, grabbing at her. Aiming to hold her between him and our fire, I reckon. But he wasn't quick enough. He caught the sleeve of the shirt she wore, but she tore free, leaving half the sleeve in his big hand. Then she was gone, running like a wild thing through the trees.

I let El Younger have one then that whirled him off his feet and flopped his big rangy body down across the dead horse.

But shooting El Younger was like making a body shot on a catamount. And just as dangerous. I hadn't got him center and he come to his feet now, quick, with his white teeth bared in a sneering half-grin, half-snarl. Both guns belched flame.

I'd dropped my Winchester and was clawing for my sixgun when the first one got me. It taked me high in the shoulder and sent me reeling backwards. And before I had time to fall, Younger's second shot got me solid, tearing through my side like a hot branding iron. It spun me around, dropping me face down.

The pain blinded me for a second, but I wasn't out yet. I could still move. It didn't seem then like that El Younger could ever put enough lead into me that I couldn't move. He could kill me maybe, but not before I got him. I was coming to my knees now and lifting my gun and I knowed nothing could keep me from getting El Younger.

But something did. My gun was too heavy in my hands. I could lift it, but I couldn't raise the muzzle. I strained with every ounce of power I had left, but it wasn't enough. My gun kept pointing at the ground.

A Winchester cracked loud to one side of El Younger. The big outlaw leader sagged down behind the dead horse. And I looked to where old Whet Ringer lay propped on his elbows, still sighting down his rifle barrel and waiting for El Younger to make a move.

But Younger didn't make it. He'd done made his last move.

Most of the rest I don't know about. It's too hazy. But now and then there was a gap in the dreamy fog I floated around on and the things that happened in them gaps stand out, sharp and clear.

I recollect when I found myself propped up and half smothered in the soft arms of Bess Ringer. Her face was buried in my hair and she was telling me over and over that she knowed all the time that I'd come.

Then there was a mocking bird singing in the trees over us once and I recollect wondering if them little old birds back at home that me and Bess had been feeding in the nest had got their worms that day. It seemed important at the time.

And then there was the time when Nels Handsome flipped out a gun and shot Dude Whitman between the eyes.

Dude had seen old Purdy Cole trying to get up from where he'd fell out there across the river in the sand and had throwed up his gun to shoot the one rustler of the bunch that was a white man. But Nels got Dude first, and I recollect how Nels was picking his teeth with one hand while he shot Dude with the other.


That's all, till I come around a week later and find myself in old Whet Ringer's special bed. The old hard-headed rancher was hanging around and mothering me like a hen with one chicken. He claimed him and the other Valley ranchers was rebuilding the old Ben Mead spread, restocking it and getting everything in shape for when I was able to stand up to a preacher with Bess at my side. I knowed then what Pa meant when he put me back inside the law again.

But there was a rock in the beans. Like there always is. Nels Handsome had rode off with Purdy Cole that day after killing Dude Whitman.

This bothers me about Nels Handsome.

Then the baby comes along. And the leaves must of rustled loud along the owlhoot. Less than two months later, here comes a letter with a bunch of South American postmarks. It's from Nels and Purdy. They're telling me to take care of the little un. They claim they'll be needing a horse wrangler by the time he gets his growth. They say they're running an honest cow spread down in the Gran Chaco country.

THE END



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BACK TO SEA!"**

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FOR VICTORY!

Lazy old Hodge Cohut didn't give a hoot in hell whether his horse round-up came off or not. But a Mad Dutchman, a hunting dog not quite as lazy as his master, and an inoffensive rattlesnake turned it into the damndest jam-boree ever seen on the Bar Nothing range!



He hits old Satan full abeam and falls flat.

RATTLESNAKE ROUNDUP

By JOE AUSTELL SMALL

IF I WAS nominating some codger for second prize material as laziest man in the world, it would damn sure be Slo Cohut. He's just seventeen years old, but that boy's learned more about being lazy in seventeen years than a heap 'o people do in a full lifetime.

He'd win second prize all right. But place No. 1—the title holder himself—could be nobody but Slo's pa, Old Hodge Cohut, owner of the Bar Nothing Ranch. Old Hodge's laziness is matched by nothing in the wide world except his hating ability. He can out hate any man I ever saw. And for a hating man, Hodge is a little strange. He just really hates one thing at a time. Guess that's what makes him so good at it. Right now Hodge just plain loathes the sight of a rattlesnake!

'Course there's a reason for it. This reason starts taking shape on that sunshiny morning back just two weeks ago . . .

The Bar Nothing is a little ranch. Hodge, Slo, Old One Chaw Larson and me the the only workers on it. And when you really get down to spring water, just me an' Old Chaw really do the work. One Chaw likes his tobacco. The old cow nurse takes half a plug at one chew at the break o' dawn and it lasts him all day.

'Course he has to park it on the wash shelf at meal times. We start to calling him One Chaw and he likes it a right smart.

Hodge is sprawled out under a cottonwood tree, lying on his back about to drown in tobacco juice because he's too lazy to turn over on his side and spit, when me an' One Chaw walks up.

"Hodge," I says, right irritated like, "if we don't drag on over to the Thicket, round up them horses o' yourn and put the auction hammer on their rumps, you gonna lose this ranch just as sure as hell!"

"Ummmm," Old Hodge grunts regretfully, raises a shaggy eyebrow, rolls over on his side, ejects a stream of liquid the color of day-old cowchip, and fixes me with a drooping eye.

"I know we ought to rustle 'em up, Buck, but I'm jest too blasted tired today! We can see 'bout it tomorrer. Catch a cloudy day and they won't shy at their shadders so bad."

"It's gonna take longer than you think, Hodge," I persists. "Them horses are more than half wild by now and it may be mor'n a three day job to round 'em all up. We better get started today."

"Dad blast a fo'man like you anyhow!" says Hodge. "A man's got to rest a little

once in a while. I'll lay here and stretch a mite while you and One Chaw saddle the horses an' then I'll be ready to go."

Old Hodge is sound asleep when we get back with the horses all saddled and ready to go. It takes a good half hour to get him woke up and in ridin' shape but we finally get off. Slo has rode over to the store early in the morning to get a batch o' grub, so we goes on without him.

Wild Horse Thicket is a marshy section of the Bar Nothing that got its name from serving as a hide-out place for strayed-off stock, mostly horses which Old Hodge always has a pretty good supply of. He'd let them roam free and raise their young now for two years. They ranged the whole ranch, of course, but just let us start rounding up a few and the rest of them will head for the Thicket every time. We'd already corralled three of the critters but there are easily a dozen more and it's going to take some rough work to get them ready for sale.

Old Hodge has seen a couple of bad years and has borrowed some money to keep going on. He's given a lien on his ranch for security too, being as everybody knows Hodge is honest but too lazy to press for money unless his life or his ranch is at stake.

Of course Hodge has waited until the very last minute to do anything about it and now if we don't have good luck he might be slow at that. And Hank Gobel only requires one minute over the deadline to start encircling a ranch with his hairy arms. Hodge's loose it sure as hell.

We ride along in silence for a while and then Hodge bawls out, "Satan!" He cranes a wiry neck to glance at our back-trail. "Whar's that blasted hound? We might need him to head off a wild stallion."

Old Hodge has just now woke up enough to take stock in what's happening. He curls a weather-cracked old hand around the scarred stock of Mrs. Hell, his single barrel twelve-gauge shotgun, and lifts it gently from the saddle scabbard. "Dad-burned hound's gettin' lazy here lately. Used to I couldn't shake a hock a'fore he'd be right on my tail!"

Hodge raises the old gun skyward, braces himself and pulls the trigger. Our horses shy and snort a few times, but

pretty soon we hear a sort of short yowl on our back trail and Old Satan whips around a clump of black brush like a bee's on his tail.

"Wouldn't take a purty for that dog," Old Hodge declares. "Best all 'round hound a man ever had!" He blows a puff of acrid powder smoke out of the barrel, puts a brass necked shell into the barrel and shoves the old gun home in its scabbard. Hodge carries a sixgun on his right hip, of course, but that shotgun is his right hand weapon. The old man can't see to shoot like he used to.



WE MAKE a swab through that thicket and sure enough jump a pretty looking stud with a coal of fire under his tail. We all three take after him since that's about the only way you can corner one with fireflies in his eyes.

But that hoss just fair outruns and outdodges us and we lose track when he hits the pinoak ridges. Hodge puts Old Satan on his trail when it dims out in the rocky terrain. We follow the sweet notes of a baying hound over the back country.

Pretty soon Old Satan loses his trail and makes a wide circle to pick it up. He ranges far and after a while crosses the line fence into the Circle J. We examine the fence and can't see where no horse has broke through and are sort of treading water when Old Hodge's face lights up like you'd run a branding iron down his throat.

"Mebby he's lost the trail of that hoss, all right," Hodge beams, "but I'll bet you a bred cat that he's found a covey of quail in that yaupon thicket yonder!"

"Wal, call him in an' let's get after that stud," One Chaw blurbs out ahead of a liquid load of weed soup. But there's a tone of helplessness in his voice. Everybody that knows Hodge is acquainted with his love for quail shooting. Strange for a cattle man, but Hodge ain't ordinary in any one thing nohow. It's the big reason he keeps that shotgun always with him. He's even trained a common old hound to smell them birds out of the thickets. Says Old Satan is half bird dog but he don't look it. Beats any thing a man ever saw.

"It ain't that easy." Hodge is already crawling through the fence, his shotgun held ready. "If I'd disappoint that old hound just one time he'd never trust me agin'! Rest your hosses a minute and come watch me!"

One Chaw runs a wrinkled hand over a sprouty face and shifts his cud. "I hear the Mad Dutchman don't cotton to trespassin' on his ranch—specially any kind o' huntin'."

"Aw, come on!" Hodge starts getting a little irritated. "That old codger's at home makin' faces at hisself."

Me an' One Chaw follow.

You got to give credit to that old hound dog. He works that cover like an Indian squaw combing lice out of her buck's hair. Couldn't no pure strain bird dog done better. The old dog raises his muzzle a mite to catch the drift, then works easy around an oak brush thicket. They've moved up on him but he nails them dead away in a sprouting of needle grass they've taken to after leaving the thicket.

I've never seen quail do like these did. They quit the ground in a blur, cut sharp to the right, circled the thicket, dipped low and twisted like a tornado down a shallow draw. Hodge wheels and cuts loose just as they top a short growth of yaupon but he don't get a feather.

Hodge is just about to recall some of his rarer corral talk when it sounds like hell has opened up and the devil's crawling out with hi-life in his eyes. I never heard such rumblings, scrambling about, brush poppin' and general cussing as what comes from behind that clump of yaupon Hodge has just shot into.

Out of that thicket busts a human form, blood-spattered and waving clinched fists. It charges us like a rabid sow.

"The Mad Dutchman!" moans Hodge, and he fades down our back trail like a ball of morning mist hit by an August sun.

WHAT with the small birdshot Hodge is using, I know the Mad Dutchman ain't shot serious, so I tucks my tail and follows the hole Hodge has knocked in the timber. Just as I pass One Chaw he makes a sound like water running down the drain pipe in our wooden hoss trough and starts running.

He hits Old Satan full abeam and falls flat, but you can't even tell when One Chaw meets the ground. He gets up that fast. Old Satan yowls, takes one look at the maniac-touched eyes of that human monstrosity bearing down upon him and also craves Bar Nothing soil. He runs along with a sort of barking howl, the hair straight up on his neck.

I know Hodge has gained heavily on me over that quarter mile sprint when, a good fifty yards ahead, I hear barbed wire squeak and a staple pop out. Looks like he ain't bothering much about crawling through, and that fence is just too high for jumping. But it ain't till One Chaw pulls up alongside me and eases on up ahead that I really start getting a little uneasy about my speed. Seems like I can feel rollers sashaying up and down my back and that Mad Dutchman's hot breath on my neck.

One Chaw aims for an opening between the lower barbed strand and the hog wire and he'd a-made it sure if his rump hadn't bowed up a little too far. But One Chaw don't mind leaving part of his pants on the fence. Fact is, he don't even look back.

The noise we've made would sound like the gentle swish of a flea's breath compared to what is happening on ahead of me an' One Chaw. Hodge's sudden unnatural appearance and his fence-squeaking jumps has boogered the horses, and they are hi-tailing it toward home—stirrups clanging, saddles popping.

Hodge is pushing them close behind, hollering "Whoaaa now!" at every breath.

My tongue's hanging out when I finally drop to a log beside Hodge and One Chaw a good mile farther on. They're both panting and shivering like a wet dog in a fresh norther. Old Satan nor the horses are in sight.

"That squeeze was so tight she pinched," Hodge gasps. "Looked for a while like he had us where the hair's short. Man, I couldn't run another step if my life depended on it!"

I don't say nothing. I'm too winded. One Chaw wheezes like a chicken with the croup. My old heart is still hammering at double speed when we hear something approaching along our back-trail. Hodge throws his head up like a buck deer that's winded a catamount.

"Just Old Satan." I try to sound convincing.

But Hodge, he ain't so certain. It could be that Mad Dutchman. He hunkers down behind that log, straining all he's got to make out what's stirring back there in the brush. He's bent over so much that I can read across the thick patch in the seat of his pants. It says "Stone Mountain Salt Works."

Hodge sidles around a little and sets back on a rocky mound, still trying to see through the brush. It's then I see the rattler he's set on.

If Old Hodge had half the fear of the Devil that he has of a snake, he'd be a holy Christian gentleman. That rattler goes right under him. Old Hodge rises straight up with a squall and has got a good running start before his feet ever hit the ground. And the snake's still with him. He's hung his fangs in that quilted salt-sack patch in Hodge's seat and he can't let go. And at the pace old Hodge is traveling, that snake's tail don't never touch ground for the first three hundred yards. It just stands straight out behind him.

When he's half way through the Thicket, Hodge starts yelling "Slo, Slo, my boy! Come help your pore old snake-bit Pa—Slo!" He's clearing a path through the thicket, yelling at every step.

Hodge puts a heap of confidence in that boy. It's slipped his memory I guess that me an' One Chaw are along and might take a hand to save his life. I'm straining all I've got, trying to run him down and de-rattle the old codger. But the way he's stacking distance behind him makes me feel like I'm hitched to a heavy drag.

I'm close enough behind, howsomever, to see Hodge fall through the ranchhouse door some minutes later and hear him squall: "Slo, Slo! Do something quick! He's got me half-swallowed!"

I come dragging up in time to hear Slo drawl, "Take it easy, Pa. Yer in good shape. You've done out-pizened him!"

And it's a fact. Hodge's whupped that little old rattler through the bushes so long and so fast that the critter's as lifeless as a camp cook's dishrag. That snake ain't got a square inch of skin left any one place on his whole body.

The seat of my pants is dragging out my tracks when I finally make the ranchhouse porch. One Chaw sits down with a sigh and wipes his face with the slack in his stomach. Hodge ain't got enough energy left to wipe the sweat off his mustache. He just slumps over on his bed and fades out. Me and One Chaw does the same.

I guess we slept a while because it's getting dark when we finally come to again. We look at one another sort of sheepish like and Old Hodge appears plumb worried. Slo enters and sits down in the squeaky old rocker.

"Guess that fixes us shore." Hodge bemoans our lost day. "Even with good luck we can't hardly round up all them horses in two days now."

"Don't worry about that, Pa," Slo leans farther back in the rocker and talks light and easy so it won't take up so much energy. "That ruckus you raised comin' through the thicket, them horses a-snortin', stirrups clankin' and saddles poppin', sounded like judgement day was a-comin' through the woods a-spoutin' out fire and brimstone."

"You was doin' right well at hollerin' yourself. Wal, them horses stampeded out of that thicket ahead of you and headed this way. They come up with rollers in their noses, snortin' and lookin' back over their rumps like the devil hisself was comin' out of that thicket. Never saw such boogered nags in my life. They was ahead of the saddle horses that broke away from you'all. When they pulled up at the clearin' though and the saddle horses came right on past them and into the corral, they snorts a few times more and follows them right on in."

"Seems like they're danged glad to be there. Doggondest thing I ever saw. Enough to pop a man's eyeballs."

Hodge Cohut leans back on his pillow with a sigh. "Shore glad to hear that, son," he grunts, satisfied like. "Go out now and make sure that rattler's still dead and cook us up some supper."

Hodge smiles, contented like, at us, and stretches with a big yawn. "Bein' as the hosses are all rounded up, guess we can rest a day or so, eh boys?"

RULE OF THE

WRITTEN *and* ILLUSTRATED *by*

*Ex-grocery clerk Watt Moor-
man nearly conquered the
Texas Republic, but home
folks' opinion—and booze—
finally pitched him into the
Valhalla of all
mad kings!*



This savagery was no
respector of persons
... innocent and
guilty alike suffered
brutal reprisals.

WINDAS
1947

RUTHLESS

CEDRIC · W · WINDAS

IN THE days when the Republic of Texas was young and headstrong there flamed into being a war of revenge that blazed a path from the Sabine River to the Gulf.

It started when politicians and land-grabbers sought to oust pioneers from their hard-won acres. It ceased only when hundreds of those who schemed and struggled lay sleeping beneath the blood-soaked sod for which they died. And nowhere did the fires of hate burn more fiercely than in Shelby County, where the pioneer Regu-



lators stood to arms against the encroaching Moderators.

Watt Moorman became the head of the Regulators when their first leader, Captain Charles Jackson, was ambushed and killed while riding home from a raid.

A strange man, this Moorman, grocery clerk without conscience but with great ambition. How the pioneers ever justified their selection of this ruthless hombre as their champion of justice is hard to understand. But, it seems, one's only needed qualification to lead was to be a first-class fighting man, and Watt was.

He was fearless, carried a brace of pistols and a Bowie—and was quick to use them! Oddly, he was a witty poet and had an infectious laugh; he liked to imagine himself a kind of Robin Hood, and actually used a hunting horn to call his men to arms.

We discover Moorman addressing a turbulent audience of Regulators, demanding vengeance for the death of Jackson. His directness of purpose is evident in the words with which he dismissed the meeting:

"We know the captain is dead; we know how he died. We know the names of his murderers. What the hell are we waiting for?"

From the meeting house he led an avenging cavalcade to the Trinity River, where they surrounded five of the known killers, Squire Humphries, Bill and Bailey McFadden together with their fourteen-year-old kid brother, and a man named Bledsoe. The latter refused to surrender so they killed him on the spot.

The prisoners were brought back to Shelbyville, where Moorman held open court with three hundred Regulators in attendance. What chance the culprits were given to prove their innocence is not on record, but it is a fact that nine minutes after the session opened three dead men were swaying from a hangman's ropes. Only the boy went free.

In vain the Moderators protested to the authorities. For the present, at least, the Regulators had a cinch on public affairs. When Moorman was ordered to stand trial for the triple lynching, he procured a brass cannon and, loading it with scrap, trained it on the courthouse, defying Judge Ochil-tree to enforce his edict.

Now, it seems, the judge was something of a fighting man himself, for he grabbed two sixguns and backed the sheriff's play when that peace officer seized the cannon and threatened to kill anyone who got in the way.

Watt stood trial, but the proceedings were farcical, for all the jury were Regulators, and Moorman went free.

About this time romance entered the warlike leader's life. The woman in the case was Helen Mar, daughter of an anti-Moderator. As all her family favored her lover; their courtship soon culminated in wedding bells.

The girl was beautiful and talented. She thought her husband was on the road to fame, so set herself to aid his aspirations, which included not only dictatorship of Shelby County but ultimate rule of the Lone Star Republic. After a short honeymoon they returned to Shelbyville to further their future plans for Moorman's rise to power.

But, even in that brief interlude, Moorman rode back to find fresh trouble awaiting his immediate attention. Two men—Henry Runnels and Samuel Hall—had quarreled over the ownership of certain hogs. Whereupon Slim Stanfield, who worked for Runnels, met Hall on the streets of Shelbyville and, in an exuberance of loyalty and liquor, shot him through the head.

The slayer sought safety across the Louisiana line, but Hall's brothers caught and hanged him from a convenient cottonwood.

This hasty action on the part of Hall's kinsmen irked Moorman, in that Stanfield had been a staunch Regulator; and when Runnels was also dispatched by bushwhackers, his clansmen howled for vengeance. It was about time, they figured, to raise a little hell.

One suspected marksman, a rancher named Jamison, was captured, and under pressure implicated Joseph Hall, Doctor Todd and John M. Bradley in the Runnels' ambush party.

Whether Jamison was actually guilty has never been proved, but Moorman was never one to split hairs, so he summarily hanged the man and went home quite satisfied that the Runnels' case was closed for all time.

IN THIS he erred, for public opinion was at last turning against the ruthlessness of the Regulators, and the slaying of Jamison added to public indignation. When Lew Ennis was shot from ambush while bringing stores from town to his ranch, the Moderators retaliated by setting fire to the homes of two men whom they suspected of being the culprits.

This might have been considered frontier justice by some, but for the fact that an innocent woman tried to save her husband from one of the flaming cabins and perished in the attempt. This so roused the Regulators that they vowed to exterminate Moderators on sight.

Ennis's brother-in-law one night was removing the stores from the wagon in which Lew met sudden death, with the laudable intent of bringing them to his sister, Lew's widow. He worked under cover of darkness when, hearing the movements of mounted men coming down the road, sought shelter under a stack of dried grass.

As the riders came slowly into hearing he recognized the men to be Regulators. The men halted near where he lay hidden, and one voiced the opinion that the wagon should be destroyed.

"Shove it into the tall grass, then fire the grass."

"What about the field?" queried a rider whose farmer instincts were outraged at thought of such needless destruction.

"It's Ennis's field, ain't it?" the other man said. "What the hell!"

The wagon was pushed up against the stack and a handful of flaming grass started the conflagration which finally swept across the entire meadow. As it reached the hidden man he sprang to his feet and raced for the friendly shadows of trees bordering the nearby road. His sudden appearance so startled the riders that he had almost covered the necessary distance before they recovered their wits.

Then with angry shouts they ripped their guns from their holsters and threw a barrage of lead at the fleeing man. But the dancing light of the roaring flames made their aim uncertain, and the runner disappeared among the trees. They hunted him an hour, and continued the search even after the fire had left the wagon a smoldering framework, and burned itself out near a creek bed. But hunt as they

would, they couldn't find him, and at length concluded he had made good his escape to a friendly farm.

But others were not so lucky; many died in the broad light of day while working in the fields, or lost their lives in the blackness of the night in defense of their homes. This savagery, which flaunted itself so brazenly, was no respecter of persons, so that innocent and guilty alike suffered from the brutal reprisals of the feud-crazed community.

John M. Bradley swore out murder warrants against Moorman and several of his riders. Moorman surrendered but was liberated by a Justice of the Peace with Regulator sympathies. Straightway Moorman had Bradley and his intimates served with writs for the murder of Runnels; but the Moderators also had friends in court, to the end that a biased judge slapped Justice in the face and Bradley, et al, were discharged.

Sam Hall's brother was killed, and with his scalp still bleeding at their belt the Regulators took the warpath against Bradley. But he had wind of their coming and fled hastily.

The mills of the gods grind slowly, but the public opinion at which Watt Moorman scoffed was stirring. . . .

It came to his ears that a third faction was forming; a faction composed not only of would-be neutrals but recruiting the more tolerant-minded members from both Regulator and Moderator clans—men who were becoming increasingly alarmed and disgusted at the holocaust which was threatening to destroy all decency.

Colonel James F. Craven was at the head of this new party which, under the name of "Reformers," was seeking to stem the reign of terror. Especially were they incensed against the violent deeds of the arch-bully and tyrant Watt Moorman.

Seeing which way the wind was blowing, Moorman signed a temporary peace treaty with the Reformers. But he was a killer by instinct and long habit, and hearing that Bradley had been seen in the vicinity of St. Augustine, he could not resist the opportunity to destroy his enemy.

With four heavily-armed clansmen he set out for St. Augustine, and reached that peaceful little community in time to see its citizens leaving church.

Men and women in little groups of four and five talked soberly, discussing the problems of the day.

The groups were beginning to break up and move toward their homes when the grim cavalcade from Shelbyville clattered up and halted in their midst. Their purpose was reflected in each tight-lipped rider's face. Instinctively the church-goers knew that violence was to be done.

Bradley, bidding some church friends farewell, was in the act of replacing his hat upon his head when the horsemen first appeared. He, of all these people, knew best the reason for the coming of the horsemen, but being unarmed could only face his finish without flinching. With a sweeping gesture he flung his hat aside and, folding his arms across his breast, stood with feet wide spread.

In all this time no word had been spoken by either group: no explanation asked, none volunteered. Then Moorman spoke.

"I been looking for you, Bradley," he said, and with the words urged his horse over toward his quarry. Three short paces from the doomed man he reined in, and with a lightning movement sent a .44 bullet into Bradley's brain.

Women shrieked; men cursed bitterly at their own helplessness under the menace of the Regulator guns. Children whimpered in sudden fright or clung spellbound to their parents' hands. Moorman blew the smoke from his gun barrel with studied deliberation, paused long enough to say in a loud, clear voice, "So die all murderers!" Then he spurred away. . . .

Matt Moorman later gathered an army of one hundred Regulators, called a meeting and organized a provisional government for Shelby County, with himself as President and Commander-in-chief of its armed forces.

His first official act was characteristic; he prepared a list of twenty-five personal enemies whom he described as "disturbers of the peace."

First on his list was Thomas Haley. But this intrepid planter was already strongly barricaded in the stable when the Regulators paid a visit to his homestead, and put up such a heated argument with his rifle that the boys left in a hurry. Nor could Haley's shooting be dismissed as a purely local victory, for his was "the shot

that was heard around the entire county," and from that day Moorman's prestige began to wane.



THE Reformers held armed meetings and began to take an active part in local disturbances; so determined was their opposition to Moorman's ambitions that finally the Regulators were forced to build a fort on the old Buena Vista road, three miles from Shelbyville.

From these headquarters Moorman wrote and invited Harrison County Regulators to join him in a smashing attack on Shelby County authority. To which the men of Harrison replied with a glad shout and hastened to rendezvous at the fort. It began to look as though Watt Moorman was destined to see his dreams come true, for the fort was strong and the reinforcements numerous.

But the Reformers, under Colonel Craven, had other ideas. They marshalled their forces, and with plenty of supplies and ammunition marched against the log fortress.

The day they made the first attack on the Regulators, Watt Moorman, himself, was absent from the fort, having gone some miles down the road to lead one hundred volunteers with due ceremony into his stronghold.

The Reformers charged three times and, while they attacked with great resolution, it must be admitted that the defenders were tough warriors, for each time the charge was broken up with heavy losses.

Night came on. There was no water at hand for either side, so Craven finally deemed it expedient to withdraw to a running creek some two miles nearer town. He apparently left no guards to keep contact, for in the morning, when he led his men in another assault, it was only to discover the Regulators had evacuated.

The Reformers bivouaced for several days, awaiting expected reinforcements. Fifty men finally rode in from St. Augustine to join them, and more came from Louisiana.

With his company now considerably strengthened, Colonel Craven felt he could again take the initiative; he ordered a general advance to close with his opponents.

In the meantime, the late defenders of the fort had met up with their leader and had taken up positions at a spring some fifteen miles away from the previous day's battle-field.

Moorman had gathered thirty new recruits and, with these men helping them, the Regulators felled trees around the spring and prepared for attack.

Helen was with her Regulator husband, and indeed was aiding him in his plans for the coming struggle. It is on record that a treacherous ruse proposed by her almost succeeded in defeating the Reformers.

It came about when Craven, in sight of his opponent, was deploying his men. The Reformers had taken up strategic positions under cover surrounding the spring when Helen, having ridden wide around their flanks, suddenly shook her pinto into a canter and rode up to the astonished Reformer commander.

She expressed chagrin, protesting that she was coming to him with a proposal for a truce when his men had deliberately fired on her.

Craven was a gentleman, and he assured her of his regret at such discourteous treatment. Indeed, so thorough were his apologies that he called up different groups of men to see if she could identify those whom she claimed had disregarded the customary exemptions granted women. By the time she had scrutinized about half of Craven's fighting force to discover her alleged assailant, she had practically all of his army milling about the spot.

This was what the woman had planned and waited for. She suddenly announced her intention of riding back to her husband and, suiting the action to the word, galloped away swiftly.

Hardly had she put one hundred yards between herself and the puzzled group of men than the Regulators, who had crept up on their unsuspecting enemy, opened fire with such devastating effect that a dozen Reformers died.

Had Moorman held his men in their favorable position, the score might well

have been all in his favor, but Watt was always too impetuous, and now called on his followers to charge.

They did charge willingly enough, but threw away much of their initial advantage in the doing, for the Reformers rallied savagely and drove them back.

Perceiving that the ruse had failed of its main objective, Moorman now blew the retreat on his hunting horn and withdrew to his original position at the spring.

Next day the Reformers attacked in force, and while they did not actually drive the Regulators from their breastworks, Moorman realized that in any war of attrition he would finally be annihilated. So, in bitter mood, he counted his dead and wounded, and tried to devise a plan whereby he could escape with his men and lay low while recuperating his forces.

But his fortunes were on the wane. Even while the Reformers were holding him to these close confines, word came by scout that General Sam Houston was taking a hand in Shelby County's bloody feud, and was calling out the militia to restore order.



UNDER the keen eyes of Craven's warriors it was impossible for the Regulators to attempt to retire from the spring in a body. Therefore, by Watt's orders, the men slipped away in the night, singly or in pairs, and at last there were left, of all his army, only a half dozen of his personal bodyguard.

Using the same tactics as their comrades, even these finally departed between dusk and dawn, so that of all the boisterous crowd of fighting men who had ridden so gaily to the wars, there remained but Watt Moorman. Only his wife was with him. Then they, too, fled and met a few of their followers at a hideout near the county line.

With a few days of respite, Watt's ambitions were beginning to stir again, and he was riding to summon his scattered forces for a new venture when he rode right into a company of Sam Houston's

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soldiers. He was carried to Shelbyville, where General Houston, with creditable impartiality, arrested all the leaders of the factions, and issued a proclamation insisting that murder and terrorism must cease.

He backed his proclamation with a display of military might which had the desired effect of discouraging usurpers of the Law, and at long last the bloodiest feud in Texas history gradually faded.

Then came the Mexican war of 1846, and with its advent went the last lingering signs of the vendetta, for among the loyal companies recruited in Shelbyville to fight against the Mexicans massing on the border, were many Regulators and Moderators—and many Reformers.

These men fought side by side in many a hard won battle; they suffered the same wounds, the same torturing pangs of thirst on many a stricken field; and oftentimes lived to bless the name of some erstwhile "enemy" who shared his scanty canteen with a parched comrade.

For war does things to men, and while in general it is a thing of evil, yet it often brings to the surface a spirit of glorious self-sacrifice undreamed of.

When peace was ratified by the two governments and the soldiers mustered out, ex-Regulator and ex-Moderator found that though they had won the war, they had lost something. They had lost their hatred of each other

* * *

With his whole dream castle collapsed about his ears, Watt Moorman went to live at the little town of Joaquin. Ambition was gone; love of power was gone. Even the vital energy of the dominating Regulator had burned itself out like an untended candle, so that at the age of 35 he was an old man.

Brooding and sullen, with nothing but bitterness in his heart, he was fit companion for nobody but himself. His wife had deserted him, leaving him to face the hours he hated most, the dreary night hours, alone. Sleepless, he would toss and turn while the dreams of yesterday took form like topsy-turvy mirages to mock his failures; while the ghosts of men and women who had died to further his schemes

crouched at his feet and pointed and jeered and dared him to sleep. So that finally he could stand the torture no longer, but would come to his feet and grope in the dark for the only friend he had in the world, his jug of corn liquor.

Gulp after gulp he would swallow till at last he would drop back on his bed in senseless stupor until daylight came. How much longer even his iron frame and nerves could stand such punishment is doubtful, but Fate has a knack of solving problems which somehow seems to reconcile us to her inscrutable ways.

During one of his rare absences from Joaquin, Moorman paid a visit to Logansport, calling while there on a Doctor Burns with whom he hoped to make a deal regarding his little property, for Moorman's once abundant finances were at very low ebb. Whether the doctor was in an ungenerous mood is not known, but the general opinion seems to be that Moorman started the quarrel which ensued, and from his unsavory reputation this would seem to be the case, for he still retained his faculty for causing trouble.

However that might be, the discussion became heated, and in the midst of a torrent of blistering words, Watt flung himself from the doctor's presence, uttering lurid threats as to what he would do should they ever meet again. The doctor, knowing what manner of enemy he had made, determined that from that moment on he would always go armed. Soon afterward they met by accident on the boat landing at Logansport. Burns saw Moorman first and made ready for action, although he always vowed he would have been quite willing to avoid trouble.

But the ragged-nerved ex-Regulator caught sight of him directly as he stepped onto the landing, and with a bitter oath started to drag his black handled sixgun from its holster. The weapon never cleared the leather. With a roar that shattered the quiet of the early morning river front, a charge of buckshot from the sawed-off shotgun in the doctor's hands cut Moorman almost in half.

The Tyrant of Texas died as he had lived, gun in hand. And with his passing the feud of the Shelby County clansmen was very definitely finished.

By ROD PATTERSON

By ROD PATTERSON



They was tryin' to git to their hosses when the sheriff throwed down on them.

A cowtown medico gave old, bullet-torn Sheriff Ramsey a fighting chance. But that was far more than could be promised for Dave Ramsey, the man he called son, when a murdering jailbird came to claim Dave's guns and loyalty—as his nearest of kin!

THE stubble-bearded doctor appeared in the doorway and beckoned to the tall young man who waited in the corridor. White-faced, silent, Dave Ramsey gave an involuntary start, then braced back his shoulders and entered the room on the second floor of the hotel at Totempole.

The cloyingly sweet smell of chloroform cut through other strange odors here. It was the smell of death. Dave feared and hated it; not because he had never seen death before, but because this was the first time in his nineteen years that it had

struck so close. Somehow, it was different when it was your own flesh and blood.

Half way between the door and the iron bedstead where Sheriff Loyal Ramsey lay, Dave stopped tiptoeing and stared. His father was shrouded in a clean white sheet, and had his scarred, solid-knuckled hands extended at his sides as though someone had carefully placed them there. The old man's usually ruddy face was white as alkali now, his eyelids closed heavily, the corners of his long, thin-lipped mouth twitching almost imperceptibly. To Dave, Loyal's face looked as if it was carved from rock.

Dave moistened his lips with his tongue two or three times before he could speak audibly. At last he said, "Dad."

Doc Appleholm, standing back of him, said gently, "He can't hear you, son; he's unconscious."

Dave nodded dumbly. He felt cold and hot all at once, and his legs didn't have any strength in them. His fingers bit deep into his palms as he stared. And then he turned blindly and stumbled back toward the door, not wanting to look any more at the man whom he had loved ever since he could remember.

Somehow he got downstairs, dragging his feet like a tired old man. Erin Malone and her father, Loyal's deputy, were waiting anxiously in the dim-lit lobby.

The girl, tall and slim and blonde, cried, "Davie," and went to him with a rush, her fingers reaching out and clinging momentarily to his shirt sleeve. "Davie," she breathed, "is he—"

Dave was seeing the girl through a kind of grayish mist. "He—he looks pretty bad, Erin." He pushed the words out through tight-drawn lips. "How—how many times did they hit him, Mike?"

Silver-haired Mike Malone's face was twisted with emotion. He answered in a husky, unnatural tone: "Three times. Once dead center, son. They was tryin' to git to their hosses in back of the Wells-Fargo office when the sheriff throwed down on 'em. The one he got died, though, 'fore I c'd find out—"

"Wells-Fargo?" Dave repeated. "The other two got away then?"

"They're still hidin' out somewheres in town," Malone said heavily. "Can't git out. I got five men watchin' the trails an'

two coverin' the stage-road bridge. We'll know who them hombraes is in an hour's time. Don't worry."

"Yeah," Dave said dully. He was wondering what good it would do his father if the men *were* caught. "I'm gonna stay here till—till—" He nodded his black head toward the stairway.

"We're stayin', too," Malone said flatly.

He was a short, rather heavy-set, blue-eyed Irishman with an habitually loud and blustering manner. But there wasn't any bluster left in him now. He looked ten years older than he was. His mouth had a whipped and beaten appearance; it jerked at the corners from time to time. Mike Malone and Loyal Ramsey had started out at Totempole fifteen years ago to make the territory a safe place for women and children to live in, and between them they had finally brought a measure of peace and safety to the land.

Dave spoke grimly, hopelessly: "Looks like a lung shot. Just a fightin' chance, doc says."

"He'll be all right," Erin still gripped his arm, desperately fighting against her own uncontrollable fear. "I just know it, Davie. I—I feel it."

Dave took the girl's hand and held it, thinking with a kind of stunned agony of his father lying unconscious and helpless up there above him. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. A square and great-hearted man like Loyal Ramsay shouldn't ought to have to die, murdered by a pair of damned—

Dave bit down with his teeth and swung away and made a complete circle of the lobby, a movement like that of a caged animal. He stopped, staring out into the blackness of the street, and his thoughts were desolate.



A HALF hour passed before Doc Appleholm's tread sounded on the stairway. And then he appeared, walking slowly, wearily, a set smile on his bearded face. The patient, he told them, had a fifty-fifty chance. He had found the three bullets and removed them. If Loyal's heart held out there might be—

Mike Malone said gruffly, "Come on, you kids. Let's go home."

Dave nodded dully. They left the hotel and turned across town toward the Malone cottage on Chickesaw Street. During the fifteen-minute walk, Dave asked Malone about the details of the holdup.

Mike said, "There was three of 'em. Rode into town about four o'clock this afternoon. One of 'em even had the gall to go to the courthouse. Somebody heerd him augerin' with Loyal, though what for I can't figure out. Mebbe—"

"Then they got that Lode Star payroll?" Dave asked. "Dad told me yesterday there was ten thousand in Oberholzer's safe."

"Got it all," Malone declared grimly.

Dave left Mike and Erin presently and headed for the Ramsey bungalow on Vine Street, three blocks farther on. In the little house he had shared with his father ever since he could remember, he moved aimlessly about.

Dave sat down on the horse-hair sofa in the living room and thought of Loyal. His father wasn't really very old—only sixty-six, but somehow he seemed old to Dave, and Dave had always called him the "old man." Jokingly, of course. Dave couldn't remember his mother at all. Loyal had a tintype of her, though, and had it propped up on his bureau. Dave used to wonder why he didn't have the physical characteristics of his parents. He was black-haired, blue-eyed, while they were brown-eyed and sort of blondish. Loyal used to say banteringly, "You're a throw-back, son. A blasted black sheep, by grabs!"

Dave stretched his lean body out on the sofa and rolled himself a smoke, trying to relax. He had a job to do tonight. He'd made up his mind to that from the first. There'd be no sleep, no rest until he settled the score for his father. Somewhere in this town two desperate men were holed up, men who had tried to kill Loyal Ramsey—maybe had already succeeded in killing him. Totempole was a big town, as towns went in this desert country. Down on the West Side, for example, was a district of saloons and hook shops, a section where two tough strangers could bury themselves indefinitely.

Dave threw his unfinished cigarette into the fireplace and stood up. And that was the instant that three quick raps sounded on the front door. When he went over

and opened it, the man standing there on the porch looked at him for a long moment, head bent forward slightly, thumbs hooked nonchalantly over his heavy gun belt.

"Dave?" the man asked in a bland, cold voice, and he came in without waiting for an invitation, his right hand outstretched.

He was a solid-girthed man with tremendous shoulders, dressed in dusty rider's garb. His face impressed Dave suddenly as being vaguely familiar.

"How are you, Davie, my boy?" the stranger said, when he stood in the living room a moment later. The outstretched hand, however, had fallen to his side.

"What d'you want?" Dave demanded curtly, not leaving the door, though he closed it carefully.

"Didn't figure you'd remember me. Been quite a spell since I seen you," the man said.

"No, I don't know who you are," Dave said flatly. "What d'you want?"

The stranger sat down on the horse-hair sofa and draped his faded hat on a saddle-whitened knee. In the lamplight, Dave could see the man's face more clearly. It was blunt-featured, almost block-like in its short, aggressive lines. The eyes were cold and blue and looked like cloudy glass.

"Fifteen years," the man said slowly, "is a helluva long time. 'Specially when a man spends it behind walls." His obsidian eyes never stirred from Dave's stiff-set face. And then he said, blurring the words out, "You sure do look like your mother, kid."

Dave started, blue eyes staring at the stranger, trying to fathom what he meant, suddenly being afraid—afraid. "What—what are you ravin' about?" he stammered hoarsely. "I never—"

The man shrugged his heavy shoulders, a slow, twisted grin appearing again on his dark face. His next words were spoken in a deliberately ingratiating tone, but their effect on Dave was like a bombshell exploding in his face. "Why, hell, boy, I'm your father."

Dave's breath whistled in and stopped. "My—my father?" He dragged it out stupidly. "I—why, I—"

"I'm Lew Dorfler." A narrow amusement showed on the man's square face. "And you're Davie Dorfler, sure enough."

Dave reached suddenly out for the back

of a chair, then swayed over and sagged heavily into it. He felt sick, weak, unable to make his wits work. "You must be loco." He wrung out the words in a kind of agony. "My father's—"

He couldn't finish, but stared blankly at Lew Dorfler, his lips moving silently. Slowly, gradually, he felt all doubt begin to evaporate. That expression around this man's eyes, the angled set of his jaw. . . . It was the same. He, Dave, might look like that, twenty years from now.

Dorfler spoke quietly, wryly. "Well, this ain't no way to welcome your own father. Ain't you gonna shake hands, kid?" When Dave merely stared, he let his thin mouth droop ludicrously to simulate sadness. But his eyes remained as hard as agate under the black, straight brows. "Hell," he said meagerly, "I figured you'd be tickled to see me, son."

Dave swallowed and closed his eyes, trying to shut out that face. Dorfler went on in a kind of surly reproach: "So Ramsey never told you—never said a word? They railroaded me and Sid down to Yuma and then stole my kid and—"

Dave opened his eyes. "Sid?"

"Sid Lomax," Dorfler said. "I want you to meet Sid, Davie. He's one reg'lar—"

"No!" The word exploded from Dave. Color draining back into his face, he said, "You plugged my—you shot Loyal and stole the Lode payroll!" He choked to a stop, his mind frozen, numb. Staring at the man across the room, he half expected him to vanish into thin air like a ghost. It couldn't be true—not any of it.

But Lew Dorfler didn't dissolve before his eyes. Dorfler was still sitting there as big as life, a sneer showing on his dark face.

And then, deliberately, Dorfler propped a boot on his left knee and said, "Kid, I want you to help me and Sid get clear of this damned burg."

Dave gulped, and then found his voice. "You got a gall," he cried. "First you kill Loyal, and then you—"

"Now, wait a second." Dorfler was frowning now. "Loyal ain't dead—not yet. And anyways, he had it comin', kid. You don't seem to savvy—"

"All I know is you shot him and I oughta kill you for it." A harsh note, al-

most of hysteria, was creeping into Dave's voice. "You better get out of here before I—"

"Take it easy, kid." Dorfler kept on frowning. "If I was you I wouldn't talk like that, Davie." He leaned forward suddenly, his face deliberately threatening. "I been askin' questions since I hit this town and I hear you're kinda sweet on that deputy's daughter. Now you wouldn't want her to know about—about you and me, would you?"

Dave stiffened. "Ah," Dorfler said, "I thought not." His cold eyes glittered. "Come on, now. Let's me and you get down to business. You're gonna get me and Sid outa this tight."

"No. I won't do it!"

Lew Dorfler stood up and made a quick, down-cutting movement with his hands. "Oh, yes you will," he snarled. "Because if you don't and I'm nabbed, I'll spread the whole story over this burg about how you're not Ramsey's son, but the son of a jailbird." He put on his hat and moved toward the door. "I'm goin' back and get Lomax, but we'll be right back. And, kid"—in a wheedling tone—"we're hungry as a pair of chaw-eared bobcats, so rustle up some grub." He pulled open the door and passed out into the darkness.

Dave's mouth was a stark and bitter line. All these years Loyal Ramsey had allowed him to think— Suddenly Dave swung toward the door. He had to make sure. Now. Tonight. He had to find out before Dorfler and Lomax came back here. He had the door open when he thought of the gun in the bedroom, and he strode into the chamber and picked the weapon up. He hesitated only a moment, then pulled up his shoulders and let them fall again, and whipped the belt around his waist.

Five minutes later, he was standing on the veranda of the Malone cottage. He knocked softly, and presently the door opened and Mike stood there in his shirt sleeves, staring at him. Dave murmured, "I—I gotta see you a minute, Mike."

The two faced each other in the hall with the door shut. Dave said, "Erin—is she—"

"Gone to bed," Malone told him gently. "She was plumb tuckered out. And worried about you, son."

Dave's face was harried, anxious. It

was difficult to speak, an effort to even mention Lew Dorfler. At last he blurted it out: "Mike, Loyal's not my—father."

Malone's broad face went utterly blank. At last he shrugged and said, "Well, if you know, why, I guess it's just as well." Then, sharply, shrewdly: "How'd you find it out, Davie?"

Dave looked at him and lied. "I—I found something—a letter over at the house that—"

Malone appeared helpless, angry. "Well, it's true, son."

"He never told me," Dave said harshly. "Why?"

"Because," Malone said heavily, "your real father was a bad 'un, Davie. He was a killer. Loyal never wanted you to know or even hear about him. He took you when you was jest a little shaver, after Dorfler went to the pen." His voice ran low, insistent. "I ain't gonna tell you no more, Davie. Loyal wouldn't want me to. Anyways, you'll never see Dorfler. He went up for life for murderin' a man."

Dave nodded, not speaking. A lot of things were clear now—memories of a dim and distant past. He said softly, "Dad—Loyal was afraid I'd turn bad, too?"

"Yes, that's right, son."

"My mother, was she—"

"Died when you was a baby, Davie. Dorfler killed her with abuse. An' neglect. We found out about—"

Whiteness tinged Dave's lips. "I—I often wondered," he began absently, "why I wasn't more like—"

"Don't even think any more of it, Davie," Malone pleaded anxiously. "That's past—dead. You're Loyal Ramsey's son. Allus will be, too."

"Yes," Dave said quietly. "Loyal Ramsey's son. But—" He lifted his shoulders then and turned abruptly to the door. "Thanks, Mike. I'll go on home now. Goodnight."



WHEN he got back to the cottage on Vine, Dave's thoughts had fallen into a kind of half-ordered pattern, though he still felt confused and a little stunned. He held nothing, he realized, but hatred and scorn for the man

who had returned from the dead past to take vengeance on another he rightfully should have been grateful to. A man who would inexorably go on hating, would go on killing, if it served his warped and vicious will.

And now Dave thought of Erin Malone. Had Mike ever told her that the man she loved was the son of a blackleg, a murderer? It was hardly likely, knowing Mike.

Turning up the walk to the veranda of the Ramsey cottage, Dave let his hand fall to the butt of the gun he wore—Loyal Ramsey's old gun. But a shudder of involuntary horror ran through him as he walked, and he pulled his hand away as though the polished bone handle had burned him. A man couldn't cold-bloodedly kill his own father, no matter what crime he'd committed. There was only one thing to do: to get rid of him, somehow make him promise to leave the country and to stay away. Then, he, Dave, could start life all over again, some place else.

"Jest a minute!" The voice whipped out of the darkness of the porch.

Dave went rigid, his hands pushed out from his sides, the hair rising on the back of his neck like the hackles of a dog. Slowly, very slowly, he turned his tight gaze toward the left and saw a man standing in the deep shadow, near the front door. He gradually made out the man's face and saw the gun in his hand.

The man spoke then, in a cold and deadly tone: "Kid, if you brought anybody along with you, I'll let you have it right in the belly. Lew said you—"

Dave's voice came low and bitter: "Put away that iron, Lomax. I'm alone."

Lomax snapped, "Git in the house. I'll jest have a look around for a minute."

Dave went in. He saw Lew Dorfler across the room, standing stiffly in the lamplight by the open fireplace. Dorfler spoke in a suddenly bullying tone: "What's the idea of leavin', Kid?"

Dave faced his father defiantly, angrily. "I went to Malone's to find out the truth."

"Malone!" Dorfler barked it out, dark face blanching with sudden fear. "You mean to tell me—"

"Don't worry," Dave hurled back in disgust. "He don't know you're here."

Dorfler relaxed with visible relief. "All right," he said. "Now you can get that grub for me and Sid."

Dave ignored that. He threw his hat on the sofa and went over to where a mirror hung against the faded wall paper across the room. His heart was speeding up a bit, now. He straightened his coat collar and smoothed down his wind-blown black hair, staring bitterly at his reflection in the glass. Yes, he was a Dorfler, all right.

Dave stared at Dorfler through the mirror. "There ain't any grub in the house. So you better shag on out while you've got the chance."

"Wait a minute." Dorfler gave a brittle laugh. "You're gonna come with us, Kid, so's we c'n get past them guards at the bridge. And you're gonna get four horses for us."

Dave turned slowly, a puzzled frown ridging his forehead. "Four horses? Why do you want four?"

"We're takin' a friend of yours along," Dorfler said suavely. "Just to make sure everything comes off okay."

Dave's eyes grew round and wide. "I—I don't—"

Dorfler threw up his hands with a laugh and strolled to the bedroom door. He opened it gravely, pompously, and waited.

Dave's jaw sagged. A girl sat there in a straight-backed chair, a gag obscuring the lower part of her face. Erin Malone! As the door opened she began to struggle against the rope that bound her wrists, and her eyes were dark and frightened on Dorfler's face. Then she saw Dave, and she stopped fighting her bonds, those eyes pleading, begging.

But they weren't the eyes Dave remembered: quick and eager. Something had gone out of them, something that might never come back. Had Dorfler told her? Had he blurted out the whole sordid story? Well, no matter, now. She'd be sure to know everything in a few minutes more. It was hard for Dave to realize that face was Erin Malone's, the Erin he had known since they were school kids together. Now Erin was going to be dragged in on this, the victim of this man who stood grinning so smugly.

Dorfler was speaking slowly, mildly. "Well, Dave, guess you've changed your mind. Hey?"

"You—you—" Dave's voice was strangled, incoherent. He got control of himself with an effort. "Take that gag off her," he cried hoarsely. "She'll keep quiet. I promise that."

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DORFLER hesitated, and then he went into the bedroom and ripped the bandanna from the girl's mouth. Dave said, "Erin, what in God's name made you come here like this?"

She said listlessly, "I was worried about you. I—I had to come. I—I didn't know—"

Dave said in a suddenly whipped tone, "Then, he told you?"

She kept looking at him, seemed to be trying to signal to him with her eyes. "I've known," she said clearly, quietly, "about it for a long time, Davie. Dad told me years ago."

"You knew all along?" Dave gasped.

"Yes," she answered faintly.

"And you still—"

Dorfler didn't give him a chance to finish it. "Cut out the tongue-oil, you two," he said harshly. "We gotta hit the breeze."

"Keep quiet!" There was the thrust of steel in Dave's voice. "Untie her!"

"Hey. How do I know she won't—"

"She'll do what I say," Dave said savagely. "Untie her."

Dorfler's years in prison had had their effect. He wavered a moment, then loosened the cord that bound her wrists. Looking suddenly around at Dave, he said, "It'll go hard with you two if you double-cross me."

Dave's voice was packed with hatred and bitter loathing. "I told you I wouldn't cross you."

Dorfler came back into the living room. "All right," he said thinly, "but don't make any bad moves. I might forget you're my own flesh and blood. Savvy?"

Dave's mouth curled. "I savvy."

"Now gimme your gun." Dorfler held out his hand.

"I'll keep the gun." For a long moment they stood there, the three of them, close together, and the air seemed to be vibrating. Dave repeated it, "I'll keep the gun."

Blood stormed up into Dorfler's face. The palms of Dave's hands were moist

and sticky and he rubbed them together, still staring defiantly into his father's implacable eyes.

That was the moment that Erin screamed, a high, piercing cry.

Dave's hand automatically whipped down to his gun and he started to turn. Even after he felt the swift pressure of steel at the small of his back, he tried to turn.

Someone behind him whispered, "Reach, Kid."

Dave could feel hot breath pelting the nape of his neck, and he pushed his hands slowly up to shoulder level, staring straight into Erin's horrified eyes. Lew Dorfler came forward.

"So," he said with heavy irony, "you was gonna throw down on me?"

He pulled back and deliberately struck Dave in the face with his open palm. The sound of the blow was like a pistol shot.

"All right." Dave strained the words through tight-trapped lips. "That lets me out. I'm warnin' you."

He felt Loyal Ramsey's old Navy pistol being lifted from the holster on his hip. With the weight of it gone, it seemed as though part of his body was missing.

The man behind him said, "When do we eat, Lew?"

"We don't," Dorfler whipped out. "We're gettin' outa this joint pronto. But first you're goin' down to the livery barn with Davie and get the horses. The rest'll be easy. Them hombres at the bridge'll never figure anything's wrong, with Davie and the gal ridin' with us."

He let his gaze travel from face to face, coolly, calmly. Suddenly he said, "No, I'll go with the kid. You stay here, Sid, and keep an eye on the gal." He gave a leer at Dave, added, "But no monkey shines, Sid. Not unless we don't get back in half an hour." To Dave, he said, "Come on, Davie, let's go."

Dave's mouth was dry as chalk as he turned to follow his father to the front door. His mind was racing, but in a tight circle. Always, it came back to the same point: Erin Malone. He'd have to do as he was told, no matter what the risk.

Dorfler pulled open the door, cautiously, slowly. He hesitated a brief moment, then stepped out to the porch to look up and down the darkened street. He had a

hand lifted to beckon to Dave when it happened.

A familiar voice lashed out of the night, "H'ist 'em, Dorfler!"

"Mike!" The deputy's name burst from Dave's lips as he jumped back.

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WHAT happened after that was like a nightmare to him. Dorfler had his gun out and was blazing away as fast as he could work the trigger. He was aiming at a dim shape out there on the walk, and he was firing blindly.

Dave heard one of Malone's bullets strike his father with a squashing, sodden sound, and he saw Dorfler go down.

Dave yelled, "Get back, Erin!"

He lunged away, bumping solidly into the stunned and staring Sid Lomax, who crouched in back of him. Lomax still had Dave's pistol—and he had his own gripped in a rock-like fist.

Dave pulled back and swung a blow at the tall outlaw. But Lomax, a faster and more agile man than Dave had counted on, moved forward swiftly. There was a sudden glint of steel as he hit Dave in the temple with the barrel of his Colt.

Blinded and knocked half-senseless, Dave struck the floor. Lomax rammed a boot heel down cruelly on Dave's outstretched arm, hard enough to break it. But the bone did not snap, and the pain, instead, served to arouse Dave from his shocked stupor. He rolled sideways and tried to get his legs under him. Lomax was turning the barrel of his weapon down, covering Dave, his right arm held straight out in front of him. But he never pulled the trigger, for at that moment, Erin Malone came from the bedroom door with a frantic rush and pinned her arms deliberately around the outlaw's chest.

Lomax stumbled backward, cursing, trying to break the girl's frenzied grip. He succeeded finally, hurling her against the wall, where she collapsed limply on the floor. But Lomax had dropped Dave's pistol during the brief tussle and now it was resting on the floor, a foot from Dave's twisting form. Dave squirmed toward it, reached it before Lomax could recover himself and lunge.

One gun roared, but it wasn't Dave's.

Dave's shoulders jerked and he fell forward, still clawing at the Navy pistol on the floor. His face struck the boards. Lomax, staring down through the smoke of his own gun, was deadly, patiently intent. Dave groaned and stirred. He tried to get his legs under him again, but he couldn't quite manage it. He got hold of his gun, though, and flopped suddenly on one elbow, doggedly lifting the gun.

Without any change on his lean face, Lomax deliberately fired again, point-blank. Dave's body twitched as the bullet cut into his defenseless flesh. And then he was getting up. But Lomax didn't see him. Lomax was heading toward the kitchen.

Dave got to his knees, groping crazily for the gun which he had dropped when the outlaw's second slug had smashed home. He got hold of the pistol and lurched to his feet, blood pouring down his arms, dripping from his finger-tips. He had one slug in the shoulder, a second in his right forearm. Dave made the kitchen door in a long stumbling run. There, he went to his knees, but the side of the door braced him and once again the gun in his left hand came up.

One swift, staggering lunge carried him to the outside door. Swaying there in the opening, he saw Sid Lomax twenty feet away, heading for the fence at the rear of the yard. Halfway to his goal, however, he heard Dave's movement in the kitchen door and pivoted on his heels, dragging up his Colt. Lomax grunted with the shock of Dave's first bullet and he drew bead on Dave and let go. He missed.

Dave fired twice more, cracking lead into the outlaw with both shots. He saw Lomax sag to the ground and stiffen and lie still. Dave weaved dizzily in the kitchen door, the smoking pistol lowering slowly to his side. Slackly, he went down, this time to stay.

Erin Malone entered the room at the hotel where they had carried Dave. It was Loyal Ramsey's room. Dave lay in the iron bed next to that of the wounded sheriff.

Erin was flustered, almost incoherent. "Davie," she was murmuring, "I—am you all right now?"

"Did I hit him—Lomax?" Dave said vaguely. "I tried to—"

The girl was holding his hand tightly, desperately. "Yes," she whispered hoarsely. "You did. And that—Dorfler's dead, too. Dad got him before he managed to—before he—"

Dave jerked open his eyes, alarm twisting his face. "Mike!" he gasped. "They didn't—"

"Hush." Erin shook her yellow head. "He's all right. Just a bullet in the brisket."

Dave eased back, suddenly relaxed, at peace. He turned his bandaged head on the pillow and looked at the old man in the bed next to him. Loyal Ramsey was watching him narrowly, out of questioning, sharp brown eyes. The old lawman was going to pull through, Doc Appleholm had said confidently. All Loyal needed now was a long rest, and freedom from worry.

Dave murmured, "Well, how you feel, Sheriff?"

Loyal Ramsey's voice was surprisingly strong when at last he spoke; it was almost like a deep bell tolling. "Son," he said, "they done told me you and Mike cleaned up that bunch fer me. Thanks, boy. Thanks a heap." Staring at Dave from under suddenly lowered lids, he tried to make his next words casual, matter-of-fact: "But there's one thing I wanta know—Did yuh palaver any with them two boys, Davie?"

Dave looked at him keenly, thoughtfully. And then he said, "Shucks, no. There wasn't any time for talkin' to them *orejanos*. Hell busted loose the minute Mike and me caught up with 'em down there on River Street."

Erin gripped Dave's hand beneath the coverlet and squeezed it reassuringly. Loyal Ramsey's deep-seamed face appeared to smooth out, until there was hardly a wrinkle on it. He lay back with a long sigh and said, "Don't know what I'd do—"

"Heck!" Dave Ramsey said it so emphatically that the effort brought a wry grimace of pain to his face. "What'd you expect?" He reached out suddenly and gripped the old man's hand where it rested on the checkered quilt, added with a shaky grin, "Why, us Ramseys and Malones, we gotta stick together—dad!"

The tall, thin, black-coated hombre blasted a quick shot.



Law-and-Order Gunman

By MORGAN LEWIS

On a rough, tough, lawless range, you can't stop rustlers with popguns. . . . But the city-bred owner of the Diamond S tried. Then his two fisted ramrod's red-headed temper got the best of him—and blazing guns showed who was boss!

LEE WINSTON, ramrod of the Diamond S, sagged in the saddle as his roan gelding jogged onto the one dusty street of Alliance, and his spirits were lower than his drooping shoulders.

Time was when, with a month's pay in the pocket of his levis and a good horse under him, he would have swept into town with all the exuberance and zest for excitement of his twenty-six years. But that was before James Sheffield had come out from the East to take possession of the Diamond S under the terms of his brother's will.

Sheffield, a pale man with cold gray eyes and a firm mouth, was used to courts of law to protect his interests and blue

uniformed police officers to do his bidding, and he looked with abhorrence on the wild and lawless customs of his new home. The reckless, gun-slinging ways of his dead brother were not his, and he announced it in precise language.

Lee hitched his roan to the rail in front of Streeter's general store and crossed the street to the town's only restaurant. He took a seat at the wooden bar and ordered a rare steak.

Behind the counter, Pop Hoozler turned his leathery old face toward him with a grin. "I hear that out on the Diamond S the boys has laid away their rifles and is usin' nothin' stronger than popguns to shoot rattlesnakes," he cackled.

"Yup," Lee agreed with quiet irony, "we are all little pals together, full of brotherly love, and if some no-good hombre rustles a few head of steer, we just jog into town and tell the sheriff about it and he will ride out and speak harshly, to this errin' brother. Law and order has come to the cow country, and we must never fill a man full of lead—not even if he is ridin' off with some of our best critters."

He broke off disgustedly and sprinkled salt on his steak.

Pop's grin faded. "It shore must be tough," he exclaimed sympathetically. "Don't yore boss know them ideas won't work? Yuh can't hold a outfit together that way."

"You might try tellin' him," suggested Lee. "I have talked 'til my tongue hung clear to my boot straps, but it has done no good."

Across the street, a man emerged from Ed Barnes' harness shop, next to the Emporium, and walked down the street with a saddle slung over his shoulder. Lee looked sourly after the retreating form.

"That's a right nice saddle for a waddie to be buyin'," observed Pop. "Ed was tellin' me it set Clem back one hundred and forty iron men."

Lee pushed the unfinished steak away from him with a sudden loss of appetite. It was no mystery to him where Clem Slocum was getting his money. A few days ago he had come upon a horse picketed in a fringe of trees at the mouth of a coulee.

The horse was a blood-bay with a watch-eye and it belonged to Slocum. Lee had ridden into the thicket and had come upon a small branding fire and a steer with the brand freshly blotted. Slocum must have heard him coming and circled around through the brush, for when Lee went back the bay was gone.

When he had made his report, Sheffield had said that the evidence was inconclusive but had promised to tell the sheriff. Lee had to grin at the idea of pot-bellied Tom Latham riding out after a rustler. He went over to the counter and paid for his meal.

"Why don't yuh quit?" inquired Pop. "There's aplenty would hire yuh."

Lee shoved his Stetson back on his black curls and a faint pucker appeared between his gray eyes. "Darned if I know, Pop. Guess I'm just soft in the damned head."

He picked up his change and went out. Pop's question had started a train of thought in his mind. During the long months, when Sheffield's attitude of pacifism made it increasingly harder for a man to work for him and retain his self respect, the idea of quitting had occurred to Lee and he had shoved it quickly out of his mind.

He had told himself that he was sticking because of his loyalty to the Diamond S, a loyalty that had grown within him when he worked for the brother of James Sheffield. But now he knew that wasn't so. He was sticking because of Sheffield's daughter Nina.

The Eastern-bred girl had taken to ranch life like a duck to water, and she could ride as well as any girl in the country.

Lee had shown her how to handle a six-shooter, and he still remembered the delighted sparkle in her blue eyes when her bullet made the first tin can leap into the air.

Whenever he could get away from his duties as foreman, he had delegated himself to show her the country, and on their rambling rides he had come to know her well. The thought of leaving the ranch and not seeing her again filled his heart with a sudden ache that told him why he stayed on.

As he went down the street and exchanged greetings with men he knew, there was a feeling of sympathy in their eyes, for an outfit that will not fight to hold its own is a poor thing in the eyes of cattlemen.

The glances of men who were not his friends held a hint of mockery.

Clem Slocum came by with the new saddle cinched on his watch-eyed bay and rode slowly out the trail at the south end of town.

That decided Lee. He got his roan and went out of town, heading north. Clem had a shack at the foot of Crazy Mountains and if Sheffield wanted more evidence, Lee had a hunch he could find it there.

THE roan carried him across the rolling expanse of plain at a quick lope. Ahead, the outlines of Crazy Mountains shimmered and swam in the hot air.

More was involved than Lee's desire to prove to Sheffield that Clem Slocum was a rustler. Bad times were coming upon the ranchers of Wyoming; the cattle rustlers were becoming stronger and bolder, and a man like Sheffield was a plain invitation to them. It would take stern measures to fight them off, and Sheffield had to be made to realize it. Clem was only an unimportant member of the rustling gang, Lee was convinced. The shiftless waddie didn't have brains or nerve enough to do much by himself.

It was past noon when Lee reached the little valley in the curve of the foothills where Clem had his shack. He struck the trail that led across the meadow and followed it to the far end.

Clem's layout wasn't much. A two-room peeled-log shack and a flimsy corral with a lone horse standing disconsolately in it. Off to one side was a refuse dump dotted with tin cans.

Lee left the roan ground-hitched and pushed open the door. He blinked while his eyes became accustomed to the dim interior.

There wasn't much inside: a rusty stove, an unmade bunk and a table of rough boards with a cracker box for a chair. His glance searched the place. He walked over to an iron pot in the corner and lifted the lid. Inside was a piece of veal.

Lee's eyes narrowed. In the cow country, veal usually meant stolen meat and a buried hide. When an honest rancher butchered, he left the hide out on the fence for all to see that it bore his own brand.

He came out of the shack and hunted around, but there was no sign of freshly turned earth. He took a broken-handled shovel that was leaning against the side of the shack and started to dig into the refuse heap. Presently his shovel struck something yielding and yet tough. He scraped away the layer that covered it and hauled out a hide. Lee kicked it to knock off the dirt and spread it out on the ground. An attempt had been made to blot

the brand, but he still could make out the Diamond S mark under the fresher burn.

Here was evidence enough to hang Mister Slocum by his scrawny neck. Lee carefully rolled up the hide and tied it behind his saddle. Then he went over to the corral. The pony inside shied away from him, so he flipped his rope over its head and snubbed it to the post in the center.

Now the animal stood docilely enough, and Lee went up to him and brushed aside the shaggy hair on his flank. The brand was an old one but still visible, the quarter circle and the W standing out plainly. He released the pony and coiled his rope. As he went back to his roan there was a grim set to his lean, tanned jaw. The pony in the corral belonged to Red Wallace—and Lee didn't believe that it had been stolen.

Red owned a small spread farther on in the foothills of Crazy Mountains, where he sold rotgut whiskey to the Indians and corn liquor to the shifty-eyed riders of the outlaw trails. He also handled stolen beef and was suspected of doing some rustling on the side.

The pony was a strong link connecting Clem with Red's illegal activities.

Lee hung the rope on his saddle and was bending over to pick up the reins when there was a sharp crack from the wooded hill behind the shack and his hat was swept from his head.

He didn't straighten up—but, still bent over, ran to the shelter of the building. As he ran, a bullet kicked up the dust beside him, and then he was out of range. When he peered cautiously around the corner another bullet whined past. There was a slight movement in the brush halfway up the hillside.

Lee dragged his gun out and fired at the spot. There was more movement of the brush and then the clatter of hoofs as the bushwhacker rode up the tree-concealed trail.

Lee waited a moment and then went back and picked up his hat. A neat round hole showed on each side of the high crown. If he had been a fraction of a second later in bending over, the bullet would have drilled him through the head.

Whoever had done the shooting had been mighty anxious to stop him.

Lee swung up on his horse and skirted the edge of trees around the valley on his way out. He had no intention of presenting another target to the bushwhacker, who might still be lurking up the trail.



HE REACHED the home ranch late in the afternoon and turned his horse into the corral. James Sheffield was on the veranda of the two-story stone-and-frame ranchhouse when Lee went up with the rolled hide slung over his shoulder.

His pale eyes widened a trifle as Lee eased it to the ground and turned it over so the brand could be seen.

"I found it in the dump by Clem Slocum's shack," he said and stepped back.

Sheffield stood looking down at the evidence, and behind his city-pale face Lee could see the distaste for trouble struggling with the need for action.

The screen door banged and Nina Sheffield came out to stand beside them. She nodded to Lee, then looked wonderingly from her father's troubled face to the hide. "What is it?" she asked.

"Lee says he found it behind Slocum's shack," said Sheffield, as though glad for the diversion.

"But why did you bring it here?" she asked Lee.

"Because it's from a Diamond S steer," Lee told her and bent over to point out the Diamond S brand beneath the fresh burn.

"But—are you sure Slocum put it there?" Sheffield asked, as though seeking some loophole of escape from the evidence before his eyes.

"It didn't grow there," Lee said bluntly.

"You'll have to do something about it, dad," said Nina. "We can't have him stealing our cows."

"Yes—yes, I suppose I must," Sheffield said, rubbing his hand over his smooth face, as though driven into a decision. "I'll drive into town with it and have the sheriff go after him."

Lee shook his head. "It won't do," he said quietly. "In the first place, Tom Latham won't dast to bring him in, and if he did the crooked jury they got down

there in Alliance would set him loose."

Sheffield's troubled glance shifted from his daughter to Lee. "What do you suggest?"

"Get in a couple of your neighbors and show them the hide, so it will be all square and legal. Then go out and hang Slocum to the nearest cottonwood."

Color washed up into Sheffield's pale face. "There'll be no lynching or shooting as far as the Diamond S is concerned. No steer is worth a man's life."

"Suppose you was back in the city," Lee said, "and a man held you up and took your money, and a policeman came along and shot him—would your money be worth a man's life?"

"That would be different," Sheffield answered. "Police officers and courts are empowered to enforce the law."

Lee nodded slowly. "Sure. But don't forget that the people gave them that power. When the sheriff is afraid of his own shadow and the courts is run by a bunch of blackleg politicians to suit themselves, why—the people just natchally take back that power and do the job themselves."

"They won't in this case," said Sheffield, compressing his thin lips. "I'll have no man's blood on my hands."

Lee shrugged and turned abruptly away. It was a waste of time to talk to Sheffield. He was halfway to the corral when he felt a light touch on his arm, and Nina was beside him.

"Don't be angry, Lee," she coaxed. "Dad thinks he is acting for the best."

Lee looked down at her bright face and felt his anger die away. His arm tingled where her hand rested on it. He forced a grin. "Sure he does," he agreed. "He just doesn't know the cow country."

Nina went on down to the corral with him. "Red Wallace stopped in this morning," she said.

Lee swung around to look at her. "Red Wallace! What did he want?"

"Just to be neighborly," said Nina. "He's very handsome, isn't he? He says he is in the cattle business."

Lee snorted. "His business is rustlin' cattle and sellin' bum whiskey."

"He seems to be well educated," Nina continued as if she had not heard him. "He talked very interestingly about the

country. He promised to take me to see some Indian relics."

Lee looked at her in alarm. "You wouldn't go riding with him!"

Nina looked back at him with a faint crinkle about her eyes. "I think I shall. He seems to be perfectly safe."

Lee shook his head helplessly. Where girls were concerned he felt awkward and tongue-tied. He couldn't tell her the sordid details of Red's way of life . . . the squaw that Red kept in the shack back of his place . . . the drinking bouts that wound up with every one dead drunk . . . the killings.

She gave him a smile that took his breath and went back to the house.

Lee strode into the cook shack with black anger and doubt in his heart.



SHEFFIELD sent down word Monday morning that he wanted Lee to go into town, so the Diamond S ramrod got the waddies started and then went up to the ranchhouse.

Sheffield looked up from the desk in his office. "I want you to take the hide in to the sheriff," he said. "I have written a letter explaining things." He handed it across the desk to Lee.

"This puts the whole thing in the sheriff's hands," he continued. "Under no circumstances do I want you to start any trouble." His manner was decisive. "If Slocum should happen to be in town, stay away from him."

Lee nodded and tucked the letter in his pocket without speaking. The anger that had been gathering within him during the months of Sheffield's regime was near the boiling point, so he clamped his jaw tight shut on the impulse to tell Sheffield what he could do with his job. To his way of thinking, a man new to the country who wouldn't take advice was a plumb fool, and if he wanted to lose his entire herd to rustlers, why that was his lookout.

When he went out on the veranda, Nina was talking to Red Wallace. There was a smooth assurance about the tall, red-headed man that caused the hair to bristle on the back of Lee's neck.

The two men nodded shortly and Nina

turned to Red with her most devastating smile. "Why, of course, I'd be glad to ride with you, Red," she said with a lilt of eagerness in her voice.

Lee banged down the steps and on to the corral. He hitched the team to the buckboard, heaved in the hide, then unstrapped his gun belt and left it in the bunkhouse. He knew his own temper. The team went out of the yard with a savage rush that matched his mood.

All the way to town the memory of Nina's face, tipped smilingly up to Red's, burned within him. Red undoubtedly had a way with women. He had enough practice, Lee thought grimly.

At the sheriff's office he threw the rolled hide at the feet of the astonished Tom Latham, and laid the letter on the desk. "That'll explain it," he said shortly and leaned back against the wall and rolled a cigarette while the rotund lawman laboriously read the letter.

There was a startled look on the sheriff's red face when he looked up after finishing it.

"That sort of puts it up to you, Sheriff," Lee said ironically.

Latham stood up on his short, heavy legs and shifted the gun belt about his bulging middle. "Yuh just leave things to me," he promised importantly. "I'll have that rustler locked up before yuh can say 'scat.'" He started for the door.

Lee kicked the roll of hide. "You better lock that up before some jasper steals the evidence," he said dryly.

The sheriff turned back, his face a shade redder. "It might be a good idea," he agreed.

Lee left while he was lugging the hide into a back room. Despite the sheriff's big talk, he didn't place much dependence on his catching Clem. Latham wasn't dishonest, but his bulk made him lazy and his timorous spirit made him scarce when trouble was afoot.

He climbed into the buckboard and swung the team around. The sun was still mounting the eastern half of the sky and he figured he could be back to the ranch before noon. The wagon was abreast of The Golconda when he saw Slocum's watch-eyed bay hitched to the rail, the fancy new saddle shining in the hot sunlight.

Acting on a sudden impulse, Lee pulled the horses in sharply and stopped them at the rail. He stepped down from the rig and pushed in through the batwings. It was in his mind to make certain that Clem was there. Then he'd tell the sheriff. But the interior of the long, low room was dim. By the time his eyes were focused enough to recognize his man, Slocum had seen him and was coming across the floor.

Ordinarily, Clem Slocum was not brave, but whiskey gives a false courage to some men. His loose lips were dripping curses.

"Some low-down ornery so-and-so was nosin' around my shack," he finished up.

Lee took a step forward and Clem turned and looked across the deserted room to the barman, who stood with outspread palms on the bar, watching.

"The dirty snooper ain't even got a gun. His boss is afraid he might hurt hisself."

"I won't need one for this," Lee said grimly, and all his pent-up anger exploded on the point of Clem's wobbly chin.

The cattle thief went down with the suddenness of a bull-dogged steer. Angry amazement spread over his face when he found himself on the floor.

He scrambled up and rushed Lee, both hands swinging. His right cracked against the bone over Lee's left eye, driving him backward. As he followed up, Lee's heavy fists shot out solidly with all the weight of his sinewy body behind them.

Clem reeled backward, with his arms up, trying to defend his face. His back banged against the bar and he swayed there for a moment. Lee connected solidly with a right and Clem fell.

Lee wiped his knuckles on his levis while the barman stared wordlessly, making no move to interfere. Then Lee leaned over and snapped Clem up on his back in a fireman's carry. His high-heeled boots clicked across the floor and out through the batwings.

Sheriff Latham was coming out of the back room of the jail when Lee strode in and dumped his unconscious burden into a chair.

He looked from Lee to Clem and his eyes seemed about to pop. "How—what—?" he stammered.

Lee's anger was gone now and he grinned. "Clem stubbed his toe down at

the Golconda," he drawled, "so I thought I'd bring 'im in and save you the trouble."

The sheriff took a long look at Lee's face and then went over to unlock the cell door. "He musta butted yuh with his head when he tripped," he said dryly.

THE buckboard rattled into the ranchyard and Lee pulled up beside Sheffield, who stood near the corral.

He watched silently while Lee unhitched the team and started them for the stable with a slap on the rump.

From the cook shack came the rattle of dishes. Most of the waddies had come in for their noonday meal.

"Did you give the sheriff the hide and the letter?" he asked.

Lee nodded while Sheffield stared accusingly at his bruised eye.

Lee touched it. "I ran into Slocum in town," he admitted. "He's in jail now."

Sheffield's thin lips compressed. "You know how I feel about fighting, Winston," he said coldly. "I'm afraid you're a trouble-maker. Come up to the office and I'll give you your time."

Lee stared at him. "You mean I'm through on account of I had a run-in with Clem?" he asked incredulously.

Sheffield nodded. "Exactly. I won't tolerate fighting." He hesitated for a moment. "You can get your stuff together and I'll bring your check down to you."

He went up to the house and Lee entered the stable and took the harness from the sweating team, while his anger grew at the thought of Sheffield's unreasonableness. He picked up his rope and went out to the corral and caught his private horse. He was a big, rangy dun, an ugly looking brute, too big for cutting-out work, but with the deep chest and iron leg muscles that could eat up the miles tirelessly.

Lee slapped on his center-fire rig and heaved back on the cinch. He dropped the reins and turned to meet Sheffield.

"Here's your check—and no hard feelings," the boss said with a pale smile.

Lee took the check. "Is Nina up at the house?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," said Sheffield, "but she isn't home. She went riding this morning and hasn't come in yet."

A picture of Nina and Red Wallace as

he had last seen them flashed through his mind and he felt a sudden coldness.

His eyes blazed at Sheffield. "If you let Wallace take her to that sink hole of his," he said with quiet grimness, "you ought to be shot." Then he dove for the bunkhouse. When he came back, his gun belt, with the big Colt, was buckled on, and he carried a rifle.

"Wh-where are you going?" Sheffield asked nervously.

Lee shoved the rifle into the scabbard, and there was a pale hardness about his face as he answered. "I'm goin' to make a little visit on Red Wallace and if he's laid his dirty paws on Nina—God help him!"

* * *

It was about ten miles to where Red Wallace's place backed up against Crazy Mountains. Lee rode with fear like a heavy weight against his chest. He tried to tell himself that Red wouldn't dare try anything, that if he harmed Nina the surrounding ranchers would get together and wipe out his outfit—but the cold fact remained that she had gone out with him and hadn't come back!

Lee didn't head directly for Red's place. Some of his tough hands might be posted out in front for just such a visit, and Lee had to get through. So he rode for a trail that led up into the mountains about a mile from Red's. He figured that he could angle around and come in from the back.

The dun swept from the smoothness of the plains into the rolling, climbing foothills. Off to the right was the far-flung mass of Big Snowy, while ahead rose the vast steepness of Crazy Mountains. When the trail that climbed up the pine-covered side opened before him, he pulled the dun down to a fast walk.

It was cool, riding here in the dim twilight caused by the big pines, and the thick mat of needles deadened the sound of his

horse's hoofs. To a plainsman, used to building his campfire from the twisted sagebrush roots or from dried brush, it was startling to get into a region where, as an old-timer once said, "the wood grew on trees."

At the top of the first ridge, Lee swung away from the trail and headed through an open glade on a line that would bring him out well behind Red's place. This comparatively open space extended for a couple of miles, and, despite an occasional fallen tree, he was able to make better time.

Lee pushed the dun as hard as he dared, for impatience rode him like a demon. The descent became steeper, and as they came out on a jutting promontory he suddenly reined in.

Below him lay a valley, completely walled in by wooded hills. A stream entered at the far end and meandered down through the middle, while cattle were spread out grazing on the lush meadow grass.

Lee swore softly. Apparently he had miscalculated and gone back farther into the hills than he had intended.

He turned off to where it was less steep and went on down. In some places the dun had to bunch his feet and slide, practically on his haunches. Lee shook his head. It would take a good horse to climb these steep hills.

Now that he had left the promontory, the valley was completely screened from view by the dense stand of pine. He could have ridden past and never been aware of its existence.

The dun did another tricky bit of sliding and came out on the valley floor. Lee touched him with his spur and the big smoke-colored horse stretched out over the soft turf, pounding past scattered bands of cattle.

Lee noted that they wore a confusion of

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brands, representing most of the local ranches. One bunch was almost entirely Diamond S stock. This hidden valley held the secret of the rustled cattle—the hide-out to which they were driven after a raid! And not ten miles from the Diamond S home ranch!



THE valley narrowed down at the end, and Lee was forced to follow the stream which flowed between massive buttresses of naked rock. The dun splashed through the shallow water, his hoofs clicking on the rocky bottom.

There was a sudden movement on the ledge of rock at his right. Lee ducked low over his horse's neck as lead screamed past him. The sharp crack of the rifle reverberated between the rocky walls.

Lee dragged out his rifle and, hanging over the side of his horse, fired. There was no cover on that flat-topped ledge, and the bushwhacker jumped to his feet and started to run back so the bulge of the cliff would protect him. Lee straightened up and fired. The running man stumbled and threw up his arms.

Lee sent the dun through the narrow pass in a flurry of flying water. Those shots might have been heard. There was no time for caution now. A few hundred feet farther on, the ramparts of rock ended and the stream flowed into a narrow valley.

As he emerged, a rifle cracked and the dun plunged furiously. Lee spurred him up the bank and into the shelter of the trees. He looked around and saw that the bullet had burned a streak across his horse's rump, but the wound was superficial.

The dun plunged to a stop at the edge of a clearing. A hundred feet beyond was Red's place.

Lee looped the reins around a limb and walked unhurriedly across the open space; that way he was less likely to attract attention.

He pushed through the first door he saw and found himself in a kitchen. At the sound of his entrance the cook turned from the stove. His black mustaches framed the round hole of his mouth as he opened it to give a startled yell. Lee's

arm swept up and down as he laid the barrel of his Colt over the man's shiny bald pate. He caught the sagging body before it could crash to the floor, and dragged it to a corner.

From up at the front of the place came a murmur of voices. He stepped into a short passageway and walked its length. At the end was a curtained doorway, and through it came a voice that caused him to freeze.

James Sheffield was speaking in that cool, precise way of his. "Of course, when Nina came back from her ride and I knew that Lee's fears were unfounded, we came right over to prevent any trouble."

Red's smooth laugh answered him. "I'm sorry that I had to let Miss Sheffield go home alone. I had to get back on the job. I suppose Lee thought I was going to kidnap her."

Sheffield joined in the laughter and Nina said, "Lee should know by this time that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

Lee, listening outside of the curtained doorway, felt his ears grow hot.

"If Lee comes around here," Red said, "I think I can handle him."

He broke off as a door slammed at the other end of the room and one of his men pounded in.

"Red!" he gasped. "Lee Winston just come in through the back valley. I took a shot at him, but he got away."

There was a moment of astounded silence. Then Red boomed out, his voice rasping with anger, all the smooth suavity gone. "So you tried to trick me with your cock-and-bull story while your man took a look-see out back, you mealy-mouthed, whey-faced fool! You'll be damned sorry you ever tried your tricks on me!"

Lee pushed the curtain aside and saw a long, narrow room with a bar at one side over which Red sold his rotgut. Sheffield, dressed in riding clothes for a change, was backed against the bar, staring with horror at the gun in Red's hand. Nina stood a few feet from him, and the man who had just entered was at the other end of the bar.

Lee's Colt swept up. "Take it easy, Red," he warned, "and you'll live longer!"

Red swung around with a startled grunt and his gun roared.

Lee felt a searing impact in his side. Then his Colt kicked against his palm. Red stood stock-still for an appreciable instant before he started to fall.

The other man, a tall, thin, black-coated hombre, blasted a quick shot at Lee and then dove through the door.

Sheffield stared uncomprehendingly at the dead man stretched at his very feet.

Nina started toward Lee, wide-eyed. "Oh, Lee!" she gasped. "Why—why did he—?"

Lee took her arm whirled her behind the rough board bar, and grabbed for Sheffield. "Get behind there!" he ordered tensely. "We ain't outa this yet."

Sheffield obeyed like a man in a trance, wiping his forehead with a shaking hand. "But why?" persisted Nina.

"There's a bunch of rustled stock back in that valley," Lee said grimly, "and this outfit ain't gonna quit without a fight."

Nina looked at the red stain spreading over his shirt and went white.

Feet were pounding outside. A man was yelling, "They got Red! Lee Winston got Red!"

A bullet sang through one of the narrow windows, and the rush of feet swept across the yard.

Lee picked up Red's gun and handed it to Sheffield. "If you want to keep on livin' you better learn to handle this."

He ran along behind the bar. As he reached the end, men jammed in through the doorway. Lee leveled his gun across the rough boards and poured lead into the close-packed figures. The man in front stumbled and fell forward.

Guns blasted deafeningly and powder fumes filled the air. Lee's gun clicked on an empty shell, as one of Red's gunmen swiveled his gun at him. For an instant Lee saw death in the depths of that slim black hole. There was a blast of gunfire from the rear of the room.

Lee shot one startled look behind him and saw Sheffield cowering behind the bar and Nina pointing Red's gun.

He put both hands on the bar and vaulted across, catapulting himself into the men jamming into the room. His only chance lay in getting in so close that they couldn't shoot.

The knot of men milled furiously about, surging into the wall and banging up against the bar. Lee's breath was coming in agonized gasps and his side felt as though every move pulled it wide open. He swung mightily at a face before him, and then something cracked down on his head.

Lee opened his eyes and tried to sit up. A hand pressed him back and a gruff voice said, "He's comin' around now, ma'am."

Lee looked up into the face of Texas Pete, one of the Diamond S waddies, and then Nina was beside him.

"Are you all right, Lee?"

"I reckon," he said.

"The boys got here just as you went down," Nina explained. "I thought there might be trouble so I told Texas Pete to get them together and follow us."

"From the looks of things," said Texas Pete, "we didn't git here any too soon. It was hot work for a minute. What's left of Red's gang is tied up in the hoss barn."

He moved away and Lee slid down from the bar. He stood, a little shakily, with his back to it. "I reckon I played the fool," he said.

He swayed a little and Nina put her arms around him. "There should be more fools like you in the world, Lee," she said. "Besides, I was only trying to make you jealous. I thought you'd never speak."

Lee's left arm was battered and bruised, but he didn't feel any pain as he put it around her.

Sheffield came up—a changed Sheffield. "I'll have to admit I was wrong," he said. "Your ways may not be mine, but they were most effective." He paused and his eyes searched Nina's face. "I can see that you're going to stay here with Lee," he said, "but I don't think I'm cut out for this ranch life. I'll give you the Diamond S for a wedding present. I'm going back east where I belong."

Lee grinned to hide his emotion. "Now that Red's outfit is broke up, things'll be nice and peaceful around here."

"I doubt that," Sheffield said dryly, "but after seeing the way Nina can handle a gun, if anything comes up, I guess the two of you will be able to take care of it."

"I got no money here. If I did have, I wouldn't tell you where it was!"



Smoke Talk Says Murder

By GUNNISON STEELE

Only a dead man, or a ghost that wanted to keep warm in that isolated mountain cabin, could have raised the smoke talk in the skies —to call the murderer back!

MODOC JOE VERNE crouched in a fir thicket, a scowl twisting his dark, buck-toothed features as he watched the two men in front of the log cabin seventy yards away. One of those men was old Adam Hawn, whom Modoc Joe meant to kill and rob. The other was Sheriff Sam Buck, from Lee's Ferry.

The two had just come from the cabin. The sheriff's saddled horse stood at a post nearby. Modoc Joe stirred impatiently, looking up at the low, sullen sky. It was very cold, but still and quiet, for there was no wind. In the unnatural silence Modoc Joe could hear what the two said.

"Keep that stove hot," smiled the raw-boned, gray-mustached sheriff. "I'll be comin' back this way in three-four days, with Injun Charley."

"She'll be hot," Sam Buck promised. "Be somethin' left in the bottle, too. You'll need thawin' out, I reckon. It's gonna snow, sure as shootin'."

"Looks like." Sheriff Buck peered up at the low sky, at the darker line of clouds banked along the northern horizon. "But I can't wait. Injun Charley might line out."

"Watch that hombre. He's bad medicine."

The sheriff smiled again, went to his

horse, mounted, and with a wave of his hand rode away. Adam Hawn watched till the rider vanished into a fir grove, then turned and went back into the cabin, closing the door behind him.

Modoc Joe Verne grunted with vicious satisfaction. It was going to snow, and any sign he might leave would be wiped out. He waited several minutes, until he was sure that the sheriff was well away, then wriggled back through the thicket, circled, came up to Adam Hawn's log house from the rear.

Adam Hawn lived here alone. From his trap line, and the few cattle he raised, he had saved considerable money. That money cache was here. In hours of furtive spying, Modoc Joe had learned just where.

The back door was latched on the inside. Gently, Modoc Joe tapped on the door with the muzzle of the six-shooter. Footsteps sounded and the door swung open.

Adam Hawn was a bald, pot-bellied little oldster. His pale eyes flared with surprise and alarm as he looked at Modoc Joe, at the gun in his hand.

"H-howdy, Verne," the oldster stammered. "What's the idea of the gun?"

"You'll find out," Modoc Joe growled. "Back up!"

Hawn backed away from the door and Modoc Joe entered, closing the door behind him with his foot. Old Hawn stopped near the glowing sheet-iron stove, in his eyes the growing conviction that the dark-faced man meant to kill him.

Modoc Joe growled, "What'd that lawdog stop here for?"

"To get warm. He's headed into the hills after Injun Charley Whitdeer. Injun Charley's been thievin' pelts. What d'you want here, Verne?"

"I want the money you've got cached."

"You're loco. I got no money here. If I did have, I wouldn't tell you where it was!"

Modoc Joe sneered, "You don't have to. I *know* where it is!"

The gun roared, spouting flame and lead across the room, straight into Adam Hawn's stomach. Hawn grunted, walked forward two steps, then crumpled gently to the floor.

Modoc Joe looked unblinkingly down at the still figure, grinned, touched it with his boot, squatted down beside it for a moment, then got up. His muddy eyes circled the room, touching the full wood box behind the stove, a stack of furs in a corner, the quart whiskey bottle on a table. He crossed to the table, up-ended the bottle and drank deeply.

Then he went to a bearskin rug, pushed it aside and raised a loose floor plank. In the cavity thus revealed was a square tin box. Modoc Joe made greedy, grunting noises in his throat as he surveyed the thick bundles of banknotes inside the box. He scooped up the money without counting it and put it inside his shirt. Then he replaced the plank and carefully rearranged the bearskin.

He drank again from the whiskey bottle, paying no further attention to Adam Hawn's sprawled figure. He knew that the bullet had caught the oldster in the stomach. He contemplated the stacked furs, then shrugged and turned away. The money was what he'd wanted. Furs might get him into trouble.

Modoc Joe paused in the front doorway for a last look about the room. Except for the dead man, it was exactly as it had been before he entered; that, and the half-empty whiskey bottle under his mackinaw.

He closed the door, stepped to the frozen ground. A hundred yards from the cabin, he looked back. A thin wisp of



smoke rose straight up from the chimney. Soon, as the fire died in the stove, the smoke would vanish, and bitter cold would creep into the cabin to keep Adam Hawn company.

Modoc Joe turned and went on. Whiskey and triumph made him feel warm inside.

ADAM HAWN'S cabin huddled beside a frozen creek almost in the center of a wide valley. On either side the earth rose gradually in low, fir-studded swells to the dark hills many miles away. From these swells, in almost any part of the valley, Hawn's cabin was visible on clear days.

Modoc chuckled as he strode along. He'd planned this long and carefully. His boots left no mark on the hard-frozen ground. Anyway, it was going to snow, and long before Adam Hawn's body was discovered he would be safe in his cabin in the higher hills. His scheme was fool-proof.

A mile from the cabin, he paused atop a rise to gulp more whiskey from the bottle. A weird silence held the vast, cold world. Starting on, Modoc Joe glanced back over his shoulder.

He paused again, frowning. Adam Hawn's cabin was plain back there. And the smoke rising from the chimney, instead of thinning as the fire died, seemed stronger and darker.

The big killer shrugged, turned and went on.

But the frown remained on his face, and atop the next rise he paused again and looked back. A quick, puzzled oath ripped from his lips. No doubt about it—a thick, black column rose straight from the chimney against the gray sky!

Modoc Joe stood several moments, undecided, puzzled. The fire in the stove should be down to coals by now, with no smoke at all rising from the chimney. But there it was!

Superstitious fear surged through Modoc Joe's muddy mind. Somebody had put fresh wood into the stove. But there was nobody back there except Adam Hawn. And Adam Hawn was dead.

Or . . . was he?

The dark killer cursed again, furiously, imps of doubt and panic capering in his cruel mind. The stovepipe had got stopped up, he told himself, and had just now become unstopped. He turned and stumbled on, eager to reach the next vantage point, yet dreading it.

He stood longer this time, staring with fascinated eyes at the dark column of smoke that rose like an accusing finger above the cabin. He gulped the last of the whiskey, unaware that sweat stood out on his face despite the cold. Conviction was a clamoring voice inside him.

Somebody was stoking that fire. Adam Hawn—or Adam's ghost. Modoc Joe had heard queer, dark tales. Maybe Adam's ghost had got cold, and had put wood into the stove.

Modoc Joe laughed, a low, wild sound. Ghosts were insensible to cold and heat alike. That could mean but one thing: Adam Hawn hadn't died! Somehow, the old man had managed to drag himself to the wood box, was feeding the fire, to keep the spark of life inside his body.

Modoc Joe turned suddenly and stumbled back the way he'd come, bitterly cursing himself for not having made sure old Hawn was dead before leaving the cabin. This time there would be no mistake. He shivered, thinking about what would have happened if he hadn't noticed the smoke—if Adam Hawn had lived to tell who'd shot and robbed him.

As he reached the crest of each rise he could see the smoke, dark and strong against the sullen sky. He went faster, savage anger against the oldster who had refused to die mounting inside him. It seemed an age before he stumbled across the frozen creek and approached the cabin.

The wind was rising, rolling with a weird moaning noise out of the north, swirling the smoke that boiled from the chimney. Sudden caution slowed Modoc Joe. He circled, came up to the cabin from the side and paused under a window. Cautiously, he raised his eyes above the sill and peered into the room.

Modoc Joe's lips pulled back from his buck-teeth in a half-snarl. The stove glowed redly. And, seated in a chair, hunched forward over the table with his head on his arms, was old Adam Hawn!

Modoc Joe left the window, gun in hand. He went quickly to the front door, pushed it open and entered. He paused, head and shoulders hunched forward, staring at the figure at the table. Adam Hawn didn't move.

Modoc Joe strode forward, grinning coldly, and reached out a hand to grasp Hawn's shoulder.

Behind Modoc Joe, a bleak voice snapped, "Freeze, Modoc—or you'll get some lead the same place you gave it to Adam!"

Modoc Joe spat like a startled cougar, leaped backward, whirling in midair and sending a hot blast of flame and lead toward the voice. He saw the head and shoulders of Sheriff Sam Buck above the stacked furs, saw gun-flame lash out at him from the muzzle of a long-barreled gun.

The close-range bullet caught Modoc Joe in the shoulder. It smashed him backward, against the hot stove. He squalled with pain and terror and tumbled to the floor, his gun slithering futilely across the room.

Sheriff Buck got slowly up from be-

hind the furs. Using a chair as a rude crutch, one leg dragging grotesquely, he hobbled forward and took the killer's gun. Adam Hawn still hadn't moved. Modoc Joe watched dazedly, moaning, swaying on hands and knees.

The sheriff said grimly, "I'm not surprised to find it was you, Modoc. You see, my bronc fell on the side of a ravine over there a mile or so, pinning me and breaking my leg. I managed to get into the saddle and make it back here, putting my bronc in the barn. Must have got back just after you left. 'Course, I didn't know who it was that had shot Adam, and I couldn't follow with this broken leg. So I hit on the idea of cramming the stove fulla half-green wood."

Modoc Joe groaned, "You—I thought it was—"

"Yeah, I know," Sheriff Buck agreed, without sympathy. "You thought it was Adam Hawn stokin' that fire, and you nearly broke your neck gettin' back to shut his mouth for good. Well, your neck'll get broke, all right—only a rope'll do it. Adam couldn't stoke no fire. He's stone dead!"

Getting Up Nights Makes Many Feel Old Too Soon

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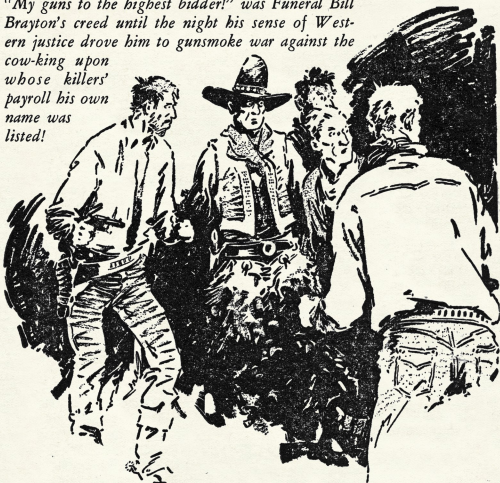
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THE REDEMPTION OF FUNERAL BILL

A thundering Western novelette by
M. HOWARD LANE

CHAPTER ONE

Life-Saving Killer

TIGE O'GORMAN had sent out a call for gunmen and Funeral Bill Brayton had quit the risky business of trying to make a living playing poker to answer it. He had crossed the high Mogollons, and now he was camped for

the night on their lower flanks. Hunkered beside a small, merrily burning cook fire, he lazily stirred the beans and bacon in the fry pan his left hand was holding. This sunset time was the best hour of the day as far as Funeral Bill was concerned; that was his reason for halting here on the rim of Pleasant Valley.

"Might as well have one more night without fuss," he murmured to himself.



"Hold up, all of you!" she commanded.
"I'll drop the first man that comes a
step closer."

"I'll start drawin' gun-pay tomorrow and that's soon enough."

He savored the mingled scents of tangy Arizona air, fragrant pines and aromatic smoke from his cook fire, and was satisfied. Dusk was rapidly blanketing the land, but from where he sat he could look out over the broad reaches of Pleasant Valley beyond and below him. A creek, bordered by thick willows, divided the valley, and beyond it lay a cluster of structures that was Pleasantown.

"Seems like a damn shame," Funeral Bill told himself half drowsily, "that sheep and cattle cain't get along together in a place big as that there valley."

Then he caught himself with a start. "Damn you, Bill Brayton," he told himself acidly, "you got to watch yore thinkin' apparatus. Yes, you have! First thing you know you'll be herding a bunch of stinking woolies, and this here country won't stand for sheep. The critters ruin the grass with their chisel hoofs, and then

hosses and cattle starve to death."

Funeral Bill ate his beans and bacon right out of the skillet, then topped off the meal with coffee. Afterward he stretched his long, lazy-moving body beside the coals of the cook fire and rolled a cigarette. Off to one side, his big gray gelding, Pancho, grazed contentedly, and all in all this was as peaceful and calm a spot as a man could find.

"And will be again," Funeral Bill thought, "when the woolies are chased clean outa this part of Arizona."

The crashing thunder of hoofs back on the thickly pine-clad slant of the mountains behind him broke the run of Funeral Bill's thoughts. At the sound all the relaxed laziness seemed to drop from his long frame like an easily discarded cloak. He was on his feet as fast as a cat and ghosting into the darkness outside the ring of firelight where he had been reclining. If a visitor was coming, there was nothing like seeing him first. And, from the sound

of things, he was coming fast, like maybe he figured the devil was hot on his tail.

Funeral Bill sighed. He had decided to camp here for the night instead of riding on into Pleasantown, because he knew there wouldn't be any peace for him once he got there. If somebody didn't start talking war, there'd at least be a poker game. And poker, to him, was irresistible. It had cost him most of the gun-play he'd earned in knocking about from range war to range war.

"If I could just handle cyards the way I can a pair of Colts," Funeral Bill had told himself many times, "I'd quit gun-sliding for a living."

His keen ears were following the progress of that hard-running horse down the mountain slant. A man with any sense wouldn't be racing a cayuse through this dark. The thought was barely across his mind when a crash sounded back on the slope. After that came silence.

"Damned fool bronc bounced off a tree," Funeral Bill muttered. He waited for further sounds, but nothing came to him save the music of a soft night breeze in the high-tops overhead. "Blast it," he added to himself, after a few minutes, "your conscience ain't going to let you rest until you go find out if the cuss riding that hoss broke his neck."

Quiet, even in his spike-heeled boots, Brayton moved through the dark aisles toward the spot where he'd heard the crash. But in the dark the scene of the accident was not as easy to locate as he'd anticipated. A pain-wracked curse from not over ten yards to his left was the final guide that led the tall red-headed gunhand to his goal.

Fighting his way through the undergrowth, Funeral Bill heard the raspy breathing of an unconscious man even as he sighted the lumpy shape of a dead horse near the base of a big pine. Eyes used to the dark now, he picked out the prone body of the dead animal's rider. The man had been thrown a good twelve feet from his mount.

Moving to the injured rider's side, Funeral Bill hunkered down beside him and brought a Lucifer match alight by scraping it across the seat of his tight levis. The sulphur match sputtered blue flame then steadied to a bright pinpoint that

showed him the other was lying flat on his back.

Red stained the front of the stranger's shirt from shoulder to gunbelt. Then Brayton's eyes saw the blood oozing from a neat round hole in the chest of the man's shirt. A Colt slug had made that hole and, coupled with the added shock of being thrown from a running horse, an instant doubt rose in Funeral's mind as to whether the other could survive much longer.

The match singed his fingers and he snuffed it out. Fumbling to detach a second from the wooden packet, he dropped the matches, and leaning to retrieve them brought Funeral's nose close to the unconscious man's lower body. The smell of blood came strong to Bill's nostrils, but mingled with it was another odor. A pungent, pervading scent that had soaked into the man.

Funeral Bill caught that scent, and the dusty warning of a diamondback's rattle could have made him straighten no more quickly. Rocked back on his heels, the roving redhead sat there, and he could feel his nostrils twitching.

That pungent odor was sheep smell!



"HELL and blue blazes!" Funeral Bill Brayton muttered. "Wouldn't this rope and hog-tie yuh, though? Me, a woolie hater, gittin' next to a damned sheepherder! I oughta," he told himself fiercely, "leave the cussed whelp right here to die in his own juice!"

That was what the roving gunhand told himself, but he was striking a second match even as the words were tumbling through his mind, and he knew, with complete disgust, that he couldn't do it. The wounded man might be a sheepherder but he was still a human being. A new thought came to Funeral Bill. It salved his conscience and made him feel considerably better. He wasn't actually at war with anybody in Pleasant Valley yet, for so far he hadn't signed on O'Gorman's X over X payroll. That made it natural for him to help this hombre. If anybody asked him later about it, he could say that his nose wasn't very good.

With his conscience salved, and the

first shock of discovery past, Funeral Bill studied the wounded man more closely. The sheepman was a wispy little cuss with a shock of bushy white hair reaching back from his weathered brow. Fifty-five, Funeral judged him, and probably hard as nails from footing it after herds of woolies. His clothes, though, were a cut better than those worn by any shepherd he had ever seen before. Maybe this sawed-off gent was Rance Akers, the cuss O'Gorman wanted driven out of Pleasant Valley.

Funeral Bill got his long arms beneath the other's knees and shoulders, and managed to stagger up with his burden. "Good thing for you," he told the unconscious man sternly, "that you ain't no bigger, or I'd sure have to let you lay here."

He picked a careful way back through the trees, the light of his campfire guiding him. It came to Funeral that maybe this hombre had seen either the smoke or the light from back up on the slope, and had been heading for his camp. It made him feel half way responsible, and responsibility was something Brayton had shunned whenever possible.

"If you're that cussed Rance Akers," he mumbled, "I'm jest going to have to let you bleed yoreself to death. That'll shore stop the trouble in this valley, pronto."

But even as he spoke, Funeral Bill knew he wasn't going to do anything of the kind. "You're jest talking to make yourself sound rough and tough, Bill Brayton," he told himself.

As he reached his camp, a cynical thought came to bolster his ego. If the man he was now stretching on the layer of thick pine needles he had gathered together for his own mattress was Rance Akers, and he died, there would be no gun pay at the X over X. There'd be no gun pay because most likely peace would come, pronto.

Two lonely silver dollars was the total wealth in his jeans, Funeral reflected. That being the case, his first chore, he decided, was to wake up the injured man and learn his identity. If the wispy hombre was Akers, he'd have to do his best to keep the shepherd alive—or lose a good job later.

From one of his saddlebags, Funeral Bill brought a pint bottle. He unscrewed the cap and sniffed the whisky and decid-

ed he'd better not sample it. This was a night that might call for a completely clear head. It wasn't often that a gunhand, arriving to help drive sheep and their herders from a place, was called upon to keep a boss shepherd alive.

Forcing the unconscious man's teeth apart, Funeral poured a meager drink down his neck. It set him to coughing and choking, and brought blood more freely from his wound, but it also made his eyes fly open. They were black and pain-wracked, but the light of sanity was in them. He reached for the bottle, and took a generous drink while he regarded Brayton.

What he saw evidently pleased him. Particularly the pair of tie-hard Colts poking from the other's lean shanks and the cool, rather saturnine face peering down at him.

"Son," he said huskily, "I'm right obleeged to you for that drink. My name's Akers. Rance Akers. And I'll see you git rewarded for giving me a hand."

Funeral Bill dragged a ragged breath into his lungs. So his guess *had* been right. This was Rance Akers. And he had to keep the cuss alive, or lose the job he'd ridden a hundred miles to grab.

"Wouldn't you just know something like this would happen to me!" he said disgustedly.

Akers had his teeth gritted against pain. His words were slurred when he spoke. "What'd you say, young feller?"

Funeral's wide lips curled. "I said you got a hole in you that needs patchin', pronto. I'll tie this pad over it, and then if that whiskey has give you enough strength to set a saddle, with me up behind to hold you on, we'll make a ride to Pleasantown. Ought to be a sawbones there who can probe out the slug and fix you up good."

A smile touched with irony moved Rance Akers' lips. "Pleasantown's got a doctor, all right," he said slowly. "His name is Newt Manning, and he's right good at fixing gunshot cowpokes. But he jest forgets all he knows if one of my men shows up at his office."

The only clean white shirt he owned was being ripped into strips under Funeral's fingers as he listened to Akers' talk. Hands full of bandages, he blinked as he knelt beside the man.

"You trying to tell me," he demanded incredulously, "that the Pleasantown doc won't care for a man if he runs sheep? Why, hell and damnation, doctors are supposed to work on any critter, from men to poisoned pups—and not worry about pay neither! We're riding to town when I get done with you, and that damned pill-pusher is going to fix you, and good!"

Akers shook his head, and his face twisted with pain as Funeral sliced the bloody shirt from about the wound with his pocket knife. "Nada," he said, almost cheerfully. "Ain't nothing but death waiting for me in Pleasantown. And you, too, young feller, if yuh ride with me. I got eyes, and from the cut of yore tucker you're a cowpoke gunslinger, on the way to join up with O'Gorman."

He spoke the words without rancor, Funeral Bill noted, and found himself a little surprised. In fact, he was finding it increasingly difficult to remember that Akers was an enemy and that he was only doing his best to keep the cuss alive so as to get that job O'Gorman had waiting for him.

Despite his pain, the sheepman grinned. "Case you don't know it," he said, "you're on the wrong side of the deadline right now. That's how-come I was heading for your camp. Saw the fire, and figured you were one of my herders. Kind of passed out in the saddle, I guess, and lost the reins, and my hoss went crazy-wild."

"You was dry-gulched, maybe?" Funeral said, and hated to voice the thought because that never had been his idea of fighting.

"Shooting men from ambush ain't half the tricks O'Gorman's pulled," Rance Akers gritted. "It's kinda funny, too." Once, down Texas way, me and him were friends. Good friends. He pulled stakes and moved here to the Mogollons. I come along later, looked the country over and figured sheep would get along here better than cattle.

"Right then me'n Tige, and our families, quit being friends. This here is all free Govmint graze, and there's land a-plenty to run sheep and cattle, but Tige said no. Claimed this whole damn area as his'n by right of priority, on account he'd winter-pastured a few head of steers on this side of Willow Creek."

"That the stream meanderin' across the valley?" Funeral Bill surprised himself by asking the question. In fact his own reactions were surprising him more all of the time. Sheepmen, he'd always been led to believe, were meaner'n and ornerier than a den of blind sidewinders on the prod. But this cuss, Akers, was acting almost human. He found himself interested in the sheepman's story.

"The one, all right," Akers said. "Warn't very long ago that from here you could see a thousand sheep on the flats this side of it. But you cain't now. Tige sent a dozen riders into my camp about a month ago, caught my herders at breakfast and proceeded to lash every one of 'em to a wheel of the chuck wagon."

"Then they started my herd for the quicksands. Drove 'em helter-skelter into the creek, and when the sands got so full of bodies that no more would sink, they took clubs and finished the job. Mebbe you don't know herders, mister, but they love their flocks. One went crazy watchin' that Willow Creek slaughter."

Funeral Bill Brayton felt sweat on his forehead, and the night was anything but warm. "Them damned woolies weren't to blame for being down there!" he found himself growling. It wasn't exactly right to tie men to wagon wheels and torture them, either. No, shooting a man down that had a gun in his fist was one thing. That way he had a chance. But tying herders to wagon wheels . . . Deliberately he closed his mind to such thoughts. O'Gorman was the man he'd come to work for. Not a sheepherder! But just the same he found himself saying: "Go on."

"Losing that herd purty nigh busted me," Akers said. "And when Tige sent me word that this rim of the valley was my deadline, I had to take it and like it. Figgered I had to save what sheep I got left. That mebbe they could scratch enough out of these hills to keep alive. Guess Tige figgered they could too, so he slipped a man into a couple of my water holes and spread saltpeter around. It wouldn't hurt cattle, but it's quick poison to sheep. Lost two hundred more that-away before we could clean up the stuff. And the wust is, I cain't afford to hire enough men to watch against its happening again."

"You're forgettin' the dry-gulchers!" There was acid in Funeral Bill's voice.

"He's jest started that," the sheepman gritted. "Guess he's hired hisself enough guns now to start wiping out more than sheep."

The bandage was in place. Brayton got up from his cramped position, and in the fire's glow his lean, bronzed face looked as though it had been carved from copper. He knew he was about to voice a decision that he might regret, but he didn't give a damn.

"Akers"—his voice sounded almost drowsy—"I'm thirty years old, and I been earning a living by selling my guns since I was twenty. I've done my share of killin', but I ain't ever yet leaded up a gent who wasn't looking me in the eye when I done it.

"Far as that goes, I don't rightly believe I've ever killed me a cuss who ain't deserved it. Folks call me Funeral because I've always made it a p'int to attend the funerals of them I've helped on their way to hell. Round and about I've picked up quite a rep for being a gent who allus sells his wares to the highest bidder. Figgered to do it this time. But I guess I'm going soft. You've bought yourself a gunhand—for nothing!"

CHAPTER TWO

Turncoat Sawbones

PLEASANTOWN was like many other western communities Brayton had visited down the years. It boasted a single wide street, flanked by conventional boardwalks and shabby falsefronts. Only two saloons looked impressive, which also was as usual.

However, there was something not so usual about this valley town. Funeral Bill sensed it before he had single-footed Pancho a hundred yards along the street. The atmosphere was tense. Pleasantown seemed to be holding its breath. What men there were on the streets at this hour peered almost furtively at the rail-straight, high-hatted shape riding his lone way along the street.

One hand brushing the Colt at his side, Funeral paced his mount along the thoroughfare, his face impassive. Ahead, on the left, light splashed across the street from beneath the swing doors of the Elkhorn Saloon. Without having to turn his head, Funeral Bill saw a man bat hurriedly through those doors. He knew the word the other was carrying, for this was an old game that he had played on more occasions

"IS GOD DEAD?"

(as this war grows worse Americans are asking that question)

Well I can say to them that God is most certainly NOT dead for I TALKED WITH GOD, and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God,

and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a postcard to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 105, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1942, Frank B. Robinson.

than he suddenly cared to remember. In a few moments some idle figures would appear on the saloon porch to look things over.

His arrival, however, wasn't the cause of the tension that seemed to hang over Pleasantown. Funeral felt certain. The town seemed to be waiting for something to happen. And then a possible answer came to him. Word of the attempt to murder Rance Akers had reached the town, and its citizens were awaiting the verdict. A verdict that might spell peace or war for the whole valley.

As a rule, in a sheep-cattle fracas, neighborhood towns stayed strictly neutral, and let the boys fight their own fight. The law, too, usually refused to take a hand. Free range was free range. If men wanted to battle over it, that was their business. However, if the citizens of Pleasantown had any leanings they likely favored cattle.

Grimly Funeral Bill Brayton thanked the fates for the cow country garb he was wearing. As long as he looked like an arriving recruit for the powerful X over X, no one would stop his ride.

But if eyes watched him turn into Doctor Newt Manning's yard, questions might start popping quick and fast. Questions there'd be no time to answer. That wounded sheepman out at the camp he'd left thirty minutes earlier was not in as good shape as he'd pretended, Funeral Bill knew.

The man's last words had been a futile attempt to dissuade Brayton from making the ride to Pleasantown. "Hell, Brayton," Akers had said weakly, "I'm all right. Lost a leetle blood, that's all. The bullet went plumb through me, and you say yourself the wound's as clean as a whistle. I'm tougher'n leather and brimstone. Take more'n a slug to lay me low."

"A bullet's a bullet," Funeral Bill had said. "When a slug slices as close to gizzard as the one that went through you, it needs the attention that only a doc can give. I'm riding into Pleasantown and I'm bringing that Manning back with me. If his memory fades when he gets here, I got just the medicine that'll make him remember his trade."

But, stubborn to the last, the doughty old sheepman had tried a final plea. "Son," he'd said, honest feeling in his

voice, "it goes without saying that I appreciate what you've done for me. But you're a woolie-hater at heart, and there ain't no sense in you denying it. I'd rather cash my chips right here than deal you into a game that can't be won."

"There ain't a game been invented yet," Funeral Bill had told the oldtimer, "that can't be beat. This'n is purty tough, I'll hand you that. Howsomever, I got no use for cusses that tie innocent hombres to wagon wheels and slaughter sheep that ain't to blame for bein' here or anywhere else. And I got even less use for hombres who plug folks from ambush. You lay here and rest your bones, Rance. I'm goin' after that doctor!"

Newt Manning's place, so Akers had told him, lay at the opposite end of the street he was riding along now. It would be dark, once he was past this cluster of business buildings, and if folks didn't pay him too much attention he could reach the medico's house without being observed.

Quietly, Funeral Bill cursed himself for not having sought a back alley that would have led him to Manning. However, he hadn't expected to draw so much attention. Idle figures were sliding through the batwings to the porch of The Elkhorn now. One was as tall and as rail-thin as himself, Brayton noted. The man touched a match to a cigarette as he lounged alongside the door, and Funeral got a look at his face. It was hatchet-thin, lined. An arrogant beak of a nose threw shadow across thin lips. Something told Brayton that he was seeing the cattle king of Pleasant Valley—Tige O'Gorman!

Those silent watchers on The Elkhorn porch made no move to stop Funeral Bill as he rode on past. But Brayton felt the flesh along his back start to crawl once they fell behind. Again he blessed the careless old cowhide vest and faded levis he was wearing. In any other garb, lead might even now be reaching out to tag him, for it was plain that O'Gorman was set to use his gunhands for murder. The bushwhack attack on Akers proved that. Nothing was going to suit the X over X but the annihilation of the sheepman's flocks, and all those who sided him.

A glance across his shoulder, when he was beyond range of lights from the saloon, showed Funeral Bill that he wasn't

being followed. It was possible, he realized, that the hombres who had turned out to give him the once-over might figure him for nothing more than an unsociable saddle tramp riding through their town.

"Leastways there ain't no reason why I shouldn't hope so," Funeral Bill muttered.

A steep-roofed white house, shaded by towering poplars in the front yard, appeared out of the darkness to his left. From the description Akers had given him, Bill Brayton recognized it as Doctor Newt Manning's office-home. Without pausing he rode straight past the house, then circled cautiously back to ground-hitch Pancho alongside the medico's stable.

Spurs jingling softly, he moved along one wall of the house, seeing a crack of light beneath a curtained window. That, too, was good, for likely it meant the doctor hadn't retired yet.



CLIMBING to the dark porch, Funeral rapped on the door. He herd steps along a hall inside, and then the portal opened. Lamp held shoulder-high in one hand, a round-bellied man in suspenders and shirt sleeves peered out at him.

Studying him, Funeral Bill saw an expression of relief cross the other's pudgy face, and he realized ironically that the doctor had probably been half expecting to see Akers standing there.

"You Doc Manning?" he inquired.

"Yes," the man behind the lamp nodded. "What do you want?"

Funeral had put his left arm half behind him so that the other couldn't see it. "I got a hand," he drawled, "that needs fixin', and the dinero to pay for it."

"Come right in then!" Doctor Manning sounded more hearty now. "We'll take care of you in a jiffy." He moved back into the hall, and Funeral Bill followed him to the room where he'd seen the crack of light. A medical book lay open on a desk. A bottle of whisky and a glass stood beside it.

"Take my own medicine, sometimes," Manning gestured toward the bottle with a laugh. "Now," he set the lamp down on the corner of the desk, "let's see that hand." He turned as he spoke and his

speech ended with a big startled: "Ulp!"

His round, watery blue eyes bulged as he stared into the muzzle of a Colt. The battered, curl-brimmed old sombrero Funeral Bill Brayton wore was pulled forward across his brow. It cast the flat planes of his face into shadow, save for the straight line of his mouth, and that was decidedly hard.

There was iron in Brayton's voice as the unwavering barrel of the Colt held the medico motionless. "Grab your bag, doc," Funeral Bill said tonelessly, "and call goodbye to yore wife if you got one. We're taking a ride, and she's going to be a widow come morning, unless you do a good job of patchin' up a friend of mine. If you ain't got a wife nobody is going to give much of a damn if you don't come back at all."

Doctor Manning licked flabby lips. His eyes looked stunned as they swept over the redheaded gunhand. "You—you look like a cattleman," he stuttered. "There's no call to scare me half to death with that gun. No there ain't!"

"What I look like and what I am is a hoss of two different colors," Funeral said flatly. "Fact is, it even surprises me some to learn that I've done turned stinkin' sheepherder."

A sick look was coming over Manning's face. "Wh—who is hurt?" he managed to ask.

Funeral Bill chuckled without humor. It was easy to see that even this medico knew of the attempt that had been made on Rance Akers' life. "I'll give you just one guess," he grunted.

"A-Akers?"

"You're a good guesser," Brayton snapped. "Grab your bag."

Manning reached shakily for the whisky bottle on his desk.

"Leave that stuff alone!" Bill rasped. "Bottled courage ain't going to help you none."

Five minutes later Doctor Newt Manning pushed open the squeaky back door of his house and stepped out to a small, rear porch, roofed and completely dark. Spurs jingled in the dark, and Funeral Bill swung like a cat toward the sound. A voice came from the thick darkness to his right.

"Night air ain't good for you, Doc," a

man said. "Get back in the house. You, too, cowboy!"

There was confidence in the man's voice. It gave Funeral Bill his only chance. "We—we'll go back," he said as his pantherish stride carried him toward the back porch guard.

"He's coming at you!" The doctor's vindictive cry spoiled the gunhand's ruse "Get him!"

Funeral Bill leaped, the long barrel of his right-hand Colt slashing into the blinding darkness ahead. He heard the *click* of a gun-hammer earing back and the slithering sound of a man side-stepping, and then the steel in his own hand struck solidly.

Shock running the length of his arm, Funeral Bill reached out with his other hand to steady the crumpling weight of the guard. He lowered the man gently to the porch, conscious that the cocked gun still in the other's fist would explode if it struck hard enough. A shot here would bring investigators in a hurry.

"Did you get that damn sheepherder?" the medico was calling excitedly. "Did you get him?"

If the doctor fled it would cause him more trouble was the thought that crossed Funeral Bill's mind. "Got him," he grunted, and he hoped that his voice sounded authentic.

"Good, good," Manning said gleefully. "Tell Tige, on your way back uptown, that Rance Akers is still alive."

"And going to stay that way," Funeral murmured gently in his normal voice. He was back at the doctor's side now, and the muzzle of his Colt rammed viciously against the flesh layering the medico's ribs.

The doctor said "ulp" again, and Funeral Bill felt the man sag. "You get some starch in your laigs," he said sternly, "or I'll gunwhip you, too, and there won't be nobody around to patch you up. Now move, mister, and your memory better be good when we get to the Mogollons. . . ."

When the guard Brayton had knocked out regained consciousness, and found his way back to the Elkhorn and O'Gorman, the cat would be definitely out of the bag. It wouldn't be hard for the X over X owner to figure out that the lone gunhand who had ridden down Pleasantown's main street had come to take their medico out

to care for the badly wounded sheepman.

"Which means O'Gorman will have men riding every trail afore morning," Funeral Bill muttered. "And he'll have 'em looking for me as well as Akers. Damned if I don't get myself in the wust jackpots!"

And yet, even as the acid thoughts were running through his mind, Funeral Bill Brayton found that actually he was more pleased with himself than he'd been in a long time. Every bridge with his past had been burned by siding Rance Akers, for regardless of the outcome of this fight, the word would get about from the Rio to the California line that Funeral Bill Brayton had renounced his own kind and become a woolie-lover. The thought almost made him shudder. He hated sheep just as much as ever, but he did like the doughty Akers, and more important still, he liked a fair fight.

"Which it won't be from here out," he mumbled.

There was more truth in that observation than Bill Brayton had figured. How true, he learned as he guided the discomfited doctor into the Mogollon camp he'd left little more than an hour ago. From the edge of the semi-circle of pines in which he had encamped, Funeral could see a lumpy shape lying beneath the bedding he'd stretched on top of the pine-needle mattress.

"Rance," he called cheerfully, "it's me, Brayton. I've brung that pesky doctor—"

Funeral Bill quit talking then, and he knew his mouth was hanging open, because he could feel the chill night air cold against his tongue.

That lumpy shape inside his bedroll had stirred and sat up, and light from the dying coals rolled along gun steel. But it was not the sight of the weapon that killed the words on Funeral Bill's lips. It was the person behind the Winchester. For the light of fading coals outlined a girl.

CHAPTER THREE

Kidnapped to Boothill

"STAY right where you are, you two!" The crisp warning now came from the girl who was crawling lithely from the blankets. She was

a little thing in a rider's open-necked plaid shirt and levis. The dim firelight showed Funeral a firm, tight-lipped mouth and a stubborn chin. She was a young, feminine replica of her tough old Texican dad—only a whole lot prettier.

Funeral Bill sat Pancho without moving, and tried to recover from the shock of this unexpected welcome. "Why," he finally moaned to the night at large, "don't folks tell me these things? I'd never have guessed in a dozen years that that old wal-loper, Rance Akers, could have such a purty daughter. I sure wouldn't!"

"Don't think your blarney will do you any good!" the girl snapped. "Keep your hands where I can see them or I'll knock you right off that saddle."

Doctor Newt Manning was chuckling nervously. "Heh heh," he began, "looks like your bird has flown the coop. Since I won't be needed to patch up your sheep-losing friend, I'll just pull out."

"You'll stay right here," Funeral Bill gritted, "or I'll sick this she-heller on you, and she'll treat you worse than I've done, I'll bet!"

At the doctor's words a puzzled crease had formed between the girl's eyes. "Are you trying to tell me, Dr. Manning," she enquired softly, "that this man *forced* you to ride out here with him?"

The Pleasantown medico didn't have sense enough to know when he was being baited. "That he did, Miss Celie," he said righteously. "He pulled a gun on me when my back was turned, and said that he was bringing me here to take care of your father. You know, yourself, that if your father is wounded, like this man says, he should have been brought right in to me at my office where I could have given him proper care."

Celia Akers' brown eyes were starting to sparkle dangerously. "The same kind of care you gave our sheep when you mixed up that poison for O'Gorman riders to spread around our water holes! No, don't try and turn that horse around, doctor, or I'll fill you so full of lead that it won't carry you!"

This girl had courage, Funeral Bill could see, and he doubted if her tongue was usually so sharp. She was talking hard and fast to keep herself from breaking down completely.

"Ma'am"—he hooked one long leg about the horn of his saddle and brought tobaccco and papers from a vest pocket—"you got the story straight, so far. Yore dad's bronc busted its neck against a tree, and I picked him out of the brush and brought him here to my camp. No use trying to fool you. He got bushwhacked, and there's a hole in him that I did my best to fix up. While I was doing it, he told me a couple of cute little stories about this here O'Gorman—"

"You're wearing two guns," Celia Akers' hot eyes swept over Bill Brayton's lank frame, "and you've got long fingers that look like they've never done an honest day's work. And you're wearing the gear of a cowman—"

Funeral's red-headed temper was starting to simmer. He had kicked a ten-year rep out the door, and a high pay job to boot, just to join a fight that looked hopeless. And now this snip of a girl showed her appreciation by giving him a tongue-lashing.

"And smell like a damned sheepherder, already!" Funeral Bill took the words away from her. "So let's quit this palaver and git down to cases. Yore dad was here not more'n an hour ago. Now you're in his place. I want to know what happened to him, and if this welcome is the reward he was talking about?"

The girl pulled a crumpled square of paper from the front of her blouse, and her stubborn little chin had started to quiver by the time she reached Pancho's side. Wordlessly, now, she handed the missive to Funeral Bill.

"Keep an eye on our medic friend," he told the girl brusquely, "while I read this thing."

Twisting, Funeral focused firelight on the writing. Scrawled in pencil by a heavy hand, the note made easy reading.

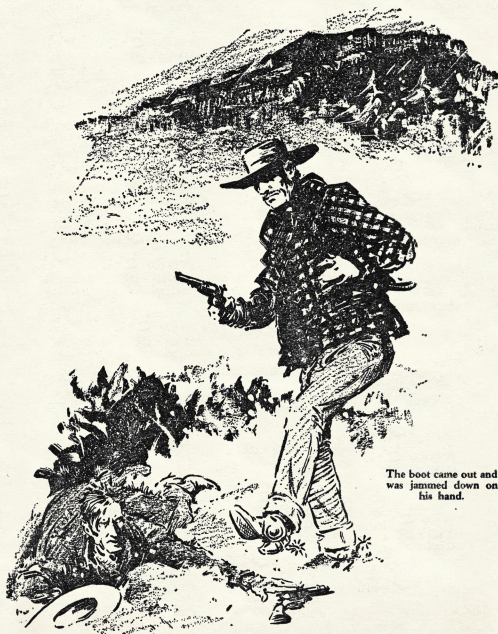
Akers has done accorded us the pleasure of riding to the X over X with us. He won't get hurt none, pervidin' his sheep are thrown back across the Mogolons. If they ain't movin' inside twelve hours, you guess what'll happen to him.

The note was not signed. It wasn't necessary. Funeral Bill Brayton felt the acid taste of bile coming into his mouth.

(Continued on page 102)

THE KING OF WILDERNESS CANYON

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS



The boot came out and
was jammed down on
his hand.

Even gun-hung, gold-mad riders of the dim trails felt something crack in their hearts when, in the vastness of a snow-white wilderness—they saw that fierce, proud, four-legged king!

DAVE ROBERTS sat motionless beside the cook stove in the Fiddleback line cabin, Harriet's letter gripped between thumb and forefinger. The flame of the oil lamp sucked along the wick with a frying sound. Dave's pet chipmunk hopped from its box and regarded the silent man with beady, querulous eyes. A high wind whined over the cabin's sod roof, driving spits of rain against the window pane. Dave scarcely heard it. He was mentally wording the letter he must write to the girl he had promised to marry. And it was hard to end his dream . . .

A fist pounded on the door. Dave sprang to his feet and opened the door. Light fell dimly over three riders, hats pulled low over their faces, rain glistening on black slickers. The bulky shapes of two pack horses loomed behind them.

"Howdy," the big, black-bearded man said. "We seen your light."

Dave swung the door wide. "Howdy. Bad night for travelin'," he said. "Like to bed down here?"

"Sure would," the big man said. "Much obliged."

Dave lighted a lantern and led the riders to the stable. The rain was like slanted strings of jewels flashing against the solid blackness. He forked hay into the rack while the riders unsaddled, observing how heavily they were armed. He especially noticed the small, scar-faced man, whose eyes were so cold and colorless and whose movements were so quick. He wore two guns, thonged low to his thighs. They followed Dave back to the cabin in silence. The big, dark man rubbed his palms together, heaved a sigh.

"Boy, this feels good!" He looked narrowly at Dave. "What they call you, pardner?"

Dave told him.

"Glad to know you, Roberts," the man said. "I'm Watt Gregg. This here—" he pointed to the tall, stoop-shouldered man—"is Murdock. And the little feller—well, we just call him the Kid."

Murdock grinned. But the Kid merely

glanced at Dave, and sat down beside the stove, adjusting his guns with tender care.

"You boys eat yet?" Dave asked.

Watt Gregg shook his head. "Not since sun-up. We was tryin' to make Soda Gulch before dark, but sorta lost our way."

"Make yourselves to home," Dave said. "I'll throw some grub together."

Dave built up the fire. His glance kept going to the pale, expressionless face of the Kid. There was a cold detachment about this man that puzzled him.

"I heard there was a bunch of broom-tails over Soda Gulch way," Watt Gregg said. "Seen anything of 'em lately?"

Dave looked up from the grease-popping skillet. "Horse hunters, are you?"

Murdock chuckled. "And if you ask me, it's mostly huntin'. Ain't no more fuzz-tails, like they use tuh be."

"I heard about this bunch over on Soda Gulch," Gregg persisted. "Their stud is s'posed to be Pancho Silver. You know about him, of course?"

"Oh, sure. Everybody knows about Pancho Silver." Dave turned, so that they might not see the sudden tightening in his face.

"You see him lately?"

Dave shook his head. The truth was, he had caught a glimpse of the great silver-white stallion only last week, leading his band to water on Soda Creek. He had sat motionless, admiration and wonder upon him—worship, almost. Each year since he had been stationed in this line camp he had waited for the wild horses to come down out of the mountains to their winter range in the foothills.

There was a secret park, over the ridge from Soda Gulch, where Pancho Silver and his band were wont to graze. Dave packed the boss's rock salt in there every fall. Always the sight of Pancho Silver thrilled him, and he had come to look upon the famous stallion as a shining symbol of all that is wild and free and strong and beautiful.

When he had eaten and lay on the bunk, smoking, Watt Gregg again brought

up the subject of Pancho Silver. "I seen him once, when I was mustangin' over in Utah. I swore, right then, he was goin' to be my saddle hoss. I been huntin' that devil, off and on, ever since."

Murdock laughed. "You can have him, Watt. Me and the Kid will take the mares. They're worth money." He eyed Dave through the smoke of his cigarette with narrow speculation, and his glance slid to Gregg.

Watt Gregg reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of currency. He laid a fifty-dollar bill on the table. "It's yours, Roberts, if you tell me where to find Pancho."

"I didn't say I knew where he was." Dave said.

"But you do, don't you?" Gregg smiled confidently.

"That's my business, I reckon, Gregg."

"You bet, it is. I can savvy how you wouldn't want anything to happen to old Pancho. I feel just the same way. But I want that hoss so bad—" He threw down another fifty-dollar note on the table. "How about it, feller?"

A gust of wind struck the cabin, rattling the window as if with giant hands. The Kid whirled toward the door, incredibly quick, both guns out.

Murdock roared out a laugh. "Goshamighty, Kid. You shore must have a bad conscience."

"How about it, Roberts?" Gregg repeated softly.

Dave stared at the money. "Take it," a voice within him seemed to say. "That hundred dollars, added to what you've saved up, will go a long way toward buying half interest in TP Charley's cow ranch. Soon you could send for Harriet . . ."

"Well?"

"No," Dave said in a firm voice. "Even if I knew where he was, I wouldn't sell him out—not for any price."

Anger glinted in Watt Gregg's eyes. He flung two more fifty-dollar bills on the table. "Now!" he challenged.

"Damn you, no!" Dave stood over him, fists clenched, hotness in his gaze.

The Kid then made the only sound he had uttered this night. He laughed. A sharp, metallic sound that stirred Dave's roots. Murdock looked amused.

DAVE was long in getting to sleep. He kept thinking of Watt Gregg's offer, of all that this money would mean to him. Harriet's face was before him in all its haunting beauty. And longing for her was such as he had not known. Her letter, reminding him that she had been waiting four years and could not wait much longer, etched itself word by word into his brain. He had promised to come back for her within a year. How sure he had been of making a quick fortune in this big, new country!

He had not known that the day of free land was over, that gold and silver no longer lay at the grass roots, awaiting the prospector's pick. So he had hired out to the Fiddleback at thirty-five a month. Less than three hundred dollars were all he had to show for these four years. And Watt Gregg had offered him two hundred . . .

He seemed to hear the wild, defiant call of Pancho Silver bugling from the heights, to see again the stallion's proudly lifted head and magnificent body. Dave loved all wild creatures. He knew, in his heart, that never could he betray this lordly scion of a vanishing race in whose veins flowed the blood of the Arabians of the Spanish Conquerors. He was smiling as he drifted into sleep . . . and he dreamed of Harriet. . . .

Dawn broke cold and gray, with a feel of snow.

Watt Gregg said, as he led his horse from the barn, "So you don't want my two hundred?"

"I told you," Dave said shortly. His lips were tight.

"I think as much of Pancho as you do, Roberts," the man said. "More, come right down to it. Instead of letting him be hunted to death, I'm goin' to give him a good home. I might even raise the ante a notch," he added, "if you led me right to him." He paused. "I might make it three hundred."

Murdock whistled. "Gosh, Watt! You sure do want that stud. If you don't take him up, cowboy—"

"I told you, no," Dave said, a cold anger rising in him. "The good Lord meant for Pancho to be free, and he's goin' to stay that way, if I have anything to do with it."

He went into the cabin, and the mustangers-headed west. "They ain't liable to find him," he confided to the pet chipmunk. Humming a song, he slowly saddled up to make his daily round of the fence.

Toward the middle of the morning he sat his horse on the brow of the ridge that overlooked TP Charley's spread. It was a sight to stir the heart of any cowboy with longing. A wide meadow, deep in grass, spread from the foot of the ridge, tilting to meet a dark wall of pine. A line of willows marked the winding course of the south fork of Soda Creek, and cattle stood in the sedge bordering a slough. Held within an elbow of the stream were the log house, corrals, barns and sheds.

Three hundred dollars. The thought struck Dave with sledge-hammer force. With that money, and what he had saved, he could buy the half interest TP had offered him. "No!" he said aloud, and reined sharply about, to see TP Charley coming toward him along the ridge. The gaunt, white-mustached old sourdough lifted a hand in welcome.

"Hi, Bub!" he called. "This damned cold rain's got my rheumatism rarin' up again. Wish you could see your way clear to take up that offer I made you, to come in with me."

"Keep your offer open, TP. I'll make her yet."

TP Charley nodded. "I know how it is. Punched cows, myself, a long time afore I was able to stock my claim. But I shore would admire to have a youngster like you for a pardner."

"I'll make her," Dave repeated. "I got half of it, already."

TP grunted. "I was headin' towards the slough," he said. "Seen some buzzards circlin' over there a while ago. May be a cow down."

Dave went with him, thoroughly enjoying the rancher's colorful talk. As TP had said many a time, they seemed to trot naturally together. This slough was a deep, slimy bog out of which grew a tangled wilderness of alders and willows. Skirting the edge, Dave came upon horse tracks entering the thicket. The great padded footprints of two mountain lions cut across the trail. Their kill, a horse, lay a little farther on.

It was a mustang, partly devoured. The head, untouched, showed unmistakable symptoms of glanders—the swollen jaws, the sticky discharge of the nostrils.

"One of old Pancho's broomtails, I reckon," TP said. "Well, the lions done a good turn, endin' its misery. Most of 'em git glanders, sooner or later. If it ain't that, it's somethin' else."

Dave looked thoughtfully at the mangled carcass.

"Three fellers come by my house a while ago," TP Charley said, "Askin' about old Pancho."

"You didn't tell 'em?" Dave shot the question at him.

TP chuckled. "Nope. I feel the same way's you do about that old devil." His face sobered. "But somebody's bound to git him, one of these days. Either that—or that." He pointed down to the dead mustang.

Dave went back through the brush, thinking how Gregg must love that stallion to offer such a price for him. And he came gradually to feel that perhaps he had been wrong. Pancho Silver might be better off under the care of a loving master. His mares, as range stock, would lose little freedom . . . Dave had said so long to TP Charley and was heading away from the peaceful little valley. Suddenly he straightened. His eyes shone.

"Harriet," he said aloud, "it's all right now."

He struck the horse hunters' trail. By fast riding, he overtook them in the hills beyond Soda Creek, a little after noon. He told Watt Gregg of his change of mind.

"Good!" Gregg reached into his pocket. "Here's your money."

"Better wait till we catch him, hadn't we?"

"That's all right. I trust you."

Murdoch grinned. "He's an awful trustin' fellow, Watt is. You can tell that, him such a fool about a hoss."

The Kid rode on, a small, lithe shape, his gaze fixed on a far horizon.

Dave took the three hundred dollars and guided the mustangers toward the secret park where he had left salt for Pancho Silver and his band. The sun had not shone this day. Low, gray clouds moved slowly in the lead-colored sky, and a fine mist sifted down the air.

TWO hours' ride brought them into a wild region of rushing water and marching rock, where massive mountains thrust naked summits into the clouds. On these heights a spit of snow stung their faces, rattling like shot against hats and slickers. Dave led his horse up a rocky shoulder that jutted, like a monstrous fin, from a lodgepole-covered cliff. He struck a game trail, following it through the thick stand of pines, and so came to a saddle. The mountain dropped a sheer thousand feet. At its base lay an oval park, solidly framed with spruce.

"There she is," Dave said. He pointed toward a wall of rock piled across the south end of the park. "That's where the canyon comes in. We'll have to run him in there to catch him. Let's go."

Leaving their pack horses, the three mustangers followed Dave in a zigzag course down the mountainside. Soon they were leading their mounts across a treacherous field of loose rock. It was snowing hard now, the basin scarcely visible. Suddenly Dave stopped.

"Listen," he said softly, turning in the saddle.

A sharp, clear sound, like a trumpet blast, rang from the lower depths.

"Pancho Silver!" Dave's voice quivered with excitement.

"It's him," Watt Gregg agreed. "I've heard that whistle before."

"I'd like to see that hoss," Murdock said, as if thinking out loud. He was looking into the distance.

When still a hundred yards from the bottom of the slope, Dave saw the stallion. The great white horse, trailed by fifteen or twenty mares, was moving toward the far wall of the basin. Dave froze in the saddle, a tightness in his throat. Adoration swept him, as it always did when he beheld the mighty monarch of the mountains. He had a moment of keen regret at what he was about to do, but he put it swiftly from him.

"How does he look to you, Murdock?" Watt Gregg asked, straining his vision through the shimmering snow.

Murdock did not say anything.

"We'll start in from here," Dave said. "Gregg, you go on into the canyon. Take him with you. He indicated the Kid.

"Leave him at that first fork in the canyon, and you keep on till you see a place where you can throw a rope good. Come on with me, Murdock. We'll haze 'em in."

"Okay," Gregg said. "Don't let him get away, Murdock."

Murdock appeared not to hear. He still looked toward the silver stallion, a kind of madness in his gaze.

Leaving Murdock in the brush at the foot of the slope, Dave circled the upper end of the park. He had come within sight of the wild horses when Pancho flung up his head and whistled a piercing challenge. He wheeled and ran down the basin, the band of mares following in fluid motion. Swiftly they vanished behind the slanted screen of snow. Dave drove in the spurs, shouting: "Murdock! Murdock!"

The vague shape of a rider came toward him. Dave raced after the thundering mustangs, glad they were headed toward the canyon. He heard the muffled report of a rifle, pounding out from the lower end of the park. Cursing, he reined toward the oncoming rider.

"Murdock!" he yelled. "Who—"

He broke off, staring. It was not Murdock who rode toward him. It was the Kid. A gun was in his hand. The gun roared, an instant after a thin whistle passed Dave's ear. White-hot with anger, he clawed out his .44. As the weapon came up, the Kid's bullet caught him in the upper right arm, the terrific impact blasting him out of the saddle.

His horse ran from under him and he lay where he fell in the snow, face down, stunned. Far down the basin, reports of a rifle drifted to him. He cursed soundlessly. That was Gregg or Murdock, shooting the wild horses. He moved his eyes carefully. The Kid sat his horse, motionless. Dave could feel that icy, inhuman gaze burning into him. He waited, with bated breath. The Kid rode toward him.

Dave looked desperately for his gun. He did not see it. The horse stopped within three feet of him. He lay there in the snow, waiting for the bullet to drive into the back of his head. The spot where he imagined it would hit burned both hot and cold. A creak of leather warned him the Kid was swinging down. He could

feel the thin killer standing over him.

A boot toe drove into his side. The boot came out and was jammed down on his hand. It was a brutal blow, jamming the breath behind his locked teeth, starting his eyes from their sockets. Silence then, except for the distant shots. Dave waited in an agony of suspense. Now the Kid was bending over him. The snaky feel of his hand reached into Dave's trousers pocket. It touched the bottom of the pocket and came out. The Kid stepped over him. His fingers darted into the other pocket and fastened on the money.

Dave whirled over, his left hand grasping the Kid's arm, jerking him off balance as the gun exploded. That fight was brief and terrible. As the Kid fell across him, Dave grabbed his gun wrist. The Kid's other hand flashed to holster. As the second gun cleared leather, Dave snapped the Kid's wrist backward, the Kid's own finger pulling the trigger that sent lead into his throat. Heaving him off as he would some unclean beast, Dave sprang up. He turned the Kid over on his face.

"No doubt about him bein' dead."

But there was a doubt. He knelt and pressed a hand over the Kid's heart. No vibration reached his fingers, only a faint crackle of paper in the shirt pocket. He drew out the paper and unfolded it. Astonishment widened his eyes, as he read:

\$500.00 REWARD

\$500.00 Reward is offered for the death of the wild stallion known as Pancho Silver. This horse and his band of mustangs are a menace to ranchers in this section, destroying crops and enticing away range stock. The above amount, in cash, will be paid on proof of this stallion's death.

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Dave stared at the reward notice, rage churning his brain. How devilishly he had been trapped! The Kid was to have murdered him and taken back the three hundred dollars, while his partners shot the stallion.

"And I sold Pancho out for that!" he said aloud. He snatched out the money and tore it into bits, scattering them into the wind. He ran to his horse and headed rapidly down the basin.

He strained his vision through the snow screen. And when he saw the shape of a horse stretched on the ground, he breathed a little prayer. But it was a mare, dropped by a bullet. As he plunged on toward the canyon, Dave saw more of these still figures, and another mare, dragging a broken leg. A wall of rock, cleaved by a slit of black, lifted suddenly before him. The canyon's mouth.

Too late, in the driving snow, he saw the strands of barbed wire stretched across the cleft. The horse struck the barricade with head and chest, recoiling as though tossed by giant hands. Dave kicked free of the stirrups as the horse fell dying of a broken neck.

Four shots roared from his gun—one into the horse's brain, three cutting the wire. A killing fury in him, he folded back the strands and ran into the canyon. Pain in his broken arm forced him to stop and belt it tightly to his side. Even then, he gritted his teeth at each step. The walls drew together, and he entered the neck of a gorge into which snow swirled in solid sheets. There was no sound here, except the metallic rustle of snowflakes on brush. Dave hurried on.

Anxiety and remorse marched beside him. Somewhere up there was the noble horse he had betrayed—and the stalking killers. A rifle's flat report beat on the stillness. Dave ran faster, fearing to think. He heard now a distant drumming of hoofs and, lifting above them, Pancho Silver's wild, fierce whistle.

"They haven't—got him yet!" he panted.



LOUDER grew the hoofbeats, rising to a tremendous crescendo. Dave flattened against the wall, to let the torrent of mustangs sweep past. But the sound of hammering hoofs lessened and died away. The horse had turned into the fork of the canyon—where Watt Gregg or Murdock would be waiting. Now a distant shot goaded him to frantic haste.

He reached the cleavage in the wall, and stood listening. A bugle-like peal blasted the stillness. He raced into the main fork. A bullet sang its death-whine close over his head; another, blending into the rifle's

muffled report. He flung himself against the wall. Watt Gregg or Murdock was up there. Whichever it was, he must wait here.

Dave ran on alongside the wall, driving his vision up the gorge. Hoofbeats pounded toward him. Then the great white shape of Pancho Silver streaked out of the dimness, and Dave's heart leaped against his throat. But the stallion was not running freely, he was dragging something from a rope noosed around his neck. Dave stared.

"It's a man!" He moved out from the wall. "God! That's Murdock!"

To halt the stallion, he shot up both arms, shouting. In a single motion, incredibly swift, Pancho pivoted, racing back up the canyon. Behind him, caught by the ankles in his own rope, his brains banged out against the rocks, Murdock bounced and whipped.

But Pancho was breathing hard; the rope was choking him. Dave raced after the wild horse, but was quickly left behind. He ran on up the chasm. Mustangs dashed past him like phantoms. Forgotten now were the menace of Watt Gregg and the strange impulse that had driven Murdock to capture instead of kill.

He followed the trail into a gulch that cleaved the wall of the main canyon, doggedly clung to it through a maze of intersecting gulches. A small band of mares swept past him, their small, keen heads leveled out, their tails beating the air like faggots. Dave heard Pancho's harsh breathing before he saw the horse, statue-still in a hollow of the wall.

A wild cry broke from him.

"Dave! That you, Dave?"

Dave stopped, looking about him. That was TP Charley's voice. "Where are you, TP?"

"Up here. I'm hurt."

"Quick as I unloose old Pancho."

Glancing at the unrecognizable mass that had been Murdock, he drew his knife, opened it with his teeth. The mighty stallion's head was lowered, his tongue lolled from a side of his mouth, his eyes were bloodshot and bulging. He did not move as Dave came close.

"It's all right, old boy," Dave said softly. Pancho Silver turned quietly away, and

Dave hurried to where TP Charley lay, a leg crumpled under him.

"Who done it, TP?"

TP Charley pointed to the dead man. "I got sorta curious, seein' you head over here with them mustangers, so I foltered." He wagged his head slowly. "You know, it's the durndest thing, Dave. That feller there had his rifle aimed square at old Pancho, when I seen him drop it and pick up his rope. Then he caught sight of me. Whether he thought I was one of his pardners, or not, he flung a slug into my thigh so fast I didn't know what happened. Yes, sir. The sight of Pancho Silver done somethin' to that poor devil."

"Somethin' else Pancho done," Dave said. "He led me right to you, TP. I never would—" He spun half around, as a rifle shot came. "Be back in a minute."

Stark fear raced beside him. For Pancho Silver probably lay on the ground, kicking out his life, Watt Gregg's bullet in his brain.

Swerving into the canyon, he was met with a thundering blast in his face. Falling, he shot twice into the middle of Watt Gregg. Scarcely able to believe he was unhurt, Dave got to his feet. He bent over Gregg's face, straightened slowly, and walked a few yards down the canyon. He saw no blood on the snow.

"Son," old TP Charley said, when Dave returned to him, "this settled it. I been wantin' you as my pardner for a long time. You're in with me, from now on. I'll fix up the papers, soon as I git to town. Shake."

Dave gripped his hand. "That's fine, TP. But there's two things. First off, I want to pay out my share, as I go along. And," he paused, reddening. "Well—"

"A gal?" TP prompted.

Dave nodded. "We aim to get married."

"Couldn't be better," TP Charley said heartily. "It'll be right nice, havin' a lady round the house. Send for her pronto, son."

As Dave started toward TP's horse, a clear, sharp bugling sound, utterly wild and triumphant, drifted from the heights. It was as though Pancho Silver were adding his blessing to Dave's and Harriet's happiness.

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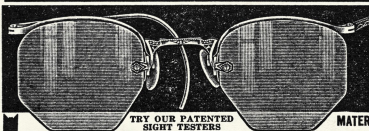
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(Continued from page 93)

"A cuss with any sense," he told the girl, "would have figured that the bushwhackin' bunch who ambushed yore dad would folter him. But damned if it ever occurred to me."

Celia's voice was sympathetic when she answered. "You were thinking about getting the doctor for dad, and I appreciate that."

There was no use trying to hide anything from the girl. "Rance needs Manning more than ever now," he said bluntly. "Mister," he addressed the doctor, "you know the way to the X over X. We're riding there."

A mean smile was on the Pleasantown medico's lips. "I've never heard of the X over X!" he drawled.

Funeral Bill drew a deep breath, but before he could speak, Celia Akers cut in crisply: "I know every trail in these foothills, and I'll do the guiding."

"But—" Funeral began.

"Don't tell me this is no ride for a woman to make," the girl stormed. "I'm in this fight just as much as my father. And we're going to win it. Only—"

"Only you don't know just how," Brayton grunted, and a lopsided grin touched his lips. "I don't know either, but that ain't going to keep us from tryin'!"

With Manning's mount on lead behind his own, Funeral Bill rode beside Celia Akers as they left his camp. Narrow trails, the girl had told him, lay ahead, and for safety's sake Bill Brayton had lashed the doctor's feet into his stirrups and taken the reins himself.

"I ain't takin' no chances on you, mister," he told Manning.

And by way of apology, Celia Akers had murmured a little contritely: "I wasn't taking any chances with you, either, Mister Brayton, at first. When dad didn't come home from his ride this evening, I got worried and set out to look for him. Finally, coming down this slope, I saw the light of your campfire ahead, and rode here. When I found that note pinned to your bedroll, I figured whoever owned the camp was one of O'Gorman's riders, and that the note had been left for anyone trying to trail my father. I also decided the owner would return, and that I'd line my sights on him before he saw me. With him

as my prisoner, I—I hoped to work an exchange for dad. Maybe we could still do it—if we could surprise an O'Gorman rider."

"Nada." Funeral Bill shook his red head as they rode. "Your idea won't work, ma'am. A cuss that will do the things O'Gorman has done ain't going to give a hoot if he loses a few men. He can always buy more—like me."

Celia Akers shook her head, and she spoke a few quiet words that had the effect of mallets banging against the roving redhead's heart.

"Tige O'Gorman can't buy men like you, Bill. You've proved that!"



ALATE MOON was rising over the jagged Mogollons to eastward when Celia Akers halted them on the rim of a little cup in the hills, five miles or more from where they had started. Wordlessly the girl gestured downward.

Funeral Bill pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. "So that's the X over X."

"Yes, and it'll be here a long time after every damned sheepherder is in hell, where he belongs," Manning growled.

Brayton gave the medico a sidelong glance across his shoulder. "I wouldn't make any bets on that, if I were you."

"Quite a layout," Funeral murmured.

Like a pair of golden eyes watching them, light showed through two windows in what was probably the living room of the main house. The rest of the ranch plant was dark.

"A feller would almost think"—Funeral Bill gestured at the lighted windows—"that O'Gorman is settin' up in there, waiting for us."

Something like a bleat came from Manning. "What are you aimin' to do?" he bawled. "Ride right down there? We're apt to all get shot!"

Celia Akers' eyes swept the medico. "Even Tige O'Gorman," she said scornfully, "won't shoot a woman!"

Funeral Bill found himself a little doubtful. Thoughtfully he eased the brace of Colts at his thighs. Normally, this was a ride a man shouldn't make. It was never wise for a weak force to put itself in reach

(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 102)

of superior numbers. But there was nothing else they could do here, he realized bleakly. He hadn't put it into words, but the feeling was strong in him that unless Rance Akers received medical attention he wouldn't last out the night.

"Let's move," he said briefly.

A wide verandah faced them as they rode into the ranchyard. The only light that touched it flowed through those two windows Funeral had noted from the basin's rim. Now that they were closer, he could see that the windows flanked a heavy door.

In the moonlit dark beyond the corners of the house, Brayton's attentive ears picked up the sound of an incautious spur jingling at the heel of a boot, but as he swung down and handed the girl from her saddle he gave no hint that he knew X over X gunmen were around them.

She thanked him with a stiff smile that Funeral hardly noticed, for Manning's voice, shrill with fear and malice, suddenly broke the silence of the night.

"Tige! Tige!" he bawled. "It's me, Manning! Get these other two devils, but don't, don't plug me—"

Funeral Bill had his clasp knife in one hand. A ruthless sweep, and the pigging strings binding the medico to one stirrup were severed. He was around the doctor's mount and slicing the other binding almost before the man had finished yelling.

He reached up ruthlessly, caught the medico's belt and yanked. Manning squealed as he came out of the saddle, and one wild-flying fist grazed Funeral's cheek. Accurately, Funeral Bill shifted his grip to the collar of the doctor's coat as the man struck on his feet.

The door between the flanking windows was coming open now. Action had started to boil. Men hidden behind the wings of the big house were pounding out into the open. Then, as he hustled the doctor unceremoniously ahead of him toward the steps, Funeral caught the flash of a gun-barrel in the hands of Celia Akers.

"Hold up, all of you!" she commanded. "I'll drop the first man that comes a step closer!"

Framed in the open door stood the tall,

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 104)

lobo-lean man who had looked him over from the porch of the Elkhorn—only now his head was bandaged.

The sight made Funeral realize that O'Gorman himself was the hombre he had gun-whipped at the doctor's.

If he had expected anything in the way of a decent reception for Celia Akers and the doctor, it was gone now.

Funeral Bill acted on impulse. His rising boot caught Manning on his fat can, and catapulted the doctor toward the lobo cowman who had moved out to the porch. Arms flailing, bleats of terror coming from his lips, the Pleasantown medico clawed at O'Gorman to try and stop his fall.

The X over X owner side-stepped with a snarl. For the space of half a minute, it took his attention from Brayton. Funeral had counted on the diversion—and he made the most of it.

Two long strides put him behind O'Gorman, and the Colts at his belt flickered into his hands with a speed hard to match. One gun prodded into the lobo cowman's ribs. The other swung toward the steps where the girl's rifle had momentarily stalled the ranch gunhands who had come from either side of the house.

"Celia," Funeral Bill drawled, "you can come on up now and take the doc in to see your dad. Mister O'Gorman, here, ain't going to object, and neither are those fine upstanding' gents in the yard. If they do," he added, "they're jest going to find themselves out of work!"

Tige O'Gorman's body was stiff against the gun boring his spine, and there was nothing the matter with his tongue. "What in the good hell are you drivin' at?" he demanded.

Bill chuckled. "If you are daid," he drawled, "that fine assortment of stringhalt gunnies you got won't have jobs. Now, 'course, to protect said jobs, they're going to stand their hands where they be. Ain't that right, boys?"

Somebody in the ranks growled, "That's Funeral Bill Brayton. The damned fool will be attendin' his own funeral afore we get done with him!"

"Brayton?" Tige O'Gorman grated. "Word came in that you were signing up with me. A fine—"

The Redemption of Funeral Bill

"I'm a fine hombre, yeah," Funeral cut in. "I allus sell my guns to the highest bidder. Wonder if it ever occurred to yore kind, O'Gorman, that there's a few things in this world more valuable than dinero?"

As he talked, Bill's eyes and thoughts were busy. He counted ten men in the yard. And he felt pretty sure that took care of all the hands here at the base ranch, otherwise a sneak attack would have hit him before this.

Celia Akers had been gone inside the big house for more than ten minutes. But more minutes stretched before he heard her returning through the main room.

Then, as though he hadn't heard the girl's heels clicking just inside the door, Funeral drawled confidentially to his captive: "I've been playing your hand all the way along, Mr. O'Gorman. Dang it, I left that cuss, Akers, at my camp, figgerin' some of your riders would be along and pick him up. Same with bringing the girl here. Long as I got an eye on her she won't be out rounding up her herders to make a try at gittin' her dad back. She thinks I'm on her side, so let me handle her this time. I'll get her away from here, and see she stays away. Public opinion in Pleasantown is goin' to go ag'in you if people hear you've started fightin' petticoats. Savvy?"

"Savvy." O'Gorman nodded.

"And I savvy, too!" Celia Akers said furiously from almost beside him. "You double-crossing—"

Those were all the words she got out, for Funeral Bill's Colts were back in their holsters and his long arms had dexterously caught the girl about her shoulders and beneath her knees. Heels kicking, hands slapping at his face, and with a cry of fury on her lips, she was up in his arms then, and Funeral was stepping with her to the porch steps.

"Quit that caterwauling, you damned she-wildcat!" he yelled, and a howl of mirth from surprised gunnies in the yard drowned the softened words he spoke.

"Keep on givin' me how-come," he whispered. "We got to git out of here."

For a fraction of a second surprise relaxed Celia Akers and then she snapped acidly, "I'll be glad to, you big fool red-head!"

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Like a sack of oats, Funeral Bill slung the girl across his saddle, and swung up behind her. Grabbing up the reins of Celia's gray, he waved his hat at the still laughing gunnies and their lobo leader on the porch.

"Adios, boys," he called. "Don't forget, O'Gorman, that I'll be wantin' my check the same as the rest of yore boys, come pay-day. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Funeral Bill's Redemption

FUNERAL BILL BRAYTON found it a little hard to concentrate on the trouble that lay ahead of them with one arm around Celia Akers. "You don't have to squeeze all the breath out of me!" Celia's voice broke through his wondering thoughts. "I'm sure we've come far enough now so that you can let me ride my own horse."

"I ain't so sure about that," Funeral Bill murmured doubtfully.

"If I could believe that you really didn't mean what you were telling that O'Gorman, you could quit calling me ma'am, and make it Celie."

"You better believe it!" Funeral told her sternly when he let her slide from his saddle and mount her own horse. "And I sure hope Gorman believes just the t'other way 'round, leastways for a little while. Can your dad set a saddle, you think?"

"I'm sure of it," Celia Akers said firmly. "You did a good job of patching. Even Doctor Manning admitted that, and he seemed to mean it."

"I—I'm sure he could ride as far as our place. I'd hoped that maybe we could take him right along with us, while you had O'Gorman under your gun. But when you spoke to him like you did, it just shocked all the ideas I had right out of my head."

Funeral Bill chuckled. "Celie"—the girl's name sounded nice and natural on his lips—"when a gent starts bluffing there's only one trouble. He's got to keep pyramidin' his bluffs, and each one has got to be better than the last. You figured we had O'Gorman. Truth is, he had us. You can't watch ten gun-slingers with itchy fingers for much of a stretch. Minute we tried to get Gorman in the house,

The Redemption of Funeral Bill

them boys would have surrounded the place, and had us corked tighter'n a bung in a beer keg, on account there warn't anybody else handy to keep 'em occupied.

"Celie," he continued earnestly, as the girl led the way at a fast walk along climbing trails, "there's yore principle. Diversion. I set Gorman thinkin' by what I told him, and I gave his hands a good show by pickin' you up and packing you to our hosses. Men who are laughin' ain't likely to think much about shooting. Neither are gents trying to figger out whether you're honest or a goldanged liar. See what I mean by diversion?"

As a spear of moonlight struck down through the dark pines overhead, Funeral Bill thought he had never seen any girl prettier than Celia Akers, and he wondered bleakly if they might ever ride this trail again without trouble on their minds. If they did . . . He shut such thoughts away. The job at hand needed all of his attention.

"I see what you mean by diversion, all right," Celia Akers said out of the silence that had fallen between them. "And even if we can create one and rescue dad, we won't be much better off than we were before. There's still the deadline, still poisoned wells and killers riding our Mogollon trails."

"How many men can you muster in a hurry?" Bill asked.

"When dad didn't come home, I ordered the cook out to round up the herders and bring them to the house to wait until I could learn what had happened to him. They'll be there now, but they're not, not —" the girl stumbled.

"Not gunhands like me, huh?" Funeral Bill grunted. "Well, Celie, I'm hoping to show you afore the night's out that gunhands are sometimes right nice folks to have around."

Thirty minutes later, high on a point of the pine-stippled Mogollon foothills where Rance Akers had built his headquarters house, the tall redhead explained just what he meant to six beard-stubbed, grim-looking herders. Their clothes smelt of sheep in the closeness of the ranchhouse living room, but Funeral Bill had decided the odor wasn't any worse than that emanating from a cowpoke at the end of day.

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"We're riding right back to O'Gorman's," he summed up, "and it'll be yore job to make it hot enough out front to draw all of O'Gorman's gunnies to that side of the house. I looked over the lay of that basin where he built while me'n Celie were there, and I think I can slide in from the back with a couple of spare brones—"

"Why two horses, Bill?" The gun-hand's name sounded quite natural on the girl's lips.

Funeral Bill met her with his crooked, ironic smile. "Why, Celie," he drawled, "that ain't hard to figger. I'm going to pick up Tige while we're there, and see how he likes to wear his own shoes!"

At the edge of tall timber alongside Tige O'Gorman's huge ranchhouse, Funeral Bill sat Pancho and waited for Celia Akers to start the decoy attack from the southern end of the basin. She had told him of a hall that ran straight through the house to the kitchen, and she had described the location of the bedroom where her father lay in a big four-poster.

The house and bunkhouse were both dark now, but Funeral had a hunch that wide-awake gunnies would be prowling the premises. He was thinking that when pale gun-flame blossomed from the edge of the southern ring of pines. The rifle's loud report shattered the deep silence of the night like an alarm bell. Then more guns were taking up the chant from scattered points where the roving gunhand had carefully placed the Akers herders. There were only seven, counting the cook but, with an eye to strategy, he had spaced them in such a way that a gunnie crew roused from sleep would think a young army had them bottled up.

As he had suspected, gunfire from about the house was answering the attack now. Lights came aflame in the long bunkhouse. Darker shadows against the night, Funeral watched O'Gorman gunnies come tumbling from its doors. He counted eight, and he had already spotted the flash of two weapons from about the big house.

"Fight and run," he had advised the sheepherders. "Don't try and tangle with any of O'Gorman's crew. Their business is fighting. Yours ain't."

One bent old Mexican with a leather-lined face had shaken his head, and ex-

The Redemption of Funeral Bill

pressed the sentiment of all the Akers herders. "Señor," he had said quietly, "we will do as you say, maybe. But do not forget that thees *cabrone*, O'Gorman, has killed and poisoned our sheep before our eyes. He has made ee-crazy a *compadre* of ours. He has tried for to keel our *patrone*, and he has caused the señorita much worry. Señor, do not ask us to run far!"

Those sheepherders were remembering the terror that had stalked those Mogollon foothills now, and they were doing themselves a proud job of fighting. Funeral Bill saw an O'Gorman gunnie, running to flank the attackers, sink to his knees and then sprawl flat on his face.

The rest of them were also deploying to flank the herders. It was time for him to move. Funeral felt his teeth grit on the thought. If he failed, the Akers were finished in Pleasant Valley, and old Rance was too old a man to start over again.

Celie's stubborn little face came before his eyes as he gigged Pancho into the open, but he brushed the vision of her aside. A job had to be completed before he could think of Rance Akers' daughter.

Angling in toward the back of the house, he rode at a trot. Nerves steeled against the desire to lift the gelding and the horses on lead behind him into a quick run, Funeral knew that sometimes a slow moving object might attract less attention than one moving more rapidly. If any of O'Gorman's gunnies did notice him, he hoped that they would think he was one of their riders returning from a Mogollon trail patrol.

Bothered by no one, he reached the kitchen side of O'Gorman's house, and

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now for the first time he moved fast. O'Gorman was a lobo, and as cunning as one. As he went through the kitchen door, and across its dark floor to the hall door, Funeral Bill was cocked and ready for an unexpected reception. He had gambled from the beginning on the hunch that the Pleasant Valley range lord wouldn't stray far from his valuable prisoner. He'd leave the fighting outside to men his dollars had hired.

Guns palmed, he pulled the hall door slowly toward him and stepped into the darkened hall beyond. A crack of light showed beneath one door part way along it. Gauging distances swiftly, Funeral Bill judged it to be the room where Celia had found her father. On silent feet, he moved along the hall to the door, and as his hand fumbled for the knob his fingers touched something silken at the keyhole. For an instant he thought it was nothing more than a cobweb, then touch as he ran his hand along told the roving gunhand that it was thread. Thread that stretched back to the kitchen door he had opened.

O'Gorman, he knew suddenly, as though the words had been shouted at him, was waiting for him in the room of the man who had once been his friend. Yes, O'Gorman was ready and waiting for him with the hot lead welcome he'd half expected in the hall. The thread was a signal cord to warn the lobo range king of his coming.

Funeral Bill put his body against the solid log wall and let his fingers twitch the knob of the door. Sturdy as the wall against which he leaned, that door had appeared. But as his hand turned the knob, sudden lead tore through the panel as though it didn't exist. Planed to paper thinness, the paneling was a decoy of its own. A death door for any man standing in front of it.

A .45 slug tore like a length of hot iron through his right palm, and a scream of fear, hardly audible above the gun thunder came to Brayton's ears from behind him.

There was no need nor time to look around. Under his breath, Funeral Bill cursed Celie Akers for having followed him after promising to stay well back on the slope, out of danger. The death door was hanging half off its hinges, a riddled travesty of its former self, as Funeral

The Redemption of Funeral Bill

flung himself to the floor, and let his digging toes push him across the portal. Lead sheeted like lethal hail above his prone figure. He caught an unforgettable picture of the lobo king of Pleasant Valley wreathed in clouding gunsmoke, and then the canted Colt in his left hand spoke once, twice, and a third time.

Utter stupefaction on his seamed visage, the twin weapons in Tige O'Gorman's hands drooped slowly toward his side, and as though their weight was dragging him forward, he bent with the guns.

"Dead," he was saying through a gush of blood coming into his throat. "You're dead, Brayton! Nobody can come through that door and live!"

From his place on the floor, Funeral Bill watched the Pleasant Valley king topple, and he could find little but hatred in his heart for the man.

"You're headin' for hell, O'Gorman," he told the cattleman. "And likely more of your kind will land there before folks get it into their heads that this West is big enough to hold both cattle and sheep."

Warm young arms were tugging at him, trying to turn him over, and Funeral found the experience pleasant. It had been a long time since anyone had cared whether he lived or died. He twisted, and tried to look stern, but the effort was wasted, for the most pleasant experience of all awaited him.

Celia Akers' lips stopped whatever words he had been about to utter, and afterward he couldn't remember them. A dry, very pleased voice spoke from the depths of the four-poster bed.

"Damn me for a polecat," Rance Akers murmured, "if it don't look like the redemption of Funeral Bill Brayton is now complete."

And, indeed, William Brayton's redemption was complete. For, with the coming of the dawn, Pleasant Valley watched the dust of fleeing O'Gorman gunmen settling in the hollows. And honest, old wise men could see in Funeral Bill a new cattle king who ruled, with his new-found queen, a domain where both cattle and sheep would breed and thrive.

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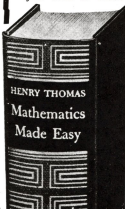
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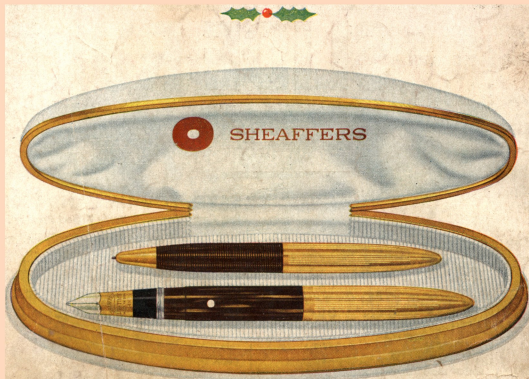
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