

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE NOVEL

● CHRIS DEFEVER — — —
TOWN WRECKER

by TOM W. BLACKBURN

TWO NOVELETTES

● ONE AGAINST THE
SLAUGHTER HORDE

by TOM ROAN

● WAR SMOKE OVER
THE LYING E

by ART LAWSON

● KETCHUM ● LANE
● CHESHIRE ● STEELE
● MCINTOSH
● QUAYLE
● GARDNER





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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED
DECEMBER 12th

VOLUME XXIX

DECEMBER, 1945

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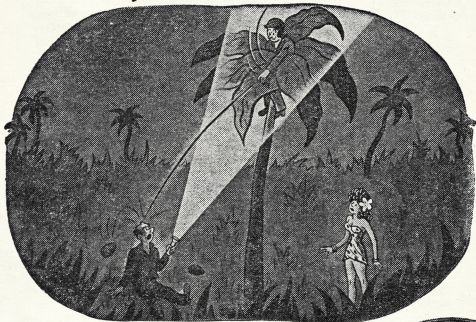
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GUN BID AT SHERIFF'S SALE

THE great JC ranch was going under the hammer to the highest bidder at public Sheriff's Sale. Old John Conway was dead—murdered. Sheriff Tully Jones and Judge Shoefelt were going to handle the auction very legal-like.

A notice of the Sheriff's Sale had been printed in the newspaper. Yes, siree! But it had been printed in the defunct *Red Butte Banner*; the notice sandwiched in between advertisements. All copies of the paper had been bought before the ink had dried—and every copy had been destroyed.

Yes, siree, very legal-like! And Sheriff Tully Jones had tacked up notices announcing the date and place of the Sheriff's Sale. But a cowhand of the tough Lightning outfit had walked behind him ripping down the notices before anyone could read them.

For the Lightning ranch was taking over the JC in a single stroke of legalized grand larceny. The wolfish Eubank twins gunbossed the tough Lightning. It was said that the Eubank twins had drygulched Old John Conway. And it was said that the Eubank twins weren't brothers.

Now, at twelve o'clock noon on April Fool's Day, the Sheriff's Sale was held in the Conway barn. A quick-triggered guard was at the gate, crouching in the driving rain, to shoot anyone who approached the auction. Anyone—except Sheriff Tully Jones, Judge Shoefelt and the pale-faced bespeckled Howard, bookkeeper for the murderous Eubank twins.

The three of them were inside the big Conway barn. . . .

Judge Shoefelt smiled thinly and mounted a large grain bin. His deep-toned voice rolled across the dark barn:

"Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye!" Then, as if addressing a large group of bidders, he asked: "What am I bid, Gentlemen?"

"One thousand dollars!" Little Howard's voice sounded thin and reedy.

Judge Shoefelt's voice boomed and echoed: "One thousand dollars is the first bid! One thousand dollars! One thousand dollars! Going—going—"

"Two thousand dollars!" The flat-toned

voice came from nowhere—not loud—but it seemed to fill the old, dark barn.

Sheriff Tully Jones jumped as if he had been kicked from behind.

Howard cringed and shivered as if he'd been stricken by chills and fever.

Only Judge Shoefelt, standing there on his clubfoot seemed unmoved. His thin-lipped mouth twisted faintly. "I hear two thousand dollars bid!"

Sheriff Tully Jones had his six-shooter in his hand. His blood-shot pale yellow eyes were darting swift looks around the dark barn. "Damn it, Shoefelt, there's somebody here. Hold up the sale!"

"This is a public auction," said Judge Shoefelt. "I am bid two thousand dollars. Do I hear anyone raise the bid—?"

Howard shook his head. Terror filled his eyes. He had only that signed Eubanks check for one thousand dollars—no authority to do or say anything further.

The judge intoned: "Two thousand dollars! Going—going—gone! Sold for two thousand dollars!"

From an empty stall at the dark end of the big barn came that flat-toned voice: "Put up your gun, Sheriff—or I'll gut-shoot you."

Sheriff Tully Jones was a hard loser. He shoved his six-shooter back into its holster.

Then a tall, rawboned man stepped out of the empty stall and walked toward them. He had a six-shooter in his hand, and a grin on his freckled face. "The name—" he said—"is Pat O'Gorman. . . . You're on my land, Sheriff. Get your horse and drag it. Stay off my range unless you got business here. Otherwise you'll be trespassin'. And that tin star don't make you bullet-proof. Git!"

And in this way did Pat O'Gorman twist the double tail of the devilish Eubank twins. The complete story will be told by Walt Coburn in his gripping, vigorous novel—"Hell For Sale!"—in the next issue. There will also be novelettes and shorts by William R. Cox, Tom Roan, Branch Carter and others. January 10 *STORY WESTERN*—published December 12th.

THE EDITOR.

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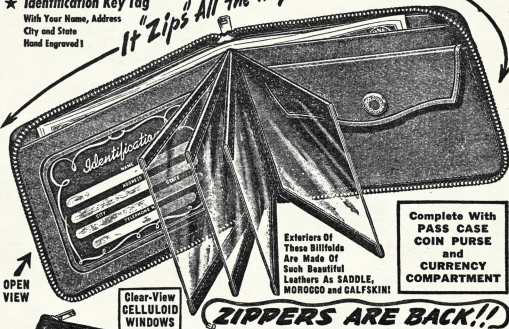
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HORNS AFIRE

By JOSEPH W. QUINN



NE jump to their feet and another jump to hell!" Such was the way an old hand described one of the strangest of the characteristics of that wild, nervous, sturdy and wholly self-reliant monarch of the open range—the Texas Longhorn.

One moment the herd was slumbering peacefully in the grass under a star-spangled sky, a pair of drowsy softly crooning night-herders riding easily but ever warily around their unpredictable charges. Then, in the next moment, for no apparent reason, the herd was on its feet, rising as one unit, like a perfectly coordinated team. Wild-eyed, senseless with panic, two or three-thousand longhorns would be thundering across the prairie before the night-herders could pull a breath to switch from crooning to cussing.

The cause of a stampede could be a smell suddenly wafted to super-sensitive nostrils. Some prairie animal who'd nudged one of the recumbent steers in its nocturnal prowling. Or, as reported in one case, it might be something as insignificant as the sudden click in the night of a gate latch at a nearby ranch.

Wise was the trail boss who gave sharp eye to the herd itself for the cause of the dreaded stampedes, which could come at any moment of any hour the clock around.

In among the longhorns there might be a loco steer, or an animal blind in one eye, or a cuss on hoofs that would start a stampede just because it wanted to. These critters, when spotted, were transformed into beef for the chuck wagon.

Some cowboys claimed they could sense a stampede before it exploded. Others watched for little warning signs in the animals themselves—the way they snorted or "bellered" or the fact that they all faced in one direction when they bedded down.

Of the scores of known and unknown causes, lightning storms were the most common. At night, with thunder rolling and lightning forking the sky, it was a rare herd

that didn't hightail it for anywheres yonder.

Balls of fire would dance on the tips of their horns as they thundered headlong through the rain and darkness. Often the cattle and the horns were obliterated in the darkness, leaving only the vast sea of bobbing balls of blue-white fire to mark the animals' progress. An eerie phenomenon caused by Nature's electricity that wasn't confined to the cattle alone. The same fire would run down a horse's mane, along spurs and bridle or around a rider's hat band.

Stampedes were more of a nuisance and a cause of financial loss than a peril to life or limb. Millions of longhorns in thousands of herds traveled the cattle trails. Yet surprisingly few cowboys were killed or gravely injured in the countless stampedes that attended the drives.

Stampeding longhorns, no matter how black the night, would invariably split and go around a fallen man. The greatest danger was in riding hell-for-leather through wind and rain, or hailstones big as eggs, in the thick black of night, in order to come abreast of the leaders and turn them, so that the herd could be made to chase itself around and around in a circle or mill, and eventually halt.

Real danger lurked in the darkness—a plunge over the unseen rim of a chasm—a tree branch that would whisk a man out of saddle and into the surging sea of horns—an unseen arroyo, gopher hole, or dry wash.

Rarely were six-shooters fired. The sharp bark of guns only added to the cattle's senseless panic.

The presence of the longhorns' master—man on horse—at its flank was usually enough to turn the leaders and transform the run from headlong flight into a churning mill, which, if too tight, often resulted in the loss by death, or crippling of the cattle in the center.

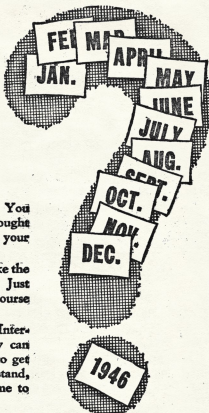
Gradually the speed of the run would diminish, until finally the wild-eyed longhorns halted and commenced lowing and belling in their mournful way as though nothing at all had happened.

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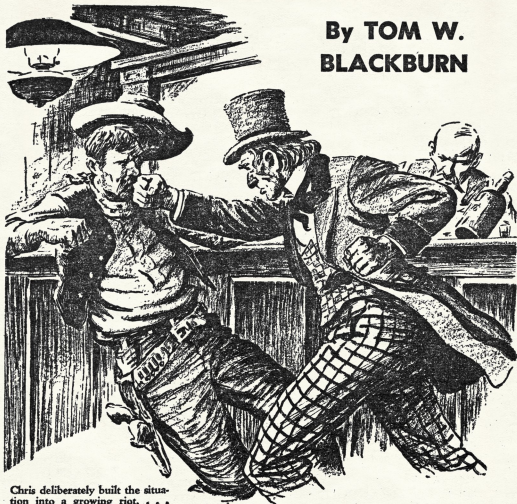
CHRIS DEFEVER— TOWN WRECKER



*The only way to save the town of Sandy Ford from the evil of its ways,
decided Christian Defever in pleasant anticipation, was to blast the town
inside out and stomp on it.*

Unusual Novel of the Old Frontier

By **TOM W.
BLACKBURN**



Chris deliberately built the situation into a growing riot. . . .

CHAPTER

Chivalry Be Damned

1

The Honorable Christian Defever—fugitive from the machinations of Fate—stirred restively on the red plush seat. Under him and about him the Kansas Pacific's Republican River Express clanked joyously onward toward the setting sun, the metropolis of Sandy Ford, and the end of the rails.

Beneath Defever's checkered, somewhat gravy-spotted vest beat a troublesome admixture of emotions. Believing the equi-

noxes with a perversity of its own, the weather was unseasonably hot for mid-summer, let alone this first delicate blush of spring. Thus, Chris was uncomfortable and beset with the raggedness of temper which heat and humidity never failed to generate in him.

It was his luck, also, that misfortune had hounded his steps of late, depleting his never too plentiful purse to a point approaching desperation. He had secured passage on the Republican River Express by certain subterfuges. Otherwise he would have been afoot. And the condition of his finances were also an irritant; a constant

prodding which he knew from sad experience would force him into connivance.

But despite these nettles in his soul, Chris was aware of the season. He had seen the moon at full and he had felt the caressing of gentle breezes in the twilight. He sighed deeply and often and his appetite had plain gone to the devil.

The direct cause of this phenomena sat one seat ahead of him and on the opposite side of the car. Chris eyed the silhouette of one generous shoulder, a bold ringed ear, and a quantity of salty hair under a hat somewhat too small for the head it crowned. Chris reflected that woman was the noblest work of nature. If he was aware that the woman sat in comfort because all of her luggage, in addition to his own, was heaped in on top of him in his seat, he restrained the thought with the chivalry of a true gentleman.

The conductor came back through the car and paused between its two passengers. He had been a thorn in Chris Defever's side for upward of a hundred miles. The conductor smiled down at the woman and would have lightly pinched her cheek had she not looked at him as though she might bite.

"It is none of my business," the conductor remarked, "but Sandy Ford is no place for a girl—alone."

The woman answered him in a voice Chris had already likened to the contralto throatings of a great organ, although both tremulo and volume were a bit on the strong side for a musical ear.

"I am neither a girl nor alone!" she snapped. She twisted her head and shot a smile at Chris which was effulgent and well studded with gold bridgework. "My name is Lottie Lebeck, you brass-buttoned Casanova; I buy cattle for a business and I've built tougher towns than Sandy Ford. No you go mind your whistle cord or I'll write a letter to the president of this road that'll break you to a porter so fast your head'll swim. Mister Defever will see that I am properly escorted."

The conductor was a philosopher. He shrugged and pulled the ticket stub out of the clip in front of the woman. Turning, he reached out and snagged another stub from the frayed band of Defever's tall, napless old beaver hat. He looked at the luggage jammed in around Defever, grinned,

and jerked his head at the big woman.

"Porter—she says," he chuckled. "Must like 'em. She's sure made one out of you, friend. And you won't like Sandy Ford. Not while you're squiring a female cattle buyer. Clint Fawcett's got his own way with buyers—and those that travel with them. We're slowin' for the Sandy Ford yards. I'll open you a vestibule door. Better drop off to the ties before we reach the station—"

Chris would have gotten up but a heavy bag was across his knees and another had fallen down where he wanted to put his feet. He settled for an ominous glare. "Sirrah, you tempt me to deal strongly with you."

The conductor shrugged and went on down the otherwise empty car. The train clicked across some switch frogs and brakes began to grind. The bag on Defever's knees slid into the aisle, skidded a little, and burst open. Considerable pink and blue gear in large sizes and with which Chris was relatively unfamiliar, spilled onto the carpeting.

Lottie Lebeck heaved out of her seat and got down on her knees to hurriedly re-pack the case. She scowled up at Chris. "If you're that clumsy with your chest-iron—"

Chris glanced down at the butts of the two heavy derringers riding their special pockets in his vest. He smiled widely and somewhat smugly. "My dear Madame," he observed courteously, "Arthur had his *Excalibur*, Richard his Damascus steel, and I have my Allen and Thurbers. Be of good cheer. As the Great Bard saith: *'When a man comes among enemies, armed to the teeth and cleanly and fair of spirit, the seats of the mighty quake as saplings in the wind.'*"

The woman tossed the bag back to Chris and caught at the handle on the end of her seat as the train ground to an abrupt halt. When the shuddering stopped she looked down dryly.

"Mister," she said, "if you think Clint Fawcett is a sapling you've bit off a chaw that'll be almighty hard swallowing. You aim to welsh—or you still like my company?"

CHRIS eyed the woman's heroic figure, taking care that his admiration was open. 'More covertly, he eyed the slight

bulge under her dress at about the point where the top of one of her boots would be. He had earlier seen, in an indiscreet moment, the large and beautifully marked bundle of bills she carried there. An argument sufficiently persuasive to carry on a wooing campaign with an even more terrifying creature than this bluff titan of femininity. He smiled with gallant assurance.

"I prize your company, my dear girl, above life, itself."

Lottie Lebeck snorted. "You're a wall-eyed fool!" she said tartly.

But Chris could see that she was pleased and he saw a relief in her eyes which was vastly satisfying to his ego. He lifted their combined luggage and lurched down the aisle. At the vestibule doorway the conductor was waiting. He smirked and made some slurring comment which Chris failed to catch. Chris Defever was tempted to set the baggage down and deal with the varlet, but Lottie Lebeck came along behind him and he went down the steps to the platform outside.

A coach, dusty and gaping at the seams but labelled, *The Astor of the Plains*, was drawn up beside the platform. There was a driver and a couple of hands or so idling about. They tumbled Chris and the luggage will-nilly into this vehicle. His feminine companion heaved in beside him and sat back as the coach began to roll. She was panting a little with exertion and she stared out through the window at Sandy Ford as they clipped up the main street.

Chris cast about for small talk. "Service," he finally remarked. "A brisk and efficient service. Train-to-door delivery. A hostelry so business-like must be a comfortable place, my dear."

Lottie Lebeck snorted again. "Maybe," she agreed. Her head swiveled and her eyes touched Chris. He saw alarm in them. Almost immediately he saw what had caused it. The coach was rolling at top speed past the Astor of the Plains, past the Sandy Ford hotel, and it plainly was not going to stop.

For a moment Chris was nonplussed. Twisting, then, he thrust his head out and shouted up at the three men riding the deck above:

"Halt! You blithering numbskulls, yonder is the tavern—already behind us!"

Two of the fellows on the roof of the stage chuckled. One carried a short rifle under his arm. Its muzzle slanted grimly downward. The other gripped a large pistol. He made a short, unmistakable gesture with it.

"Shut up!" the man counselled. "And suck in your head before I bat it off. You ain't where you're going—yet!"

Chris sank back onto the cushions, his eyes considerably widened.

"Clint Fawcett—" his companion breathed—"got word I was coming, I reckon. And he's taking no chances that I'll do business with somebody else. Mister Defever—friend Christian, I should say—it appears I'm lucky to have a gentleman friend riding with me, after all!"

Chris said in a somewhat uncertain tone: "Ah—definitely."

As Shakespeare had written with immortal wisdom and as Chris himself had declaimed to many a bravo-crying audience: "*Follow not a woman into Purgatory lest she cast away the key. For surely she shall thrive upon fires which shrivel callow man to merest ash. . . .*"

The coach rapidly quit the straggling spread of Sandy Ford, leaving alike the prairie village, the rails, and the sprawling shipping yards which were the hamlet's excuse for existence. The road lined out through dusty herds of cattle, the most of them cropping hungrily on local grass and fattening ribs worn gaunt on the long drive up out of the barbaric limbo of Texas.

Directly the rocking vehicle quitted the road, punched its way through a large herd of hungry beef animals, and drew up at a squalid, semi-permanent camp of shacks and tents in a cottonwood-shaded bottom. A number of callous saddle characters were lounging about, swaggering with the graceless lack of balance imposed on men who wore shoes much too high at the heel and small for their feet and who carried the weight of their guns on one side and low on their thighs. These gathered as the stage came to a halt.

Defever's companion, with an admirable scorn for convention, hastily raised the hem of her skirt above her boot top and plucked the beautiful roll of greenbacks which had been the first thing Chris had noted about her. Leaning toward him, she thrust them hurriedly into his hand.

"Quick—keep this for me!" she breathed.

Chris shifted one of his huge derringers, ramming the roll of bills into his vest pocket under the downward prodding muzzle of the gun.

"They could be no safer in the vaults of the Treasury," he murmured.

As the dust settled about the halted coach, a man came out of one of the shacks and crossed unhurriedly.

Lottie whispered: "Clint Fawcett!"

Fawcett spoke quietly, and the stage door was jerked open. Hands helped Lottie Lebeck to the ground. Others reached in for Chris with the evident intent of dragging him roughly forth. He eluded them, kicked open the other door, and stepped nimbly down. With a quick tap to set his hat straight atop his head, he strode around the coach with his eyes frosty.

Clint Fawcett smiled at Lottie Lebeck. "Some service, eh?" he inquired. "I figured I'd better play safe. I wasn't sure you'd be of a mind to deal with me, Lottie. So I played it certain." He swung on the men still atop the stage. "Roll those wheels back into town and thank Ed Vimy for their loan," he ordered.

The driver frowned. "Ed's going to be ringy, Clint. We promised to have his stage back before train time."

Fawcett's smile did not change. "Well—?" he asked. "You boys don't know how to handle that? I'm surprised at you."

The driver grinned and flexed his hands. They were large hands. The two men crouching with him atop the stage had large hands, too. And they, also, were grinning broadly.

"Why, now, I reckon we do, at that, Clint," the driver agreed. He clucked to his team, wheeled the stage about, and rattled off in a huge funnel of dust toward town.

Lottie Lebeck rammed a stubby elbow into Fawcett's ribs. "Clint, you was making big talk—to match your play, I reckon," she said bluntly. "Something about me dealing with you for certain. You know better than that. You been hanging around shipping pens long enough to know I don't scare worth nothing and that when Lottie Lebeck sees a snake she tromps it. She don't get down and waller in the dust with him!"

Fawcett shrugged. "Who's making the big talk, now? This is my layout. You're here, hauled so fast through Sandy Ford that nobody knows you're in town. I got no taste for making a woman trouble. But the deal works this way: Texas drovers coming in pay me a head tax on their herds. That guarantees them security from trouble while they're fattening their stock, waiting for buyers and shipment. When a buyer makes a deal he pays me a head tax on the stuff he ships. Saves him trouble while he's culling and loading. A sound proposition, both ways."

The woman snorted. "For you. Look, now, Clint. I ain't a peaceable woman and you know it. Why dab a loop on a critter you can't set iron to? Sandy Ford may be the hub end of hell, but it'll get fed up directly with this kind of business going on in its back yard and you'll get callers one day with a short rope in their hands."

Fawcett shook his head. "No. Sandy Ford's lost three-four marshals. And it's had no law. Part of the deal is that me and the boys keep the streets pretty orderly. So long as we do that the town's satisfied. You're traveling with cash. Turn it over, Lottie, then we'll sit down and figure out just how many beef cattle you're going to be able to buy yourself with it."

Chris had watched this exchange with vast interest. But he had not permitted his interest to show on his face. In fact, he had been giving a tolerable impersonation of an elderly, stuffy, and somewhat stupid character listening to dealings which bored him markedly and which he did not understand. He perceived, however, that when Fawcett began hunting his companion's roll of bills, it behooved him to make some gesture to thwart the varlet. He glanced with a faked accusation at Lottie Lebeck.

"This—ah—Romeo of the rangeland—" he waved a huge hand carelessly toward Clint Fawcett—"appears to be an old acquaintance of yours, my dear lady. You have deceived me. I presumed I was to enjoy your company unmolested by local talent. I do not care for this dusty camp. I shall return forthwith to yonder hamlet. If time becomes a burden to you here, perhaps you will wish to join me at the tavern."

The woman blinked uncertainly, obviously uncertain as to the nature of this tack. But Fawcett was smoothly taken in.

"Still up to your old tricks, eh, Lottie?" he chuckled. "Picking up an acquaintance with anything that wears pants and will look at you twice. Damned if the two of you don't make a pair. Like something out of an old trunk that the moths had been working on. Sorry to bust it up, but I don't want this old goat under foot. . . . Listen, Uncle, the town lies over that way. If you walk brisk, you'll make it by supper." Fawcett spoke easily but with firmness.

Chris glared haughtily at the fellow, but without enough venom to ruffle Fawcett's feathers. Then Chris bowed to Lottie Lebeck, saying:

"Farewell, sweet charmer. *'Hours shall run as ages and the earth shall be empty of beauty until the fates bring us to a common pathway—'*"

Chris reset his hat with a flourish, turned, and set off briskly in the direction of Sandy Ford. Behind him, he heard Lottie Lebeck commence a bleat of angry alarm.

"Hey! You blasted old scarecrow, if you think that you can—" The woman broke off.

Chris ventured a look over his shoulder. She was staring after him with a queer admixture of suspicious anger and hopeful admiration. It was fortunate, he saw, that fate was forcing her to trust him.

At a turn of the road, Chris glanced back again. Fawcett and two of his crew were escorting the woman—who now argued volubly and with volume—toward one of the shacks. Chris sighed. He was a callous scoundrel to depart, leaving the charming creature in so foul a nest. But chivalry be damned, Chris thought with a blunt and practical philosophy, his first duty was to protect the woman's money.

Thus justified and somewhat satisfied with himself, he was whistling when he strode into the upper end of Sandy Ford's street. He presently presented himself at the hotel with a loud demand for quarters.

CHAPTER

"You'll Hang—First"

2

Retiring to the privacy of rooms acquired at the Astor of the Plains, Chris

**For better-looking shaves, just get
The thrifty, keen-edged Thin Gillette!
For ease and speed it wins hands down—
The swellest low-priced blade in town!**



Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

shed his worn and sizeable shoes and esconced himself at ease upon his bed. Lying thus, he battled briefly with the evil nature rampant in the best of men. And Lottie Lebeck's bank roll burned fiercely in the bottom of his vest pocket.

But in the end, the saintly aspects of his character prevailed. That and the fact that this roll of bills he now possessed, fat as it was, very probably represented but a fragment of the Lebeck woman's fortune. And it would be the rankest of folly to accept a single fruit when a whole orchard stood for harvesting.

Rising, Chris donned his coat and shoes and purloined a square of lining paper from one of the larger drawers in the commode beside the door. Removing the greenbacks in question from his vest, he peeled a single dollar bill off and rolled the others tightly. Using a portion of the square of lining paper, he wrapped and rolled money carefully so that in the end it was a small and innocent package. With a fine, Spencerian hand he addressed this to Mme. Lottie Lebeck in care of the postmaster at Sandy Ford, Kansas Territory. This done, he used another portion of the paper to scribble a small note:

*Wells-Fargo, Abilene: Gentlemen,
kindly forward enclosed parcel as
addressed. Fee for forwarding also en-
closed.*

*Yr. Obt. Svt.,
C. Defever, Esq.*

This, plus the bill he had peeled from the roll, Chris enclosed with the package in a fresh wrapper, on which he scribbled the address of the Well-Fargo outfit in Abilene. Satisfied with these arrangements he quitted the room, descended to the street, and presently bought postage on the package at Sandy Ford's post office.

He smiled satisfaction when he saw the parcel dropped into an outgoing mail bag behind the grilled partition. The funds were safe, protected by the integrity of the Federal Government, until such time as they were returned from Abilene, addressed to the Lebeck woman at General Delivery.

Whistling one more, Chris returned to the hotel and ordered a meal of noble proportions which he proposed to thoroughly enjoy despite his complete inability to pay

the score whenever it was presented. He was munching heartily and eyeing the graceful movements of a little chit of a waitress when Clint Fawcett and certain dusty and perspiring associates arrived before the hotel with considerable haste, profanity, and hullabaloo.

Fawcett and his riders came piling in out of the gloom of the street and halted in the lobby, blinking at the brightness of the lights hung there. Then Fawcett strode across to the desk and collared the clerk.

"Where is he? Where is that long-gear, big-nosed, shag-headed old swindler? That be-doubled, be-damned old slicker that calls himself Defever?"

Fawcett was distinctly testy. His boys looked somewhat unpleasant. And the clerk was thoroughly startled if not downright scared out of his skin. He swallowed mightily a pair of times and stuttered somewhat before he could get his tongue under control. The uproar in the lobby drew the attention of such other diners as were still at their meal, and in this admirably contrived diversion Chris drew one of his derringers and squinted upward at the two bright oil lamps which illuminated the dining salon.

The derringer bucked back in his hand twice. The lamps became shards of rent brass, shattered glass, and spilling oil—which fortunately snuffed itself before it reached the floor.

The abrupt change from lighted brilliance to noisy darkness within the dining room gave Chris cover enough to reach a side window. He batted glass out of his way with a derringer and slid through the opening. A moment later he rounded the front corner of the hotel and joined the curious citizenry crowding before the building.

In the hotel there was considerable yelping—the voice of Clint Fawcett the loudest. Room lamps from the upper floor were brought below and dim light was again in the dining room. Some of the citizenry from the street crowded in and faced Fawcett and his riders. One of them spoke sharply.

"What the hell is this, Clint?" he demanded. "We've kept hands off of you because you've kept our streets quiet. Why this? Who you after?"

Fawcett swore competently. "The most dangerous, back-stabbing, black-leg in the Territory!" he snapped. "He just clipped Lottie Lebeck for ten thousand dollars—in cash!"

The citizen scowled blackly. "Then you'd better get him. But quietly, Clint. If you can't handle it—we'll take over again. We'll hire our own marshal like we've done before. And your little game out there in the cottonwoods is over. . . . That was the deal!"

It was a very blunt statement. Chris, peering unobtrusively over shoulders jammed in the front door, saw Fawcett pale somewhat. It was obvious that the man's entire game with buyers and Texas drovers alike was predicated upon continuance of his understanding with the city fathers of Sandy Ford. Chris chuckled, backed away from the door, and swung up the street.

Some rods from the hotel a man was fumbling with the front door of a gunsmith's shop, his anxiety to get closed and up the street toward the excitement very plain indeed.

Chris stopped beside him and nudged his ribs. "Closing early? Done a lot of business today?"

The fellow turned, a sort of blank look on his face. "Tolerable amount, tolerable—Hey, wait a minute; what's it to you, friend?"

Chris smiled pleasantly and substituted the barrel of his derringer for his prodding finger. "Tolerable business means a tolerable full till. That interests me vastly, my good man. Kindly open the door again. I would look into the state of your business."

The shop-man blanched. His head kind of squeezed down between his shoulders like he was dodging something. "A hold up—" he breathed.

"In fact," Chris agreed blandly. "This town has prospered too long. I regret to inform you, Sir, that it is now about to undergo a veritable reign of terror. Lawlessness has come amongst you. Kindly make haste with that door!"

The shopkeeper did as he was bidden. Under Defever's direction he emptied his till into a hardware sack. Chris bowed his thanks, nudged the fellow lightly behind one ear with the barrel of his gun, and returned to the street, pausing to carefully lock the shop, he moved on up the street and angled

across to the town's largest saloon. Stepping into this, he caught the bartender's eye and tossed the sack to him.

"Keep that for me, Sirrah," he ordered. "I have a little business here which may require both hands. And draw me a potion of Roanoke as a stirrup cup. There may be a dry night ahead."

The barkeep shoved the sack under the bar, blinked curiously, but set a bottle of noble Roanoke before Chris. Defever poured himself half a tumbler, downed it, and shivered appreciatively.

"Nectar—" he remarked. "Sweet beverage of the gods. *It maketh a lion of the mouse and a shrew of the comliest maid*—" Chris paused and looked about challengingly. "Yet I venture there is no pap-bellied son in this village who can hold a full glass of so magnificent a brew. It was distilled for a race of true men, and they have all died with the buffalo."

OUT on the street there was fresh uproar. Chris judged the gunsmith's misfortune had been discovered and that his own time ran consequently a little short. This being the case, he bore down on the uncertain stragglers at the bar a little more acidly.

"In fact, I dare say the old buckskin men are fortunate indeed to have already died. What a burden it would be to them to face such a company as this, misshapen from hours in the saddle, and realize that these—these cowperson caricatures have followed in their footsteps. Fagh!"

A man beside Chris growled and turned away from the bar. Chris gently flung him into the sawdust, from which the fellow came up with a touch of respect and considerable heat. Another closed in to watch and was treated in like manner. In a moment several of the bunch along the bar had squeezed close.

With a wiping punch of one hand, a little foot work, and certain salty and scurrilous vocal proddings, Chris built the situation about him into a growing riot. At this juncture he unhung one gun, dumped the bar lights—and ducked to the rear of the saloon in the confusion.

A moment later, nursing an eye moused by someone's luckily tossed punch and panting somewhat with exertion, he leaned against the exterior of the rear wall of the

building to listen to the destructive sounds arising from the interior. The saloon was coming apart and in the darkness within none of the townsmen knew the slightly elderly gentleman who had baited them was no longer in their midst.

After a brief moment of rest, Chris straightened his gear and flanked the saloon, returning to the street. The crowd which had been about the hotel and a little later very likely also at the gunsmith's shop, had come to sense an evil spirit was afoot on the street. Wise with the wisdom of citizenry of Western hamlets, those who had made up the first gathering had vanished into doorways and ports of safety.

Chris saw that there were only a few stragglers among those on the street. The others milling in the dust were Fawcett's riders, cutting for sign of the man who had precipitated chaos on this street which they had guaranteed to keep peaceful.

This was pleasant work. It provided nearly the uplift of spirit that an appearance with Shakespeare again on the boards of a great theatre would have provided: Chris savored it. He stepped from the shelter of the saloon building, crossed the walk, and sauntered diagonally across the street. Midway he was sighted. A man bleated.

It was not, Chris saw with regret, Clint Fawcett. But he saw, also, that the man was handy with his side-iron. Chris did not halt or alter course. He drew smoothly, fired swiftly, and replaced his weapon. The bleating lad commenced bleating in earnest, clinging in sudden fearfulness to a forearm which had been neatly pinked by a large caliber slug.

Somebody else shoved his head out from behind a building, loosened up with a Winchester, and plowed a singing furrow through the air scant inches from Defever's cheek. Chris flung down on the man's position and ripped a length of siding from the corner where he crouched. Half blinded, the fellow spilled into the open. In jovial good spirits, Chris dusted the seat of the man's britches with a derringer slug. Running head down, the man abandoned his rifle and raced for the saloon. Chris let him go and cast about for further victims.

There were none. The street was deserted. Veering sharply, Chris sought a wall and pressed against it at an angle which provided him a view of any con-

certed attack. Thus stationed, he tilted back his head and turned loose with a voice which had rocked the chandeliers in the greatest auditorium of the land:

"I'm a curly wolf and it's my night to howl! I've plowed three under since noon and there'll be ten more for breakfast! Call in your dogs and daughters and board your doors!"

These bellows were delivered with enthusiasm, but they were in the nature of propaganda. And effective, at that. Chris could no longer keep his face straight. Shoving out from the wall, he walked directly into the doorway of the disarranged saloon.

Certain sombre and uneasy gentlemen were assembled in the light of barn lanterns there. Among them was the city father who had spoken warning to Fawcett at the hotel and Fawcett, himself.

Shifting character, Chris came in with his guns sheathed, his head down a little as though in mortification. He moved directly up to Fawcett and the city father. In order to give his next speech credence he lifted both of his guns and plunked them down on the saloon's scarred counter. Then he addressed the two men while others listened watchfully in the background.

"Boys," he said heavily, "there's a devil in me. It riles and comes out when I'm not looking. I got a tail-twist on it, now, but I don't know how long the hold'll last. So I'll make a deal. I done this account of a woman. A fair sorceress. If Mister Fawcett will release her from her prison in his camp, I will surrender myself to you. But don't take too long to make up your mind. That devil jumps quick when he jerks free—"

Clint Fawcett made a very doubtful and scoffing face. "Hell!" he said.

Chris frowned at him. "You tempt me, Sirrah!" he growled, and he reached out to one of the two heavy old guns before him.

Fawcett continued to scowl and Chris saw he had not entirely sold the man a bill of goods. But the city father was very hasty indeed. He raised one hand protestingly and wheeled acridly on Fawcett.

"Clint, you got a woman prisoner out to your camp?"

"I—ah—she's a guest," Fawcett explained. "A dear old friend. Lottie Lebeck, the cattle buyer—"

"Get her in here!" the city father demanded.

Fawcett's scowl grew blacker. "What about this powder smoking old fool—?"

"We'll take care of him—in the lockup," the citizen said flatly. "And that's where you and all your boys will go if there's another night like this. Get going. Get that woman in here before our friend takes every roof in town down!"

"Love," Chris quoted smugly, "*can exalt a man to his noblest nature or it can breathe life into those dark threads of iniquity which are entwined in the roots of us all.* If I have erred, I shall repent only in the presence of that charming creature Mister Fawcett has so ruthlessly imprisoned. But while I wait for her, I shall not permit incarceration myself. Gentlemen, I warn you: I value my freedom!"

With this, Chris agilely scooped up his guns and backed to a corner table. He dropped into a chair beside this and eyed the room without friendliness.

The city father and certain others held a brief, blunt consultation with Clint Fawcett which finally sent Fawcett onto the street in sullen urgency. After some time, the city father crossed to Chris.

"We found the sack full of cash from Ogilvie's till back of the bar, here. That clears you of robbing him, except for the scare. And you only clipped Fawcett men. That stands for you. But we're going to have peace in this town if we have to route the railroad a hundred miles north and run the Texans back across their own border to get it. Fawcett seemed like a good answer till you built this fire tonight.

"Now, whether he stays here hangs on you. And I reckon you sort of hang, or don't hang, on him. If this play was to get a woman out of Fawcett's hands and she'll stand behind you, then we'll clear the board and make talk with Fawcett. But if this was a play from the under side of the deck for the plain hell of it or for any other reason, you'll hang, friend—high and fast!"

CHAPTER

3

Fury of the Fates

In less than an hour Clint Fawcett was back with Lottie Lebeck and, Chris noted without pleasure, the balance of his crew. The reign of terror to which Chris

had subjected Sandy Ford in his effort to discredit Fawcett's ability to maintain peace in the town had spread its echoes onto the surrounding grasslands. From their various camps among milling herds, had come a considerable number of Texans. Lean, tall, leathery men with a sullen humor in them and considerable competent hardware at their belts.

The most of these, together with the more daring of the town's citizenry, had gathered in the saloon where Chris was Exhibit A of the evening. Defever eyed the Texans with interest. Having unfortunately come afoul of a number of the breed at various times in his varied career, he had a respect for them. And they gave him some hope.

But for the most part, Chris was dependent upon Lottie Lebeck. As he watched her come in through the front door of the saloon with a bold brusqueness, he reflected that she was a blunt soul, given to the realities of life. Therefore she would doubtless grasp in an instant the skilled and inspired connivery by which Chris had brought the present situation into being.

He rose from his chair with true courtliness and bent low in the most elegant of bows. "My dear—" he murmured.

Lottie Lebeck squawked. A loud and indignant explosion of sound. "You spindle-shanked, horse-faced, wall-eyed, syrupy old reprobate!" she squalled. "Where's my roll? Blast your eyes, you think I'm a giddy kid that'll curl her toes at a couple of mouthfuls of mush? Where's that *dinero*? Produce it, quick, or I'll hoist you up for a hangnoose waltz with my own hands!"

Perspiration jetted out on Defever's brow, beneath his collar, and in the palms of his hands. He, a master of thespian art and possessed of the entire vocabulary of the Great Bard, could force no sound from between his lips for a long instant. And in that void of silence he heard a mutter from those facing him. He saw suspicion become certainty. He saw an unlovely intention form on face after face.

He made a great effort and his voice—that diapason of the vocal chords which had stood his stead through many a desperate moment—came back in a thin, shocked echo of its usual sonorous volume:

"What, sweet lady, you have forgotten? It slips your mind that you gave me instructions for the use of the trifling sum you en-

trusted to me? You assume I have dealt dishonestly with you? Perish the thought! I am cut to the quick; I lie bleeding before you. That I, your humble servant, should be thus accused. A cruel blow, my dear one!"

Lottie Lebeck made a very uncomplimentary snorting sound. For emphasis, she made it again. "Do you shell out my greenbacks or do I beat 'em out of your hide with a chair leg?"

Clint Fawcett and the aggressive city father started forward with unmistakable purpose. Fawcett was grinning easily, his earlier concern and much of his anger vanished. Chris could see he was also losing ground with the watching Texans.

"Gentlemen!" he implored in a more normal tone. "I beg of you, let us not be too hasty. *How small the travails of man were it not for womankind!* This dear creature but suffers from excitement. I moment, I pray you!"

Fawcett and the citizen of Sandy Ford halted their advance but Chris perceived he was about to be indicted before this gathering as a thief. And he had no doubt that the swift judgement of the overwrought crowd would involve dispatch with a length of knotted hemp. He confronted Lottie Lebeck with all the charming pathos his long years on the boards had taught him.

"Madame, I assure you I have acted with noblest sentiments. Since I first beheld you, your interests have been my own. How could I otherwise? Your funds are safe. It is easily proven. Send to the post-office—request a parcel lately mailed to Wells-Fargo in Abilene—have it opened. Within you will find another parcel containing your money and instructions to Wells-Fargo to mail it back to you, here. Relieve me of your suspicions. Restore me to the respect of my fellow men. Return me to the sunshine of your good esteem. I beg it humbly."

"The train with the Abilene mail left twenty minutes ago!" somebody in the crowd stated loudly.

Chris came near to weeping at this news. His mind shuttled frantically for salvation. It grew momentarily more evident that if he did not produce this fat woman's shekels without delay, his jig was up. Perspiration was a flood which poured from him. An idea pierced the whirling maze of his mind. He seized eagerly upon it. Laying hands

upon the Sandy Ford city father, he spoke rapidly.

"The punctuality of the Kansas Pacific Railroad is regrettable," he said hurriedly. "But I can yet prove my point and my honesty to the satisfaction of all. Gather a posse. It will ride with me. We shall overtake the Express and flag it down. I will personally enter the mail car and contrive to secure the parcel in question. We will return with it to this village!"

The city father's eyes widened. "That's mail robbery—!" he protested.

And at the same moment, Clint Fawcett, grinning from ear to ear, shoved forward. "That's it!" Fawcett yelled. "That's the whole thing! The old fox has let it all out, now. See it? The whole this is a scheme to get innocent help in robbing the Express. He cottons to Lottie, here, and gets her to trust him with her money. If he wasn't after something bigger, that roll would have been enough and he'd have jumped town instead of hanging around!"

The aggressive citizen slapped his thigh excitedly, forgetting his earlier anger at Fawcett. "By hell, Clint, you've drove the nail! Sure, that's it. He trumps up this business about you holding the woman prisoner and all and then riles the town up so's we'll be thinking about you and Miss Lebeck and not about what he was aiming at. If we'd ride with him after his proof, there'd be enough of us to make the Express guards on the Republican River Express mighty careful. He could walk aboard the mail car and take what he wanted. And a mite later, when we weren't watching close, he could give us the slip. . . . Why, damn your eyes, you moth-eaten old goat, since when do you think you can make train-robbers out of a whole blasted town?"

Chris moaned. His agony was drowned out by the anger of the crowd. He noted that the Texans eyed him quizzically and showed no heat, but even men up from the Panhandle could not aid him, now. He glared angrily at Lottie Lebeck.

The woman pulled on the arm of the city father. "See here," she yelled, "hold your horses in! This old boy cottoned to me, right enough. But I ain't a fool. Danged if I'm big enough one to pass my whole roll to a train robber. You ain't got him figured right, yet. Quit squalling about the

Express and bear down on getting my roll back. I'll call it quits there. And another thing, friend Christian was right about one thing. Clint Fawcett was holding me prisoner—and I want to hear that talked about, too!"

It was a valiant if belated effort. But it came to naught. The townsmen shrugged away from the woman. Fawcett's men closed in, splitting her off from the citizenry.

Rough hands were laid upon Chris and he was hustled onto the street, from whence he was shortly jostled into a small and dusty calaboose, the door of which was slammed closed on him with spiteful violence. The street outside began to echo with restless talk of a ten-minute court—and a dawn hanging.

Chris sank back onto the broken cot with which his cell was furnished to consider the whimsy of fate and the almost certain probability that he would shortly hold a stellar role in a command performance at whose end he would quit this earthly vale of tears via strangulation.

A pox upon the moon, spring, romance, and the unreliability of women!

ASIDE from the restless stir of a pair of Fawcett's men, left on guard before the street door, the vicinity of the lock-up quieted directly. The crowd moved back up the street to the saloon, where men could consider the demands of justice and satisfy their thirst at the same time.

This quiet was presently broken by a sharp, sibilant hiss from beyond the small window of the cell. Chris was lost in his somewhat desperate consideration and the sound was three times repeated before it

fully penetrated his consciousness. He rose and crossed to the aperture.

Lottie Lebeck was pressed uneasily against the dark rear wall of the jail. "That you, Christian?" she asked softly.

Chris snorted his irritation. "My dear lady, I am not a ghost—not yet, at least!"

"You mad at me—?"

"When a man has come to the pass in which I now find myself," Chris answered piously, "it does not behoove him to cling to the passions of earthly existence. Rest easy, Madame. I have, I assure you, a cleansed heart and a passing affection for friend and foe alike."

Lottie Lebeck noisily sighed relief. "I was afraid you'd be stewing, for a fact," she said. "I been telegraphing. Got the train flagged at Heber's Crossing. Agent says the mail clerk says there's a small package in the Abilene sack addressed to Well-Fargo. So I'll go along with you on the rest of your story. And there was a big Texas drover in the saloon when they bushed you. He heard the whole story and he followed me up to the telegraph office. Appears he's got the cow-critters I want and at a price I can pay. So it's a clean haul from here on but for two things—"

"And those are—?" Chris asked with chill civility.

"Prying you out of this lockup and turning a good deep furrow over the top of Clint Fawcett and his boys. I—ah—" The woman paused uneasily.

"Proceed, Madame," Chris invited.

"Dang it!" Lottie Lebeck complained, "it ain't fitting I should stand to my toes outside a jail window and make this kind of talk. A woman should be squired, not the other way around!"

SMART WOMEN WEAR TREDs



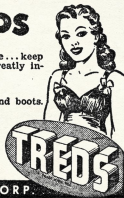
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"I did my best with you, my dear Lottie," Chris reminded her.

The woman grunted. "That's what I mean. You got dealt from the dirty deck. Blast it, what I'm driving at is—would you buy chips on a fresh start?"

Chris considered this. If he could again secure his freedom—if he could extricate himself from this to-do—then Lottie Lebeck and her store of cash would be as attractive as ever. More so, perhaps. Recent events had served to strengthen the conviction within him that a life of pleasant ease was far more to be desired than this constant plunging from one frying pan into the next in search of fortune.

"Madame," he said with fluid pleasantness, "the moon yet shines and the spring zephyrs are soft. And I am a man of purpose. Consider me again as a slave to your charm."

"Bushwah!" Lottie Lebeck remarked. "But it sounds good, just the same. How the devil we going to get you out of there?"

Chris scowled. A thought struck him. "My dear, I mean no offense, no hint at brazenness in you, but do you by any chance have with you a little cheek rouge—for use on especial occasions, let us say?"

The woman scowled also. Then her face cleared. "I'll have you know I'm no painted hussy, but I do have a little by—for special occasions, like you say."

"I'll take it, then. And a weapon, if you're armed."

There was a little fumbling outside, then the woman passed up two articles; a tiny jar of rouge and small-bore pistol nearly as tiny. Chris glanced scornfully at the insignificant weapon and dropped it in his pocket. He opened the rouge and commenced diluting it with water from the pitcher his cell provided.

"Now go away," he told the woman. "Go to the hotel and wait until I call for you in person. If I fail, wait until train-time tomorrow, claim your package at the post-office, and go elsewhere to buy your cattle. Go elsewhere with the knowledge in your heart that a man died to win you."

"Oh, I will, I will—" Lottie Lebeck breathed.

Chris listened to her departure, then opened his vest and commenced smearing the diluted rouge onto his shirt. When he had a considerable mess there, he shook the

bars of his cell and commenced to shout guardedly.

"Constable! Constable!"

One of the two men outside swore. The door opened. Both of them stepped into the entry outside the cell gate.

"What the hell you want, you blamed old coyote?" one of them snapped irascibly.

"I have repented, good friend," Chris announced. "My sins weigh me down. Gather closer and I'll confess my misdeeds against this fair city. Anything to escape bearing confinement longer—"

The guard who had not spoken edged forward curiously.

His fellow seized his arm and jerked him back. "You damned fool!" he snapped. "Get close enough for one of them old hooks to snag you through the bars and you'd lose your gun and that cell key quick. Probably enough blood to paint a barn, too. . . . Now listen, Grandpa, keep your trap closed and no more tricks—or we'll make you trouble!"

Chris had expected this. He struck a dramatic pose and brought forth Lottie Lebeck's infant pocket-gun. "*What man can bear alone the fury of the fates? Ay, death becomes me better than this foul condition!*"

CHAPTER

4

Chris' Courtship

With nice timing and considerable care that the muzzle of the little pistol directed its charge under his arm and into the pad on the cot behind him, Chris sobbed noisily and pulled the trigger. The tiny weapon's thin bark was so lacking in force that it nearly spoiled the act. He staggered, clapped his hand over the copious rouge smear spread on his shirt, and sank to the floor.

As he did so, knowing the small gun to be of little further value to him and that it might make the guards too cautious for his purpose if he retained it, he let the weapon slip from his hand and skid across the floor.

The guard with the irritated voice swore in astonishment. "He done it!" he breathed.

"He sure did!" his companion choked. "Clint ain't going to like this, what with him wanting to know where the old gal's

cash is before the old boy is put out of the way."

"Maybe it's a fake."

"That ain't fake juice coloring up his shirt front."

"Just the same, we'd better take a close look—"

The cell gate opened. The two men came in. They bent low. And they were disagreeably surprised. Chris had taken care to fall in such a manner that the full spring of his long legs was under him. One square shoulder, as he came up from his death pose, jostled one guard so sharply against the wall that the fellow's head snapped back against stone and he wilted.

Chris seized the other very skillfully about the neck and whacked his head against the corner of the broken cot. Thus, in a swift, short pair of seconds, he was possessed of the keys to his cell, a pair of usable guns, and his freedom. He burst onto the street with all three firmly in his grasp.

He thought briefly of Lottie Lebeck, shrugged, and grinned philosophically. Slapping the top of his tall hat to jam it firmly onto his head, he murmured softly:

"Oh Luxury, for thee and thee alone—"

And by-passing the saloon where the patriots of Sandy Ford were measuring his fate, he loped hastily toward the Astor of The Plains.

The lobby of the hostelry was deserted. However, there seemed to be a certain amount of commotion on the second floor. Chris took the steps with swift, silent strides, and paused in the upper hall. The commotion emanated from the room which had been assigned to him. Its door stood slightly ajar. He fitted one eye to the aperture. He was not pleased with what he saw.

First, there was Clint Fawcett and two of his surliest hands. This was definitely a setback. He had figured Fawcett would be at the saloon, bearing down on the citizenry and talking a hanging very loudly, indeed. To discover the man here was not good.

Lottie Lebeck stood very definitely by the window. A tall and somewhat grizzled Texan who was not without a certain touch of bravado and a kind of seedy handsomeness was beside her. They were both obviously under pressure. Off to one side was a small man with an air of importance which had been thoroughly punctured.

His face was swollen with the marks of a competent beating. He was bleating at Fawcett.

"Clint, there's got to be an end to this. Blast it, ain't it enough you borrow my stage, return it late, and let three of your boys beat the devil out of me when I squawk about it? Hell, this ain't keeping peace. You can't bust into my hotel, rip a room apart in a search, and then start putting other guests of mine over a rough string of hills to get some money—"

Fawcett made an angry gesture and crossed the room with a quick, swinging stride. The barrel of his gun came down. The man with the battered face nosed into the carpet.



"Try that on me, Clint Fawcett; just try it!" Lottie Lebeck said loudly.

"I'll try worse than that, you old she-owl!" Fawcett growled. He swung on the woman, one hand stabbing out to catch her wrist. "For the last time, where's that cash?"

The question was accompanied with a sharp twist which shot pallor into the woman's face. The Texan beside her made a protesting move and was immediately checked by the barrel of the gun which one of Fawcett's men rammed into his belly. Chris could wait no longer. He fetched the door a kick which nearly took it off its hinges. Then he strode into the room.

"Unhand the maid, varlet!" he roared at Fawcett.

IT WAS a superb entrance. Chris had hoped its suddenness would permit him to lay down certain demands and enforce them before Fawcett could recover from shock. However, Fawcett was a jumpy character. He freed Lottie Lebeck's arm and wheeled, the gun with which he had felled the mauled owner of the hotel still gripped in his free hand. It swung upward.

The rider who was prodding the Texan beside the woman shifted a little, also, making him an equal threat. And Fawcett's other crewman ducked shiftily behind a table, from which he peered out very truculently, indeed.

Chris managed to loose a shot barely ahead of the man behind the table and to about break even with Fawcett on the first exchange. The man behind the table ducked from sight—and remained there permanently. Fawcett's slug passed uncomfortably between the inner pocket of Defever's coat and the outer pocket of his vest, burning somewhat as it passed. And—a pox on unfamiliar weapons—Chris missed his first stab at Fawcett by a full finger's width. In addition, the third man had drawn his attention from the startled Texan to shift also toward Chris.

Settling himself, Chris alternated the fire of his two borrowed guns in a rising, staccato fusilade. Plaster came down. Lottie Lebeck squalled hoarse alarm. Glass fell in noisy shards. Somewhere a man was swearing with a peculiar sustained, stentorian fluency. Chris became aware after a moment that this masterly profanity was issuing from his own lips—that its cause was a smarting burn across the meaty side of one thigh—and that Clint Fawcett had quitted his career as a peacemaker, a trouble-brewer, and a rough-handed collector of illegal taxes.

While the echoes of an epic of gunfire still shook the room, Fawcett's one remaining gunman bolted into the hall. Chris knew that the town fathers would shortly arrive. He thought his neck likely safe enough from them, now, but he had not performed what duties he had managed in Sandy Ford for the adulation of village squires. He had performed them for a lady's gage.

Smiling and smugly satisfied with his chore, Chris took his derringers from the dead Fawcett. Then Chris started across the room toward Lottie Lebeck. He had thought it odd she did not come to him, that she did not inquire nervously of his health and if he had been injured in her service. He now perceived the reason.

She was gripping the arms of the tall Texan with vast concern in her eyes. She was muttering incoherent things to him while he stood and stupidly blinked his eyes at the carnage on the floor before him. The woman was rattled. Chris was certain of it. She had mistaken the Texan for him.

"Here—" he cried—"here stands Launcelot, my dear. . . ."

Lottie Lebeck swung her head and looked at him as though she was seeing him for the first time. She blinked. "Good boy," she said briskly. "Good job. Good work!"

"Good job!" Chris exploded. "Job! Thunderation, Madame, this is a sacrifice to lay at your feet!"

The Texan shoved forward at this. "Now, see here, Uncle!" he said. And at the same time his arm fell across the woman's shoulders. She turned and looked up at this droopy-mustached, sun-fried son of the grass, and the affection in that look fair to sickened Chris.

"Egad!" he murmured with deep feeling. "*Done in 'twixt midnight and the dawn by a wench's perfidy! Farewell, sweet ducats; thy golden charm is spent before these hands e'er clutched thee—*"

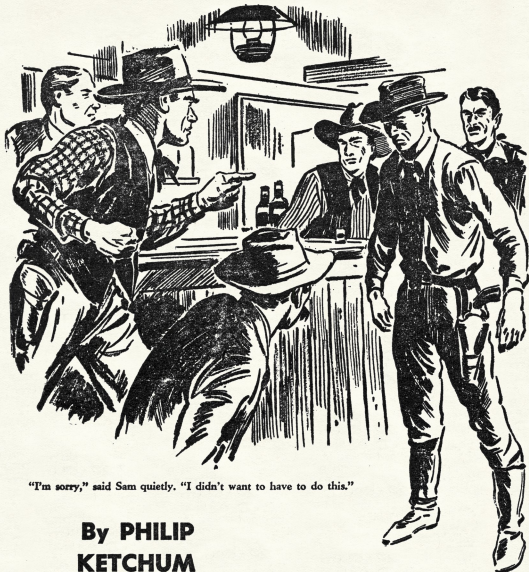
There was more to the passage which came to his lips, a fuller statement of wise and bitter philosophy, but Chris had no spirit to continue. He had, in fact, a greater need for forthright profanity than any counsel from the works of the Great Bard. He, once idol of a thousand matinees, had muffed a romance with a fattish dowager of the desert!

He swelled his chest to relieve himself of his bitterness, but Lottie Lebeck cut in on him, speaking from under the Texan's arm:

"I tried to hire a couple of men to come on into Sandy Ford with me, but there were none handy in Abilene worth pitting against Clint Fawcett. I took on the bill of goods you peddled aboard the train

(Please continue on page 95)

TENDERFOOT VIGILANTES



"I'm sorry," said Sam quietly. "I didn't want to have to do this."

**By PHILIP
KETCHUM**

Secret indignation meetings and muttered threats weren't going to get rid of a vicious rangehog. Texas Sam Jarrett figured that the answer was a little guts and maybe a mite o' gunsmoke.

ONCE every month Sam Jarrett hitched up his team and wagon and drove into Wall to buy supplies and to listen to the range gossip in the Arizona bar or on the porch of the Wall hotel or around the stove in the general store.

The trip required two days' time each way and another day in town added up to the better part of a week. And Sam could ill afford this time for he was alone on his

foothills ranch, but the drive to town and the talk with other men, meant a great deal to him and once each month he managed it.

Sam Jarrett was in his late thirties. He was a tall, gaunt, stoop shouldered man, not at all handsome. He had sharp, irregular features and very dark hair. He wasn't given much to talk himself. Now and then, during these trips to town, he would say something, but mostly he listened to others. He was something of a mystery to the rest of the valley.

Where he had come from, no one knew. What he had been before he had settled in the foothills he never explained. For a couple of years people wondered about him at times, but after that he was accepted by most everyone and people forgot to wonder about his past.

He wasn't exactly popular, but he was well liked. The women who came to know him said that some girl, somewhere, had made a grave mistake, for Sam would have made an ideal husband. That he worked hard was an acceptable fact for a man had to work hard to manage a ranch in the foothills.

He wasn't a heavy drinker and if he was a man of temper he never showed it. And even his appearance, after a time, didn't stand against him. Sam Jarrett wasn't really hard to look at after you got to know him.

Mary Higgins, who was Ollie Higgins' wife, took quite a liking to Sam and after a time insisted that he stop by their place on his way to and from the ranch, even though it was a little out of the way. He sometimes did and Mary, who prided herself on her cooking, would throw a regular banquet for him when he would stop. She was a rather forthright woman and she asked him straight out one day why he had never married.

"Why, Ma'am, I just never got around to it," Sam answered. "I reckon I've been too busy."

From that time on, Mary Higgins constituted herself as a committee of one to find Sam a wife and she got Sam introduced into a good many homes, but if there were chances for matrimony, Sam steered clear of them. He seemed satisfied with things the way they were.

Sam Jarrett wore a gun the same as the

other men around Wall but if he was an expert with it, no one knew it. He seemed to have no violent likes or dislikes. He voted on election day and when the cattle market dropped he looked worried and when there wasn't rain for a long stretch he scowled and watched the sky.

Lou Billings, who was the sheriff, once characterized Sam Jarrett as a simple, honest, down-to-the-earth fellow who would never make a fortune or end up in jail. And there really was something quite simple and honest about him. There was no mystery in his past.

His ability with a gun was quite indifferent. He had been born and reared in Texas. He had worked as a cowhand and had saved his money. He had come here looking for a small place which could be bought cheap and he had found it in the foothills. He was making a living. He was working for himself. Someday, he thought, he might be well off, but he knew of no shortcut to success.

When Cass McClendon moved into the Wall river country and started making trouble and when the other men of the valley began having meetings to talk the situation over, no one thought of inviting Sam Jarrett.

Sam was only a small-time cattleman. The men at his command consisted only of himself. Higgins had eight hired hands and Pendergast five and most of the others two or three. Besides, Sam Jarrett was far removed from the source of the trouble, a hard day's ride from Wall.

Cass McClendon was about thirty. He was a tall, arrogant, broad-chested fellow. He had bought the Shaeffer ranch, close to Wall, and had brought in with him, to help run it, close to a dozen hard featured riders, who seemed used to having their own way. Within a week of McClendon's arrival one of his men promoted a fight in the Arizona bar and one of Higgins' men was killed.

And about that time, too, there was an open clash on the range between McClendon's men and the men riding for Jake Plummer. It was a row over water-hole rights and there had been shooting, though no one was hurt.

SAM JARRETT came to town at about this time and heard what had happened as he sat on the porch of the Wall hotel.

Pendergast was there that night and Higgins and Jake Plummer and some of the others and they talked things over quite soberly and arranged a meeting for the next evening at Plummer's ranch. They didn't suggest to Sam to be there.

"We've got to do something," Higgins declared. "I've had a little experience with men like McClendon. They spread out over all the territory they can. They make their own laws. They have no respect for anyone else. We've got to stop McClendon before he gets too big."

The others nodded in agreement.

"He talked to me today about an association," Pendergast mentioned. "He's got an idea we should all go together so far as marketing is concerned. That is, he wants us to go in with him. He'll run the association."

"Did he say just that?" Ollie Higgins asked.

"Not yet," said Pendergast, "but he will."

"Those men he brought in with him," said Jake Plummer, "aren't just cowhands."



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They're gun-fighters. We've got to do something."

There was more talk like this. It was clear to Sam that these men appreciated the situation they were facing but it was also clear that they didn't know what to do about it. A couple of times Sam Jarrett started to say something but someone else spoke before he could get started and Sam was never a man to push himself. After all, he decided finally, these men would eventually come to grips with their problem and do what had to be done.

Sam stayed at the hotel over the night, as was his custom, and left early the next morning for the foothills. He didn't stop at Ollie Higgins's place on the way. Ollie Higgins, he was afraid, would be too busy to have much time for him and Mary would be as much concerned about all this as her husband.

It wasn't Sam's way to worry about things. The problems which he faced sometimes concerned him, but he didn't fret or let himself get excited. He placed problems in two categories. There were some he couldn't do much about, like a long, dry spell or the seemingly endless snows of the winter.

There were others which he could handle. It didn't help to worry about the problems he couldn't handle. And it was foolish to worry about any others. The thing to do about the other problems was face them and reach a solution. But rather strangely, Sam found himself worrying about McClendon in the days which followed.

He had lived here long enough, now, to know most of the men around Wall pretty well. They were peaceful men, neighborly men. There was sometimes trouble or an argument between two of them but it never led to much. There was an occasional fight in Wall but never a very bitter fight. The people here got along with each other. It was a good place to live. A man like McClendon didn't belong, couldn't ever belong.

For almost three weeks Sam Jarrett went about his daily tasks but he couldn't get the worry about this situation out of his mind. In the cool of the late summer evening he would find himself wondering what had happened and if the men of Wall had faced this problem and solved it or if they had let it grow and get bigger.

Some problems, Sam knew, had a way of getting bigger if they weren't handled. Some problems were like a leaky roof. A little leak wasn't really bad but if you let it go it got to be a bigger leak and pretty soon the entire roof was bad and a good many things under it had been spoiled.

Sam was at the far south corner of his place one afternoon when he heard a shot. He straightened up and listened but he didn't hear any more. That single shot, he knew, might not have meant anything.

Some rider might have taken a crack at a jack rabbit or a snake or at some distant mark. That was probably it but just the same the sound of that shot decided him. Sam rode back to his cabin and cleaned up. That night he started for Wall.

IT WAS late the following afternoon before Sam Jarrett drove into town. He hadn't hurried and his face showed none of the uneasiness he felt when he pulled up in front of the livery stable. The old fellow who came out to take charge of his horse was a dour, silent man who had never had much to say to him and who had little to say today.

Sam left the livery stable and headed uptown toward the Wall hotel. He saw several men in front of the Cattleman's bar whom he didn't recognize and he passed a couple other strangers on the street. It occurred to him, suddenly that this was Saturday night and that as was customary, there was quite a crowd in Wall. He hadn't thought of this before and it was only a passing thought, now, much in the same category as his recognition of the condition of the weather.

There were several men whom he knew on the porch of the hotel and Sam stopped to speak to them.

"Did you stop by the Higgins' ranch?" asked one of the men. "I wonder how Ollie Higgins is making out?"

Sam shook his head. "What's the matter with Ollie?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"No."

"There was a fracas in town between some of McClendon's men and some of the old timers. Ollie got shot."

Sam Jarrett scowled. He asked, "How did it happen?"

"It was about who had grazing rights in

the flat lands north of here. We've all used those lands but McClendon's claimed them and ordered Ollie to get his cattle off."

Sam grunted but made no other comment. He sat down on the edge of the hotel porch. The talk went on and he heard other things about McClendon. It seemed that McClendon had bought out the Anchor Bar ranch and had made an offer for the A Double F. It seemed that there had been a good deal of trouble in town, lately.

Two days ago two of McClendon's men had had a knife fight in the Silver Dollar saloon. A water hole which Pendergast had used for years had been fenced off by Cass McClendon. And McClendon had announced the formation of the Wall Cattle Growers Association and had insisted that everyone in this part of the country join up and entrust the marketing of cattle to the association.

The men hanging around the hotel seemed a little bewildered by all that had happened. Pendergast joined the group but had nothing to say and Jake Plummer dropped by. Plummer looked worried. He confided to Pendergast that he had just talked to Lou Billings, the sheriff, and that there was nothing Billings could do.

"He's kept inside the law, Damn him," Plummer growled. "What the hell are we going to do, Pendergast?"

Sam Jarrett dug out his pipe and sucked on it without lighting it. "Is he here in town," he asked after a while.

"Who? McClendon?" Plummer asked. "Yeah, he was in the Cattleman's bar while ago. He already acts like he owns the town."

"These new men I've seen on the street," Sam asked, "are they the men he brought in with him?"

"Yeah, he must have brought in twenty men. A hell of a lot more than an honest rancher would need."

Sam sucked on his pipe, scowling, and then, as though realizing suddenly that it wasn't lit, he searched in his pockets until he found a match which he struck on the porch and touched to his pipe bowl.

Pendergast and Plummer were talking in whispers and Sam watched them curiously. He had an answer to all of this and he wondered why it didn't occur to Pendergast and Plummer. It was so simple that he didn't see how they could have missed it.

"A meeting at my place tomorrow night, then," Plummer said finally. "Tell the others."

Sam Jarrett scowled. He wondered how many meetings there had been. He wondered if anything was ever accomplished in meetings. After a while he stood up, knocked out his pipe, put it in his pocket and then started down the street. No one on the porch seemed to be aware of the fact that he had left. No one watched him.

SAM took his slow and deliberate way down the street. He slouched a little as he walked and the scowl was still on his face. Several men spoke to him as he passed them and when he stepped into the cattleman's bar the fellow who worked back of it raised a hand in a friendly greeting.

"Back to town a little early, aren't you, Sam," he asked.

Sam shrugged his shoulders. He ordered his drink and paid for it and then looked around the room. At a table toward the back of the saloon, a noisy poker game was in progress. Sam didn't know any of the men at the table.

"Red," he said to the man back of the bar, "where will I find Cass McClendon."

Lou Billings came up to the bar just at that time and seemed a little surprised at the question. "What do you want of McClendon, Sam?" he asked.

"Why I just wanted to tell him something," Sam answered. "Why, Lou?"

The sheriff scowled and before he could say anything, the bartender spoke up. "That's McClendon in the poker game, facing this way. The tall, thin fellow."

Sam Jarrett nodded and said, "Thanks." He left the bar and headed for the poker table and walked around it and tapped McClendon on the shoulder.

McClendon looked around at him and it was plain that McClendon was annoyed. "I don't like people standing back of me," he growled. "Get the hell out of here."

Sam Jarrett blinked. He didn't look startled or frightened or surprised. His face didn't show any expression at all. "Is your name Cass McClendon?" he asked mildly.

"You're damned right it is," McClendon snapped. "Get out."

Sam shook his head. "That's what I came here to tell you to do."

McClendon's eyes widened and his jaw dropped open. He stared at Sam Jarrett as though unable to believe the evidence of his own ears. The game had stopped and those at the table seemed startled. Everyone in the saloon was now looking toward the poker table.

"You what!" McClendon gasped.

"I said I had come here to tell you to get out," Sam Jarrett repeated. "You don't fit in a place like Wall, McClendon. Folks here are friendly. They work together. If a man's in trouble his neighbor helps him. You don't understand things like that so I reckon you've got to go. It's really quite simple. Get out, McClendon. Get out while you've still got a chance."

Sam Jarrett hadn't raised his voice. He hadn't been profane. If he had shouted or sworn at McClendon, the man might have gone for his gun or might have jumped him. As it was, McClendon still seemed too surprised to be able to make any answer.

"That's the way it is," Sam continued. "I reckon an hour is enough time, McClendon. You've got an hour to get out of town and get started out of the country. You can put your ranch up for sale. You won't lose much. You've got an hour. I'll be back in an hour. You'd better be gone, McClendon."

There wasn't a sound in the saloon. Sam Jarrett nodded soberly as though he had considered what he had said and found it good. Then, without another word, he moved around the poker table and headed for the door.

One of the men at the table suddenly jerked up his gun—but didn't use it. After all it takes a lot of provocation to shoot a man in the back and the man who had gone for his gun didn't have any idea in the world as to who Sam Jarrett was.

The same men were still on the hotel porch. They were still talking in undertones about Cass McClendon. Sam rejoined them and hardly anyone noticed that he had been away. Then a few minutes later Lou Billings came hurrying up to the porch and stopped and stared incredulously at Sam Jarrett.

"You—you're still here!" he gasped. "My Lord, man! Get your wagon and get out of town. If you hurry you might still make it."

Sam Jarrett chewed on the stem of his

pipe. He shook his head. "I don't think I understand you, sheriff. Why should I get out of town?"

The sheriff's eyes widened. He lifted his hands and ran his fingers through his greying hair. "He asks me that," he muttered. "He asks me that just after he's finished calling Cass McClendon. Good Lord, man! Don't you want to live?"

"That's just the point," Sam nodded. "I want to live."

The sheriff mopped a hand over his face. He looked around at the others. Everyone was staring at him and at Sam Jarrett.

"You mean it, sheriff?" Pendergast asked. "You mean that Sam Jarrett here just called Cass McClendon?" There was disbelief in Pendergast's voice.

"DO I mean it?" breathed the sheriff. "Do I mean it! Listen here. Just a minute ago in the Cattleman's bar Sam Jarrett walked up to McClendon as cool as you please and told him to sell his ranch and get out of town. He told McClendon to his face that he didn't belong here. He gave him an hour to get out."

Sam was sitting on the edge of the hotel porch. There were men standing behind him, men standing on the board walk, facing him. Everyone he could see looked as startled as the sheriff. Sam Jarrett scowled. He took his pipe out and looked at it and then tucked the stem between his teeth again.

"Say, if he really did that he'd better get out of here in a hurry," Plummer suggested. "McClendon isn't the kind of a man to take a thing like that."

Sam's scowl deepened. "What makes Cass McClendon so different from any other man?" he asked suddenly. "He walks on two legs, don't he? He breathes the same kind of air as the rest of us."

"But Sam, you don't know what you're up against. What'll you do at the end of an hour—if you live that long?"

"Why maybe I'll have to use my gun, Plummer."

"Are you good with it?"

Sam looked down at his gun. "I've killed a few snakes with it."

There was a moment of silence there in front of the hotel. Sam was still scowling. He had a feeling these men didn't understand him and he wondered how he could

explain. "A few months ago," he said finally, "a timber wolf came down from the hills and got a couple of my cows. A night or two later it got a few more. I couldn't just sit by and let that go on, or pretty soon I wouldn't have had any cattle left, so I went out one night with my rifle and shot the wolf. There wasn't anything else to do. I guess—I guess that isn't much of a story but there's some men like timber wolves."

Sam took his pipe out of his mouth. He knocked it out against the heel of his boot, filled it from an old pouch and lit it. No one in the group said anything.

"It's like this," Sam went on. "It wouldn't have done me any good to have meetings about that timber wolf or to have worried about how terrible it was that he was pulling down my cows. If I wanted to get rid of him I had to do something about it and so I did."

Lou Plummer's shoulders lifted a little and he glanced from side to side. His face had brightened. He had the look of a man who had just made a terribly important discovery. "He's got it, fellows," he said slowly. "By golly, there's the answer. When you're worried about something you don't dodge it. If you've got a problem you walk right up and push it in the face. By Golly, that's it."

Several of McClendon's riders came out of the Cattleman's bar and moved up the street until they saw Sam Jarrett. For a while they stood in a group, watching him, then they broke up and two of the men spotted themselves across the street from the bar, one lounged against the front of the saloon and the other man went back inside.

Those at the Wall hotel had noticed this and had watched these men in a stony silence. Now, Plummer whispered something to Pendergast and then he and Pendergast drew away and started talking together. After a moment several others joined them.

Sam finished his pipe, knocked it out and then stood up.

Lou Billings cleared his throat. "Sam," he ordered, "You're going to stay right here. I'm not going to have any shooting in Wall unless I do it myself, understand. You stay right here."

"I'm just going over to the store, Sheriff," Sam said mildly. "How's that little girl of yours?"

"Huh?" the sheriff blinked.

"She's a mighty nice looking girl," Sam nodded. "See you later, Sheriff."

SAM crossed over to the store. He went inside and gave Bill Hopkins the order he had written out and talked to Bill about how dry the range was and about the fences he was building across the foothill draws.

He rather casually examined his gun, moving the cartridge cylinder so that the hammer rested over a live shell rather than the precautionary empty. After a while he told Bill that he had to move on and he turned to the door and stepped outside into the street.

The sun had just gone down but the sky hadn't yet started to darken. A larger crowd was in front of the Wall hotel and there seemed, to Sam, to be more men on the street. Sam wondered if an hour had passed since he had talked to McClendon.

He decided that maybe not a full hour had gone by but the time was close enough

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and when he reached the walk he started toward the Cattleman's bar. The man lounging in front of it, slid inside and the man across the street came erect and dropped a hand to his cartridge belt. Sam noticed this but kept steadily on his way. Two men moved out to the walk in front of him and accosted the fellow across from the saloon. These were Pendergast's men and their guns were suddenly covering the fellow.

Sam Jarrett grinned. He hadn't counted on this, hadn't counted on any help, hadn't thought about help from anyone, but it gave his spirits a lift to know that he wasn't wholly alone in what he had set out to do. He angled over toward the saloon door and pushed it open and stepped inside.

Cass McClendon was still there but he wasn't playing poker, now. He stood at the far end of the bar and six of his men were grouped near him and all of them were watching the door. There were others in the saloon, too. Pendergast was there and Plummer and Tex Anderson from south of Wall and Slim Mobray and several other men who had lived around Wall for years.

These men were scattered around the room and they, too, had been watching the door. Sam Jarrett's spirits went up another notch.

Sam Jarrett didn't hesitate. He went up to McClendon.

"So you're still here," he said quietly. "I'm sorry, McClendon, for I meant what I said. You've one more chance. Get out, get on your horse and get out of the country. Now!"

Cass McClendon's eyes jerked from side to side and he must have known that Sam wasn't alone in this, but the man's arrogance and pride smothered any misgivings which he might have had.

"You're damned right I'm still here," he said gruffly. "I'm here and I'm going to stay here. What are you going to do about it?"

There was a tense moment of silence after this challenge and into that silence came the sharp voice of Jake Plummer. "We're backing his play, McClendon. Any fellow who wants to can ride out of here. You can ride out or stay and be planted. You don't fit in Wall, any of you."

Several of McClendon's men exhibited a sudden nervousness. Four of them drew

away, three of the four half lifting their arms. McClendon didn't look around. He stabbed a glance at Jake Plummer, then fastened his eyes on Sam Jarrett. "What are you going to do?" he grated. "I'm staying here."

Sam Jarrett shook his head. "I'm sorry, McClendon," he said quietly. "I didn't want to have to do this." And then, quite slowly, it seemed, his hand moved toward his gun.

Pendergast shouted a warning as Cass McClendon clawed for his gun. McClendon's gun came up and roared and a bullet plowed into the floor at Sam's feet. The gun exploded again and Sam's body twitched. Then Sam Jarrett fired. He had lifted his gun and had taken time to aim and he fired only once. McClendon rocked backwards, straightened, leaned forward. And all at once his legs went limp and he fell to the floor.

There had been several other shots from behind Sam Jarrett and from two of McClendon's men. One of them was down. The other man was hanging onto the bar, moaning. The remainder of McClendon's band had backed to the wall.

Both Pendergast and Plummer were almost immediately at Sam's side and were asking him where he had been hit. Sam gulped. He felt terribly tired. There was a pain in his side where he had been hit and he could feel blood soaking into his shirt.

"I've got to get back to the ranch," he heard himself saying. "There's a lot of things I've got to do."

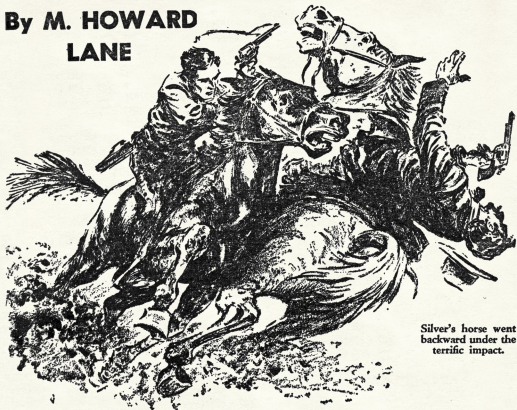
Jake Plummer shook his head. "Don't you worry about that ranch of yours, Sam. As long as I've got a man around the place it'll be taken care of. You're going to bed until this side of yours heals."

There were a good many folks around him now and Sam realized that he was lying on the floor and that the doctor was here and was working on him. He heard the doctor say, "Not bad. Not bad at all," and suddenly everyone around him was grinning and looked pretty well pleased and a couple fellows who lived here in Wall were arguing about whose home he was going to stay in until he was well.

Sam Jarrett sighed and closed his eyes. He thought, "Well, that's over. Now if I can only get the rest of my fences in before fall things will be pretty well set up."

The Captain's Last Chore

By M. HOWARD
LANE



Silver's horse went backward under the terrific impact.

• • •
Back in the buffalo days, Captain Cameron had run a rotgut-peddling weasel off the range. Now, he'd have to do it again—but the weasel had grown into a lobo.
• • •

THE buffalo plains had called him back. The squat adobe walls of Fort Griffin, softened into beauty by the purple twilight, looked almost like home to one-time cavalry captain, Lon Cameron.

Ten years and more had passed since he'd shucked his gray cavalry uniform, and garbed himself in a plainsman's rig. He'd been just twenty-one at the conclusion of that long war between the States, and the excitement of blood and gunsmoke spent had still filled his nostrils. So he'd headed for the Brazos to help other wild

young men clear the prairies to make way for the herds of Texas cattle that would someday populate these vast, short-grass plains.

Fort Griffin had been civilizations outpost then, and still was, Lon reflected, but from what he'd heard in Dodge City at the end of the Chisholm Trail, it wouldn't be considered an outpost much longer. For settlers were heading toward the Brazos in this year of 1878, hungry for land and homes.

He'd made his decision to return here

that night in Dodge. Made it in a saloon where cigar smoke swirled and coiled about the rafters, but he hadn't been seeing that smoke. For in his mind's-eye he was viewing once again a little hidden valley he'd found one day while scouting for the wily buffalo.

A clear creek had meandered through it, and wild roses and red willow had patterned its banks. The grass had been lush and he'd seen a grove of graceful cottonwood trees where a man could build his soddy. He'd called it the Valley of the Rose, and gone on about his business; for he'd been too young then to think about settling down.

But the years had brought their changes and he was in his thirties now, a long limbed, hard-muscled man with a roan lock of hair falling across his brown forehead. He'd had his fill of gunsmoke, Lon Cameron decided that night in Dodge, and now all he wanted was peace, and the chance to build a home.

Thinking about the Valley of the Rose had filled him with a vast impatience, and the gripping fear that some other settler might find it, and homestead there. That fear had driven him to the Livery where Pelter had grown fat and lazy waiting for a master who could always win them an easy living across the green tables in Dodge City's better palaces of chance. Like a strong wind, it had blown him down across the Plains to the Brazos and the remembered prairies.

He'd spend the night inside the Fort, Lon promised himself, and come morning he'd head West to the Valley of the Rose and hang his hat there on a cottonwood limb.

Across the Brazos he could see the twinkling light of a single fire in the grove where buffalo hunters had once set their camps. The sight gladdened him, because it meant that the in-rush of settlers hadn't really started yet.

That firelight leaped and danced, and showed him the big shape of a prairie schooner looming in the yonder camp as he put Pelter into the Brazos Crossing. Water splashed and chuckled about the big black's hocks.

From the camp came the lazy strumming of a banjo playing remembered tunes of the South. The music brought back

many memories, and it made Lon think that this was just like coming home.

"Welcome, pilgrim," a soft, rich voice rolled out from beside that wagon in the grove. "Ride on in, and set a spell. My 'Liza girl's got a big turkey turnin' on the spit, and I'll be carvin' it right soon. You might as well come and eat with us. You won't find any decent grub at the fort."

That warm, friendly voice made Lon feel mighty good. Suddenly he wanted no more of the stale odor of saloons in his nostrils. But he found himself impelled to ask a question as Pelter, seeming to recognize the invitation, turned of his own accord and stepped lightly toward the camp.

"And why won't the food in the fort be good?" he queried. "I can remember when a man dined on buffalo hump, and champagne straight from France."

"Them were the good old times," the deep voice answered. "The days when buffalo were plentiful, and a hunter had a pocket-full of gold. An honest man could sleep then without his Sharps for a bed-mate. But not no more, friend—"

"You sound like you knew Fort Griffin back in '74," Lon said.

"That I did, stranger," the voice in the shadows drawled. "And now I'm back to find me a home-site, but I don't-like the things I've seen inside the fort."

Lon felt an unaccountable twinge of alarm slip through him, and he didn't relish the sensation. He'd returned here to find peace, not trouble.

Lon's horse moved into the circle of firelight. Turkey grease dripped into the flames and made them dance. By their brightness, Lon saw his host. The homesteader was old, broad, and squat, with a bush of gray hair that fell below his shoulders. His paunch strained against his butternut shirt, and his thighs filled his linsey pants until the seams were ready to split. His mouth was an over-wide slash in a remarkably clean-shaven face. His eyes were bright and friendly.

He was hunkered down, with one big Conestoga wheel for a back-rest. His hands, the size of a buffalo haunch, strolled with lazy accuracy over the strings of his banjo, bringing music sweet and nostalgic. *We're tenting tonight* was the tune.

Lon remembered hearing the same song down in Georgia when the War was hot.

"Why," he said, looking down from his saddle, "I heard a banjo played that way once before, a long time ago.

"In Georgia, perhaps," the homesteader murmured. "I used to try and do my bit to amuse the boys with a minstrel do now an' then. The coppers they tossed in my hat kept me and Liza alive. She was a wee one then."

And as though the mention of her name was all that was needed the girl came to stand in the rear of the tall-tilted wagon, and firelight touched her as she paused on the end-gate. Lon looked at the girl, and he knew in that one single instant why he had returned to the Brazos. He knew that this girl was what he had needed all these years to fill out his life. The force of his thoughts were so great that he was almost afraid she might catch them, and think him bold beyond reason.

"Liza," her father said, "step down and meet our company. My daughter, Elizabeth—"

"Lon Cameron," Lon said.

A gusty sigh whipped the minstrel-man's lips. "Cameron, you say? *Captain* Cameron. Aye, and I heard that name back there in Georgia. You were one to always make it hot for the bloody Yankees. Aye. I wish there were more of your kind here on the Brazos."

"And why do you wish that?" Lon asked a little sharply.

The minstrel-man moved his ponderous body. Lon glimpsed the length of a long barreled shotgun leaning against the wheel beside him. The weapon was a beautiful, polished thing, a hand-finished Greener, all mahogany and shining blue steel. It was a gun that would blow the average man over backwards if he touched the trigger. Lon could feel his respect for the homesteader increasing. But why, he asked himself, was it necessary to keep a weapon like that so handy with the fort nearby?

"My name is Yaune," the minstrel-man stroked his banjo. "Jock Yaune, and I'm right pleased to make your acquaintance. Please step down, Cap'n. We'll eat and then talk."

Lon swung from Pelter's saddle and dropped the reins. The big black would not stray. Lon noted with amusement that even the animal's glossy eyes kept watching the girl as she busied herself between the fire

and a table they'd set near the front of the wagon.

She was worth watching, tall and clean-limbed in faded calico. Her oval face wore the calm look of complete self-possession. Her hair was the color of the firelight, piled low at the nape of her neck. Her lips were the hue of wild strawberries and the smoothness of her cheeks reminded Lon of flowers in his Valley of the Rose.

You're a fool, Lon Cameron, he told himself. The girl hardly knows you are here.

AFTER the meal was finished, Jock Yaune returned to his favorite seat against the wagon wheel. Lon hunkered down facing him, and picked up the homesteader's banjo.

"Your pardon," Lon murmured. "It has been a long time since I held one of these."

Yaune's eyes touched the smooth blackness of the Colt riding Cameron's right thigh, and he sighed gustily. "Cap'n, ye'd best be ready to handle that gun on your hip when you ride through the gates of Griffin. That is, if ye are carrying anything worth stealing—and five dollars is enough to satisfy the thieves roosting there. They have a leader named Barney Silver—"

Lon looked up from the instrument in his lap. His thumb struck one discordant note, then his palm stilled the strings. "Barney Silver?" he said, and his voice was as harsh as the banjo's discord.

"You know him?" the minstrel-man asked.

"I remember him," Lon said flatly, and memory of the one man he'd had trouble with here at Fort Griffin in the years long past came back to him. . . .

Silver had been a whisky peddler in those days, setting up his business near big buffalo camps about the Plains. He had taken the hunters' and the skinnners' gold, and doled out whisky that had made men go mad. Silver, Lon remembered, had unloaded his wagon full of whisky barrels and tin cups near the camp for which he'd been head hunter—that had been the trip when he'd found the Valley of the Rose.

The peddler had set up for business. And two skinnners, after drinking his rotgut, had carved each other into small bits. It had been enough for Lon. He'd ridden into Silver's camp, and filled every barrel full of Sharp's lead, and watched the rotgut

with the grass. Barney Silver had packed up and headed back to Fort Griffin vowing vengeance. And now the whisky peddler was back again. . . .

"He's the big auger around the fort," Jock Yaune's deep voice rumbled with worry. "And he's got a band of drunken Tonkawas and renegade buffalo hunters and outlaws hanging around his Broken-Bit Saloon that are enough to turn a man's stomach. They'll kill for a hoss or a dollar, and there ain't airy law strong enough to control 'em. They's been some killin's right here in this grove. So many in fact that other families aimin' to take up land are campin' inside the compound with the few soljers still stationed here.

"Why aren't you inside with them?" Lon asked.

The minstrel-man smiled, but his eyes were narrowed to wicked little slits. "Cap'n," he said placidly, "I ain't got nothin' wuth stealin' save my daughter, and I figger me'n my Blue-bell—" his big hand caressed the handsome shotgun—"can take care of her."

"I can take care of myself!" the girl flung at them as she kept busy with her camp chores.

"Ma'am," Lon told her gravely, and her eyes disturbed the beat of his heart, "I'm sure you can. But a mite of caution don't hurt."

"If ye've got money in your britches, cap'n," Jock Yaune said, "I'd advise ye stay out here with us'n tonight. The fort ain't safe after dark and that's the God's truth!"

"I have a little money," Lon said simply, and he did not want to mention that in the belt beneath his blue shirt was probably ten times the sum this minstrel-man and his daughter had brought to buy the things they'd need to build a home.

"So ye remember this Barney Silver," Jock Yaune prodded gently.

Lon nodded, and his fingers idly stroked the banjo, bringing soft notes from it to match the tone of his voice. "He was a whiskey peddler in the days when this was the headquarters for buffalo hunters. He found it necessary to pull stakes and leave Griffin—after his stock was lost."

"And might you have had anything to do with his losin' it, Cap'n?"

Lon nodded, and his own wide, calm lips

smiled. "A little," he murmured, "and I'm wondering if he'll remember me."

"You'd best not try and learn that answer," Jock Yaune said with something like worry in his voice. "I tell you, Cap'n—"

Lon felt a sudden impatience. He handed the banjo into the minstrel-man's hands, and lifted lithely to his feet. He saw the girl watching him with wide, frightened eyes from beside the failing fire. The light made her face ruddy as a wild rose. Then he tore his glance from her, and looked down at the homesteader.

"Yaune," he told the minstrel-man, and the wicked impatience rising in him was reflected in his voice, "it will be a pleasure to test Silver's memory."

"Go and see him then," the girl said with unexpected violence. "All men are fools!"

Lon remembered as he rode Pelter toward the open gates of the fort that he'd neglected to ask the Yaune's what section of the plains they were aiming to homestead. But it did not matter much. "I will see them in the morning," he thought, and then because he was a single-minded man he put all of his attention on the chore ahead. . . . The walls of Fort Griffin loomed out of the night before him. The heavy log gates were hospitably open. Once it had been an outpost against the plains Indians, and sentries had walked the parapets. But those times were gone.

Lon let Pelter idle along as he studied the throng moving through the light-splashed early darkness. There were a few sullen-faced soldiers in the crowd, and Lon could not blame them. They were far from civilization here, and curbing local trouble was not their chore. There were others in the throng that interested him. A few men in the linsey-wool of settlers were wandering along the street, looking like lost souls. Filthy Tonkawas in dirty buckskin slouched through the crowd. Lon recognized the faces of men who had left Dodge in a hurry.

Once this street had felt the tread of those kings of the plains, the buffalo hunter. The saloons had been full as now, but never had the outlawry been organized.

"Silver," Lon thought as his eyes found the burning pitch barrels lighting the facade

of the Broken-Bit, "has come far since I knew him!"

He tethered Pelter at the crowded rack in front of the whisky-peddler's saloon. He strolled to the pine-board bar that stretched across one end of the room. Lon remembered the Broken-Bit when it had worn another name, and been the quiet haven of hunters who needed a clear eye in the morning. Now the saloon was shoddy, and dirty, like most of its customers.

A barkeep sloshed liquor into a glass at his elbow, and Lon's five-dollar gold piece disappeared into the till.

"Thanks, friend," the barkeep's drooping mustache lifted as he smiled. "We don't make no change in the Broken-Bit."

The Colt in the slick leather holster at Lon Cameron's thigh came into his hand. He watched the greasy barkeep's mud-black eyes start to pop.

"In that case," Lon said gently, "I'll take mine on the house—and my five dollars."

There were gun-toughs in the saloon, hirelings of Silver. They broke away from their watch over crooked gaming tables and converged on the bar. Lon watched them come in the back-bar mirror.

"Tell 'em to get back to watchin' the suckers," he ordered the barkeep, "or you'll eat some lead."

The barkeep's hands fluttered. "Git on back to your games, boys," he bleated. "I've done made a little mistake here—"

"Then go see my bookkeeper and draw your time," a new voice interrupted.

Lon swung his head and his eyes met a big man standing beside him.

This was the test, Lon knew. He watched for any sign of recognition in the other's face. But Barney Silver's expression did not change. The man, Lon thought, did not look much like the jackal whisky peddler who had been a camp-follower of the big hunting outfits. His clothes were of the finest broadcloth now, and a good tailor had fitted the box coat smoothly to his shoulders, and shaped it to accentuate his flat hips and long, slender legs. His mustache was black, and so was his hair and eyes. A diamond, half the size of a hickory nut, sparkled in his white shirt-front.

"Welcome to Fort Griffin, stranger," Barney Silver said. "If they don't treat you right let me know." His eyes swung to

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the barkeep. "Get on out of here," he said coldly. "I told you that you were through."

No visible sign passed between those two, but Lon saw the barkeep smile. That smile did not seem the right reaction for a man being discharged.

"I hear there is free land 'round about for the taking," Lon drawled.

Barney Silver's black eyes turned full on Cameron. "Some will hold it," he said enigmatically.

It was all the answer Lon needed. The whole pattern of Barney Silver's plan lay before him like an open poker hand.

Lon lifted the glass at his elbow, and he knew the moment he downed the drink that it had been a mistake. For there was a bitter twang to it that twisted his stomach like tearing fingers. He had to get out—and fast.

"Another?" Barney Silver's light eyebrows cocked above lazy lids.

"No," Lon said thickly. There wasn't strength enough in his arms to draw his Colt and shoot the whiskey peddler where he stood. On legs that felt like pipe-stems, he made his way toward the door. The fresh night air was like a cold towel to revive him a little, but even so it was an effort to reach Pelter at the hitch-rail. The big horse stood docile as a friendly dog, and Lon pulled himself slowly to the saddle. He felt no pain, but every movement was an effort.

He swung Pelter into the street, and pointed his head toward the south gate through which he had entered the compound. There was only one place for him to go, his foggy mind told him—that was the grove, and the Yauneys. Lon knew now why Barney Silver had returned to Griffin.

The one-time whiskey peddler was intimidating citizens and settlers alike in an effort to drive them into the vastness of the Brazos plains where they would take up valid homesteads. But if a man could not prove up on the land, another might step in and claim his improvements. And each of those men would belong to Barney Silver—and before many more years might pass he would own leagues uncountable. More land than any one man could rightfully claim, and not an acre of it would cost him a 'dobe dollar.

One single question haunted his fogged

consciousness. Had Barney Silver recognized him, or were knock-out drinks the usual welcome to men who looked like there might be money in their pants?

Pelter rocked gently through the gates of the fort, seeming to understand the sickness of the master who usually rode his saddle so lightly. Lon moved his head slowly, and he could see the coals of the Yauneys camp-fire glowing like a sleepy eye beneath the canopied trees of the river grove.

Shadows stirred and rose from beside the road just ahead, and Lon knew that he had the answer to the question. Barney Silver had a long memory. The whiskey peddler had recognized him, and his lobos were out here now to make good Silver's brag that—*someday I'll kill you, Cameron!*

He found the butt of his Colt and wrestled with it, and the whisper on his lips was enough to rouse Pelter, but the command came too late. A leaping man on either side caught the bridle reins, and another pair reached up to claw Lon from his saddle.

"Make it quick, and final!" one of them said.

The other cried, "Watch out. He's gettin' at his gun—"

Lon freed his Colt, and fired straight down, and he saw one of the men whirl backward, arms flailing like a windmill and go down with the despairing cry of death on his lips.

Then he was pitching out of the saddle, himself, to the irresistible pull of many arms, and the earth rose against his face, and he felt the salt taste of his own blood against his lips.

A rifle barrel crashed against his ear and jaw, and as the great blackness came, he heard from far-off an enraged howl that was like the growl of a grizzly, and one single great report, and he knew that Yauneys and his Blue-bell were coming.

HE'S waking, Dad," Lon roused to the sound of those words, and he heard the cheerful ringing of an axe cease at the call. Feet came running through crackling leaves, and then a shadow fell across him, and Lon opened eyes that concussion had closed for a long time.

Jock Yauneys stood beaming down at him, sweat making bright rivulets against the

redness of his smooth, round cheeks. "And t'is glad I am to see you awake, Cap'n," he rumbled. "You've been so long asleep in the wagon that Liza got the notion that the feel of the sun through the trees might do you no harm. So today I lifted you down, and by the saints it looks like the fresh air has done you some good."

Lon swung his head and he found no pain in it, though it seemed chained to the pillow. His eyes searched for 'Liza Yaune, and she was more beautiful by day than by firelight—delicate as the rose he had hoped to find in that small valley of his choice. Then a sweet, wild scent brushed his nostrils.

"Roses?" the word was a question on his lips, and he saw the girl nod and smile.

"Yes," she said, "we have found the most beautiful place I have ever seen. There are trees and a stream, with wild rose growing along its banks."

"Cast your bread upon the waters—" quoth the minstrel-man. Lon blinked at him. He could feel strength flowing back into his long dormant body. "Me?" he queried. "You said I've been out cold as a dead turkey—"

Jock Yaune chuckled. "You done a heap of talkin' and rantin' ye knew nothin' about, and 'Liza here, she pieced most of it together. Like when you done told us about how you aimed to settle in a place ye'd found and named the Valley of the Rose. Workin' it out, we hit 'er smack on the nose, and here we've been since. I've got all the diggin' done for a soddy that'll see you through the fust winter, and I jest been waitin' for you to come 'round so's I could ride inter Griffin and file your claim."

"My claim?" Lon asked.

"Why sure, this valley is yours," said the minstrel-man. "Warn't it your plan to homestead here?"

"If you'll keep me company," Lon said.

"Why, Cap'n," Jock Yaune beamed, "that's right fine of ye. We'll git another banjo for you, and 'Liza will sing with us. We'll make the winter pass!"

The girl's brow had clouded while they talked. "You spoke of Barney Silver and his plans for these plains," she said a little hesitantly.

"Ah, and it was just talk," the minstrel-man said. "Silver can have no such ideas

in his head. They are too big for any one man. He jest had it in for ye, Cap'n—"

"And all the rest," Lon said, and memory of his visit to the Broken-Bit came rushing back to him. "I—owe you many thanks," he changed the subject simply.

"Trust the Blue-Bell," Yaune said grimly. "She speaks with authority, as those who jumped you have likely told their boss."

Lon drew a deep breath, and his decision was immediate. "Pelter?" he asked.

"Why that big black devil is fine," Yaune chuckled. "He's insisted on me liftin' his picket-line every day and lettin' him come and have a peek at ye in the wagon!"

"That's fine." Lon closed his eyes to save his strength for he knew the day was soon coming when he would need it and more.

And that night as he dozed into sleep his plans were complete and clear. As soon as he could set Pelter's saddle, he would steal away from the Yaune's and make his ride back to Griffin. Barney Silver had to be killed for the Yaune's would not be safe from the whisky-peddler's vengeance as long as the man lived.

THE days brought contentment, and there were wild roses at table each night in a crystal vase that, 'Liza told him blushing, had come from her hope chest.

Lon found only one cloud to mar his happiness, and he kept the fear strictly to himself. Barney Silver was not a man to wait, for the story of how his lobos had been routed was likely common gossip about the fort. Such a yarn might shatter a man's prestige, and there was only one way for Silver to recover it.

Lon went to sleep each night and woke each morning with something close to a prayer on his lips. "Keep him from finding this valley," was his plea to a power greater than any of them.

But just to be on the safe side, he slept with the hard presence of his Colt in the blankets beside him.

The wagon was his now, for the soddy had its roof and the Yaune's had moved their beds. It was what he had been waiting for, and the bright stars in the sky gave enough light to let him ease down to the ground, and find his way to Pelter.

The big horse blew softly, and Lon silenced him with a stroking hand. "Mebbe," he murmured, "we'll be coming back," and he bridled and saddled his mount, and led the animal quietly from the clearing where the Yauneys slept in their new dugout home.

He was in the saddle, and a half mile away when the first pin-sharp crack of rifle fire came from the grove behind him, and Lon paused for one frozen second, then he was swinging back with a curse as the sound of more guns destroyed the silence of the night.

Moments later he heard the vast rumble of Blue-bell, and he knew that Yauneys would never have the time to ram a fresh load down the muzzle of his long gun.

A branch whipped his face like a quirt, and Lon ducked forward along Pelter's neck as the black raced on winged feet through the trees. Flame bloomed ahead of him, sheeting high as fire caught the dry tilt of the minstrel-man's wagon. By its light, Lon sighted Yauneys in his night-shirt standing sturdy as a rock before the door of the soddy. His Blue-Bell was clubbed now, and it had taken a terrible toll, but there were still more men ready to rush him under the lash of Barney Silver's voice.

The whisky-peddler sat his saddle in the center of the clearing. "Kill the sod-buster. Kill Yauneys while Captain Cameron fries in the wagon!"

There'd been Tonkawas to spy on them, Lon realized. Renegades to carry back word of their habits, and the whisky-peddler had known that Captain Lon Cameron's bed was in the wagon.

He saw streaking gun-flame cut one of Yauneys' legs from under him, and like a tree swaying, the minstrel-man sagged back against the doorpost. A slender wraith came to stand beside him, and a short gun in her hand spoke its defiance.

Then he was close enough for Barney

Silver to hear the thunder of Pelter's hoofs. He saw the whisky-peddler swing his white-maned gray and surprise made his aim falter as he triggered a quick shot. Lon felt it sigh above his head, and he straightened in his own saddle, and for the first time in a long while the old reckless laughter of his youth was on his lips.

"Silver," he called, "we've been waiting for this—" He fired and missed his own shot as the gray cavorted sidewise. Lead reached for him again and screamed off the saddle-horn. They were closer now, thirty feet apart, and Lon drew his deliberate aim. He fired twice, and he saw Silver bend forward in his saddle as the gray buck-jumped straight toward the black. Pelter met the charge with his chest, and the gray went backward under the terrific impact. Lon grabbed at his saddle to keep his seat, and he watched Silver's body arc from leather like a rock leaving a catapult.

The man's body speared through the flame-bright night, and struck loosely. He was dead, Lon knew. A man did not fall that way with life left in his limbs.

His eyes swept to the soddy, and save the four men Jock Yauneys had accounted for the clearing was empty. Without their leader, a Tonkawa would not fight. They had gone as they had come, and they would carry the whisper back to Griffin that their chief was dead. It was a word that would bring peace to these plains, Lon knew.

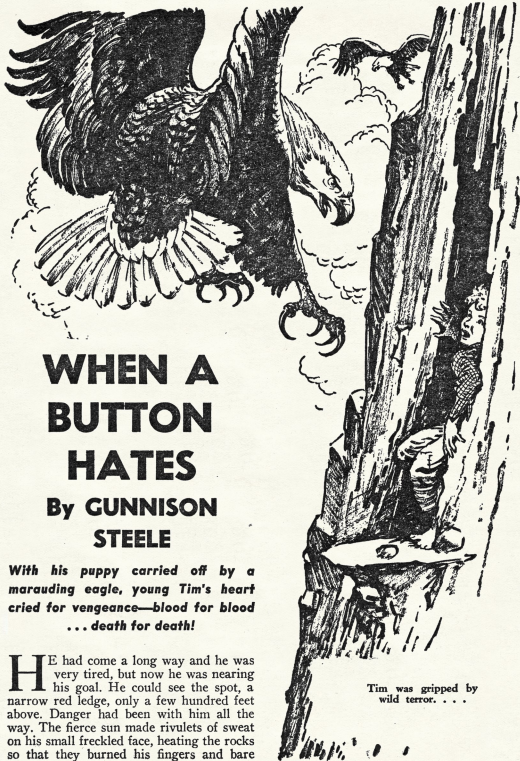
Jock Yauneys was seated flat on the dugout's single step, nightshirt billowing about his fat buttocks. The girl was taking care of his leg.

Jock called out: "Liza, for the love of heaven, go and git me a pillow. 'Tis not fitin' for a man to set on his bare backside. This damnation ground is cold!" Then he glanced up and saw Lon and Liza looking at each other. Jock chuckled. It was a nice sound—a pleasant, warm, human sound that rang clearly on the now still night.

Chocolate, Coyote . . .

The words *tamale*, *tomato*, *metate*, *ocote*, *chile*, *chocolate*, and *coyote* have not, as at first glance you might think, a Greek or Latin root; nor do they spring from the Spanish as many people think *tamale* and *tomato*, *chile* and *coyote* do. These words are hundred percent native American. They are Aztec words, transplanted by Spanish colonists and padres from ancient Mexico to what is now the United States. Here, they crept into the American speech and the English language and are now respectably housed in Webster's Dictionary.

—R. V.



WHEN A BUTTON HATES

By GUNNISON
STEELE

*With his puppy carried off by a
marauding eagle, young Tim's heart
cried for vengeance—blood for blood
... death for death!*

HE had come a long way and he was very tired, but now he was nearing his goal. He could see the spot, a narrow red ledge, only a few hundred feet above. Danger had been with him all the way. The fierce sun made rivulets of sweat on his small freckled face, heating the rocks so that they burned his fingers and bare

Tim was gripped by
wild terror. . . .

feet. The wind blew with a violent and thunderous sound through the cathedral-like spires.

Then there were the eagles, who had seemed to sense the nature of his mission on Thunder Peak and had harassed him from the beginning. They swooped in close, glaring at him with their beautiful pale-gold eyes, screaming and snapping their curved beaks with a wicked ferocity.

Only his unswerving determination to wreak vengeance on the eagles had kept the boy from turning back.

He huddled there in a crevasse, resting, high above the world, looking with a kind of startled unbelief back the way he had come. Over yonder, seeming only a stone's throw away, but really five miles, he could see the ranch — toylike white buildings hemmed by a fantastic world of sunlight and shadow, of vivid color and drabness.

On all sides stretched the endless panorama, to the smoky blue horizon, more massive and awesome than all the wild dreams of his ten years. And there, a silvery thread tossed carelessly into green grass, was the river he had heard about but had never before seen.

Carefully now the boy, whose name was Tim, resumed the climb. A misstep, or a crumbly ledge, might mean the end of the world.

"You shouldn't hate the eagles, Timothy," his mother had told him. "Like humans, they have to live and feed their babies."

"They took Jonah," he had said stubbornly.

"But the papa eagle didn't know it was your puppy. He probably thought it was a rabbit."

But Tim had seen it happen. Nothing she could say would change the dark bitterness and grief inside him.

There were the eagles now. They came down out of the red sun, in tight, incredibly swift spirals. He could hear their angry cries and the rush of their wings. They were certain now that his goal was the nest that held their two fledglings up there on the ledge. They folded their wings and plummeted like bronze bullets, with bewildering speed, but when they were very close they braked on wide-spread wings and veered away, screaming and snapping their beaks warningly.

The wind from those mighty wings almost swept him from his perch. Tim was gripped by wild terror. He tore loose a slab of granite and flung it in bitter and futile anger at the climbing eagles. He felt puny and helpless. But he wouldn't turn back now, with vengeance so near.

He climbed on.

For a long time he had admired and envied the eagles. Their domain was the roof of the world, swept clean by the free-blowing winds, and they ruled it arrogantly. They were symbols of freedom, of defiance and contempt for all earth-bound creatures. They were the wind and sun and the laughter of cool water flowing through shadowy forests.

Then, four days ago, his admiration had changed to hatred. The male eagle had swooped, like a tawny bolt, and when he rose he had clutched in his talons a squirming, yelping puppy. The puppy's name was Jonah, and he was brownish-black and clumsy, with a single white spot over his left eye.

Tim had stood, rooted by surprise and despair, and watched the marauder wing swift and true with its victim toward its aerie high on the side of Thunder Peak where two hungry eaglets waited. Tim's bitterness, the dark emptiness inside him, hadn't let him cry then or later. It was a new and depressing experience for him, this wanting to inflict pain on some living thing.

Before this he had wanted only the quiet peace and coolness of towering red pines that fashioned a purple canopy high overhead. He'd liked to lie in velvety shadows, on earth cushioned by moss and pine needles, with his bare feet in the cool clear water.

He would lie thus for hours, a rapt look on his boy's face, smiling, looking upward. For him the wind made strange, wild music in the trees and on far peaks. His eyes saw beauty everywhere, because for him there was no evil or ugliness.

But now he hated the eagles, and everything was changed.

His decision had been easy and simple. The eagles had taken Jonah—he would take one of the baby eagles, in payment. The eagles would suffer as he suffered. He hadn't told his mother of his decision, for he knew she would forbid it.

THE eagles returned. They flew at him with outraged screams, more bold and determined than before, beating at him with their wings. But fortunately he had found a deep crevasse that protected him. When they rocketed away, he resumed the climb. Just above, perhaps forty feet below the narrow ledge that held the nest, was a wider ledge.

He paused on this ledge, which was all of fifty feet wide and lined at the back side by a jumble of huge boulders; between the boulders were cavelike fissures that a man might crawl into. The ledge was covered with the clean-picked bones of various small animals and birds. A kind of stairway led up the cliffside to the narrow ledge, where he could hear the harsh, hungry squawking of the two eaglets.

Baby eagles cried when they were hungry, he thought, the same as puppies. Then he put the thought from him and began the last few feet of his desperate climb. He had to cling to the knobs of granite, for the wind was wickedly violent again.

The clamor of the eaglets grew louder. They probably thought he was a parent bird bringing food. They didn't know he brought death for one of them. Death? Why, that was what had happened to Jonah. The thought was like a dark weight lodged in his mind.

He reached the rim of the ledge and looked over, and there were the two fledglings, seeming all mouth and not at all beautiful. They croaked harshly at him and snapped their beaks in ridiculous imitation of their regal parents. He climbed onto the narrow ledge, thinking *part of Jonah is in both your stomachs*. And, strangely, the thought brought no emotion at all.

He huddled there, thinking about that, blinking in a rather stupid way at the quarrelsome things. His mind seemed to be groping in a fog for something it had forgotten. His hate—that was it. Where was the hate he'd carried like a pack on his back hours ago at the beginning of this journey? Not here on the ledge, where it should be; and not shut up inside him like a bottle of poison with the cork tightly in.

Down there then, somewhere along the way, with his sweat and weariness and the drops of blood from his scratches. He moaned a little, with indecision, looking at the fledglings. He could shove one, or both of them over the rim and watch them float lazily downward like brown autumn leaves.

But then the eagles came again, attacking with greater ferocity than ever before. They drove in wickedly, trying to knock him from the ledge with their great pinions, trying to rend him with their murderous beaks and talons.

But he had the presence of mind to jump and flatten himself back under the overhanging cliff where it was almost impossible for the eagles to reach him. And presently the baffled birds veered off, probably to plan new strategy.

Then the boy stepped forth again. There were the fledglings, to do with as he pleased, and doubtless the eagles would grieve in their eagles' way. But what of this cloud-like cathedral, kept clean and bright by the free-blowing wind, and the cool sky, and the incredible, ever-changing beauty that lay like a master painting wherever the eagles looked. These things were unchangeable and indestructible, the right of all things free.

(Please continue on page 97)

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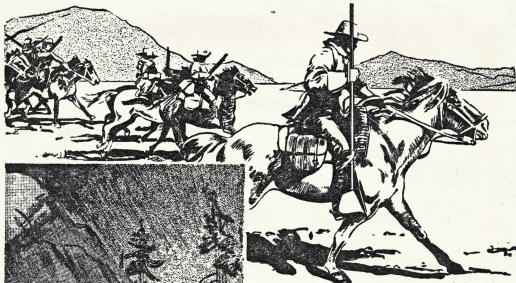



★ ONE AGAINST ★ THE SLAUGHTER HORDE

Lance Hassett Pioneer Novelette



"Don't let me suffer
like this, Lance. . . ."



By TOM ROAN

Lance Hassett was bedeviled more by the self-righteous fools in the wagon train than by the war-crazy Cheyenne chieftain.

CHAPTER

Red Men Strike!

1 Lance Hassett climbed steadily that late-summer afternoon with the red sun already low on those tall hills west of the dreaded Bad Lands. His horse was behind him, hidden down there at the east foot of the slope under the old cottonwoods and shaggy willows along the creek. Down the great valley, almost four miles away, the big wagon train he was trying to lead through the Indian country was still creeping along, the swaying canvas tops turning pink and golden in the light.

No one in the train was aware of the possible danger making itself known here. Gunfire had come from the opposite side of the tall, knife-narrow ridge splitting its way down the valley to come to an abrupt end about a mile and a half ahead of the train. All ears at once, knowing that he might

have to face Cheyennes on the warpath, Lance had gone out of his saddle like a scared gopher. Now his shaggy old buckskins were blending perfectly with the rocks, the half-dead grass and the stretches of barren ground so steep he had to dig his toes and hands into it to pull himself up. Perspiration poured from him, his breath laboring and sometimes whistling as if it came from a winded horse.

Army scout and Indian fighter on this wild and lawless frontier for many more years than he cared to admit, especially around women now and then, Lance Hassett was getting a shade too old for such climbs. In addition, he was still as touchy as a boil from the last tremendous row he had had with the self-elected leaders of the wagon train and the swarms of those easily-led settlers who were willing to back any fool thing that was said or done.

Lance would have quit it cold a number of times if it had not been for the women and children. Behind him now there would still be grumbings and threats among the scrubs and the know-it-alls. But Lance's anger faded completely when he scrambled over the last ragged spur of rock and came to the sharp crest to look down into the long and narrow valley on the west side of it.

Now Lance Hassett's keen old eyes seemed to poke forward in their deep sockets. He took a long breath and held it while he dropped himself flat between two shaggy spurs of uptilted rock. In a moment, just to make things better, he had fished out his old brass telescope from his bosom and focused it on the scene.

He was looking upon murder now, and it was murder in the coldest and most unthinkable manner—about the worst thing, he reckoned, that he had ever seen in all his rambles, and he knew the frontier from the far Southwest to the Canadian line.

There was another creek below him, probably a west branch from the one behind him that had been split down this side by the sharp north toe of the ridge. Along the creek's east bank under the edge of the trees more than a score of Indians—all old bucks and old squaws—had been lined up. A larger band of white men were galloping their horses back and forth. Each time they passed the thinning line of reds, the white men's rifles and six-shooters spouted fire and smoke. And the old Indians, making

no show of fight at all, stumbled and fell.

Ordinarily, Lance Hassett was like all the old-timers. Out on a scouting job one rarely could find him forty feet from his horse without his rifle balanced on the crook of his arm and ever-ready for use. But the climb had taken both feet and hands. And now as he lay there he could only curse, knowing that the range to those fools below was far beyond the reach of his old Remington .36's.

"Otherwise," he told himself, almost choking on his own words, "I'd shore hell take me a hand in yore little game just to see how yuh brave squirts would look an' act when I started rainin' lead down on yuh. . . . It's ganders like yuh what bring purty nigh all the real trouble to the Indian country."

WHO they were or where they had come from was more than he could tell. They looked like a gang of buffalo hunters, and yet he had never seen so many hunters together—not unless they were teaming up and pushing through hostile country to better shooting grounds. Many were doing that these days, coming up from the Southwest to begin the ruthless killing off of the great northern herds. But such outfits always came with their giant wagons trailing them, and there was not a sign of a wagon up or down the little valley.

"An' still," he told himself, "that don't mean nothin'. Their danged wagons could be miles from here, an' yet means as I've seen some of 'em come, I ain't never seen a buffer low down enough for that kinda work!"

Mean, yes. Sometimes buffalo hunters were like that, a wild and fearless breed of men, the most of them to be smelled a mile away with a stout wind against them. Out on the hills and in the valleys they lived almost constantly with danger and the sudden striking of death. Most of them carried a tube of poison swinging from a strap or a chain around their hairy and unwashed necks to make certain of quick death instead of torture in case of capture by the reds. When the hunters hit the towns or settlements for a breathing spell they naturally were inclined to gang up, eight or ten of them able to raise more hell than forty Texas cowboys.

Most scouts hated the hell out of them,

knowing their coming meant trouble with the Indians who would fight to keep them from killing off the herds and destroying the red man's source of meat and leaving him, his squaws and children to starve—a neat idea cooked up back in Washington as the simplest way to wipe out the reds and take their fine lands.

But those whites down there were only blood-hungry, and it was a certainty that they were not old-timers. The Indians they were killing made only one of the many cruel sights a man was constantly stumbling upon out here. Too old to follow their ever-shifting tribes and a dead weight on the young, they were a mixed band of bucks and squaws who had ganged up in a sheltered valley somewhere to spend their last days in what little peace they could find, with slow starvation dogging them.

And now the whites were getting set for another let-loose of killing. Laughing and talking excitedly as though finding it great sport, they had pulled up down the creek to reload, a bottle flashing here and there. The leader was a tall black-beard on a white horse, and this would probably be the last

sweep of death that was going to take place.

"Last," Hassett nodded, "cause there won't be nothin' left for 'em to kill, damn 'em!" Old Remingtons out, going to at least make some noise even if his bullets would hit ground when only a fourth of the way down the slope, Lance Hassett jerked himself halfway to his feet when the whites yelled and started back up the creek. He caught himself just in time.

Something was happening down there. The leader of the whites was seeing something that made those killers suddenly change their minds. He was throwing up his hand and yelling something to the others in a furiously startled voice. The horses jammed together, milled crazily for a moment, and they were swinging wildly out of the jam and wheeling back toward the foot of the ridge, the lined-up Indians apparently forgotten in the quick burst of excitement.

The leader was pointing to something beyond the creek, and one could guess now that his mean eyeballs were popping with terror. For Hassett had looked, stared, and was almost ready to yell himself from sudden awe.

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Down the steep opposite slope of the valley a cloud was moving as if all hell itself lay on the sudden shove and with no thought of ever coming to a stop. It was a reckless, smashing thing, the noise a growling, grinding din, many-colored feathers flying in the wind, red bodies and painted faces somehow catching reflected light from the sun, the ponies under them appearing to merely skim the rough and dangerous ground in their headlong rush.

"*Cheyennes!*" Hassett dropped back between the rocks again, old-hawk face pale. From this very moment on anything that looked like or smelled like a pale face would not be safe from that charging redskin band on the slope.

The whites were like scurrying rats trying to break out of a trap of their own making. The game of murder they had been playing so rousing and unmercifully was something they were desperately trying to lay far behind them. Panic stricken in an instant, so scared they were like madmen, they were unable to head up the slope and were forced to try to flee northward along the foot of it.

The charging Indians, reading the meaning of every move, were swinging out to cut them off, the faint, far yells and war songs soon beginning to float up to Hassett, the crash of rifles joining in as the reds opened their fire.

While the fleeing whites wanted no more of it, it was now a game a Cheyenne liked best, once his blood had been fired to the boiling point. Fast-sweeping Indians were soon cutting off eleven of the whites before they could reach a crack-like pass in the ridge six hundred yards away and escape through it.

The eleven men were desperate enough. They had been racing their sweat-lathered horses up and down the creek until they had tired them out, never once thinking of this great band of Indians suddenly appearing to come howling and shrieking down on them. Now, like wild animals at bay, they pulled up and flung themselves down, knowing their minutes were numbered. They made a short, useless fight of it, not one of their fleeing comrades turning to try to help them.

The reds simply overwhelmed them, pouring into them fearlessly, a warrior dropping from his pony here and there

from a rifle or a six-shooter ball, the noise of the firing a rolling din. Sharp cries lifted as Cheyenne after Cheyenne jumped from his pony, a knife suddenly gleaming as he grabbed his victim by the hair, pulled up on it, and made a swift, round stroke to take his scalp from a dying white.

"An' damn good riddance," Lance Hassett nodded, "when he takes it! I'm only sorry they didn't get the others."

He might have waited for the whole show to play itself out, but the stark maddening sight of it brought the wagon train back to mind. There were close to a hundred bucks down there, and they had merely happened to run upon this thing. All that bunch had come for something else—the wagon train itself, if the signs for the past couple of days could possibly mean a thing.

But even without smoke signals that had been seen on far hills all those wild bucks down there would not be satisfied with a simple taste of blood—not after they saw what had happened to those old squaws and bucks and had heard the tale from the few left alive and able to talk.

There was only one thing to do, and that was to get away from here, and get fast! There would be danged little time to waste. Lance moved back on his hands and knees, hoping that none of these enraged reds had had so much as a glimpse of him. Soon he was stumbling and sliding, kicking up the dust here and there like a scared old mountain goat going down the slope.

Those men who had escaped through the break in the ridge might want to turn down the east valley—and they probably would do that very thing if they spotted the wagon train in the distance. If they came he did not want them to know that he had spied on them.

"They belong in front of a firin' squad!" He was cursing them when he reached Old Powder, his long, smoky-colored horse, and flung into the saddle to turn cautiously back down the creek. "An' the Army wants birds like that—specially old Major Iron Tail Blunt. They're allus makin' trouble wherever they happen to hit the country."

He kept watching for them by peering back over his shoulder as he rode, but evidently they had gone on up the valley—wolves who had done their ruthless killing and would probably have some peaceful settlement or the whole danged wagon train

suffering from their stupid recklessness before another dawn rolled around.

CHAPTER

The Warning

2

Down the valley, more than a mile below the place where the tall, sharp-pointed ridge came to an end, the wagons of "Captain" Calvin Chippendale's long train were slowly creeping into a tight but wide-sweeping half-circle on the high, east bank of the creek. It was just as Lance Hassett had told himself it would be. It had brought on another one of those devilish arguments and a couple of fist-fights.

Any fool could see, as some of the settlers pointed out, that there was very little wood here other than driftwood lodged on the rocks below the high rim of the bank. There were plenty of cottonwoods only a few hundred yards on up the bank of the creek. The grass there was better in the distance also, and they could pitch camp right on the edge of the water where one would only have to dip down his pail in his hand instead of lowering it on a confounded rope and hauling it up as if from a well sixty feet deep!

The thin, long-necked and long-legged Calvin Chippendale had agreed that all of that was true. The short, pompous Mr. Harper True, the lawyer, had also agreed. Lance Hassett was only making it hard for them, using as his excuse only a few smoke signals they had seen going up from the far hills. This country, he had said, was some of the most dangerous in the entire West. Not only was there great danger from the Indians, there was danger also from the very elements. A camp pitched too close to a stream might find itself being washed away in the middle of the night by a cloudburst suddenly letting down somewhere miles and miles from the scene.

For a short while longer—but only for a short while—it was best to listen to him, yet there would be many things to report once this train reached the benchlands of the Mussellsell River and an Army post could be found to report him for his high-handed old arrogance and have him kicked out of government service.

Neither Chippendale, the preacher, nor Mr. True, the lawyer, had warmed any settler's heart for Lance Hassett by following his orders here. They had made them dis-

like the old fool all the more, and it had been done in that nice way two smart men could do a thing without openly taking sides in an argument.

Everybody knew, of course, that Mr. Harper True was setting his sights on the gloriously blue-eyed Betty, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Calvin and Dellabell, who, it must be admitted, was sometimes called Hell's Bells behind her back by certain black sheep among the lot. Mr. True was always taking a gallop on his thoroughbred bay beside the dashing Betty, his mustache waxed and the hard hat sitting prettily on his curls.

Except for perhaps twelve or fifteen, the most of them rated as out-and-out black sheep and doomed to hell, nobody liked Lance Hassett. They said that Lance probably came West in the first place to escape paying the penalty for some terrible crime not to be mentioned in front of a gentleman and most certainly not a lady! Many of the honest but plainspoken women called him Old Devil Hassett without troubling their bones to walk behind him to say what they thought.

And now, never men to be found actually turning their hands to the menial affairs of pitching camp after the shouting of orders and galloping back and forth was done, a gnawing little pinch of fear had come to both Calvin Chippendale and Harper True.

They had cantered on six hundred yards north of the train to look over the wood and grass situation. Halting their horses in the edge of the creek and giving them a chance to drink, they were staring at the tip-top of that spike-like point of the ridge.

East and west of them, scouts turning back on the slopes of the valley had halted also, telescopes and field glasses here and there busy, all eyes on that high tip of the ridge.

IT WAS possible—just slightly possible, perhaps—that Old Devil Hassett was right this time. The point of the ridge was like a finger of many-colored layers of rock grimly thrust skyward, the dying sunlight upon it and the figure of a man who had suddenly but quietly appeared up there. Viewed through Mr. True's powerful glasses, he was tall and lean and straight, the nose cruel and curving like the bill of an eagle, the naked chest catching the light,

the long feathers of his huge and gaudy war bonnet fluttering now and then in the soft wind fanning his paint-striped face.

There was no doubt about it. This was an Indian at last, a real redskin, a brawny fighting man with his arms folded on his chest, his brooding dark eyes on the valley and the wagon train below.

It did not take much imagination to read the meaning of it. This was defiance, a warning and a threat all rolled into one. This, also, was the crowning touch to all those smoke signals Old Devil Hassett had been claiming he could read as they slowly arose in lazy processions of dark balls against the skyline of tall, far hills, sometimes early in the morning or late in the afternoon. Even now three big smoke balls lifted behind the motionless figure up there. They came up one after the other, dark and ominous, each rolling, bounding and scattering in the wind to become only faint, far-flung smudges against the yet-bright sky. As the last ball faded the figure turned, facing the dying sun, his long arms lifting to the west. He stood for a full-minute like that, the red man offering up his supplication, and then he turned and was gone.

"Very impressive!" Harper True tried to laugh and managed only a dry little cackle. "I understand that a few of these savages out here are rather apt when it comes to the dramatic. Wonder if he actually thought he could scare us?"

"I see Hassett coming." Calvin Chippendale lifted a long hand to point, his face gray and grave despite the smile around the wide, loose mouth. "Maybe the old cooter can tell us—or go at his usual great length to make believe he can."

CHAPTER

3

Mercy Bullets

"Him? Yeah, of course I saw 'im." Hassett was calm but uneasy as he came cantering up. "Took me a good look at 'im through my old 'scope. It was Arrow-in-the-Wind, yeah, an' I reckon he's got a right to be purty mad right now."

He took himself a chew of home-made twist and got it firmly settled back in his jaw before he told them the rest of it. It was simple and straight to the point, just as any old-timer of the frontier would have told it.

"An' all I could do," he wound up, "was to lie up there on the top of that ridge an' see the murderin' done. I'm tellin' yuh straight when I say it's men like that who bring on the most of our troubles with the reds, damn 'em!"

"Mr. Hassett," Chippendale frowned now, the loose mouth becoming hard, like something getting ready to bite, "I detest the thought of having to continually remind you that I am unable to appreciate profanity in my presence!"

"It does sound like hell to a preacher, I guess." Hassett looked up at the spike-like point of the ridge again. "Out here a heap of folks, the most I reckon, don't seem to give a good damn about it. Yo'll hear a heap of it, I 'spect, if yuh an' yore gang stay on the frontier. Hell an' damn, now—"

"Mr. Hassett!" Chippendale was losing his temper, the wide mouth cutting out the words like a trap snapping open and closed. "Mr. Hassett, I will take pains to remind you just once more—"

"Please!" Harper True dropped a quick hand on his arm, always the quiet little fixer when it came to holding this tall man in place. "We must at all times remember to consider the source!"

"Yes—I suppose." Chippendale tried to relax. "Children and fools are always an exception."

"Arrow-in-the-Wind ain't no fool," Hassett was going on gently, eyes again on the point of the ridge. "Gawd knows he's tried to play a fair an' square game with the whites. He got a dirty deal each time for 'imself an' his people. When or where he'll strike is more'n I can tell yuh right now. Maybe he ain't aimin' to strike. Maybe he wants to hold us back for somethin' he's getting set to hit like all hell a few miles ahead of us. All kinds of settlements spring up out here, overnight yuh might say."

"But we thought," True curled his lip, "you could read all the signs as easily as scholars read books!"

"Not all, no." Hassett was still unruffled. "Signs change from time to time. There's peace signs an' war signs, huntin' signs an' travelin' signs. Arrow-in-the-Wind can well enough know that there are some old-timers in this train, an' he ain't usin' the ordinary run of signals. An Indian's damn sharp, an' he's one of the sharpest. He speaks our talk a heap better'n some

of us 'cause he hung around Army camps as a boy an' knows what we're like. Hell an' damnation, gents, he was once all the way back to Washington with a bunch of chiefs! Yes, sir, trying to work out a clear an' fair understandin' with the politickers. They promised 'im the moon with purty feathers an' beads strung all 'round it. An' when he got back home he found things worse'n ever. Yeah, half his own village wiped out, his squaws an' kids killed!

"Say, now, say!" He had glanced to westward, eyes appearing to push forward in those deep old sockets. "Ain't that young Tobe Gunnison a-comin' like he's tryin' to bust ever' gut in his big red hoss? Why, he's ridin' like the whole hell's been scared outa 'im!"

Gunnison was a lanky Missourian tow-head of twenty. Lance Hassett had told him several times that he would one day make a fine scout, if he was fool enough as he grew older to keep on trying to make good on a job almost bound to get his hair and scalp for his pains in the end. Now he was banging across the valley as if he had just seen the Devil. When he crossed the creek he was white-faced and popeyed.

"It's turrrible!" he gasped when he snatched his sweaty horse to a halt. "The most awful thing I ever saw!"

"Indeed!" Again Mr. Harper True curled his lip. "I suppose, Tobe, you have seen an Indian, a real, fighting redskin!"

"On the ridge, yeah!" Gunnison cut him off with another gasp. "But I wasn't scared—not too much! It—it's somethin' else. Lance, it's a man on a big black mule in a big ravine up—up yonder on the slope. He's a fella like yuh, wearin' the same kinda buckskins, though they're a heap newer an' he's years younger, best I could tell. Him an' the mule are so filled with arrows they look like pin cushions."

"Then," Hassett nodded, "they're dead?"

"No, they ain't, Lance!" Gunnison looked back over his shoulder. "I saw the mule move, ever so little, it was, an' I heard the man groan. They look turrrible! I saw them mean old magpies first. They're swarmin' all 'round 'em. They've done picked the mule's eyes out, damn 'em!"

"Gunnison!" Calvin Chippendale's voice was like a sudden shot, his eyes blazing, wide mouth again cruel and snapping. "Re-

member your manners in the presence of your betters!"

"In other words, Tobe," Lance Hassett was snarling now, patience gone and ready to fight or eat the devil blood-raw, "a cuss-word just knocks the damn hell outa this long-legged jackass an' the sweet an' saintly disposition he's allus carryin' 'round on his high an' mighty shoulder. Turn back, son, an' lead me to that ravine!"

IT WAS not a sight for weak men when they got there, but weak men had no right to go and see it. Chippendale and True brought up the rear. Hassett and the youth rode down into the ravine. Lance was swearing like a pirate as a flock of angry magpies arose ahead of them, forced to flee from their helpless victims. In a moment Hassett was on the ground and moving up beside the dying man who still sat slumped in his bloody saddle, his back studded with arrows.

"Johnny Silver, it's me." Lance put his hand on the man's knee. "It's Lance Hassett, Johnny. Last time we was together was when we was scoutin' for Custer a couple of years ago. Can yuh hear me, Johnny?"

"Yes—Lance Hassett—I—hear—y u h." The words came one at a time, low and ghostly, each only a faint gasp of terrible pain. "I—guess—this—is—it. Arrow-in-the-Wind. Watch out for him. He'll hit yuh somewhere. I was tryin' to get through to yuh."

"Take it easy, Johnny." Hassett patted his knee gently. "I saw 'im not long ago, an' yuh got through all right. Well done, Johnny! We'll try to get yuh to camp—"

"Please don't—Lance. . . . It—hurts me—to talk. No chance. My guns are empty. Don't let me suffer like—like this, Lance. When I saw I couldn't make it I tried to—cut my throat. Didn't—have—the strength. Help me, Lance."

"Yes, Johnny." Lance Hassett's voice had become dreadfully low. "I—I can see how it is."

"An'—an' my mule, too—Lance."

"I—I reckon I understand, Johnny." His left hand moved up to close on the bloody hands on the saddle-horn. "I hate to see yuh go, but I reckon it's best. Good-by, Johnny." It was horrible now, old Lance Hassett looking up, face the face of a dying

man, two big tears beginning to drool down his cheeks. "Fair travelin' an' no reds on the other side of the Great Divide, Johnny. I'll report yuh in at the first Army post. G'bye."

And then it was more horrible than ever. A Remington .36 wheeled upward in Lance Hassett's right hand. There was a flash, a crash, and a merciful bullet had centered the dying scout's forehead. Hassett caught him in the crook of his left arm as he was falling, and had finished off the dying mule with a second bullet before he could ease his burden on to the ground.

Calvin Chippendale's scream was like a woman's that could have been heard a mile away. "In front of my very eyes! In front of my eyes!"

"It was murder." Harper True's voice was itself like a death-bell. "Cold-blooded, unforgivable murder. Lord, save us from this unbearable monster of a human being!"

"It was the only quick an' sensible thing for one man to do for another." Lance Hassett's face was still terribly old and terribly grim. "One of them arrows had gone down through the right side an' the head of it was stuck into the saddle. Pullin' 'im off that mule woulda been like killin' a man by sawin' an' draggin' rusty barwire through his innards already as sore as a boil."

"Men like you are not competent to judge such things, Lance Hassett!" Mr. True looked as if he was about to jump for him as he flung himself out of his saddle, Chippendale still sitting there with his hands covering his eyes as if yet trying to blot out the sight. "There are established courts and the laws of the land—"

"An' only lawyers got a right to kill." Hassett nodded. "I get yore point, Mr. True. A fat gut settin' on a bench, his wolves howlin' at the bar, a closed corporation—"

"Shut that old fool mouth!" Calvin Chippendale came out of his saddle like a flying hawk. He fell back, knocked heels over-head by a sudden blow of old Lance Hassett's fist.

True was jumping forward now. "I'll not stand and be insulted by a murderer! I—Wait, Hassett! *Don't kill me!*"

"Dry it, lawyer!" Lance Hassett had caught him by the collar, slamming him back at arm's length, then snatching him to him. Now a cocked Remington's muzzle

was in Harper True's stomach, boring in halfway to the trigger guard. "I don't aim to kill yuh if yuh lis'en to reason. It's me what's stood for enough, an' just one more damn blast outa yuh is right apt to start me thumbin' my hammer. The only love I have for yore kind or could have would be to pour lead into yore hungry guts until the smoke come curlin' outa yore eyeballs. Don't crowd me into it. *Don't crowd me!* Yuh get to hell back on that hoss an' keep yore lip buttoned up. If yuh don't yo're gonna die!"

"Tobe," he glowered at the startled Gunnison as he gave True a push that sent him sprawling, "yuh he'p me get Johnny on behind my Ol' Powder's saddle an' back to camp. I'm gonna get damn mad around here if this jawin' keeps up, an' then somebody's apt to get hurt, an' when I hurt 'em they stay that way a hell of a long time."

"An' yuh, Mr. True," he glowered down at him, "yuh got yorself a couple of fancy guns jammed down in yore purty waistband, an' Chippendale's got one on his saddle. If what I've said or done ain't suitin' yuh roosters, then I've still got me a good pair of Remingtons to match anything yuh or yore friends can dig up. If it's any bigger'n a louse I'll make yuh swallow it."

OTHERS were coming up by this time. They had seen Tobe Gunnison dashing down across the valley, had seen Hassett, Chippendale and True go galloping back with him. There were about fifteen of them now, all of them staring, four out of five ready to take Chippendale's part but none caring to come right out and say it and have to face Lance Hassett over gun barrels.

Even Gunnison made it a point to keep away from him as they rode back to camp. With the body of the scout behind the cante of his saddle he was at first in the lead, then he was left alone while the rest banded on to spread the news. If a man ever walked into a swarming hornet nest it was Lance Hassett, but he was double-gear'd lightning and ready for anything now.

The women were the worst, and of course the children sided with them. The latter evidently thought it a new and a great game to make faces and thumb their noses at Hassett. No man openly bantered him for a fight or a row. He could not just haul off

and knock a woman or a youth sprawling, but he was on the verge of it a dozen times before the few who were his friends pressed forward and began to take sides, a woman here and there bracing another and backing her down, the hide and hair just about ready to fly.

It was Calvin Chippendale who finally restored order. "Quiet!" he yelled. "Let there be peace among you! What has been done has been done, and the sinner himself stands before a bar of justice higher than mere man!"

It was a lull before a greater storm and he knew it. The women kept grumbling. A Dr. Ira Pepper, a little jumble-jaw in the train, helped the situation somewhat when he declared, after a brief examination of the body, that Johnny Silver could not have possibly lived. But his words carried little weight with Chippendale and his crowd.

Hank Bender, a burly Missouri blacksmith, had his say: "Me an' my little crowd take our stand with Lance Hassett, an' if anybody wants to fight us for it," he hurled his hat on the ground, "then come steppin' forward!"

"Ease 'er down, Hank." Hassett clamped a hand on his shoulder. "It ain't no use in fightin' 'a pack of damn fools. After supper I'll want yuh an' a few others what will to help me dig a grave."

But even supper was going to be denied him for the moment. He had been eating with the Pelkey family and paying them for each meal in spite of the abundant supply of game he was always bringing in. Their wagons were at the lower end of the camp,

and as he moved toward them he could sense more trouble.

The snuff-dipping, tobacco-chewing Arty Pelkey and his Toonie somehow reminded him of a billy-goat and a nanny that had grown old and cantankerous before their time. They were just crowding around the pots and a tall, cast-iron spider filled with half-burned antelope steak at the edge of the fire when he came strolling down to them. Toonie was not long in speaking.

"Now, Arty," she whined, looking at her little, hump-backed knot-head squatting beside the fire, "ye mought git up enough spirit in yer bones to rise an' tell the ol' devil whut we've been a-thinkin' an' a-sayin'. We ain't wantin' his kind 'round our children, an' if he don't like it he can take the rest of that darned antelope he shot yesterday an' go br'ile his own meat!"

"Hit's the talk of the camp, Lance," Pelkey arose with a grimace, hands clamped to his back, "that ye've gone an' done a turrible thing what no man has a right—"

"Shet yore pore fool mouth an' let 'im be, Paw!" Fronie, their sixteen-year-old daughter, was declaring herself, standing loose and wide-legged at the other side of the fire. There ain't ary one of us young uns what kin remember havin' a full gut for two days a-runnin' until Mr. Lance come along. Hunker yerself down on a rock, Mr. Lance, an' I'll fill ye one of them fine tin pans ye boughten us 'way back yonder at the tradin' store on the way out. Hit's yore vittles, anyhow, even to the biscuits in the oven thar at Paw's feet, an' ye boughten even the damn oven for us."

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"Fronie, yo're gonna make some man an almighty good woman!" Hassett grinned for the first time in hours as he patted the girl on the back. "I guess I ain't hurryin' to eat—"

"Hold here, Lance!" Bender had followed him and now grabbed him by the arm to wheel him around. "There's a place at my fire with my Annie an' the kids. Yo've been welcome from the first day. I shot a mess of sage hens this mornin'. Annie's got 'em brown an' purty in the pan, an' yuh won't find strings of hair in her biscuits. Come on!"

"Ye low-down robber!" Toonie Pelkey was sweeping toward him. "Ye'd steal 'im away from us, the little he shoots of game or the work he does for all the drudgin' I do to feed the ol' cuss—"

"Git back, hair-in-the-brain!" Bender was roaring now. "Yuh don't want 'im until he's ready to leave. Yuh see the feed bag a-goin' away from yuh."

"My Arty ain't well!" Toonie was beginning to scream. "Ye know well he's a mighty, mighty sick man!"

"He's the laziest hunk of white trash I ever looked at!" the blacksmith was booming, his voice going all over the camp. "Come on, Lance, my Annie's a-waitin'."

But Lance Hassett did not move. He was staring westward at the top of a long, ragged ridge where a golden band of light still hung against the sky. Into that bright band figures were moving, stringing out, ponies on the gallop until the crest of the ridge filled into a mile-long row of feathered warriors.

"Indians!" Somebody started to whimper. "Look at 'em gangin' up 'way off up yonder!"

"Fighting men to your places!" Harper True's voice came flooding over the camp like a bugle call. "Remember all the things I have told you! Get out your picks and shovels! We will begin throwing up earthworks at once!"

"An' now we'll go eat with Annie." Lance Hassett took hold of the staring Bender's arm. "That sight up there is the first sigh of relief I've had in days, Hank."

"But—but," stammered the blacksmith, still staring westward, "it is Indians, Lance! That ridgeback's standin' filled with 'em! Ever'body can see 'em!"

"Which is just now the purty part,

Hank." Hassett grinned broadly. "It's when yuh don't see 'em an' can't—well, sir, that's the time yuh start worryin' out here on the frontier. Didja say yuh had sage hen for supper?"

CHAPTER

4

Red Man's Prisoners

It was Sunday afternoon, four days later, that real calamity slapped them squarely in the face. Old Devil Hassett had been right again. Every word he had said had come true. He had taken no part in the panicky digging back there on the high bank of the creek, and had waited until morning to point out to them that the true place to meet an attack, had one been coming, would have been out there in the rocks and brush fully three hundred yards beyond the outer rim of the wagons.

The high creekbank, he had told them, would take care of itself. The only digging he had done had been to help open the grave for Johnny Silver, and it had been Old Devil Hassett, himself, who had preached the sermon.

There had been smoke on the far northwestern skyline the morning they pulled out of that camp, but most of them had thought that it was only a black lump of clouds hanging over the hills. Hassett, old to such things, had kept his mouth shut to all except Hank Bender and his wife.

"Some settlement wiped out," he had told them quietly. "Arrow-in-the-Wind has hit hard somewhere."

And now, in the middle of the afternoon, Tobe Gunnison had come galloping wildly back to camp from the northeast side of the valley, his big red horse looking as if he was ready to drop from under him.

"It's Mr. True an' Miss Betty!" he gasped to Chippendale and his wife. "Lance Hassett told them not to go ridin' all 'round the valley. I saw it up there." He had swung his hand toward a dense little forest three miles away. "They was ridin' into it when Indians popped up ahead an' all 'round 'em. Mr. True tried to run for it, but they caught 'im on their ponies flashin' up ever'where 'fore he could get forty yards away from Miss Betty. She just throwed up her hands an' started screamin' like they was killin' 'er! Mr. True didn't show no fight a-tall. I guess he was just too damn

scared to remember he was carryin' them fancy guns in his waistband."

"Hassett! Hassett!" Chippendale's voice was roaring now. "My daughter has fallen into the hands of the Indians! They have captured Mr. True. Hassett! Where is Lance Hassett!"

"Hassett's outa camp." Hank Bender answered him. "Hours ago on his Rimrock while he lets ol' Powder rest today. I reckon there ain't much rest for a scout, worried as he's been with so much danger all 'round us."

"Danger, hell!" It was the first time any of them had ever heard Calvin Chippendale swear. "*The damned old fool!* His place is here! He had no right to go anywhere without my permission! Get guns, get horses! We must do something!"



"An' what would that somethin' be?" Bender faced him without batting an eye. "Only Lance Hassett, I reckon, would know what to do, an', as I've just said, Lance ain't here."

Six miles up the valley, Lance Hassett was taking great care at the moment to not do anything. He stood beside a little water hole a mile east of the creek with his old hands lifted, eyes darting as they looked to the right and left.

Every bush and rock around him seemed to have suddenly but noiselessly become

the bore of a rifle staring at him, and now feathered bucks were rising, not a word being said, not a smile nor a ghost of one on those cold and emotionless faces. He had ridden right into it, seeing nothing and hearing nothing. Down on his hands and knees to drink beside his horse he had simply looked up into the shining round muzzle of a rifle.

Now, back on his feet, it was not too great a surprise when he saw Arrow-in-the-Wind step from behind a rock and move quietly forward. Arrow-in-the-Wind was the first one of those danged reds who seemed to have the faintest hint of a smile on his red-and-blue-striped face. He spoke, voice carrying no slight touch of malice as Indians quickly ganged around Hassett to take his weapons away from him.

"Long time go by, Lance Hassett."

"Yeah, I reckon so." Hassett slowly lowered his hands now that his Remingtons were gone. "Up on the Ruby, it was, 'round three year ago, I guess. Yuh had a broken leg when I found yuh. Seems how it's done got well an' ain't leavin' yuh with a limp."

"Lance Hassett was good to Arrow-in-the-Wind." The tall chief had stopped a yard away, folding his arms across his chest. "My pony was a fool to throw me in the rocks. Lance Hassett caught my pony and put me on his back. Treat him well!" He glanced at one of his arrogant bucks and spoke sharply in Cheyenne. "He is an old man. Watch him closely. You will not beat him or tie his hands."

"Arrow-in-the-Wind," Hassett shook back his shoulders, "I'm plum sorry to see a fella like yuh takin' the warpath. We need men like yuh on the frontier. There ain't never goin' to be no way of stoppin' the whites from comin'. Yuh Indians have got to learn to live with 'em in peace, tryin' to understand them an' try to make 'em understand the Indian. Yuh only lose when yuh fight—"

"Put him on horse!" There was a fierce gleam in the chief's eyes now. "No man can live with white man. White man cannot live with white man without fighting. He is the wolf with the pale eye, and his tongue is the forked tongue of the snake."

It was the end of his speech. Flung back into the saddle of his big old flea-bitten Rimrock with one of the bucks grabbing his reins, Hassett knew that any further at-

tempt to talk would be useless. Other ponies were being hurried up.

In no time at all they were moving away, swinging to eastward and riding hard as Indians usually rode, a ring of keen-eyed guards around him, their weapons ready to blow him out of his saddle at the first uncertain move. They kept to the ravines, and he noticed despite the pace that they were being careful not to lift a tell-tale banner of dust behind them.

COMING out at last on the high east rim of the valley in a sheltering grove of trees, Hassett's old eyes widened as he saw Harper True and Betty Chippendale surrounded by a dozen young bucks. They were all off their horses and ponies, the girl sitting on the ground weeping her eyes out, and True—always the bird with the ready lip—was trying to argue.

His hands were bound behind him and his face was white except for his nose and chin now covered with blood. One of those bucks had just finished slapping him in the mouth—but he would still plead in spite of it.

"It's inhuman, I tell you!" he was crying. "We have done you no wrong! We are a peaceful people, minding our own business, and you have no right by law or common decency to treat us like this!"

"Yuh might as well shut 'er down this time, Mr. True." Lance Hassett half-grinned at him as he came up and Rimrock was halted. "If I was to make a guess I'd say there ain't ary one of these bucks what can understand a word yo're sayin'. An' another thing, Indians don't know a thing about courthouses an' lawyers—only sometimes to burn an' kill."

"Damn you, old Lance Hassett," True was turning upon him like a snarling wolf at bay, "you led us into this trap! This is some more of your scheming! You know these damned dirty Indians, these filthy lice, no better than wild animals."

"Shut your mouth, white fool." Arrow-in-the-Wind had slipped quietly from his pony. "I am one of the few who can speak your tongue. It was by my orders that you and this girl were brought here. And it will be by my orders that you die, if it pleases me to give the order. As yet," he looked at the girl, "I have no quarrel with her."

"Then turn her aloose like a man!" True

was roaring at him now. "Let her go back to the wagon train, you filthy-hearted devil!"

"I say who goes and comes!" Arrow-in-the-Wind's fist had shot forward. The girl screamed as it smashed flat against True's nose and mouth, knocking him down. "The girl's pale flesh looks well to an Indian's eye. I have admired her from the distance many times when you did not know I was watching. She will go to my lodge. My squaws will teach her to handle the pots and make and mend my moccasins. She will be my squaw!" He slapped his chest. "The red ones soon learn to like me, and," he glanced at the girl again, "this one will also learn, when," he shrugged, "I have whipped her to make her know her new master."

"Hassett, damn you," True looked up from the ground, blood running again from his nose and mouth, "don't sit there like an old fool! You've got to do something!"

"Shore I have, Mr. True." Hassett nodded grimly. "I knowed that at the start, an' I'm doin' it. I'm keepin' my mouth shut, an' if yuh don't try some of the same medicine yo're apt to get yores kicked off yore face. These fellas ain't just another gang of Missouri farmers yo're tryin' to bully an' browbeat with yore slick tongue. They'll kill hell outa yuh!"

HOPE—something never really dead in a true fighting man's breast—was beginning to grow warm in Lance Hassett's old veins as they pushed on, making their way up the side of a towering mountain hump with its bald dome thrust high above the timberline.

With more and more bucks joining them here and there there was yet no more than forty in the party. From the start he had noticed that they wore new markings on their feathers and were carrying fresh scalps tied to their belts and the manes of their ponies.

Arrow-in-the-Wind had been playing hell somewhere. More and more smoke could be seen on the skyline in the north and the west to show where settlements had been struck. From the looks of things it had not all gone well with Arrow-in-the-Wind. Wounded bucks kept showing up, and here and there they carried a dead Indian sprawled across his bloody pony's back.

The truth was gradually coming to Lance

Hassett. Arrow-in-the-Wind was on the run, his main force either wiped out completely or fleeing in opposite directions. From a word dropped here and there it was a certainty that many of his dead and dying had been abandoned and left scattered for miles in the rough and wild country behind them, and Arrow-in-the-Wind was trying to get away from some force much, much stronger than his own.

He had delayed too long to attack the wagon train, if he had intended to attack it at all. He had probably been waiting for it to get into better fighting country, back there in the narrow valleys among the tall hills through which it would have to travel. Taking prisoners now was simply a hold-out.

Whether he would actually try to take the girl for another squaw was something only Arrow-in-the-Wind really knew, and yet it would be like him when he remembered the "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" teachings he had heard so often from the whites themselves in the Army camps. They had taken his squaws by killing them, and turn about would be only fair play.

But Betty Chippendale was not the only woman Arrow-in-the-Wind had taken somewhere. Hassett saw six more, all young and pretty, ahead of them when they started up above the timberline and swung northward along the base of the high, bald hump. The warriors were still growing and there

would be somewhere close to fifty of them now, wounded and otherwise.

They were moving cautiously, able to see miles over the country from up here, and, at the same time, likely to be seen if they were not careful to keep among the rocks and follow the waterless little ravines, going it now mostly in single-file.

Lance Hassett's old heart was soon beginning to pound after a sudden halt was made with the prisoners being forced to drop quickly to the rough ground. He saw something as he was getting down beside his Rimrock with a young buck's rifle poked against his ribs—and the sight was good for old eyes.

It was a long, rather rapidly moving line coming down a deep valley to northward and a mile below. Behind it came slowly galloping strings of mules hitched to two wagons covered with brown canvas. The sunlight flashed here and there on blue uniforms and rifles, and he knew it for two troops of cavalry, the guidon fluttering in the wind.

"Blunt." He let the word come whisperingly through his nose. "Old Iron Tail an' the boys, an' they've been doin' some long an' mighty hard travelin'. I wish they could spot us 'way up here. They'd soon have a fire lit in a lot of these breech-clouts."

He took a quick glance to the right and left. Indians were ahead and behind, and

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now he stole a glance at the sun. Standing quietly, he eased his hand up to a pocket in his shirt and carefully fished out a small pocket mirror. It was just one chance in a million when he started monkeying with it and trying to flash a bright blob of reflected sunlight down in the valley and have it catch somebody's eye and make him look up.

Once started he kept it up even when he was forced to get back on his Rimrock and lie sprawled flatly across his saddle horn and the horse's neck with an Indian walking beside him. Betty Chippendale was just ahead of him now. True was behind him, still trying to argue with an Indian who could not understand a word he was saying. Like a creeping string they moved on, the little mirror busy and Lance praying silently.

And then, just when it all seemed useless, Lance Hassett got his reward. Far below that moving line of soldiers had halted. For a moment it looked as if it was just to be a fall out and rest period, and then he realized that field glasses were suddenly busy down there and many faces were turned upon the high hump.

"What goes on!" Arrow-in-the-Wind was calling back down the line in Cheyenne. "What goes on!"

"It is the old one!" A young buck had spotted the mirror Hassett was trying to slip back in his pocket. "He has made signs!"

"Swing left, Betty!" A rattler could not have executed a quicker strike. Hassett had grabbed the young buck's rifle by the barrel, jerking it from his hands. Before that startled red knew what was happening the butt of his weapon had been rammed back, catching him squarely in the face. Then, steel rammed home, old Rimrock was flinging down through the rocks, a shot crashing here and there behind. "Ride loose in yore saddle, gal!"

Even Arrow-in-the-Wind must have been startled out of his senses for a moment. Like his bucks, he was tired, his spirits low, and before a cat could lick its whiskers the entire line was broken, other prisoners wheeling their horses and ponies to flee, sudden hell tearing loose without an instant's warning.

"Wait! I kill old man!" That was Arrow-in-the-Wind, shouting out in Cheyenne

again and now hating him more than he hated a rattlesnake. "Him belong me!"

THAT was like him, all hot blood and sudden damnation. He had tried to be good and at least halfway repay an old debt. Not once since he had been captured had Hassett felt that Arrow-in-the-Wind would kill him, and he had known that if he did it would be quick. And now, everybody thrown into a panic, he was a red with only one thought—kill the one he would have befriended had he been left alone to do as he pleased with the others.

With the entire slope looking as if it had leaped into sudden flight, Hassett kept going, yelling for the others to keep to the larger rocks. He wheeled in his saddle and killed one Indian with the captured rifle, and then he was flinging on down, old Rimrock apparently knowing the danger as he whipped to the right and left, taking the turns with the agility of a goat. But it was not to last.

Rimrock stumbled and fell. Hassett flung clear, losing the rifle as he fell. One of the captive girls came from somewhere, a big redhead with a freckled face and squalling like a wild woman. Her hands had been tied in front of her, but she had managed to free them somehow. With the horsemanship of a cowboy she swung down, snatching up the rifle on the fly and bounding on around behind another tall cluster of rocks.

When Lance Hassett stumbled to his feet he saw that he had Arrow-in-the-Wind to deal with hand-to-hand. But even as Arrow-in-the-Wind came closing in a sound reached his hairy old ears—music in the wind to a fighting man! It was a bugle call, rolling its song somewhere down the slope, and then Lance Hassett and the powerful Arrow-in-the-Wind were together just as that freckled redhead opened fire from behind the rocks.

"I would protect you!" Arrow-in-the-Wind was so mad he was slobbering. "Now I kill!"

"Couldn't find me a better red for the job!" Hassett lashed out with his fist as he spoke, a solid blow that caught the chief on the jaw and set him back on his heels. "Yuh oughta learned a little of our way of fightin' with the hands while yuh was hangin' 'round them Army camps, Chief!"

And then, catching himself, Arrow-in-the-Wind was like a twisting snake coming in. Younger and more powerful, he caught Lance in his arms, lifted him, tried to whirl him above his head, and then slipped on a rock, and both were down, the wind going out of them. Hassett held on, listening to that redheaded gal shoot, and then— That singing bugle getting closer on the slope.

It was bitter now as they came up. Arrow-in-the-Wind had a pair of six-shooters at his hips and a knife swinging in a sheath down his long red belly. Anger made him scorn them. What powerful fighting wolf needed weapons to kill an old dog! He would do this thing with his bare hands, pulling the old dog apart, choking the last of the life out of him and then snapping his lean old neck with his long, strong arms!

But intending to do a thing and doing it was something else. Lance Hassett hit him again and again, and now he drove through a terrific blow for the point of the chin. It missed the chin, going in and under it, catching the chief on the adam's apple. Arrow-in-the-Wind dropped as if he had been shot through the head.

And then, sweeter than all the music on the earth, that bugle filled the slopes again, calling, chiding, whipping fast riding troopers into it; the rifles beginning to open up, Indians wheeling to flee, leaving their unconscious chief and Lance Hassett to finish things among themselves.

* * *

"And so, you damned old heller, you no good old battle-axe, you couldn't get along with 'em!" As usual, it was the long-legged and quarrelsome old Major Iron

Tail Blunt who was laying him out cold when the fighting was over. "I send you back to Independence, giving you a mighty fine job. You get everybody in the train down on you—just as I knew you would, you damned old billy-goat. When in hell are you going to learn how to get along with people, Lance?"

"By that I take it yo're about through with yore little speech." Lance Hassett sat on a rock, glowering at him. Every prisoner had been freed. Eight of the Indians had been killed, and troopers were still chasing the others. Arrow-in-the-Wind was safe in the hands of a big, red-faced sergeant, and the great Mr. True had gone on back down the slope with the pretty Betty scarcely allowing herself to look at him now. Before leaving, Harper True had given old Iron Tail Blunt a piece of his mind. *Washington was going to hear of this!*

"And maybe Washington will." Old Iron Tail grinned and scratched his hairy chin. "I told the great Mr. True I'd look into all of it. Now that he's gone I think I'd better take some right drastic action. How'd you like a drink of damned good whiskey? There's two pints in my saddle bags."

"An' that," Hassett nodded, "is the only sensible thing yo've said. There are times, Iron Tail, when I think I might learn to like yuh, but my better judgment tells me to stand clear of the likes of yuh. Yo're too much like a damn polecat. A man can never tell when yo're gonna let loose at 'im. Gimme yore hand. Seems how I've sorter sprained my ankle."

And with that they arose and moved on down the slope—two old-timers in the Indian country with an understanding.

THE END



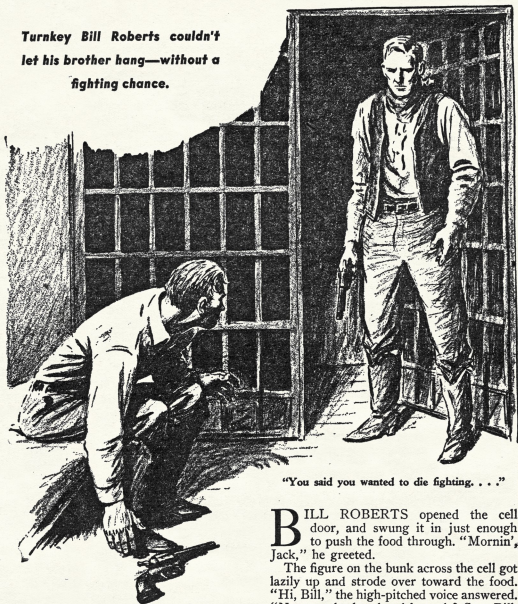
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A COLT FOR CAIN

Turnkey Bill Roberts couldn't
let his brother hang—without a
fighting chance.



"You said you wanted to die fighting. . . ."

BILL ROBERTS opened the cell door, and swung it in just enough to push the food through. "Mornin', Jack," he greeted.

The figure on the bunk across the cell got lazily up and strode over toward the food. "Hi, Bill," the high-pitched voice answered. "Next to the last breakfast, eh? Say, Bill, why do they hang a man on a full stomach? So he'll be sure to have enough weight to spring the trap?"

Bill Roberts didn't answer, nor did the cell occupant seem to expect him to. Between mouthfuls of food Jack went on:

"Still goin' to let your brother hang?"

**By FRANK
McINTOSH**

It was the same older brother Bill Roberts had known those long years ago back in Missouri. Always talking, as if he couldn't bear the peacefulness of silence. Yet he had been silent when he was first brought in and recognized Bill. Of course, he couldn't help blurring out Bill's name. No man could have. Nor could have any man explained it away so easily.

"Folks still live back in Missouri?" Jack had asked.

And after Bill's dumb nod, Jack Roberts had finished the explanation:

"Mine picked up an' drifted away a long time ago. 'Member how your pa an' mine used to fight over the line fence? An' how you an' I used to hide in the bushes an' laugh at 'em."

They had taken him back to his cell, then, and Bill had locked him in. Jack was brought to trial within a week, and convicted of the murder of a driver in a stage coach hold up. Only then had he begun to be a little scared and begun to plead with Bill for a chance to die like a man.

Jack had a horror of hanging, certain in his own mind that something would go wrong, and that he would die slowly and horribly. Give him a gun, he had pleaded, and let him go down fighting.

Now he was starting the argument again. Why couldn't he have taken Bill's first refusal as a final one?

"I wouldn't let my brother hang," Jack argued. "Especially from a scaffold I had built myself. Did you do a good job, Bill? Will the trap work? Did you measure it carefully? You want to be sure, Bill. Are you sleepin' good these nights?"

He didn't have to mention that. It was only cruelty to recall the recent tortured nights Bill had suffered; to remind the turnkey of the haunting thoughts that pestered him constantly. No man liked to see his brother die, even if there was nothing he could legally and honestly do to prevent it, even if that brother surely deserved hanging.

For perhaps the hundredth time in his life, Bill Roberts wished for courage. Like he had that night back in Missouri when Jack Roberts had become Jack Reynolds and had taken the first step on the road to the scaffold.

That night Bill had tried to build up a courage he didn't have. For long hours he

had listened to the plans of his brother, and had heard all the music of an enchanting and adventurous life. But the sober reality of the consequences had held him back. He could see clearly the end of the trail, just as he could see the starkness of the gallows frame through the window of Jack's cell.

Jack was speaking again.

"It would be an easy trick to do, Bill. You could just place a gun under the platform, an' fix the trap so that it would let me through. I could fight my way to boothill, then."

"You'd still have a rope around your neck," Bill demurred.

"It wouldn't choke me."

"Even one bullet in the gun might add another murder to your list," Bill said.

"You're a coward, Bill, like you always was."

He'd finished eating now, and Bill reached in to get the empty dishes. When the door was locked, he turned away without speaking again, and strode down the corridor to the sheriff's office at the front of the building.

Jack was right. Bill was a coward like he always had been. Like always he pondered the results of every action until it was too late for direct, forceful steps to be of any value. It just wasn't in him to do as Jack requested. He should have been more like Jack.

"I wouldn't let my brother hang."

NO, he wouldn't. Or would he? Bill Roberts didn't know his brother very well now. Years ago he had, and sitting in a swivel chair some things he had forgotten came back to him. Jack as a boy, lying his way out of difficulties, as often as not throwing the blame on Bill, and grinning as Bill took a hiding because he couldn't think fast enough to tell a better story than Jack.

Bill would get the blame now if anything went wrong. There were plenty of folks around town who were quite ready and willing to string Jack Reynolds to the nearest cottonwood if they had the chance. And their righteous anger would quite justly descend on Bill.

No, he couldn't do it—and yet he wasn't completely willing to say he wouldn't. After all, the man was his brother. And Bill could make sure there would be no slip-up by merely carrying a gun to the hanging.

A gun. One brother killing another.

On a table against the far wall, lay three Colts, each once had graced the hip of a man who had misused it. Bill got to his feet and strode to the table. He picked up two of the guns and stuck them in the waist band of his trousers. Then he returned to the corridor leading to Jack's cell.

Without speaking, without even looking at the man inside, he opened the door and flung one of the guns across the room. It skidded to a stop just short of the cot, almost between the feet of Jack Roberts.

Now Bill's eyes met those of his brother, and Bill answered the question the other was silently asking.

"You won't have to wait until tomorrow for a gun," Bill said slowly. "All you got to do is pick that one up."

"What's the answer?" Jack demanded.

"You said you wouldn't let me hang if you had a chance to stop it. You said you wanted to die fighting. There's a gun, an' I've got another here."

Then it was silent, while Jack Roberts looked down at the gun on the floor just once, and then up at his brother. It was plain he was studying the layout in order to figure out the catch in it. And it was plain he couldn't find it. Slowly the tense-

ness in his bent body relaxed, but his tongue flicked quickly across his lips, and he rubbed his right hand on his pant leg. Bill stood quietly in the doorway.

"You got the odds with you some way," Jack snarled. "You wouldn't toss that gun in here if you didn't think you had the best of it."

"You won't hang," Bill said.

It had been a trick, a stunt to get Bill off guard while Jack swooped down and swept the gun from the floor. He came to his feet savagely, with the dull sound of a trigger click carrying clearly across the narrow cell. Then there was another sound, the disheartening slap of a gun hammer on an empty cylinder. Again the sound came, and again—six times in all, and Jack Roberts looked down at the useless thing of steel in his hand.

A stream of profanity burst from him and he slammed the gun to the floor.

Then Bill spoke. "You'll hang tomorrow, Jack. You put the noose around your own neck when you picked up that gun. It was a trick—a trick to see if you'd let your brother hang. Maybe you wouldn't. I don't know. And I never will. But you'd shoot your brother. And he'd be just as dead that way as any other."

HOW SMOKE STARTED A CITY

A wisp of smoke caused the founding of Fairbanks, Alaska. The smoke came from Captain Barnette's river boat which was unable to cross the wilderness rapids near the present site of Fairbanks. Barnette, an Indian trader, was bringing a cargo of supplies up river where he intended to establish a trading post, miles beyond. His boat's failure to cross the rapids meant that he must return to his starting point and bring his cargo back in a lighter-draft vessel. While he was turning his craft around he saw Felix Pedro, a prospector, standing on a hill overlooking the river. Pedro had just struck gold and was getting his bearings so that he could go out and record the claim. Just then Pedro saw the smoke from Barnette's boat and he hurried to the bank. When Pedro told Barnette of his finding gold, Barnette realized a stampede would result. After giving Pedro supplies and telling him to go out and record his claim, Barnette unloaded his cargo on the bank and set up a trading post. That was the founding of Fairbanks, Alaska—on the very spot where, a few weeks later, thousands of gold-seekers stampeded in to buy Barnette's supplies and to prospect in the hills near Pedro's lucky find.

GUNSLICK BAIT

Bud Durham, cowtown carpenter, had to use the tools he knew—even against gun-fast Spider Orlap.

"Hear you turned smarty britches, Mister!"



By
GIFF
CHESHIRE

BUD DURHAM'S brown forehead crinkled tightly as he admitted that he couldn't possibly stretch the bakery carpenter job out another day. Jeanie Tremont had her addition built on, the snug bed and living rooms tacked onto the rear of her shop which fronted on the cowtown of Bonedry's one long and busy street. And from the looks of things, she

would be right glad to get shed of him.

This Bud could not understand, for he had turned her out a special job, putting the rock fireplace in the living room and windows in the bedroom that could be opened to let in air but keep out night prowlers. This he had thrown in on his own say-so, purposely confusing costs so she wouldn't know of his gifts to her.

Bud tacked on the last mop board and sat down on a saw horse, juggling the hammer in his hand. Through the door was the bakery kitchen, and he could see Jeanie in there, busy with her baking. In all his years of vagabond carpentry, in this wild, scattered cow country, he had never seen a prettier girl.

Jeanie looked up from a big cake pan she was greasing, but no smile lighted her pert face as it had at the start. She looked away and carried the pan out of sight. Bud sighed again. He was hungry, and something smelled like it could hit the spot, but it had been a week since she had last invited him to sample her products, with no word of explanation ever having come from her. Except when she'd said they had better break up the eating arrangement.

"This don't look good," she had said, and then she had clammed up.

Then abruptly, a week ago, she had suggested that he go back to eating in the dumpy male-cook restaurant down the street.

So now the job was finished, and he was ready to go on, and he didn't want to go. He got up angrily from the saw horse, tossed the hammer into his tool kit with a bang, and went into the kitchen.

"Reckon you've got yourself some quarters," he said.

The girl nodded, pushing hair from her face with the back of a floured hand. "We'll settle up." She looked at him a long moment, then said abruptly, "Bud, would you do me one more favor? Ride over to Thornberry and get me some baking powder?"

The carpenter looked at her in surprise. "How-come? Thornberry's twenty miles off! What's the matter with Brule's mercantile, right here in town?"

The masked look dropped over the girl's face again. "He hasn't got any. They aren't making it any more. He says."

"Say, is that sidewinder trying to pull something on you?"

"Never you mind. I can't run without baking powder. If you don't want to ride over to Thornberry to get me some, say so."

Bud was staring at her in wonder and slow understanding. "Brule have anything to do with you firing me out?"

"Bud I don't want to talk about it!" She rinsed her hands at the sink and began dry-

ing them. "I'll pay you what you still got coming and you can be on your way!"

"I'll be back," Bud said.

He turned out through the front room, where Jeanie kept her showcases crammed with light bread, cookies, cinnamon rolls, pies and cakes. He crossed the sidewalk and cut a slant straight for Sam Brule's mercantile. He had been going there a lot for nails and strap hinges and window weights. He did not like Sam Brule and was well aware that the man did not like him. Now Bud was extremely suspicious.

Brule drew plenty of water in Bonedry; ran the town, in fact. Bud had heard townsters and cowhands talking as he loitered around town of an evening. Now the tall, lean carpenter strode into the big store with purpose squaring his shoulders. Brule wasn't there, but a pasty-faced clerk tipped him an impersonal nod. Hattie Eubank, town seamstress and gossip, was examining the bolts of dress goods.

"Baking powder," Bud said.

The other stared. "What do *you* want with—?"

"A whole case of it!" Bud said. "Quick."

The clerk's lips twisted suspiciously. "Look, mister! I got my orders. She ain't tricking me!"

"STOREROOM, I reckon," Bud muttered, but the remark was directed to himself. He strode on through a door into a back room, the clerk following and protesting. It didn't take Bud a half dozen looks to locate what he was hunting. He picked up a wooden box plainly marked "Jenk's Supreme Baking Powder," hefted it to make sure it was full, put it down again.

Then he fished into his pocket, flipped a gold coin to the clerk, picked up the box and strode out through the store and across the street, aware of Hattie Eubank's staring wonder.

He went right on through to the bakery kitchen.

Jeanie stared at him. "What's that?"

"Baking powder." Brule lied. "They're still making it."

He was surprised at the effect of this information on the girl. Her body went limp and she dropped into a kitchen chair, looking at him with troubled eyes.

"He'll be after you, now, Bud! You've

defied him and he'll have to settle with you! So I reckon I might as well tell you all about it. You were being polite a while ago when you called him a sidewinder. He's the ugliest kind of a town boss, the kind that works under cover. He won't let us hire a marshal. That tough, Spider Orlop, that hangs around the saloons really works for him. The businesses Brule doesn't own in this town he exacts levy from. He laid off of me for a long time. For a reason!"

"I can guess," Bud said.

"No doubt. He thought I'd be fool enough to marry him. I had to turn him down so hard he's still smarting. So he put the levy on me, and I told him where he could go. So he quit selling me flour, lard, baking powder and things. He controls the stage and freight outfit, so I couldn't have it sent in. Lucky I'd stocked up pretty heavy, but today I ran out of baking powder."

"And got some more," Bud reminded her. "Enough to run you for months. Hattie Eubank'll have it all over town in half an hour."

She frowned worriedly. "That's the trouble. I hated to hurt your feelings like I did when I started giving you the cold shoulder, Bud, but I was scared if I told you, you'd go on the rampage and get yourself hurt. Brule didn't like you working for me, and especially me feeding you. He told me right out that if I didn't quit it, something was pretty apt to happen to you. He meant Orlop. I just hoped you'd finish your work and be on your way, and that'd be all there was to it! Now—well, he won't let you get away with taking that whole case of baking powder! If he does he's inviting ruin!"

A funny feeling had started running up and down Bud's spine as he listened to her. It was a mingled emotion, relief that it hadn't been her own notion to turn against him, excitement at the possibilities this opened up, and a tight, clammy scaredness. For a fact, he hadn't realized what he was running into when he got so high handed about the baking powder. He had seen the tough hombre, Spider Orlop, who worked for Sam Brule, and as for himself he was a carpenter instead of a gun hand.

"So I'll pay you off!" Jeanie said desperately. "And you skedaddle!"

Bud grunted. That would be the smart thing to do, all right, but he knew instantly he would never do it. Not leaving Jeanie here to be plagued by a skunk like Sam Brule, even if Bud didn't have private feelings toward her. But he didn't want her fussing at him, so he didn't say one way or the other but let her draw her own conclusion by going out to the newly built quarters and starting to pack away his scattered tools. He noted the fishing tackle stowed in his tool chest; a well stocked trout stream would make welcome surroundings, right now.

He was thinking desperately. Brule would act sudden. The only way was to beat him to the punch. Bud winced as he remembered there was not only Brule but a gun-slinging hireling to settle with; a sizable undertaking for a square and hammer man.

For some strange reason Bud found his mind running a long way back, to the days when his father had been teaching him the carpenter trade. He could almost hear the old man saying: "Learn to use your tools, son, and stick to 'em! Don't ever try to

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work with a tool you ain't got the feel of—" That seemed to make sense, but Bud turned it over and over in his mind.

He went back into the kitchen presently, carrying some tools. He picked up the case of powder and took it out in the bakery showroom. Jeanie's front windows were backed by wide, flat ledges on which she displayed some of her goods. Bud cleared a space and set the wooden case in the center of it, resting on a piece of one inch board. He spent fifteen minutes with hammer and tools, getting everything set to his satisfaction.

Jeanie came out presently and eyed the new display. "What on earth are you up to, Bud?"

Bud grinned flatly. "Advertising."

"You don't have to pull the man's whiskers," Jeanie said, frowning. "He won't stand for your flaunting that baking powder to the town!"

"Figure the same way," Bud admitted. "If he's going to get proddy, we might as well give him plenty of reason. You go back to the kitchen, and I'll tend shop for awhile."

Within half an hour he knew that the chain of cause-and-effect he was engineering was starting to operate.

They came together, presently, Brule and Orlop. Brule was a wide-shouldered man of medium stature, and he wore a spade beard, and save for his eyes, which were small and mean, he was nondescript. Spider Orlop was the really dangerous one of the pair, wearing a low-tied gun on his long, lean hip, and he had the lithe, menacing movement of a panther. They stalked across the street and banged into the bakery.

Sam Brule shot a cold look at Bud Durham. "Hear you turned smarty-britches, Mister! Teach him and this whole snickering town a lesson, Spider!"

ORLOP grinned and moved forward. That Hattie Eubank had got in her work was pretty evident from the crowd that began to form cautiously.

"Pick it up!" Orlop ordered. "You're going to tote that box right back over to Brule's store, with all them people watching!"

Under other circumstances, Bud figured he would have enjoyed tying into this cocky

Spider Orlop. Now his plans demanded a baser role. He backed away from the slowly advancing gunslinger, feigning a not too pretentious fear. Orlop crowded him toward the watching Brule.

Brule stepped capably aside, swung suddenly and sprang toward Bud, his broad shoulders hunched. He grabbed Bud from behind, pinning down his arms. The carpenter struggled furiously, but not too long. Brule held him fast.

Orlop came in, then, still grinning. Pistoned fists pelted against Bud's head. The carpenter was entirely helpless, now, and he began to regret the strategy that had let him in for this. Savage pleasure gleamed in the gunswift's eyes as his impacting knuckles drew blood. He drew back his right, sent it forward, and Bud Durham's gangling body sagged.

Brule let him slide to the floor, glowering at Orlop. "Hell, you didn't have to lay it on so thick! I wanted the town to see him totting that box back over to the store. Now *you* can tote it!"

Orlop shrugged and turned toward the baking powder box in the show window. Leaning across a row of cream pies, he tried to lift it out but lacked the necessary purchase. Cursing, he climbed into the window. He bent over the box, snugged his fingers underneath, lifted—and howled.

"Criminy, Brule! Lift this blasted thing off of me!"

Brule stared, then stalked forward. He tried to tilt the box, one end of which had caught the still stooped Orlop's fingers, and failed. He, too, climbed into the window and inserted his fingers under the other end. He, too, yelled:

"Damn!"

Bud Durham climbed to his feet, still groggy from the haymaker that had floored but failed to knock him cold. He nursed his jaw tenderly and grinned. Jeanie came to the door.

"You all right, Bud? It was all I could do to keep out of it, like you told me to!"

Bud went to the door and on out onto the sidewalk. Through the window he could see Brule and Orlop, each bent over the box, baffled in their efforts to lift it—and more, they were unable to let go now that they had started it.

"Come on over where you can get a good look, folks!" Bud invited the watch-

ers on the opposite sidewalk. "They're harmless, now!"

He went back inside, lifted Spider Orlop's sixgun from leather and tucked it into the band of his own pants. He rolled a cigarette and dropped into a chair to smoke it. Jeanie cut up a few of the pies and went out onto the walk to pass it out.

"Independence day," she explained. "We're celebrating!"

Brule and Orlop filled the air with abuse, but neither could retreat from that laborious lifting stance.

"Might as well calm down," Bud advised, "You'll never get that box lifted, on account of I nailed it down. And you won't get your fingers out until I pry up the box on account of the row of fishhooks I tacked on the bottom along either end. As soon as the crowd's had a good laugh, Orlop, we'll escort you to the edge of town and give you a start. Brule can stay in business as long as he behaves himself."

He let another fifteen minutes elapse before he rescued the two tough hombres from their predicament. Slowly the crowd recovered from its shocked incredulity. Here and there wags began to relish the situation.

"Brule's laying down on you, Orlop! Make the little son lift his end!"

And when finally Bud got his tools and pried up the box and got sundry fingers untangled from the fishhooks the crowd took over the job of escorting the gunswift out of town. Brule made a beeline for his store and disappeared inside, followed by a lot of good advice from onlookers.

By the time Bud got back to the bakery kitchen, Jeanie had a meal on the table. Bud looked at it in surprise. "Part of that for me?"

Jeanie shook her head. "Didn't I tell you it don't look right?"

The carpenter dropped gaze to his boot toes. "Been thinking. Brule might get high handed again unless somebody stays around here to keep a eye on him. Lot of carpenter work I could do around here, and help in the bakery. Thought if I rode over to Thornberry and got a license and a preacher—"

"Hurry!" Jeanie said, smiling. "I was wondering how long it'd take you to see what'd make it look right!"

FRONTIER QUIZ

A Man-Sized Kid

HHE GRADUATED from the frontier school before he was eleven years old—a master of monte, stud poker, and fighting. His wiry figure, and clean youthful appearance gave him the most famous nickname in the history of frontier badmen. He averaged a killing for each of the twenty-one lead-pocked years of his life.

What do you know of his career?

Score yourself on this list of questions.

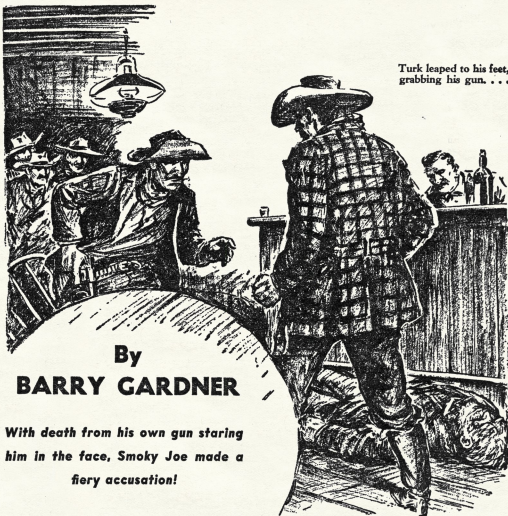
Count 55% for the first question, and 5% for each of the others. 65% to 75% is an average score; 75% to 85% is excellent; and above 85% is exceptional.

- (1) What was his nickname?
- (2) He killed his first man when he was twelve years of age. What weapon did he use in this initial killing?
- (3) What two outlaw trades provided him with his income?
- (4) He was but eighteen years of age when he led one of the two factions in one of the West's bloodiest range wars. What famous New Mexico county was the scene of this war?
- (5) Would you say that acting ability played much of a part in his career?
- (6) What type of instrument was it that he had in one of his hands at the time of his first and last fights?
- (7) What was his last name?
- (8) What facial characteristic did he have in common with nearly all famous gun-fighters?
- (9) In what state was he killed?
- (10) Who was the former friend who killed him?

The correct answers are found on page 97.

REQUEST. TO DIE

Turk leaped to his feet,
grabbing his gun. . . .



By
BARRY GARDNER

*With death from his own gun staring
him in the face, Smoky Joe made a
fiery accusation!*

JUST stooping to take the mink from the snare, Sam Turk leaped backward and whirled in midair, a silent snarl on his thin dark features. But he saw instantly that old "Smoky Joe" Carse had him cold.

Smoky Joe, a runty, gray-bearded little man, had just stepped from a snow-shrouded jackpine thicket forty feet away. A .22 rifle dangled in Smoky Joe's left hand, while in his right he clutched an old six-shooter. Clamped between the oldster's teeth was a half-smoked cigar.

"Up to your old tricks, eh, Turk?" Smoky Joe said grimly.

Turk's black eyes gleamed. "You got no proof I aimed to take that mink!"

"How about them two beaver there on the ground? They was took from my snares. I been followin' you and readin' sign. I been waitin' for this chance to get you cold turkey."

Sam Turk watched craftily as Smoky Joe came slowly forward, his laced boots crunching in the soft snow. A bleak wind rustled the snow-laden trees, the sky was

sullen and grey. Turk had been robbing Smoky Joe's traps all winter, and this wasn't the first time the old trapper had caught him stealing pelts. On that other occasion it had been Smoky Joe's testimony that had sent Turk to prison for two years.

Free again, and determined on revenge, Turk had returned to his old shack several miles from Smoky Joe's cabin. All the time he'd been robbing Smoky Joe's snares, he'd been awaiting a favorable opportunity to kill the cigar-smoking oldster. . . .

Smoky Joe, his attention focused wholly on the trap-thief, didn't see the dead branch protruding from the snow. He tripped, sprawled forward to his hands and knees. He rolled desperately, trying to bring his gun in line with Turk's lunging figure.

But Turk had pounced with the sudden savagery of a cougar. He slammed the oldster violently backward into the snow, kicking and mauling wickedly at him. When he finally rose, Smoky Joe's gun in hand, Smoky Joe sprawled, stunned and helpless, in the snow.

"So, old man!" Turk grinned. "Now we shall see!"

Smoky Joe sat slowly up, swiping snow from his eyes and whiskers. The crumpled stogie was still clamped in his teeth.

He said calmly, "Reckon you hold top cards, Turk."

"And I know how to play 'em! You know what I aim to do?"

"Sure—you aim to kill me. I caught you stealin' fur, and you've hated me ever since I testified ag'in' you in court."

"You remember that day, eh, old man?"

"Yeah, you swore you'd get even with me. Well, looks like you'll do it." Smoky Joe took the crumpled cigar from his mouth and looked surprisedly at it. Then he grimaced, cast it aside. "Seems like a man about to die's due a last request, ain't he?"

"Such as what?"

"A last smoke—one of these Sweet Aromas in my pocket."

Turk was enjoying himself. "Sure, go ahead—it'll give you a little time to think about what's comin' to you."

Smoky Joe took from his shirt pocket a long, black cigar. His love for these black, evil-smelling stogies had given Smoky Joe his sobriquet. Squatted there in the snow, he lit the cigar. Soon a cloud of smoke was fogging about his bewhiskered face.

"Reckon you know you'll hang for this, don't you, Turk?"

"Won't be any proof I done it."

"Sheriff Concho Drake's purty smart. Knows you hate me, too."

"Knowin' I hate you won't be proof I killed you, will it?"

"Mebby it won't, at that." Between satisfying puffs, Smoky Joe held the cigar down between his knees, the cupped palm of his left hand shielding it from the driving wind. "How you figure to do it?"

"Why, with your own gun. Then I'll put the gun in your hand and leave you here. When the sheriff finds you, it'll be plain what happened. There'll be the mink in the trap—there'll be your sign, where you run forward—where you stumbled over that dead limb, fell, and your gun went off and killed you."

"It won't work."

"Why won't it?"

"Because, thievin', murderin' snakes like you hardly ever get by with their meanness! You ain't fit to stink up the air—"

"Shut up, old man!" Sam Turk cursed wickedly. "If you hadn't said that, you might have lived to finish that stogie. Now. . ."

Desperately, his stringy legs uncoiling under him, Smoky Joe lunged upward and at Sam Turk.

Turk leaped backward, the gun in his hand blasted, and old Smoky Joe Carse crumpled face-down in the snow.

IT snowed that night. And, early the next morning, Turk headed for the nearby town of Doan's Ferry. He had carefully erased his own sign at the scene of the killing: Still he felt in need of whiskey to buck him up.

Doan's Ferry, huddled in the timber beside the river, had only one saloon, which was a meeting place for the townsmen, and trappers and ranchmen for miles around. Turk went immediately to the saloon. Having no real friends, he drank alone, sitting at a table so that he could see the street through a window.

It was about midafternoon when he saw Sheriff Concho Drake ride into town, leading a pack horse that carried a blanket-covered figure. Sheriff Drake was a big, red-haired young hombre who fiercely hated all law-breakers. Watching the rider's progress

along the street, Turk was instantly certain that the blanket-covered figure on the pack animal was old Smoky Joe Carse.

He had just gulped another drink, when the door was opened, letting in Sheriff Drake with a dead man across his shoulder. Drake strode to the center of the room, gently lowering the stiff figure of Smoky Joe Carse to the floor. The room got very quiet.

Drake's bleak gaze slowly circled the faces in the room. Turk felt a chill prickling along his spine as that heatless gaze paused briefly on him. A dozen men, over their first shock, got to their feet and started forward.

Sheriff Drake said sharply, "Stay back!" and they sat down again. The sheriff went on, "As you kin see, there lies Smoky Joe Carse—dead. This mornin' Pete Riker stopped by Smoky Joe's cabin on French Creek. When sign said Smoky Joe hadn't been in his cabin all night, Pete started lookin' for him. He followed Smoky Joe's trap-line, and pretty soon he found Smoky.

"Smoky Joe lay close to a mink snare, his six-shooter in his hand, dead. One shot had been fired from the gun, and there was the dead limb stickin' out of the snow where Smoky Joe had tripped. The bullet got him in the stomach."

"Gun musta went off when he fell," a puncher said.

"Looked that way. But it didn't. Smoky Joe was murdered!"

A wave of sound broke over the room. Turk's black eyes narrowed down warily.

The puncher asked, "Why you figure that, sheriff?"

"First, Smoky Joe wouldn't have had his six-shooter in his hand—he'd have used the .22 rifle I found beside him to kill the mink. Second, if it was an accident, the gun-muzzle would have been jammed hard against

his stomach, and there would have been powder burns on his mackinaw."

Those in the room shifted nervously. Sam Turk eased his hands from the table-top.

"That told me Smoky Joe was murdered," Drake said slowly, "but not who done it. Smoky Joe himself done that. The killer made one bad mistake—he forgot that even a man mortal shot, if he wants to bad enough, might live long enough to write the name of the skunk that killed him!"

Concho Drake pivoted suddenly, and his voice was like a whiplash in the room: "Turk, I'm arrestin' you for murder!"

Turk leaped to his feet, grabbing for his gun.

His gun-muzzle was still rising, when the sheriff's booted toe slammed into his chin. Then Turk realized dazedly that he was down on the floor, that Concho Drake had his gun and was standing over him.

He rolled over and sat up, and the sheriff pulled him to his feet.

"You can't prove anything," Turk whimpered. "You lied when you said Smoky Joe wrote somethin' in the snow before he died. It snowed last night, and even if he had wrote somethin' the fresh snow would have covered it."

"That's right," Concho Drake admitted. "Only you thought of that a little late. And I didn't say he wrote somethin' in the snow, or anywhere else, after you shot him. He wrote something, all right, only not in the snow, and *before* you shot him. Look!"

He stooped and spread the fingers of the dead man's left hand. Stunned, Sam Turk stared down at the hand.

For there, seared in livid, uneven letters across the palm of the hand—the hand that Smoky Joe had used to shield the glowing tip of his "last smoke" from the driving wind—was a single, damning word: *Turk!*



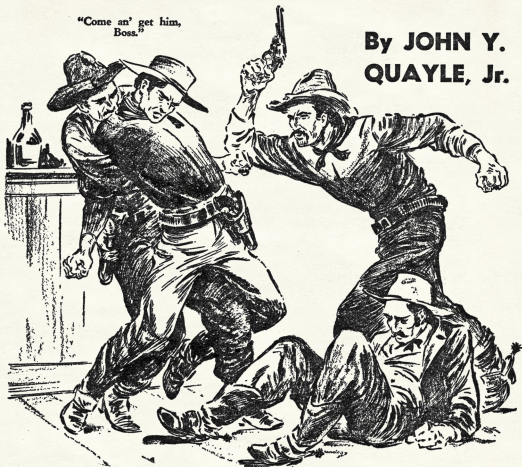
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THE PRODDY GENT

"Come an' get him,
Boss."

By JOHN Y.
QUAYLE, Jr.



● ● ●

Chuck figured that the best way to tell a two-legged polecat that you didn't like him—was to poke him on the nose.

● ● ●

ACROSS the green-topped poker table, Nash Hawkman's hard, florid face looked blurred. I decided that sooner or later I was going to use my fist to wipe the habitual sneer off his tight-lipped mouth.

Nash took the card Happy Days dealt him and added it to the four he was holding in his long fingers. He fanned them out close to his calfskin vest, gave them one

quick glance from his coal black eyes, and said:

"One hundred bucks."

Jake Flager, the short, bowlegged, broken-nosed gun slinger who was ramrod of Nash's Bar A ranch, dropped out before Nash pushed his chips into the center of the table. The others had pulled leather before the draw.

That left it up to me. And one hundred

pesos was all I had left in the world.

I looked at the card Happy flipped me. A deuce. No help at all to my two pair of Kings and tens. Although I had too much red-eye in me, I knew I had no business calling Nash. I started folding my hand.

"What's the matter?" Nash asked insolently. "Water in your blood?" His words lashed like a quirt.

I knew I was loco, but I said: "I'll call."

Nash waited until my chips were out, then laid his cards down slowly one by one. He was mean that way. When he had his iron on a man or animal, he liked to make it burn long.

He had a full house, aces and treys. I threw my two pair into the discards face down and pushed my chair back.

I was cleaned, but that wasn't enough for Nash. He took my cards and spread them out so everybody could see what a sap I was. His laugh was short and dry and he said:

"Two measly pair. Andrews, you play poker just like your Old Man did."

Flager's tobacco-stained teeth showed as he guffawed.

I was boiling mad and I snapped: "Keep your tongue off my Dad!"

Nash's jaw jutted forward and his black eyes glared at me. He started from his chair and I was ready to swing on him. Then he hesitated and sat back.

I guess he sensed the heavy disapproval of the old-timers there in Nolan's saloon. We were all thinking of the night ten years ago when I was fifteen and my Dad lost our Bar A ranch to Nash in a stud game.

Dad's cold, dew-covered body was found on the trail next day. He had a bullet in his head and his fired sixgun in his hand.

"Sorry," Nash said coldly. "Guess I spoke out of turn."

I grunted, spun on my heel and walked straight through the crowding cowpunchers and townsmen, the smoke and the fusty beer and whiskey smells and out the swinging doors.

The night air was cool and refreshing as mountain water. As it drove some of the whiskey fumes from my head, I mentally kicked myself for ever returning to Aqua Dulce.

After Dad's death, Mother took me with her back to Texas. There was no life left in her and she followed Dad soon. I drifted

around, working for one ranch and another, all the time feeling an urge to return to New Mexico and Aqua Dulce.

I fought it because I knew the old hurts would be opened raw. But two weeks before in Socorro, I hit a monte game for five hundred simoleons, and the next thing I knew I was riding down the cottonwood-shaded main street of Aqua Dulce.

Boots clumped behind me and a man asked: "Cleaned out, Chuck?"

Turning, I saw a lean old jasper with a saddle-leather face, sagging gray mustache and bushy brows that almost met over keen, faded blue eyes.

"Who're you?" I asked.

"Ron Perkins," he said. "Yore old Daddy was a pard of mine. I'm foreman at the Tumbling S."

"Sure," I said. "I remember you now. I'm cleaned all right. Flat broke."

"Need a job?" Perkins inquired.

"Does a coyote need a fat chicken?" I grinned.

"I could use you on the Tumbling S," he said.

"You hired a man," I said.

"First maybe you ought to know that it ain't exactly a healthy job," Perkins drawled.

"Why?" I asked.

"Quite some few of our boys been taken with lead poison."

"I've heard it kills a man quicker than whiskey, but not so pleasant," I said. "What brings it on?"

HIS blue eyes gave me a long, intent look. I stared back. He nodded his flap-brimmed sombrero toward Nolan's saloon.

"Nash Hawkman," he said.

I blinked and felt the resentment surging in me again.

"Well?" Perkins challenged.

"Well—what?" I said, my voice a bit thick.

"You still want th' job?"

"I already said you'd hired a man, didn't I?" I answered.

"Come to think of it," he said, "you did."

Perkins' eyes twinkled. He grinned and stuck out a big, friendly hand.

"Shake," he said.

We shook quick and strong. If Nash

Hawkman was making trouble, I wanted a hand in stopping it.

"How about a drink?" I asked. "To seal the bargain."

"It's a long dry ride out to th' ranch," Ron agreed. He smoothed his shaggy mustache with a gnarled forefinger, saying: "Lead the way."

We shouldered through the batwings and up to the scarred bar. Nolan wagged his bald head and asked:

"What'll it be, gents?"

"Some of yore coyote-killin' poison," Ron said. "I know it ain't fit to drink, but we got a bargain to seal."

"What's that?" Nolan asked. His pudgy fingers set glasses and a bottle of Bourbon before us.

"Chuck Andrews here," Ron said, clapping me on the shoulder, "has just hired to ride for th' Tumbling S."

Nash and Flager left the poker game and were behind us when they overheard Ron.

Nash scowled. He stopped so short that Flager almost bumped into him. Flager swung with his boss to face us, spraddling his bowlegs and hooking his right thumb in his gun belt near a holstered .45.

"I didn't know you was going to stay around here, Andrews," Nash said.

"If it's any of your business," I said, "I am."

"Anything that goes on here is my business," Hawkman said arrogantly.

He riled me. I took a step away from the bar, mentally figuring the distance to his chin, and said:

"This isn't."

"No?" he asked tartly.

"No."

"It's your funeral," Nash stated.

"Is that a warnin'?" I asked.

"It could be," Nash replied. "Take it any way you like it."

"I like it this way," I said.

I slammed my left fist into his stomach and bounced my right off his chin as he doubled over. Nash hit the floor hard and slid in the sawdust.

He wasn't out but he was plenty dazed. I stepped forward, waiting for him to get up, when Jake Flager jumped me from behind. He pinned my arms to my sides and growled:

"Come an' get him, Boss."

I tried to rattle out of his grasp, but he was too strong. Nash gathered his long legs under him and came up breathing heavily.

He swiped his hand across his mouth, bringing away blood from a cut lip. His eyes narrowed to slits and he started forward clenching both hands.

There was a wish, and I heard the thunk of a gun barrel on Flager's head. His bear grip relaxed and he slumped to the floor.

"Hold it," Ron Perkins commanded. "The show's over."

Nash froze, his venomous eyes resting on Ron's sixgun.

"Thanks, Ron," I said.

"It was right pleasurable," Ron answered. "Now let's cut the breeze for home."

"Nope," I said. "Me an' Nash have business to finish."

"Not now," Ron said sternly. "Yo're working for me, Chuck, an' I said git."

I shrugged and said to Nash: "Some other time."

"Get out of this country," Nash said.



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I turned and walked out of the saloon, feeling his eyes on my back like the cold point of a bowie knife.

RON and I rode silently for a while, the clomp of our horses' hoofs, the creaking of the saddle rigging and the far-away lonely yapping of a coyote making a familiar range tune.

Ron spoke first: "Do you always go off half-cocked, Chuck?"

"Not always," I replied. "But that Nash Hawkman gets me sore as a boil."

"Uh-huh," Ron grunted. "Makes you think of yore old Daddy, hey?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I was away with a trail herd when he cashed in his chips," Ron said. "Tell me about it."

I told him how Dad lost our ranch to Hawkman.

"Nash's mighty slick with th' cards," Ron commented.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked him.

"Nothin'," Ron said. "Go on."

I told him the rest of it about Dad being found dead on the trail and the coroner's jury deciding it was a clear case of "suicide."

"That don't sound like yore Dad," Ron Perkins said quietly. "Killin' himself like that."

"You think that way, too?" I asked eagerly. "I never could believe it. I know losin' the ranch would have hit him hard. But he'd been in tight before. He always got back on his feet again and took care of Ma."

"That was his way," Ron said. "But the sign read suicide, hey?"

"Yeah," I said.

The eagerness died and I felt the old dull ache again. I decided I'd better get my mind on something else.

"That's all long gone," I said. "What's wrong between the Tumbling S and Hawkman?"

"Plenty," Ron said. "It's comin' to th' point where either he goes or we do."

"I'm listening," I prodded.

"It started some time after Old Man Sterling died an' left th' ranch to Loretta and Jimmy," Ron said.

"I didn't know he was dead," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Well," Ron continued, "to make it short but not sweet, Hawkman tried to buy th' spread from th' kids. They wouldn't sell. Nash don't like bein' crossed. He turned his gunmen loose, some fences was cut, we lost cattle an' a couple of our men was shot. The rest took their time an' me, Jimmy an' Loretta are all that's left."

"How's Jimmy?" I asked.

"Stove up with a bullet through his arm," Ron replied grimly.

"And Loretta? She was a long-legged kid with red braids an' full of the dickens when I left."

"She's no kid now," Ron said. He chuckled. "But she's still full of th' dickens."

* * *

The sun was just sending red and yellow streamers over the high, ragged mountains when Ron shook he awake.

"Grab yore socks, Chuck," Ron said jovially. "I can smell that breakfast bacon an' coffee already."

I swung my feet over the edge of the rough plank bunk and looked around the bunkhouse. It sure seemed lonely with just me and Ron in there and no cowpunchers snorting and blowing while they pulled on their boots.

"There's water in th' pan outside the door," Ron said. "Get moving."

"All right," I grumbled. "Take it easy."

I slid into my faded Levis and dragged on my boots. Running a hand over the stubble on my chin, I decided not to bother about shaving.

Then I walked to the door and saw Loretta up by the main ranch house. And she wasn't the leggy kid with red braids I remembered.

She was the prettiest girl I'd seen in four states. Her figure was trim and round and the hair that tumbled over her shoulders shone like burnished copper.

I gulped, turned, brushed by grinning Ron Perkins, and dug my shaving gear from my battered war bag. Ron poked along after me while I walked out to the wash basin and started lathering up.

"I never knew a puncher yet who shaved in th' middle of th' week," Ron said dryly.

"You do now," I said.

I could feel my face getting red. Ron looked over my shoulder and winked at me in the streaked mirror. I almost cut myself

when I twisted to grin back at him.

At breakfast, I found Loretta as easy to talk with as she was to look at. She was a couple of years younger than Jim, who was my age. He had his left arm in a neat white sling. His face was pale and drawn, but his clear blue eyes and firm jaw showed he had plenty of sand.

We talked about how Nash Hawkman was trying to squeeze them out and I asked:

"How come you don't go to the sheriff?"

"Oh, him!" Loretta sniffed, tossing her head disdainfully.

Jim scowled and said: "We did and a lot of good it was."

"Sheriff Mordin is just th' same as another of Hawkman's gunmen," Ron said. "Nash's the big old he coon around here, an' Mordin used to ride for him."

I said: "Looks like they got you comin' and going."

"No they haven't!" Loretta stated. Anger gleamed in her green eyes. "If you think that way, you might just as well go over and join Nash Hawkman."

"Now don't go turnin' on Chuck, Lorrie," Ron admonished. "He's all right. He knocked Nash down last night."

"You did, Chuck?" Loretta's green eyes flashed. "Tell me about it."

"It wasn't much," I said, but old Ron grinned maliciously, set down his coffee cup and told them everything.

"No man ever hit Nash before," Jim commented thoughtfully. "He's not going to forget it, Chuck. He'll be after your hide."

After breakfast, Ron and I rolled smokes and meandered down to the corral. I dabbed my twine on a couple of good looking horses and we saddled up. I noticed Ron had saddle bags on his hack.

"How come?" I asked.

"Extra cartridges and a pair of good field glasses," Ron replied.

"Sounds like we're goin' on a nice peaceful ride," I said. "Ain't you forgetting the picnic lunch?"

"Here that comes now," Ron said.

Loretta walked with a free, graceful swing from the cook house and handed Ron some thick sandwiches wrapped in oil paper.

The breeze blew a tress of red hair across her face. She pushed it back with one small hand while she asked Ron:

"Where are you riding today?"

"Out along th' south fence," Ron said.

"Be careful," she said. Her green eyes were worried.

"Don't you fret, Lorrie," Ron reassured her.

"Yeah," I said. "We'll be okeh."

We mended a break in the fence down in a brush-filled arroyo, and by mid-morning had choused maybe fifty head back toward the center of the ranch. It was good country and should have had more cattle. I saw that Hawkman's boys had been busy.

We came to a fork in the trail and Ron told me to ride on along the fence while he cut off to look at a salt block. I was riding easy when the trail dove into a tangle of mesquite about a quarter of a mile past the fork.

That's when I heard the angry snarl of a bullet that tugged at the brim of my sombrero.

The sharp report of the rifle just reached me as I yanked the .30-30 from my saddle scabbard and jumped to the ground. I lit running and another bullet whined off a rock behind me as I sprawled in the mesquite.

THE shots came from a jagged rock ridge a hundred and fifty yards away. I saw the glint of the sun on a rifle barrel between a crevice in the rocks.

A third bullet clipped through the mesquite as I levered a cartridge into the chamber and triggered a fast shot. I followed it with another that dropped right into the crevice shadow.

A man yelled, "Ah-a-a-ah!" and I saw the rifle fall.

I scrambled to my feet and ran crouched over up the slope. It was hard going with branches clawing at me and gravel slipping under my feet. Before I was half way, I heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs and knew the bushwhacker was getting away.

The dust of his going was still in the air when I topped the ridge, but he was out of sight around a bend in the trail. I picked up his rifle, a Winchester .38-40, saw some blood spots on the rocks, and figured I'd winged him.

I heard another horse coming fast along my back trail, whirled and had the .30-30 up to my shoulder when I saw it was Ron.

"You all right?" he yelled.

"Yeah," I shouted. "Come on up. I got something to show you."

Ron caught my saddle horse and led it up the ridge. He looked attentively at the blood spots and the rifle while I told him the story.

"A .38-40, hey?" he commented. "Happy Days uses one."

"Another Bar A man?" I asked. "I didn't savvy that."

Ron nodded.

"Then let's get after him," I said.

"Clear to th' Bar A?" Ron asked. "If you want to commit suicide, why not do it right here an' we won't have to work th' horses into a sweat."

I said: "No jigger can take a potshot at me an' figure that I'm goin' to sit around twiddling my toes. At least, we can see if he does go to th' Bar A."

"Uh-huh," assented Ron. "Lead on, pilgrim."

The fresh tracks made easy trailing. I wanted to go after Happy Days as fast as possible, but Lon held me back.

"One drygulch trap is sufficient unto th' day," he said.

So we scouted from the top of each rise in the trail before riding on. Instead of turning northwestward toward the Bar A, Days kept bearing south.

That puzzled Ron. He squinted his blue eyes at the tracks, shook his head and gnawed at his mustache.

"It don't make sense," Ron muttered. "He's headin' straight for th' *malpais* where our range joins Hawkman's."

"Just how bad is that *malpais*?" I asked.

"It's a mess of piled up rocks an' old lava beds," Ron replied. "There's no water in it an' not even th' cows go in. I ain't been in myself for a couple of years."

It was the worst country I ever saw, like a devil's nightmare. We lost Days' tracks twice, but found them again after circling. Finally they cut into a well-marked trail and we reined in.

"First time I ever saw this," Ron said. "I never even knew it was here."

Among the horse tracks in the trail, were the small prints only a mule's hoofs leave. I pointed them out to Ron.

He stared at them for a second, then cuffed his old sombrero back on his head and smacked his thigh. His eyes glinted brightly as he looked at me.

"Yeah," I said, nodding at him. "I see it that way, too. Smugglers."

"Uh-huh," Ron agreed. "Nobody else'd use mules around here. Besides, th' border's not so far down th' line."

"That might explain why Hawkman's so all-fired anxious to get th' Tumbling S," I said. "His men could save a lot of miles by cutting straight across th' Tumbling S into Aqua Dulce."

"Sure," said Ron. "But we ain't got proof that Hawkman's mixed up in this."

"Then let's get it," I said.

We did. When the trail dropped into a deep-narrow gorge, we scouted along the top. Huddled under an over-hanging cliff, we saw a small adobe shack. Mules were in a pole corral and a group of men stood before the 'dobe.

Ron handed me the field glasses. As I twisted them into focus, the faces of Nash Hawkman, Jake Flager, Happy Days and two Mexicans became clear. Happy's right arm hung limply by his side. There was a big blood splotch on his sleeve.

Taking turns with the glasses, Ron and I watched them several hours. Directed by Nash and Flager, the Mexicans loaded long boxes on the mules and rode off south.

"It's my guess," I said, "that those are rifles goin' into Mexico an' it'll be dope and other contraband comin' out."

"Yo're speakin' th' gospel truth or I never busted a steer," Ron agreed.

"Now's the time to get some law," I told him.

"You gone loco?" Ron snorted. "I already told you Sheriff Mordin's just another of Hawkman's gun-slingers."

"There's other law," I said. "There's U.S. Marshal Banning in Socorro. He'll be interested."

"That's a right smart idea," Ron said.

"You go back an' hold the fort at the ranch," I said. "I'm ridin' across country to Socorro. Me an' Banning will be at th' Tumbling S around dawn."

TO LOOK at him, you'd never think Marshal Banning was a tough hombre. He was a short man with friendly blue eyes who talked quiet and moved slow, unless there was a ruckus. Then his eyes were icy pin-points and he exploded into action like an unbroken mustang.

We arrived at the ranch as Ron, Jimmy

and Loretta were finishing breakfast. Marshal Banning and I'd pushed our horses all the way from Socorro and we were bone tired. Loretta rustled us some grub and we tied into it.

Ron and Jimmy went out on the porch to smoke while we ate. We were on the second round of flapjacks and thick syrup when the screen door banged open and Ron said laconically:

"Visitors comin'."

"Who?" Loretta asked.

"I can't tell yet," Ron said. "But I think I recognize that white-faced sorrel of Hawkman's."

Excitement burned the weariness out of me. I stood and eased the .45 in my holster. Marshal Banning calmly drank the last of his coffee before he stood and walked to the door.

"What can he want, Ron?" Loretta asked. Her face was white, but she held her red head high and proud.

"Well, Lorrie," Ron said gently, "I don't figure to be readin' Nash's mind, but it can't be a social call."

Jimmy, his mouth set tight, came in and walked over to a gun belt hanging on a peg. He pulled a Colt from the holster and stuck it into the waist band of his trousers.

"It's Nash, all right," Jimmy said. "He's got Flager and Happy Days with him. Sheriff Murdin too."

"I don't savvy th' sheriff bein' along," said Ron slowly, "unless Nash's fixin' to pull some dirty stunt he wants to make look legal."

"They'll be here in a minute," Marshal Banning called from the porch.

Ron took a double-barreled shotgun from the wall. He and Jim and I walked out and lined up beside Marshal Banning.

"Let Hawkman make his bid," Marshal Banning stated. "When the hand's dealt, we'll know how to play it."

They reined in before us, Sheriff Murdin, a big-bellied man who sat heavy in the saddle, a little to the front. Beside him was Nash Hawkman, a self-satisfied sneer on his face.

Broken-nosed Flager had his hand on his gun. Happy Days had his right arm in a sling, but his left hand rested on the butt of a Colt, too.

Looking at Nash made me think quick of my Dad and I knew this was the payoff.

There was the same tense stillness about us that you get just before a horse race.

"What're you doin' on the Tumbling S?" Ron demanded gruffly.

"Now, Ron, don't go getting on yore high horse," Sheriff Murdin answered, his voice high-pitched and nervous.

"Don't stall, Murdin," Nash asserted. "Do your duty."

"We come for Chuck Andrews," Murdin said.

"What for?" Ron asked.

"For drygulching Happy Days yesterday," Murdin said. "I got a warrant."

"For me?" I said. So that was Hawkman's play. I felt anger surging in me and I rasped: "Since when does self-defense come under the heading of drygulching?"

Sheriff Murdin started to sputter an answer, but Nash cut him short.

"We haven't got all morning, Murdin," Nash stated. "Serve the warrant on that saddle tramp."

"Get off that horse," I told Nash, "an' I'll show you who's a tramp!"

"It won't work, Hawkman," Marshal Banning drawled. "Instead of you takin' Chuck here, I'm arresting you."

"Who're you?" Nash asked harshly. His hand hovered over his gun butt and his suddenly wary and suspicious eyes jumped from me to Banning.

"I'm the Federal Marshal from Socorro," Banning replied.

"And why're you arresting me?"

"For smuggling," Banning said.

NASH started in his saddle as though he'd just heard the warning whir of a rattlesnake. Banning's words meant his ruin. In the flash that Nash realized it, I could tell that he also made up his mind on his next move.

"No way in hell," Nash gritted.

His hand streaked to his gun. The bluffing was over.

Ron's shotgun roared, but startled Sheriff Murdin was in the way. The buckshot meant for Nash slammed the sheriff out of the saddle.

I had my Colt out and swinging on Nash. Flager and Days were shooting from the backs of their bucking horses. Jim got one and Marshal Banning dropped the other.

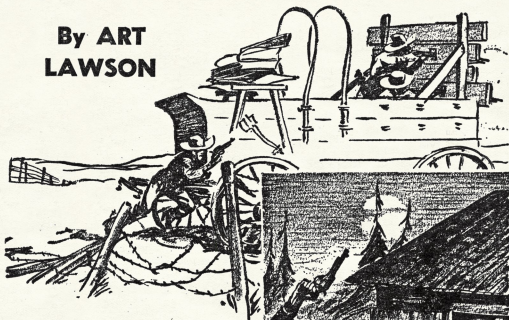
Ron was reloading the shotgun when a

(Please continue on page 96)



WAR SMOKE

By ART
LAWSON



Cowboy Jim Balt was such an all-fired strategist that he let himself be talked into being a range-war general.

CHAPTER

Cold-Decked Attack

1

Jim Balt came upon this ranch after sunset and followed the rich smell of beef and beans to the mess hall. There a man moved out of the shadows to appraise Jim carefully with the help of an unshuttered bull's-eye-lantern while Jim stepped down from the saddle. Beyond the brightness of the flame Jim could make out nothing but a blur, the dim figure of a person much his size, broad and tall, accompanied by someone rather smaller.

"Name of Jim Balt," he said. "Takin' a passar through this country. Home is up Montana way."

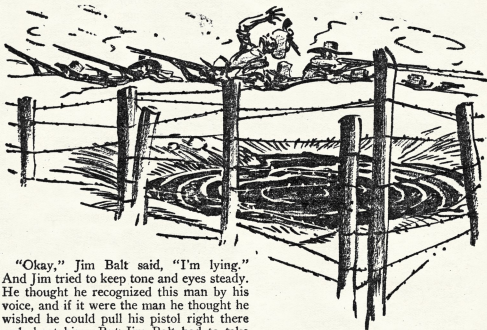
"You got a Texas crease in your J.B. and your roan's carrying a California saddle!" the man said slowly but definitely. "You're lying."



Jim came back with a bare fist. . . .

OVER THE LYING E

Dramatic Cow-Country Novelette



"Okay," Jim Balt said, "I'm lying." And Jim tried to keep tone and eyes steady. He thought he recognized this man by his voice, and if it were the man he thought he wished he could pull his pistol right there and shoot him. But Jim Balt had to take his man alive.

He put a hand on the horn and lifted a foot to the tapaderoed stirrup.

"Just a second, Jim Balt," a woman's voice said. "We don't turn away even our enemies with an empty belly—"

Jim flung his leg over the cantle. The bull's-eye light was still in his eyes. "I don't eat with hombres who call me a liar," he said.

"Don't be a fool as well," the woman cut in.

Blood boiled hot in Jim's ears, burning his ears and filling his head with a low humming sound like that of a cyclone on the horizon. He began to grin slowly.

"Okay, lady," he said. "Reckon I was humpin' my back without cause. I just get kinda sore now and then when somebody calls me names. Thanks for the invite."

He slipped from the saddle again and loosened up the single cinch. The man had

shuttered the lantern but Jim Balt was still blinded from the after effects of its brilliant light.

"You'll find oats and hay in the long shed by the horse corral," the man was saying. "And the coozie don't like to wait chow."

It took Jim quite a while to find the corral in the dark; to feed his horse and come back to the cook shack. When he arrived the others were through eating. Some of the cowboys were sitting around in front of the shack on benches smoking cigarettes. The cook scowled at Jim from behind a long, well-scrubbed table.

"What in Hell's been keepin' you?" he asked.

Jim scowled back at him. "I been tryin' to get mean enough so I'd feel to home around here," he said. "But I reckon I picked out too big a job."

The cook did not laugh at Jim's joke, but when he turned back to his pots Jim

knew by the light in the old-timer's almost colorless eyes that they would get along.

Jim ate very slowly. He slopped a lot of condensed milk into his coffee and drank three or four tin cups of the hot stuff; and when the coozie noticed that there was no Bull Durham tag hanging from the pocket of Jim's shirt he offered the makin's.

"Thanks," Jim said.

There were a couple of big lamps hung over the long table where Jim sat. At the other end of the table the cook had settled down to play a game of solitaire. Jim rolled a cigarette, tossed the makin's back to the cook, and smoked slowly. One by one the men of this outfit found excuse to come in and take a look at him. Some said, "Howdy." Some just looked and went back outside.

Jim finished his cigarette. He pinched it out and got up to walk around the table to the iron stove. He lifted a lid, dropped the cigarette inside where the coals were gray-ing. Then he went to the doorway. A man just outside in the shadows spoke quietly to him.

"Boss wants to see you up to headquarters. I'll take your gun."

He was completely matter-of-fact about this. It was Jim's man again, talking in a cold voice, but remaining in the darkness. Giving up his gun was giving up part of himself—giving it to an enemy could be suicide.

"Suppose I don't want to see the boss?" he said.

"Up to you," the man said without raising his voice.

The cook growled from his card game. "Hell! If we'd wanted to get rid of you I could of put strychnine in the frijoles."

"Okay," Jim said.

He unbuckled his belt. He carried only one gun, a Colt single action .44 holstered low in his right thigh. There was a thong at the tip of the holster for use when he expected to be doing some fast shooting but ordinarily untied for comfort. It was loose now. He handed the whole business to the man in the shadow.

"Name of Scar," that man said. "You can have your shootin' iron back when the boss is through with you."

Jim shrugged. Scar was not the name of the man for whom he was searching. Feeling very uncomfortable without a gun Jim

headed across the ranchyard to the low headquarter's building, treading lightly. The wide gallery was only a couple steps higher than the ground. He went up and halted until a voice spoke to him from inside the lighted main room.

"Jim Balt," the voice said. "Come in."

IT WAS the woman's voice that had spoken to him at the cookshack when he first rode up. He stepped into the lighted room. He had seen scores of places like this, rich and poor, in good taste or bad. But this was different from them all. It was not the gray-haired old-timer sitting behind the huge oak table, nor the excitingly lovely girl leaning against the mantel. It was the pictures on the walls.

They were oil paintings of bucking horses, of longhorn steers and grizzly bears. There was one very poignant picture of an adolescent girl that hung over the fireplace. His eyes moved from that to the girl, herself, and he saw that they were the same. That picture, he reckoned, must have been painted five or six years ago. Tragedy had come into this girl's life since then.

"You're wanted for murder in New Mexico Territory," the man behind the table said suddenly. Jim was startled. His eyes flashed down to the old-timer's and found them much like the eyes of the girl. Otherwise these two didn't look at all alike. "You killed a crooked tinhorn gambling man who had influence with the law. There was only one witness. He was wounded in the fight. He testified against you, then disappeared. If you go back they'll hang you. If you go ahead—sooner or later somebody'll turn you in for the reward."

There was no use denying this.

"You didn't change your name," the girl said in that soft, haunted voice, "because you romantically wanted everyone to know who had done in that tin-horn. Well—everyone knows."

Jim let his glance move down from the girl's face. She was dressed in shirt and levis like a man. She had braided her black hair in two ropes that hung over her shoulders.

"So?" he asked.

"We got a job for you," the man said. "We'll pay a hundred dollars a month. If you live a month to get your pay, you'll be lucky."

"I'll take the job," Jim said.

"And if I was you," the girl said sweetly, "I wouldn't give up my gun again—to Scar—or anybody else." Jim glanced again at that picture of her, then straight into her dusky eyes. She read his mind.

"My brother did it," she said.

She added nothing. The old man knocked the ash from his pipe.

"Name is Bede Emery—my daughter Susan."

Jim nodded. The girl turned away from the cowboy. He knew that he was dismissed. . . .

Jim did not sleep too well that night. A hundred dollars a month was shooting pay for a cowboy—killer's pay—and Jim Balt was a peaceful man.

Someone was moving through the bunkhouse, coming quietly, directly to the bunk where Jim lay on his back. Jim shifted his hand to the butt of his pistol and waited. He could see the whites of the man's eyes now, and knew that the intruder could see his.

"You won't need the pistol," the man whispered. "But if it makes you comfortable to bring it—" He stopped. For more than a minute he said nothing. He stood very stiff, only his eyes moving. He was listening for something, Jim deduced, but Jim could hear nothing at all except the usual sounds of a half-filled bunkhouse. The man began to whisper again: "Meet me out back."

Jim did not answer him. Jim lay still until the man left. After a while he slipped his feet out of the bunk. He put on his hat, tightened his belt, and carrying boots and gun, moved silently toward the door. The stars pointed to midnight as Jim put on his

boots, buckled his belt, and went around back to meet the visitor. The man was waiting for him. Without explanation he started to walk directly away from there. Jim followed him.

Beyond the corrals, near a grove of dusty cottonwood, they came to a square log building whose whole north roof seemed to be made of glass. The man opened a bolted door. Jim followed him. The man put a match to a lamp and flooded the place with yellow light.

Jim was astounded at the resemblance of this man to the old-timer in the house and at the same time to the girl. He had the old man's huge frame, the same dark eyes, and there was something about him that reminded Jim of the picture above the mantel.

The man poured two drinks from a decanter on a table littered with painting equipment. He handed one of the glasses to Jim and took the other himself.

"They told you about me," he said finally. "Well—the hell with them. I just don't like to kill people, that's all. And when I saw you tonight I knew you were the same."

"No—" Jim said—"not the same. That tinhorn I shot was a skunk. It never bothered my conscience at all. That's the difference."

"Maybe so," the artist said. "Well—here's to luck. And if you want to last more than a day or so, Mister, keep away from my sister Sue."

"She that poisonous?" Jim said.

"No," the artist said. "But Scar is. Scar's picked her for his. Scar's picked the Lying E for his, too. Here—skoal!"

They drank. Jim felt that clear, strong liquor settle nicely in him. He felt the silky

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warmth of it on his throat. Then he saw that the girl's brother was staring at the door. His expression seemed to hold no fright, only contempt. His lips said a silent word: "Scar."

Jim heard the soft scuff of gravel. He hated spies worse than tinhorns, and worse than anything else a man who will snoop on his own outfit. He wheeled silently, plunging for that door—and was through it in a second, smashing right into the man who had been crouching there in the brush. The man was big and as tough as an ox and he smashed at Jim's face with the naked barrel of a Colt forty-five. Jim came back with a bare fist.

CHAPTER

Range War!

2

He felt the pistol strike his head, a numbing blow that set his teeth together with shattering impact and brought a red liquid fire to his eyes. He did not feel the sight scrape along his skull, nor the second impact of steel on his shoulder. By then he was so fighting mad he could know only the bitter necessity of getting at that man and giving back twice what he took.

His first blow got his assailant in the stomach, driving the wind from him in a tornado, but not stopping him at all, only doubling him up there so he could smash down again with his Colt; and this time he went after Jim Balt's eyes, cutting crosswise in a sabre-like slash calculated to blind if it did not kill. From now on there was no doubt at all how this fight must end. After that no one could think that these two men could live together on the same range.

Jim was moving with automatic, groggy precision. His blow to Scar's stomach had thrown the heavier man up against him, so when Scar tried to push away to get in his blinding pistol whip, Jim knew what he was trying to do. Jim fell back, driving his fist into the softness below Scar's short-ribs. That straightened up Scar and put him just out of reach of Jim, and the pistol muzzle swept by Jim's nose so close the breeze of it fanned him.

Jim followed right in. For a second the force of Scar's swing had put him off balance with his right shoulder pointed at Jim and his right leg stiff. Jim kicked at that leg driving his sharp heel into the back

of Scar's knee and doubling him over. Then when Scar's face came up as he went backwards, Jim smashed him between the eyes with the heel of his fisted hand, twisted away while Scar was still falling, then jumped on him with both feet close together and his legs stiff. He heard a rib crack as Scar was driven into the ground. He heard Scar cursing bitterly, and the sudden horrific blast of Scar's pistol, and a mule-kick of a bullet crashing into his ribs.

This seemed to stun Jim as if shooting was the last thing in the world he had expected, or as if Scar was not playing according to the rules. But he snapped out of it before Scar got out his second shot. He fell to his knees, got to his own pistol and triggered point-blank for Scar's face, forgetting he had to take the man alive. His hammer clicked empty. He could not have two miss-fires. But the second triggering brought nothing but a mocking echo of the first.

While Scar had held his gun for him during his interview with the boss, Scar had emptied it, and now Scar was laughing crazily as he got to his knees and took deliberate aim. Scar was ready to kill when something hit him—hit him hard—hit him twice and crumpled him up there where the faint light from inside the studio showed him only as a gray blot on the ground.

When Jim's eyes cleared and the dizziness had gone from him he saw that the girl, Sue, stood over the motionless Scar. She held a wagon stake in both her hands. She swung it gently to and fro.

"Get inside," she said tensely. "Inside—hear?"

Jim got to his feet. He could not walk at first. He could only stand there swaying. Then he went ahead in a drunken little trot. As he passed the girl he saw Scar moving. He stumbled ahead through the doorway and got halfway across the big room before he collapsed.

There was pain in Jim Balt's head and in his chest, and he did not give a damn if he took another breath, if he lived or if he died. Then he opened his eyes and she was there above him, and that glass roof was beyond her, and the stars were still beyond it, so he could not have been out long.

"Hello," he said.

She said: "Neil—"

"No," he said. "Jim."

An angry "V" appeared above her short nose. "I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to my brother. Keep quiet." She was reaching for something that her brother was passing her. "Take this," she said.

It was hot water and whiskey. It put the old stuff into his stomach but it made his side hurt more than ever. Despite it he made himself sit up. He managed to grin at the girl in the pale light. He saw her brother, Neil, standing behind her looking concerned. He felt sweat all over him, on his forehead first, then everywhere.

"Tomorrow morning," he said with difficulty, "I'll be drifting. Scar would of had me if—"

"Tomorrow—" the girl cut in quickly—"you'll be ramrod of the Lying E. Scar's left. He's dragged his picket pin, Mister."

"Neil says—Scar's your man?" he managed to get out.

The girl laughed shortly. "Neil don't know nothin'."

Jim Balt was confused. He did not want to be ramrod of this outfit. He only wanted to go to sleep and forget he had ever come here. So he did go to sleep and the girl eased him down to his back very gently. She checked the careful bandages that she had put on him to see if his movements had dislocated them. Then she drew a blanket to his chin.

Her brother laughed. "Florence Nightingale never had that expression on her face while going the rounds," he said. "I wish I could get it on canvas."

The girl glared at him. She got up stiffly and left.

NEIL EMERY woke Jim Balt next morning at dawn. For a couple of seconds Jim stared through the glass roof of the studio trying to place himself. He realized almost before he knew the pain of his wounds that he was in a place he had never actually seen. He had arrived after dark last night. Now there was grayness in the sky.

"Better be moving," Neil said. Neil was laughing at him. He had cooked some coffee down there on a small, portable charcoal stove that added its fragrance to the stronger smells of the paint and canvas. "You big tough fighting men aren't allowed to lie abed after dawn. And you're the ramrod of the Lying E now."

"I've quit," Jim Balt said.

"Then Scar'll come back," Neil said.

Jim was furious with the artist. Old Bede Emery had shoved him into a job. The girl had pulled him out of a death-trap and promoted him. Now the mild-mannered brother was forcing him to hold his position. He sat up with great and blinding pain grinding all through him.

"Give me some of that coffee," he said.

The coffee was half rum. Jim had a second cup. He found that he could stand. His own shirt had been ripped to shreds last night and soaked in blood so the artist lent him a fresh one. Jim could not lift his arms to put it on. Neil had to slide it up onto him. Jim could buckle his own gunbelt, though, and could lean over to put on his boots. When he stamped his heel down into each Justin, the pain knifed up in him again.

He grinned grimly at Neil's derisive smile. He checked his gun to be sure it was loaded and walked very carefully and precisely up to the ranch house. There he found the boss eating breakfast with the girl. Sue looked fresh and bright, and somehow smaller than she had last night. She did not seem hardly big enough to knock a man cold with a wagon stake.

The old man nodded to him. "Set!"

Sue dished up a plate of beans. She took a chunk of steak from a covered dish and set it before him. She pushed the sourdough biscuits and a huge chunk of butter down the table within reach and poured a cup of black coffee.

The old man wiped his gray mustache with the back of his hand. "You're the first man who ever beat up Scar," he said. "Likely the only man who could. I'm makin' you foreman of the Lying E as of this minute."

"Sue—" Jim started lamely to give the girl credit for finishing the job on Scar.

But the old man was impatient today. He would not wait. "Susan told me about the fight," he said. Jim glanced at the girl. Long lashes veiled her dark eyes. "There's a waterhole—" the old man went on, "Silver Spring. I want you to take a gang over there today and take down the barbed wire fence this side of the spring. Savvy?"

He savvied an awful lot quite suddenly then. He knew what the trouble was—Range War! It was a war for waterholes;

for grass, too, likely. He knew why the cattle were so gaunt and why they crowded the half-empty tank at headquarters.

"I savvy," he said. He was about to add: *Do it yourself, Old Man*, when the girl cut in so quickly it was as if she had rehearsed it.

"Guts," she said.

"Guts!" The old man seemed to shout the word, though he actually only whispered it. "If I had a son with guts—he'd do this little chore." The old man was gently pounding the table with his fist. "If I could go, myself, I would," he said.

The old man's eyes locked with Jim's a moment. Then Jim tore his glance away, but the girl was looking into her coffee cup. Scar, he reckoned, could wait.

He got up from the table; and so it was that half an hour later he was leading a band of half a dozen horsemen across an unfamiliar prairie. He was going to war . . .

Far ahead barbed wire glinted in the morning sun. Beyond it the blue steel of a rifle sent out a sudden flash like the signal from a heliograph. Jim Balt clenched his teeth to steady his whirling brain. One of his men pulled up beside him.

"Gus Carracci's boys," he said. "And if Scar ain't there to get even with you it's because he died in the night."

"How'd they know we were coming?" Jim Balt asked angrily.

"The boss told them," the cowboy said. "If the fence ain't down by noontime today—we pull it down."

More rifles glinted out there where the enemy had dug trenches in the buffalo grass. This side of them birds fluttered over the waterhole. It would be suicide to try to pull up that fence.

"We can tell him they drove us off," the cowboy said.

Jim's head was whirling. He saw a vision of the girl beating up Scar with the wagon stake—of her brother who would laugh at fools who would get themselves killed—of the old man. If the old man had a son with guts his son would take that fence. But his son painted pictures of bucking horses instead of forking them.

"The only thing I want to do is get drunk and go to bed," he said to the cowboy. "But I wouldn't sleep unless I pulled up that fence first. We're going to do it."

He rode ahead a few yards. His men did

not follow. He kept on going until a rifle bullet zinged past him. He yelled: "I'm takin' down that fence! Any objections?"

There were plenty. That rifle yapped at him again. It hit his horse directly between the eyes and killed it.

CHAPTER

3

General Jim

Jim Balt landed on his feet but did not stay there. He kept going on down, straight down, rolling over when he hit the ground and falling flat behind his horse. Rifle bullets were humming all about him so he lay there without moving until the shooting stopped.

Then, hunkered low, he ran as fast as he could toward his men bunched on the prairie out of rifle range. He kept on going until his lungs gave out and he fell to his hands and knees in the grass.

Breath shuddered into him. There was a dampness inside his shirt, blood from the wounded ribs where the bandage had worked loose. His head was a solid ball of fire. But after a while his breath steadied and he got up and walked the last hundred yards to the spot where the Lying E men waited.

"When this war is over," he said stiffly, "I'm going to personally beat the guts out of each one of you—if you got any guts."

"We got guts," one of the boys argued. "But we got sense as well. Those boys are forced up to stay."

Jim had to sit down in the grass and brace himself with a stiff arm to keep from collapsing. He did not like this. You can't talk tough while resting on your tail and make it sound like much of anything. So he laughed. So he made a joke of this thing. These cowboys had deserted him in a pinch and he had to get them back.

"Curiosity," he said, "is sometimes better'n guts. I just wondered what they had over there so rode in to take a look. And I'll tell you what they got. They got a fort, all right. They got plenty of water in that spring and likely a whole stack of eatin' food and ammunition. But they ain't got mobility. We can pin 'em down and pull up the fence right in front of their eyes."

The Lying E men showed incredulity. Jim rolled a cigarette and smoked it. He had gotten a good look at the layout over

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there and thought he could break it. He remembered Vicksburg. Nobody could take that: But Grant did. Grant did it by going around behind and coming in from a direction no one had planned against.

"You—" Jim pointed to one of the boys—"pick a feller to go with you. Go east along that bobbed wire and get in as close to the Carracci outfit as you got nerve for. You—" he pointed to another—"choose a pardner and do the same to the west. You—" he said to another—"go back to headquarters and bring out every damn draught horse in the place—all the logging chain—at least one big, heavy wagon and some planks.

"Tell that Susan girl to round up a crew and start drifting all the beef-sized steers she can find down to that wash yonder. Be sure they're thirsty and ornery and keep them out of sight of the waterhole." This plan he had was taking on form. It was winning these men over to him. They wanted action—a planned offensive—not just a damn fool charge against entrenched gunmen. He added to the messenger, "Fetch a case of dynamite." There was one man still left without a chore. "You stay with me," Jim said. "Now the rest of you get moving."

Jim lay back, flat on the grass, smoking his cigarette. The man who was to stay with him dismounted and hunkered near him, keeping an eye on the trenches. "You got a name?" Jim asked.

"Gil Birney," the man said.

"Well, Gil," Jim said. "I'm going to sleep. I was kept up kind of late last night. Wake me when the excitement starts."

"Sure," Gil said. "It a fact you beat up Scar bare-handed?"

"Why not?" Jim asked. Jim had his hat over his face to shade his eyes. It muffled his voice and echoed it back to him.

"When he come in last night he said Neil hit him over the head with an axe handle," Gil Birney said.

This cowboy was feeling out Jim Balt, and Jim knew that if he admitted that the girl had won the battle he would never regain the confidence and loyalty of these men.

Jim said: "Neil wouldn't whack a fly with a swatter."

"I kinda figured Scar was lying," the cowboy said.

JIM went to sleep. He dreamed of that tinhorn he had shot. He had accused the gambling man of using marked cards and the tinhorn had pulled a gun on him. It was as simple as that. Jim had not intended killing him. He had only wanted to stop him. But the tinhorn had died and a hombre name of Bat Agee had testified against him. Because the minions of the law in that county were all friends of the tinhorn, they had accused Jim of murder.

And Jim Balt was sure now that Bat Agee and Scar were the same person.

Jim awoke sweating. He sat up and his head whirled for a long minute.

"I hear shooting," he said.

"They're tryin' to get Pete and Ziska," Gil said. "Two-three fellers snuck out of their trench behind an ol' broken-down range bull. There they are."

The bull was grazing away from water, going slowly up one of the wave-like rolls in the prairie in the general direction of the two guards stationed to the west. The bull was keeping close to the fence, and behind him, three men were crawling on their stomachs.

Beyond where Pete and Ziska were holding their post two balls of white smoke appeared. In swift succession the bull lifted its head, snorted and ran off; two more smoke clouds bloomed to the west; the three Carracci men got to their feet and ran blindly toward their trench. As if it were a river they dived in.

Jim laughed softly so as not to jolt his wounded ribs or aching head. He could picture how boredom had been eating at those men in the fort. He reckoned they would be satisfied for a while to lay low but he wished he could get a man or two in closer to the waterhole to take them from close range if they tried another foray. There was one possibility. He could not do it himself because he could not crawl. He put it up to Gil Birney.

"I'm goin' back to that dead horse," he said, "and get in a couple shots at those hombres when they stick their heads out of the trench. What I want you to do is take charge of things when the boys arrive with the horses and wagons. This is the idea—"

He was talking slowly for a purpose and Gil bit. Gil looked frightened at the thought of being a boss.

"Hell, no," he said. "They wouldn't do

WAR SMOKE OVER THE LYING E

nothin' I told them. Look—I'll go in there."

"You might get hurt," Jim said.

"The hell with you," Gil said.

He picked up his rifle and started walking toward the dead horse that was about half-way to the wire and the waterhole. A couple of buzzards had come down to investigate a while ago and the men in the trenches had killed them. Even though a buzzard looks huge he's nowhere so big a target as a very little man. That was a plenty hot spot. For a second Jim wished he had not bluffed this young cowboy into it.

When Gil finally made it, Jim just lay there for a while with the warm sun on his back and nausea gnawing at the base of his throat. If the kid had gotten it while on the way Jim would have felt responsible for the rest of his life. Whether it was Jim's bullet or one from the enemy it would have made no difference to Gil—or to Jim.

He thought of the artist, Neil, somewhere, painting a horse or a piece of scenery. That hombre had something. At least his conscience would not wake him during the long nights.

Then the first of the reserves began to arrive; and to Jim it was like food after starvation.

Jim Balt was a general, sitting in the grass, thinking of Grant, wishing he had a drink. He was thinking, too, how drink almost ruined Grant's career. Well, it wouldn't ruin Jim's. It wouldn't get a chance, not today, anyway.

His first reserves consisted of a couple wagons driven by the Mexican handyman and the cook and convoyed by three cowboys. One of these wagons was a huge and heavy Studebaker hauled by four giant Percheron horses. It was loaded with dynamite, caps and fuse, with a stack of logging chain. The second wagon, one ordinarily used as chuckwagon when on round-up was lighter in weight and drawn by a pair of mules. There was a carpenter's tool chest in the bed, and the heavy planks Jim had ordered.

With these wagons Jim would build the equivalent of Grant's fresh-water navy. He would use this dry-land navy to harass the foe—to distract the enemy from what was really going on.



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Out of range of the riflemen in the trenches, planks were nailed to the tailgates of the wagons. This was done in plain sight of the enemy so everyone would think he knew exactly what were Jim's intentions. The bigger of the wagons was hauled to the west where it would be up-slope from the waterhole. The lighter one was hauled to the east where a couple cowboys could push it in toward the trenches.

Then the four giant horses and the two mules hauled logging chain down over the prairie and out of sight in a wash. For a while an oddly thick silence hung over the countryside, and there seemed to be no life there except the buzzards that circled ceaselessly over the dead horse. The flies even seemed to have deserted the place, and the switching of horses' tails was so slight a wind could have caused it.

Then the rumble of hoofs vibrated through the ground. A little plume of dust swept in from the south; and everything came to life again. The cowboys in their positioned wagons sat up to see what was going on.

The men guarding the east and west approaches to the waterhole peered about them, and just for luck Gil Birney took a shot at a head poked above the trench. He was answered by a sharp cry of agony and a sudden volley of lead that built a thin white cloud over the waterhole and scattered dirt and bits of horseflesh all over him. The buzzards flapped awkwardly higher. Two riders appeared in the dust. The gunfire died out and the newcomers curved about widely to come to a halt there where Jim Balt sat in the grass.

Jim had expected Susan. But he had not thought her brother would be with her. Neil's handsome face had a sardonic twist to it.

"You got yourself shot again," the girl cried. She tossed reins to her brother before she got down from the saddle. "Where?"

"Nowhere," Jim said. "They shot my horse. Yonder."

He pointed. She glanced across to where Gil was holding his unwholesome post. She tapped her booted toe until her silver spurs rang, and the cowboy in the grass looked up at her in pure admiration. There was something to her he had never before seen in a

WAR SMOKE OVER THE LYING E

girl. It was not in the purity of her fine body under the blue denim levis and red silk shirt, nor the clean dark color of her eyes or set of her chin. Other girls had these qualities. It was something, maybe, that he imagined in her, or that showed in her without being obvious enough to single out.

"You really mean to do it?" she said.

"Of course," he said. "Didn't the boss want me to?"

The "V" between her dark eyebrows deepened. "No," she said tensely. "He tried it—and look what happened to him! Crippled. Scar wouldn't try it. And you can't do it. They can hold those trenches against an army, and you know it. They'll hold them until all our beef has died of thirst. It would take an outfit a damn site bigger and tougher than ours to overrun that fort they've built."

"That's what they told Grant," Jim grinned up at her, "when Grant went after Vicksburg. Well, Grant took it, and before he got going Grant lost his false teeth and had to send for a dentist to build him a new pair. So I got a start on him, Miss Sue. I got my own teeth and I'll show you how I bite."

She looked straight at him, and the lips that had been thin full up a little. She was beginning to believe he could do it.

"The boys are holding about two hundred steers down Green Wash," she said. "They're so thirsty their tongues are dragging in the grass. The boys as well as the steers."

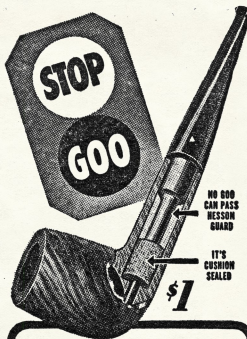
"Ah!" he said. "Give me a lift."

She took his hand and helped him up and he took some strength from her. Sue's hand was small, but strong, and when he was standing he did not let go but pretended he still needed her help.

"I got to get a horse," he said. "I'll feel more like a general when I get on a horse."

The girl laughed. The grimness was gone from her, and he thought that was a good omen. He glanced around at Neil. "You better sharpen up your pencil," he suggested. "This is going to be one hell of a picture for you to draw."

Then, with the girl at his side, he started down toward the half-dozen saddle horses the cowboys had picketed out of extreme range of the rifles.



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CHAPTER *Six Shooter Strategy*

4

This was how the battle got under way: The men in the wagons were slowly closing in on the waterhole, pushing their mobile forts a few yards then taking a couple of shots. Already they were within range and a brisk fire was being exchanged.

The original outpost guards had edged in, too, and had dug shallow holes close to the fence for protection. So far they were holding their fire, waiting for better targets.

Behind the dead horse the young Gil Birney had been reinforced by another cowboy who wanted to do some shooting and was doing plenty. They had dug in, too, for added protection, digging with their bowie knives through the tough sod and tossing dirt and grass over to the front of the horse.

As far as the enemy was concerned this was the army they were fighting, and if an attack came from the rear they could fight that off in due time. They were sitting very pretty in their trenches.

But General Pemberton thought he was sitting pretty, too, up there in his caves in Vicksburg. The federal gunboats could not get at him. And Grant was a fool. General Pemberton knew he would not only win that campaign for the Confederate States, but the war as well.

Meanwhile Grant managed to cross the river and amass a huge and tough army off Pemberton's flank.

And General Jim Balt did the same thing.

He rode down to the wash where the thirsty beeves bawled miserably and the four big horses and two tough mules waited patiently. He handed dynamite and caps to the boys who were holding that herd and started them drifting their steers farther away from the waterhole to the east.

He sent the cook and his Mexican boy half a mile down the barbed strand with the horses, mules and logging chains. They were given instructions: out of sight of the trench and waterhole they were to cut the fence, hitch the chains to the wire and wait until the shooting started. Then they were to peg hell-for-leather due west and keep on going no matter what got in their way. Did they savvy?

The cook savvied. "If you hadn't beat

WAR SMOKE OVER THE LYING E

up Scar last night, I'd never figger this would work," he said.

But as they drove away with the chains clanking behind them, the girl came up.

"You're crazy, Jim Balt," she said. "You've got a fever from your wounds. You better go back to the ranch and I'll call this off."

"You didn't tell your old man the truth about the fight with Scar," he said.

"No," she admitted.

"You told him I beat up Scar single-handed so he would bluff me into taking this job," he said. Her eyes wavered, and while he had her off balance, he added: "Now you're trying to bluff me out of it just like he bluffed me into it." His grin had gone and there was a distant look to his expression. "I know all about it, kid, because the same thing happened to me when I sent Gil Birney into the front line. If he got hurt it would be on my conscience. You feel the same way about me."

By her eyes, wide and deep, he knew he had the right answer.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Well—" his voice was clipped—"don't worry about it. A man's got to fight it out sooner or later. Your brother'll find that out, too, someday."

She moved her horse up closer to him. "We'll make out," she whispered.

Then she lifted herself in the stirrups and kissed him full on his astonished mouth. With a little laugh she reared her mount away and almost knocked down her brother who was standing nearby holding the reins of his horse. She and Jim had completely forgotten he had followed them. There was no easy, sardonic smile left on his face now.

"You still here?" she said.

"Not for long," he said. "I'm headin' back home to sharpen up a couple pencils. You coming? This is no place for a female."

"I'm sticking," she said. "Somebody from the family ought to be in on the kill. Tell Pa, will you?"

THE girl and the cowboy rode up out of the wash. Long before they reached the scene of battle they could hear the sniping. The men in the two wagons had moved in. Shooting through peepholes in the planked backs of the wagons they were keeping the

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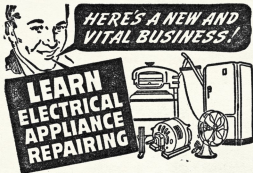
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

entrenched Carracci outfit under cover. Then from easterly out of sight on the prairie a dull boom rolled its thunder across the short, sere grass.

The girl laid a hand on Jim's. "There's no turning back now," she whispered. "Why couldn't Neil have come through, Jim? Why does he have to let an utter stranger win the ranch back?"

"Stranger?" Jim grinned over at her.

It had been less than twenty-four hours since he rode up to the Lying E. But he did not feel like a stranger.

He turned his hand over so their palms were together. He gave her a gentle squeeze and he saw that she was blushing. Her long dark lashes laced down over the clear tan of her cheeks. She spoke hastily as if she had been running and had lost her breath.

"You don't seem like a stranger—not to me," she said. Then her lashes lifted, and Jim felt almost as if he had been kicked in the chest by the way his heart began to throb. She added: "Whatever happens, Jim—"

But she got no farther. Another unseen explosion to the south and east rocked the prairie, making the girl clutch Jim's hand convulsively. Then a third—and following that the rolling beat of horses' hoofs. You could hear the cook shouting and his helper howling, and the quick bite of their six-shooters. The rattle of logging chains and the hum of wire was like a weird threnody backing the larger sounds.

And then, there they were, coming into sight, coming like crazy. They were coming alongside the fence and about a hundred yards this side of it, the two mules and the four big horses hitched to the barbed wire fence, snapping staples, sometimes pulling up whole fence posts and dragging them behind as they came.

And yonder, through the hole made there, the two hundred thirsty steers were lining it into Carracci range. Between their thirst and the sticks of dynamite let off behind them they had only one desire—that was to travel straight ahead, and for a while it looked as if they would run right past the trenches.

It was all a crazy, jumbled nightmare. The two cowboys in the easternmost wagon had already deserted their post and were running for the rear lines. Gil Birney and

his friend saw that the wire would soon trap them so they lit out for safety, too.

The two cowboys who had dug themselves a shallow trench at the far eastern end of the siege front had merely rolled under the fence before the horses ripped it up. Now they were in their hole again shooting steadily at the astonished men entrenched about the waterhole.

In one respect this brilliant maneuver was working wonderfully. In another it was a complete flop. The horses had passed the main battlefield and the fence was rapidly disappearing right before the waterhole. It had caught up one of the wagons and bashed it to bits. It was reaching for the other now. But the enemy was still in the trench and the stampede was passing by.

THEN a tall, lean figure appeared yonder toward the head of the stampeding steers. Jim Balt could see the flash of brilliant light from the exploding stick of dynamite before he heard the sound. A couple of steers veered—another explosion rocked the prairie, and the tall dark Neil

Emery definitely turned the tide. The steers wheeled around and went straight over the trenches for the waterhole.

And all along that line of trenches men appeared. They could shoot down one steer or two, or maybe a dozen or more. But they could never stop the entire crazy herd, so the enemy came over the top screaming, running onto Lying E land, dropping their weapons as they came up against the semicircle of firmly planted riflemen.

Then Jim Balt spotted the man for whom he had been hunting, Bat Agee, known about these parts as Scar. He spotted Scar crawling on his hands and knees to the east, trying to look as small as possible in the settling dust.

Jim wheeled his horse. Scar stopped moving, cowering there as if he expected a bullet in his back.

"Bat Agee," Jim said. "Stand up."

Scar got to his feet. He turned slowly to face Jim Balt. There was a mean red welt along his jaw and lower cheek.

"You could of left me alone," he said. "I didn't do nothing—"



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"You lied to the sheriff," Jim said. "They would have hanged me if I hadn't broken jail. You knew the Tinhorn Kid pulled on me first and I had to shoot in self-defense."

"I never said anything different," Scar lied.

Jim Balt was watching Scar, but he knew that the girl was riding up with a man.

When they stopped, Jim said. "Just tell these folks the Tinhorn Kid pulled first, Scar."

"That's right," Scar said.

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, Scar, you can go."

He started to turn toward the girl when Scar made an odd, animal-like cry.

"By dam', you scarred me up, Balt. They should have hanged you—"

The girl screamed. A bullet hummed past Jim's cheek so close it burned the stubble there. His horse reared around. A second horse rammed into his, upsetting him, unseating him. A second bullet hit him as he got out his own iron and began firing. When he landed he was jarred into unconsciousness, but before that he knew he had shot Bat Agee, alias Scar. He also knew that he probably owed Neil Emery his life, since it had been Neil with the girl—and the artist had driven his horse between Jim and Scar just in time to upset the gunnie's aim. . . .

Jim came back to consciousness in the big ranch house. Neil Emery was there. The girl was there. So was their father.

"Gus Carracci signed over rights to that waterhole—" the old man told him. "No more fences." The old man seemed mighty happy. "I heard what Neil done," he added, and it was apparent that the activities of his son loomed highest in importance to him, that the fact that Neil had fought was greater than the fact that they had won.

"Wasn't anything," Neil said. "Just wanted to get in there where I could get a close look."

"Nothing at all," Jim Balt said.

He was surprised to discover that the girl's hand was in his. He squeezed it as he had just before the battle, and he went to sleep still holding it. Odd how hanging onto a little hand like that was like hanging onto life—and happiness.

THE END

(Continued from page 24)

account of the guns you were wearing. Maybe it could have come to something if it hadn't have been for Edward, here. But I'm tired of buying cattle on commission, always using somebody else's money. And Edward's got a fine fat ranch on the Pecos. Ease and peace, that's what I want, Christian. But you've got pay due. Edward, we owe Christian a hundred dollar fee."

"We—?" the Texan asked in mild protest.

"We!" the woman agreed firmly. The Texan dug in his pocket and reluctantly fished out a bill. He handed it to Chris.

The woman tightened her grip on the Texan's arm. "Now, Edward," she continued, "you get right back to your camp and get your boys on the move. Get that herd down to the pens and start loading. And stop at the post office and tell them to let me know when that package comes in for me from Wells-Fargo at Abilene. And wire the Murphy Company in Kansas City that I've bought my last herd for them. And—"

Chris backed for the door. The Texan was nodding meekly enough as a steady round of commands issued matter-of-factly from Lottie Lebeck's lips. But Chris thought the rancher from the Pecos watched his own exit with a sort of longing envy.

In the hall Chris glanced at the bill in his hand. It was, in fact, a noble hundred, legal tender in whatever village a man might touch. He shrugged with a sudden easing of spirit. Behind him the woman's voice still ran on with authority, and doubtless the Texan still nodded meekly.

He had, Chris perceived, made a notable escape, and in the process he had enriched himself to the amount of a modest fee. A sufficient sum to carry him a safe and considerable distance from this hamlet in which he had all but become victim to the season and the wiles of a woman.

He was whistling as he reached the bottom of the stairs. Stepping behind a large and dusty potted plant, he watched the fathers of Sandy Ford gallop up the stairs. When they were past, he stepped onto the street and made brisk tracks toward the terminal station of the Kansas Pacific.

THE END



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 77)

bullet from Nash's .45 smashed his shoulder and knocked him down.

Another bullet from Nash's gun threw a shower of splinters from a post beside me. His horse reared and he yanked savagely at the reins, while he swung his six-gun on me again.

He was clear over my sights. I squeezed the trigger, thumbed the hammer back and shot again.

Dust spouted from Nash's calfskin vest as the bullets hit. His gun fell from his hand and he grabbed futilely for his saddle horn before tumbling limply down.

Nash, Sheriff Murdin and Flager were dead. Days had a bullet in his thigh and rolled in the dust cursing. Loretta ran from the kitchen and leaned over Ron. The old cuss forced a grin. In a voice strained with pain, he said:

"I'm all right, Lorrie girl. Just winged."

Marshal Banning and I walked over to Happy Days. He clutched at his wounded leg and looked at us with red-rimmed eyes full of fear.

"Don't kill me," Days pleaded. "I'll tell everything."

"Talk fast then," Marshal Banning ordered.

"You're right about the smuggling," Days gasped. "An' we were goin' to kill Andrews today. Nash figgered he'd found out about his father. We ran a cold deck on Old Man Andrews the night Nash won th' Bar A. Nash killed him an' we fixed it to look like suicide."

We bandaged Ron and Days and Marshal Banning rode to town for the doctor. I walked out by the corral.

I felt dazed and let-down and at the same time happy. My Dad hadn't committed suicide and the Bar A was mine now to build into a big and fine monument to him.

I built a smoke, lit it and then turned as I heard light footsteps. It was Loretta, the sun again burnishing her red hair.

"I'm glad we'll be neighbors, Chuck," she said softly.

"No more than neighbors?" I asked, my throat suddenly constricted and dry.

"That," she said mischievously, "is up to you."

WHEN A BUTTON HATES

(Continued from page 43)

Tim grinned at the gawping eaglets, without knowing why, stepped past them and wriggled over the rim of the ledge. On the wider ledge below he paused for a moment's rest before starting the return journey. It was while he crouched there, feeling clean and warm inside, that he heard the sound.

It was a scratching sound, a whimpering, eager sound that brought the boy's heart wild and hopeful into his throat. The sound came from a cavity among the boulders at the back of the ledge. Could a small dog possibly wriggle loose from an eagle's talons and escape into a fissure too small for the eagle, and survive four days and nights?


Seeking the answer, Tim darted forward and dropped on his hands and knees and peered frantically into the fissure. Almost the first thing he saw in the soft shadows was the white spot over Jonah's left eye.



Answers to the Frontier Quiz

(Continued from page 67)

- (1) Billy The Kid.
- (2) He attempted to kill a blacksmith with a stone when the man insulted his mother—then stabbed him to death a few days later.
- (3) Gambling and cattle rustling.
- (4) Lincoln County.
- (5) Yes. The history of his phenomenal escapes against the greatest odds are evidence that Billy The Kid was a proficient actor and a constructive thinker.
- (6) A knife. Besides being the type of weapon in his hand at the time of his first killing, a knife, with which he had been cutting meat, was in his hand when he died.
- (7) Bonney.
- (8) Nearly all frontier gunfighters had blue or gray eyes. It seems that brown eyes did not go with pioneer gunfighting.
- (9) New Mexico, in the town of Fort Sumner.
- (10) Sheriff Pat Garrett.



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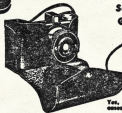
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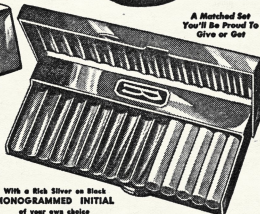
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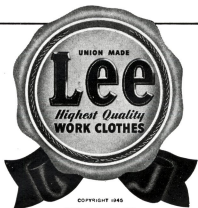


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