

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

15¢
MAY



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE NOVEL

• **JOHNNY HARLUCK
PULLS A BONER**

by **BRANCH CARTER**

TWO NOVELETTES

• **SHOOTING-IRON
SENATOR**

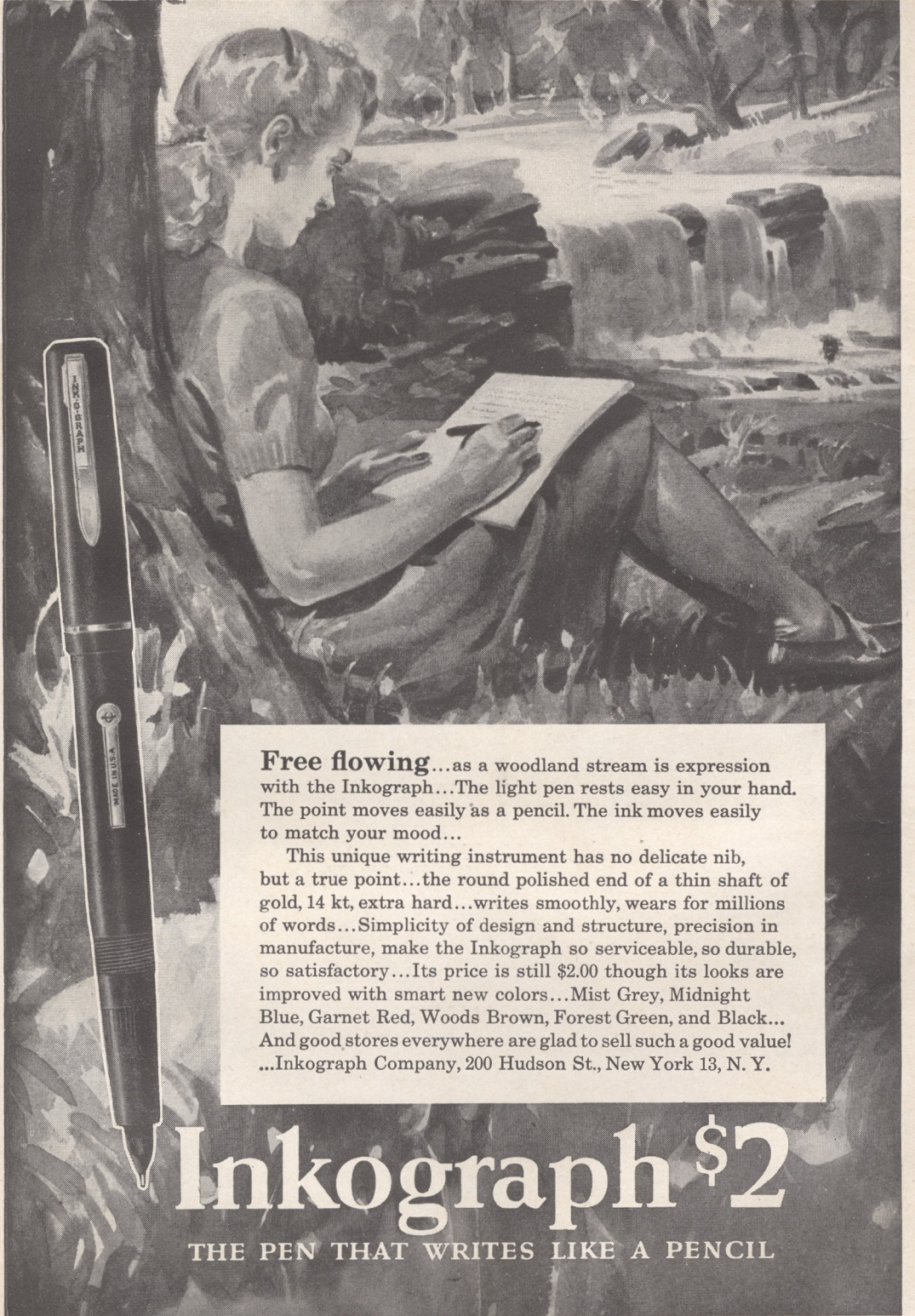
by **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

• **HOT TAR FOR
HONEST COWMEN!**

by **JAMES SHAFFER**

- COX
- KETCHUM
- CARPENTER
- BECKMAN
- STURCILL
- STEELE
- NEWTON





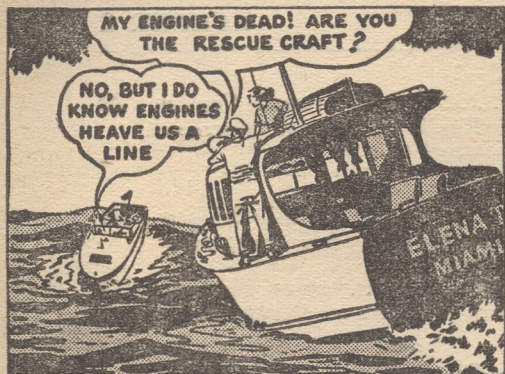
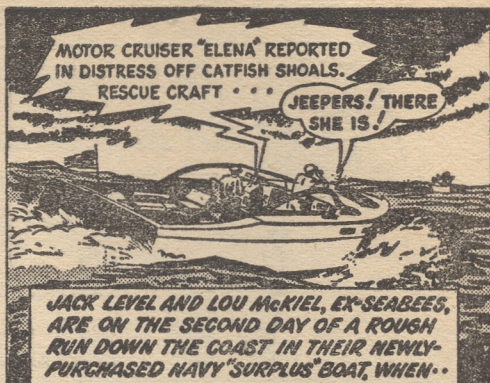
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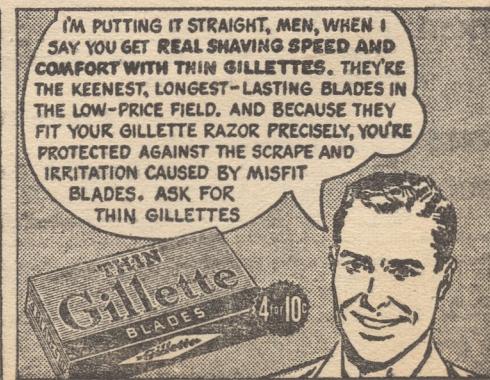
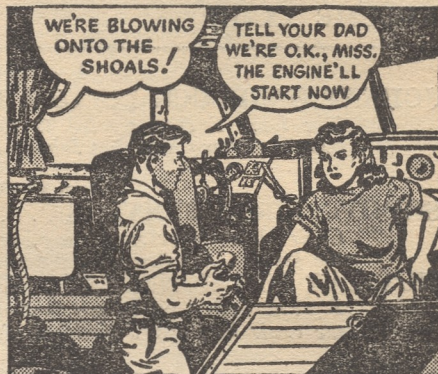
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THE PEN THAT WRITES LIKE A PENCIL

JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...



20 MINUTES LATER



10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED
MAY 9th

VOLUME XXXIII

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NUMBER 2

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Issue

May 9th



The bushwhacker's bullet ripped into Rancher Murdoch's back. . . . Young Don Peck, a stranger in these Jacaranda hills, witnessed the killing—but didn't see the bushwhacker. Peck had come to settle a bitter score with Murdoch—and now this back-shooting murder put Peck in a devil's jackpot.



Dale Madison, Murdoch's partner, roared to his cow-puncher crew: "Find Murdoch's killer! I don't want the Law in it. Comb the countryside for strangers. I want that killer—personal!" . . . And Don Peck became a hunted man—in double jeopardy . . . for Dale Madison also had been in Don Peck's vengeance book.



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Boomtown's Paunchy Tyrant

By JIMMY NICHOLS

JUDDVILLE, Wyoming, was licked and everyone in town knew it. The squat, ugly little settlement at the end of a Union Pacific spur had been once besieged by a drunken band of Sioux, twice burned to the ground by feuding ranchers, and daily pockmarked by six-guns. All these misfortunes its 187 citizens had survived, and come gallantly back for more. But now Juddville lay trembling and prostrate under the tyranny of a wealthy dude.

Harold Jaffee, Philadelphia coffee merchant, had come to Juddville for the sake of his rattling lungs. For years he had used his money to shield him from the rude ridicule of the world, and in Juddville, he used it with devastating effect.

Willy Evans, stationmaster, was the first to feel the weight of Jaffee's wrath. When he saw the short, red-faced Easterner, paunch shaking like a bowl of calves-foot jelly, climb off the train wearing a red shirt, bright blue trousers, white boots and a silver belt, Willy couldn't help slapping his worn knee and "haw-hawing" right in Jaffee's face. Half an hour later, he had lost his job. Jaffee owned a lot of railroad stock.

At eleven o'clock that night, Jaffee bustled up to Hy Wyatt, keeper of the Red Gate Inn, and said: "Clear the floor my room is on. I can't get my sleep with all this noise."

"But," Hy protested, "there's only *one* floor!"

"You heard me!" growled Jaffee.

Hy got off better than Willy Evans, for Jaffee bought the hotel, but the fury of the inn's permanent residents, who were promptly kicked out into the streets, knew no bounds.

FAT DUDE TERRORIZES TOWN! ran the next day's headlines in the courageous Juddville *Courier*. The editor, Tom Carlyle, was one of those run out of the Red Gate Hotel, and "filthy, lily-fingered, pusillanimous, scurvy, shameful" were a few of the milder epithets he applied to Jaffee in a burning front-page editorial.

The following day, Carlyle was seen riding dejectedly along Juddville's main

street. Cowboy work clothes had replaced his editorial broadcloth. Tom Carlyle was looking for a job. The *Courier* was dark, its presses silent, a rough plank nailed across the door of the shop. Jaffee's money-bags had spoken again.

To be inhospitable to a couple of million dollars is, however, humanly impossible. Jaffee threw money around as though it were hayseed, and Juddville prospered. Hating mud and dust, Jaffee paved the streets. Guarding his health, he piped in pure mountain water. For diversion, he paid high-salaried entertainers to make the tortuous trip from San Francisco. But he went too far. It was on his first—and last—visit to the only tavern in town.

A hush fell over the drinkers as the paunchy millionaire walked through the batwings. He stepped up to the bar and ordered: "One sarsaparilla!"

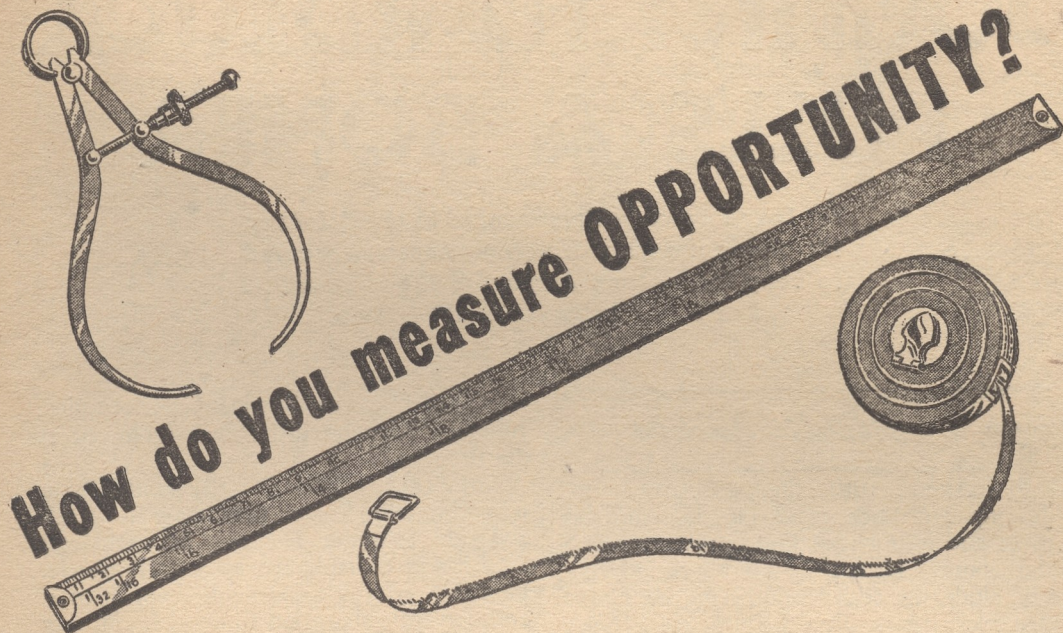
"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Eggers, while the saloon rocked with frontier mirth. Then the laughter stopped short. Jaffee was waving a bill of sale in the barkeep's face.

"I own this place," he grated. "I'm not a drinking man. And from now on neither is anyone else!" That afternoon, beer and whiskey gurgled down Juddville's brand new watermains, a lock went up on the saloon, and a rebellious thundercloud settled down over Juddville.

Rocking comfortably on the porch of the Red Gate Hotel, Jaffee heard the coast-bound express whistle around the bend and saw the knot of hardened men, led by Willy Evans, Tom Carlyle, and Bob Eggers, heading up the street. He eyed them idly, and cocked an ear to the shrieking whistle.

Neither seemed to have any special significance for him—that is, not until he found himself being hoisted forcibly aboard the train. A boot from Willy helped him settle in the plush seat. As the train began to move, the men waved, jeering, from the platform. One of them shook his fist.

"You can buy our hotel, Jaffee!" he shouted. "And you can shut down our newspaper! But by golly, no man alive kin rob a citizen of Juddville of an honest drink of likker!"



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JOHNNY HARDLUCK PULLS A BONER



The Lazy T cowpunchers wanted to shoot Johnny Hardluck; the irate Savoran townsmen wanted to hang him — and Johnny, in the middle . . . had a few salty ideas of his own.



CHAPTER

1

Necktie Ruckus

Along with the westering sun, Johnny Hardluck came off the trackless mesa and into a trail that quartered off to the south. Usually Johnny's wandering was aimless, a ceaseless questing for places that were new. Now he was on a more definite mission, the response to a call from an old-time friend of his Texas boyhood home to "run over and visit for a spell."

So was the message worded—but Johnny read it something like this: "Come a-run-nin', young feller. I need someone right bad that I can trust like a chip of your Dad." And Johnny didn't need the implied filial duty to start him promptly on his way to Bob Tolin.

Bob's message went on: "Keep acomin' plumb square west from Tracy, mebbe a hundred straight miles, till you smack up agin the Savoran foothills; then have a look for Lazy T brandin' and you won't have to ask no questions to find me." Johnny interpreted that to mean that Bob didn't hanker to have Johnny Hardluck's coming advertised. And Johnny grinned at that.

The lowering sun thrust a glare in Johnny's eyes, but through it he had seen the bluish haze of rising ground. With the end of his journey in sight, he gave his thoughts to what might lie before him.

Bob Tolin, an old friend of Johnny's father, had partnered in Texas with another crony, Giff Ord—and their combined brand was T Bar O. And it was not until the receipt of Tolin's message, mentioning the Lazy T, that Johnny had any knowledge that their iron had changed. That definitely implied a split, and Johnny was well aware that on occasion the closest

friends can become the most bitter enemies. Johnny's dust-streaked brows furrowed at the thought.

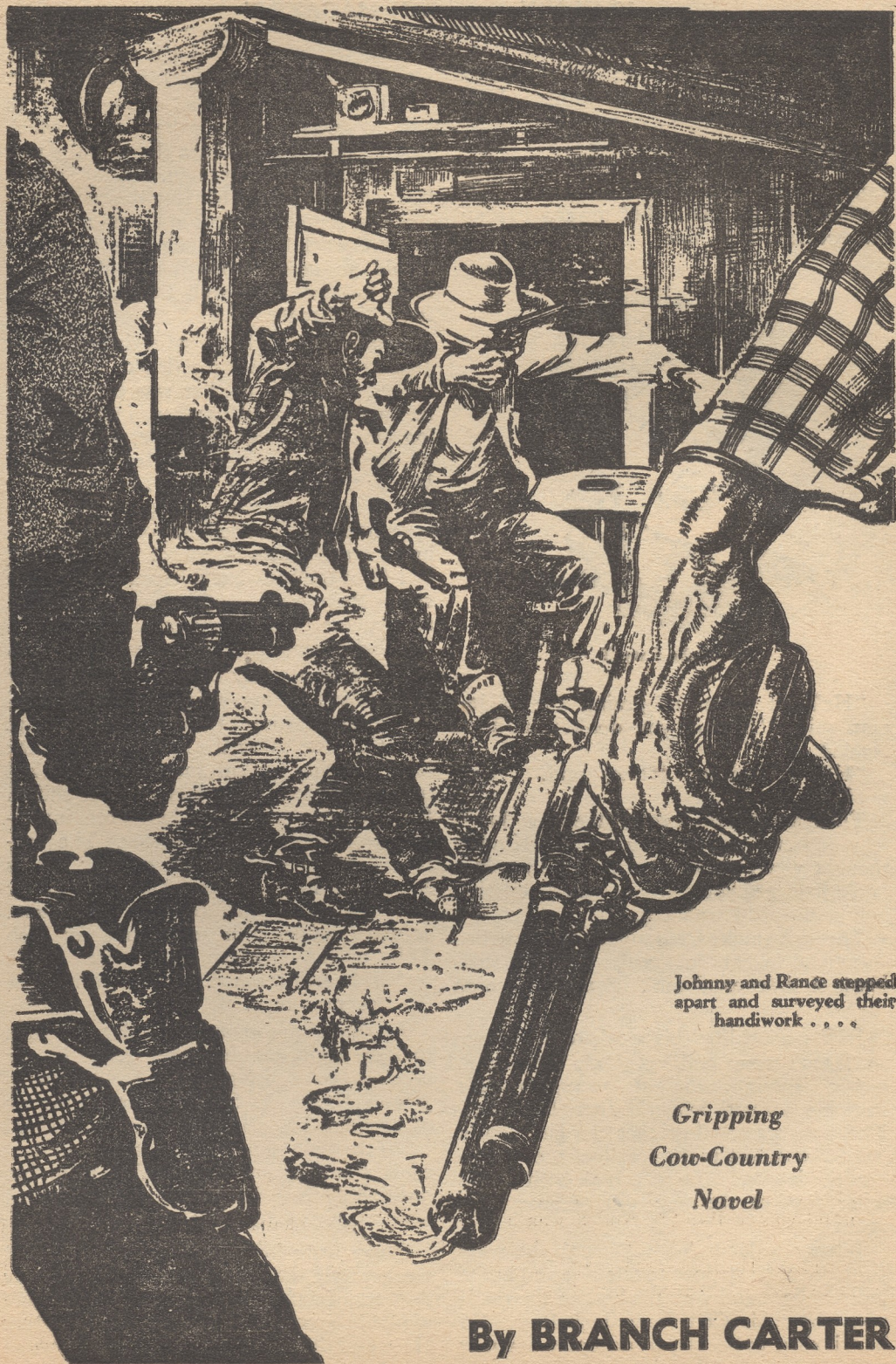
Giff Ord, as Johnny well recalled him, was a big man, a solid man, slow in speech and slow to anger, but once his mind was set he was as stubborn as a native mule. Probably got to disagreeing over breeds, and one little thing led to another till both got fighting mad. Danged old fools, Johnny grinned. Johnny knew that his father, were he living, could have brought the two old coots back together, so Johnny supposed it was now up to him.

Dusk gathered, changing the greens and ocras of slope and hillside to a darker hue, obscuring earth's features behind an ever thickening veil. Night was Johnny's full two-hour companion when the gelding abandoned its lope to a shuffling walk in a dusty street flanked by twin rows of shacks.

Lights showed dimly here and there. A lantern swung in the wide, open doorway of a backyard stable. As Johnny came into its sphere of light a man detached himself from the shadows of the sidewall.

He was a tall fellow, of the indeterminate thirties, lean, with narrow shoulders slightly stooped. An unruly mop of black hair surmounted his small head; his eyes too were dark, resting briefly on Johnny, then roving over the handsome bay. He didn't speak as Johnny eased himself from the saddle and flexed cramped leg muscles, then passed over an extra dollar for a good rub-down plus the feed.

The stableman took the lantern from the hook, gave Johnny another swift, appraising look, then carried the light to another hook in the center of the stable. Beneath it he dumped a small forkful of hay and brought up bucket, sponge and cloths.



Johnny and Rance stepped
apart and surveyed their
handiwork . . .

*Gripping
Cow-Country
Novel*

By BRANCH CARTER

Johnny stripped the gear from the gelding, found pegs on the wall for hulk and bridle and followed the horse to his fodder. He rolled a smoke, standing thoughtfully by as the hostler attacked the caked alkali on flanks and barrel. After a while the man paused, with the sponge resting on the gelding's rump. He looked toward Johnny but not directly at him.



Sue of the Lazy T

"He'll git water and grain," the stableman said. "Reckon you don't want him bedded, huh?"

"He's earned it," Johnny said. "Why not?"

The man glanced through the open doorway into the darkness beyond. "Kinder thought you'd probably be pushin' on after you'd foddered yourself," he said tonelessly, and resumed his rubbing.

Through smoke from mouth and nostrils, Johnny looked at him keenly. "Reckon that needs a little explainin', friend," he said.

THE man shifted his work to a foreleg. "Don't mean nothing. Only right now, mebbe 'specially tonight, strangers ain't stopping around longer'd they have to." The tone was so low that the last words were almost lost in the splash of the sponge into the bucket. The man took both to the other side of the bay and became busy again.

Johnny walked slowly through the wide doorway, then stepped to one side and in the indirect light and with his back to the roadway, drew his Colt from its holster. He held it close to his ear, working the hammer several times and twirled the cylinder. He

could detect no sound of grit and, satisfied, set the weapon lightly back in the holster.

Turning, he proceeded thoughtfully to the roadway, passing the hotel, which fronted the stable, with a disgusted glance at its darkened dining room. Further down, light streamed from batwing doors and the jumbled sound of voices indicated a saloon. Johnny went that way, figuring that food would go down more easily—if he was lucky to find any—with the dust washed from his throat.

After the first long, satisfying swallow, Johnny tarried with his drink. The place he had chosen at the bar was empty when he came to it and still as free of men crowding him. He slouched a little, with elbows on the board, the glass cradled in both big hands; the picture of weary relaxation. He was weary, but it was a deceptive pose. His eyes, half-lidded under the sombrero's wide brim, were taking stock of the room by benefit of the back-bar mirror. To his alert senses there was something wrong with the atmosphere of the place, and especially in the obviousness with which he was ignored.

There were many cowboys there, plenty of noise and talking, yet they were gathered in separate groups with no man, except himself, alone. After the first, general, quick look, greeting his entrance, no one looked in his direction; when their glances shifted from their companions they were invariably levelled towards the door. The bartender came quickly to serve him; left as speedily to move further along the counter and talk with the cowpunchers there. Johnny wondered if some rode for Bob Tolin or for Ord; for Johnny was pretty certain he had reached the neighborhood of the two ranchmen.

At times, the general talk lagged, then took up again too quickly in spots. An air of expectant waiting was very obvious to Johnny Hardluck. So, as he was in the act of draining his glass, he wasn't surprised when the twin doors banged open and men came tramping swiftly in. He held that position for a brief moment to look them over.

There were four, and it struck him that there was a savage intentness in the way they trod forward in the room; like a small vigilante committee looking for a victim. Here and there, men greeted them by name but none of the four responded; their

glances scanned the place over, hard, in dark anger.

There was no reason why Johnny should expect to tangle with them, yet he swiftly appraised them in the mirror.

Two he dismissed immediately, as men who would follow and not lead. The third was a burly fellow, thick of body, with heavy, sensuous lips and bold-staring eyes, a swagger to his walk and attitude. The fourth, a lean lad, held Johnny's look longest of all. The swaggering bully might start trouble, but this lean fellow was the chap to be reckoned with.

Although Johnny may not have noticed it, a third person would have instantly noted a remarkable similarity between Johnny and the lean fellow. Both had the same sinewy hardness of frame and were almost the same height and weight. But the resemblance was more than physical. The other fellow, possibly five years older than Johnny, had a cold assuredness of manner that matched Johnny's own. At the moment his expression was stern and as cold as chilled steel, yet there was nothing vicious in his features; rather, Johnny thought as he caught a brief glimpse of the man's mirrored eyes, that he was holding a burning rage under iron control.

Johnny lowered his empty glass and thumped it on the bar, the sound loud in a momentary silence.

"I'll have another," he said as the bar-keep scowled in his direction.

WITH a sidelong glance in the mirror, Johnny saw the thick-set man jerk his head toward him and all four start forward. With his hand holding the empty glass, Johnny didn't change his position. Oddly, perhaps, he was thinking of the stableman's unusual act in warning him.

Johnny didn't believe it was the extra dollar that had produced the miracle; rather he thought he owed it to the big bay and his care of his horse's need before his own. Men who lived with horses were sometimes that way.

A hand roughly prodded Johnny's shoulder. He turned slowly, with casual indifference, and faced the beefy bully.

"Hey, you, young feller," the man said in domineering tone. "We want some questions answered and we want 'em fast. We ain't got no time to waste."

Johnny grinned at him amiably. "Don't let me keep you waiting."

The burly man's face reddened in quick anger. "What we wants to know is how long you been in this section, where you come from and kin you prove it. An' in case you think this is fun, I'll tell you that there's a hunk of lead or some hemp waitin' for the wrong answers."

Johnny's quick anger began to rise but by no change of expression did he show it. He addressed himself to the burly man before him, although his thought and attention were for the lean, cold man beside him.

"Sometimes," Johnny drawled, "sign is powerful more likely to be believed than the word of a man you never seen before. Reckon you can read sign, huh?"

"You damned fresh pup," the man blazed. "The sign I read from your face is that you're a lowdown, sneakin'—"

"No," Johnny interrupted him. "You can't always tell for sure by a man's face. I meant it thisaway."



Letty of the Bar O

With his right hand he swept off his sombrero and slapped it smartly in the palm of his left. Alkali dust spurted into the red face and staring eyes. The burly man went berserk. Roaring an oath, his hand thrust for the gun at his belt. Johnny took a quick step forward. He swiped the hat across the man's face and his left fist crashed against jaw and mouth with all the spring of Johnny's body behind it.

The big body thumped solidly on the floor, gun spilling from senseless fingers.

Johnny stepped back, replacing his sombrero, his right hand dropping toward his own Colt, just in case. However, it stopped before it reached his belt. Johnny hadn't seen the lean man move; he was still standing quietly, but there was a gun in his hand now, pointed more at the floor than at Johnny—a thoroughly persuasive factor, nevertheless.

"Pick up Brad's gun, Jed," the lean man said quietly. "After all, we want to be kinder certain 'bout this 'fore we do any real shootin'. You, Gus, take this feller's iron."

Johnny stiffened, but his blazing eyes met only a bleak stare.

"Mebbe," the lean man said softly, "you don't know nothing of what this is about; then again mebbe you do. We aims to find out certain without asking no fool questions. Go ahead, Gus."

Johnny turned slightly, bringing his right side a little back.

The long blue barrel came up a trifle; the hammer came back. The man nodded. "You're makin' me feel kinder sure, fella. If that's it, try it."

Johnny shrugged and turned to the bar. He held out his glass and grinned at the bartender who was hanging back. "I said I'd take another. Mebbe you didn't hear me."

He made no move as he felt the Colt lifted from the holster. He downed his drink with a quick swallow, slapped money on the bar and faced his captors. The man on the floor hadn't moved. Johnny wasn't concerned about him.

The man called Jed asked the lean fellow: "What you aimin' to do, Rance?"

"I got a notion," Rance said slowly, "that the Old Man got a look at the skunk that downed him. If the Old Man ain't cashed in an' the Doc says he's able, I'd kinder like him for to pass the word. Mebbe it's a fool notion, an' mebbe," with a hard look at Johnny, "it's a waste of time, but I reckon I'll play it that way." He glanced down at the still senseless Brad.

Johnny paid no heed to that last veiled threat. What Rance first said struck him like a physical blow. "The Old Man" could easily mean Bob Tolin and that possibility filled him with both rage and dread. Despite his habitual poise, Johnny must have disclosed his feeling in some slight way.

"Don't like the idea, huh?" asked Rance.

"You can't get me there too soon,"

Johnny told him savagely.

Rance's eyes narrowed in speculation. "You, Jed," he said quietly, "stick along with Brad. Me and Gus will rod this feller in." His glance swept to Johnny, then back to the man on the floor again. "When he comes to, you can tell him a mule kicked him and," his voice hardened, "you can tell him, too, that 'fore you get to the ranch the show'll be over." He turned toward Johnny but there came an unexpected interruption.

At least Johnny had been so engrossed he had failed to observe the reaction of the men crowded out of the danger zone in the far end of the room. Now a big man, dark faced, almost swarthy, pushed himself to the fringe of the crowd.

"Hey, Rance," he called gruffly. "Do I unnerstand you aimin' to take this feller outa here an' mebbe let him go?"

"Reckon you heard me, Fraser," Rance said coldly.

FRASER took a step forward and Johnny noted that two men pushed ahead with him, flanking him by a pace on either side.

"I says that ain't right," Fraser said loudly, "an' I don't aim to allow it."

"What business is it of yours?" Rance asked sharply.

"For one thing, Brad's done me a heap o' favors now an' then. An' this critter snuck that knockout onto him. Looked to me he hit him with a pistol butt. An' for another, you got this feller dead to rights. I says let's string him up pronto. What d'you fellers say?"

Johnny reckoned about a half dozen favored the idea, with the two beside Fraser the loudest.

"The hell with what you want," Rance told him. "This is my play and I'm seein' it through."

"You're callin' for it, Rance," Fraser said belligerently. "I'm askin' once again. If you're chicken hearted turn him over to us."

Rance had holstered his pistol when Johnny was deprived of his. Johnny wondered, at first, if the man Fraser was drunk, but his appearance belied it. His eyes were crafty, shrewd and hard.

Gus was nearest Johnny and a step ahead

of him in the direction of the crowd, and there was a suspicious bulge at Gus' waist where Johnny reckoned his own Colt was stowed. The crowd was shoving to right and left, leaving Fraser and four or five others in a scattered group. Johnny took advantage of the attention which that movement evoked, to sway unobtrusively forward.

No appreciable time had elapsed since Fraser hurled his challenge; scarcely enough for Rance to frame his reply. Thought is that swift. Johnny knew that Fraser wanted him killed, and that was enough. Johnny slipped by Gus, lifting the pistol from Gus' holster as he did so, and thrusting it into his own. The movement of Johnny's hand was so fast, it was doubtful if Fraser and his men caught it. Then Johnny sprang to one side.

"Fraser," he called. "If you want me so bad—come and get me."

The response was instantaneous. Fraser let out a bellow of rage. Johnny saw three hands dive toward pistol butts; then his three shots blended almost into a continuous roar, and he paused, with gun raised.

Fraser pitched headforemost to the floor; Johnny had been careful of that first shot, undisturbed by the lead that twitched his sombrero around. He had just time to see that he had at least crippled Fraser's two companions, as their pistols thudded to the floor, when a gun crashed from close beside him and a fourth man slumped, the lead from his exploding pistol gouging the floor at Johnny's feet.

Johnny glanced sidewise and saw smoke curling from Rance's weapon. Rance didn't look at him. Instead, Rance strode forward, gun ready, ignoring Johnny behind him. He advanced to the two remaining men of the group. They stood sullenly, arms raised, kicking aside the fallen guns as he came close.

"Drop your belts," Rance told them, waited until they complied, then turned to one of the others who was claspings a bleeding shoulder. "What set you and Fraser up to this?"

"Nothin' set us up," the man rasped. "We jest followed Tom's lead."

Rance glanced briefly at the lifeless hulk on the floor. "You damn near followed him to hell," he commented dryly.

Johnny's third victim swung around on

the tall cowboy. He too was claspings a wound, with the blood trickling between his fingers. His, however, was a side wound, high up, and the hurt of it was undoubtedly severe.

"Dan Larkin ain't goin' to like this a mite," he growled. "He counted a lot on Fraser, besides he bein' foreman. You'll hear from it aw right."

Johnny, listening intently, groaned inwardly. Still another name and not one yet familiar.

"Now ain't that too bad," Rance said caustically. "Fraser shoulda thought of that."

The man writhed a little in his pain; his face was getting pale through copper tan. "Yeh, yeh. Damn smart, you was. You knew Fraser was after you and you were a-feared to face him, gun to gun, so you brung in this damn gunslick to beat up Brad and do for Fraser. I'd order throwed my lead at you 'stead on that ranny."

Rance eyed him intently. "You're tellin' me news, Butts," he said softly. "So you say Fraser was gunnin' for me. How come?"

"Hell, 'course you shoulda knowed it," the man answered, obviously confused. All of this was meaningless to Johnny, but he was absorbing it for possible future use.

Rance slowly shook his head. "Mebbe you're suggestin' that Mr. Larkin might've sicked him on me, huh?"

"I ain't suggestin' nothin'," the wounded man growled. "I gotta get outa here an' git this busted rib fixed."

"Yeh," Rance added, "and take your story to Mr. Larkin and your gang." He turned his back, walking slowly, the two gunbelts looped on his arm.

Johnny reversed the gun in his hand. "I'll swap this for mine, Gus," he said, turning as he spoke. Then he paused, motionless. Gus was standing quietly, a pace from him, and Johnny's own Colt was lined on Johnny's midriff. Johnny suddenly grinned.

"If you ain't the dangedest outfit to tangle with," he complained. "Mebbe that ain't loaded, Gus."

"You took a long gamble on mine, feller," Gus said succinctly. "Reckon I can take a chance on this. We ain't done what's between us yet," he added as if in apology.

Rance, now close, took the gun from

Johnny's upraised hand. "Let's get the hell outa here," he said coldly.

CHAPTER

2

Johnny on the Spot

Once again the saloon doors banged open. The first of the three men who entered was small, neat and arresting in both manner and appearance. He was dressed in city clothes complete to patent leather shoes and tie against a white shirt. He came in with forceful energy and confident assurance, his keen, black eyes roving over the scene with intelligent alertness and without the slightest indication that he felt any emotion at what he saw.

Gawking over his shoulder was a long, stringy fellow with walrus mustache and big eyes in a small face. There was a star on his shirt but to Johnny the badge looked conspicuously out of place. If there was any law around, he suspected it was carried by the man ahead of the star and not behind it.

The third man was notably different. He was dark and came in with an easy cat-like step and a half-sneer on his face. At his appearance, Gus growled something to Rance which Johnny failed to hear, yet, from his quick judgment of men, he didn't miss its significance. This fellow had gunman written all over him and his air advertised his supreme confidence in his ability.

The leader of the trio paused in the center of the room, surveyed the three men on the floor, then faced Rance.

"What is your explanation of this?" he demanded. His tone had a cold vibrant ring that echoed off the walls.

"If I felt called upon to make any," Rance drawled, "I'd say that you have an idea what was behind it, Larkin, and for the rest it was a plumb error of judgment."

Johnny sized up the situation immediately. So this was the big boss of Fraser's crowd and with him he had the prestige of the law plus his own hired killer. He became vividly conscious of his empty holster.

"Who shot who and why?" Larkin asked sharply. "Begin with your own man, Brad, there."

"He ain't shot," Gus spoke into it casually. "He called names outa turn and something hit him that has put him out for 'bout fifteen minutes."

The wounded Butts had shuffled over to lean against the bar where he was half-sprawled with a reddening handkerchief pressed to his side. Pain, hate and the wish for vengeance were clear in his look.

"Rance brought that walloper in to fix Brad," he called. "I ain't got no doubt 'bout it. You know 'bout them an' Letty. Mebbe Rance figured he couldn't fight one of the fambly an' mebbe Brad was too much man for him."

Rance jerked sharply, but Larkin cut into it.

"Never mind that now. Who shot Fraser, Janes there and the rest of them?"

"The same feller," Butts shouted. "A damn gunslick, that's what he is. That feller there," and he pointed his free hand at Johnny.

"Look here, Larkin," Rance spoke sharply, "and you too, Hall," with a glance at the man with the star. "You collect your own story from your fellers, and from the rest of the crowd who saw this-all. If you want me afterward you know where to find me. I got something to do now and it ain't waitin'."

Rance strode toward the door and Gus and Johnny started to follow.

"Jest a minnit." It was the dark gunman who spoke and he was leering at Johnny. "You say this feller done in for Fraser, huh? Wall, jest how good is he?"

He was standing easily, with his right side drawn back a little, right hand at his side but with his intention very obvious. Something heavy thudded on the floor; two belts with their heavy pistols.

"Look thisaway, Waller," Rance spoke softly. "That feller ain't loaded right now."

The gunman looked at the Colt held in Rance's steady hand. He shrugged, still with the sneer on his face, and folded his arms. Johnny and Gus pushed out and Rance backed after them. The three stepped quickly aside from the light.

"How 'bout Jed?" Johnny queried. "Wish you'd let me have my gun, Gus."

"I got me a notion," Rance said cryptically, "that Larkin ain't sore at Brad and they won't bother Jed tendin' to him. You got a hoss, feller?"

Johnny did not reply immediately. He was pondering that comment of Rance, and then it occurred to him that if the stableman had done his chore properly the geld-

ing's appearance might not bear out the story he'd tried to get over.

"I had me a critter," he said finally, "and mebbe if the feller at the stable ain't got plumb tired he could look like a hoss now. How much ridin' we got?"

"Get goin', Gus," Rance said, and not replying to Johnny, let Johnny precede him and brought up the rear, his attention as much behind as before him.

They went at a rapid pace, avoiding several men scattered along the roadway or pressed close to the buildings, but it was apparent that most of the male inhabitants were inside the saloon. The mounts of the two men were at the hotel hitch-rack, along with two others, but at the corner of the building Rance told Gus to watch out while he went to the stable with Johnny.

The bay stood in his stall, sleek and shining and not yet quite dry. Rance swung down the lantern and looked him over with a horseman's appraising eye, and with what other thoughts Johnny could not fathom.

"Back him out," he told the stableman who had shown no surprise at their coming and now stood by, silent and apparently unobservant.

Stooping, Rance took up the four hooves one after the other and examined the shoes critically. He let the last fall, swept another glance over the animal, then gave Johnny a long, speculative look.

"Slap the gear on him," he said abruptly.

"If t'was my hoss," the stableman spoke up unexpectedly, "I wouldn't push him no further tonight. He's a val'able critter if I ever seen one, an' I reckon he's done his chore today."

"How much you pay him for that?" Rance inquired irritably of Johnny.

JOHNNY'S face flushed with quick anger, but he made no reply as he swung the gear from the pegs and slipped it on. The bay nuzzled his shoulder and he briefly stroked the horse's nose.

Rance stepped to the doorway and whistled sharply, then stood there until Gus, mounted, came around with the second horse.

It was a silent ride, single file all the way although at times they were on open prairie while the trail itself was broad enough for three abreast. Save for the dips and gullies the course for the most part was

on rising ground until finally they came to the fringe of a cupped mesa with a cottonwood grove showing as a dark splotch in the starlight. Gus headed toward this.

They rounded the cottonwood clump and a light showed in the dark outline of building. Behind Johnny, Rance swore softly.

"Reckon that don't look so good, Gus."

"We'll know soon enuff," Gus said. There was noticeable tension in his voice. The horses were hastily tethered on the poles of the home corral, and, still in single file, they made their way to the house.

Gus opened the door and they pushed into the big main room, blinking a little in the light from a big lamp swung from the ceiling. A girl was standing beside the cold fireplace, and such a girl. Beauty was in her face and glorious hair; youthful vitality exhaled from her shapely figure and clear brown eyes. And her eyes grew brighter as they fell on Johnny as he came under the light. She sprang forward.

"Johnny! Johnny Hardluck!" she cried. Her two arms went around him. She kissed his copper-tanned cheek, now turning a violent red.

"Kinder 'pears to me," Gus drawled, "you plumb brung something home with you, Rance."

The girl held Johnny off at arm's length, with her eyes still bright upon him.

"For gosh's sakes, Letty," he mumbled in considerable confusion, "don't go tell me you've growed up in these ten years past."

He'd heard the man Butts speak her name, but it had meant nothing to him then. Now he was learning something more in this strange situation, and it didn't augur too well. Letty's attention, however, was caught by Gus' remark.

"Yes," she said. "How come?"

"Giff said it was some stranger," Rance said, a little stiffly. "And this feller showed to be the only stranger here'bouts. Reckon I mighta been a little hasty. How's Giff?" he asked abruptly.

Letty stepped back and seated herself. "Doc Wilson left about an hour ago. He says Dad is going to pull through, although it was a mighty close shave. The slug was a .45, Rance. Doc said the shock of that was bad. He's sleeping now."

"How come you settin' up, Letty?" Rance asked.

She stood up, turned toward the fireplace

"...solution minutes"

then back. "I couldn't sleep. I don't like the thoughts I've been thinking."

"Yeh. We got some things to talk over come mornin'. Nothing more we can do tonight." He turned to Johnny, and for the first time there was no restraint in his look. "Seems like you're an old friend of the Ords an' most likely they'll want you to stay a bit. Howsomever, you could have another idea."

"Why shouldn't he stay?" Letty cried. "Why, Johnny seems like—almost like a brother to me. I used to tag around after him in pigtails. Why shouldn't he stay?"

"Wal now," Gus spoke when Rance hesitated. "I reckon Brad'll be gittin' in 'fore long, an' seein' Giff's bad laid up—" he finished lamely.

"And what has Brad to do with it?" Letty asked sharply.

Gus was in it now and couldn't see a way out. "Oh, he said something and this feller you call Johnny socked him. My gosh, what a wallop. Brad never stirred through all the ruckus."

"Good for you, Johnny," Letty cried impulsively, then looked quickly at Gus. "What ruckus?"

"Aw, heck," Rance broke in. "You, Gus, got about as much sense as a gopher. She won't leave us alone now until she has the whole business. So here she is, Letty. We was persuadin' Johnny here to come 'long with us when Larkin's man, Fraser, an' four, five other rannies, took a notion to lynch Johnny on the spot."

"Why would they do that?"

"That's what I'm tryin' to figger out, puttin' one thing an' 'nother together."

"Yes. Go on."

"Johnny did for Fraser and winged couple others, an' it was all over."

Letty frowned thoughtfully. "What does this all mean now, Rance?" she asked worriedly.

"Look-a-here, Letty," Johnny said casually. "I'd sure be powerful obliged if you'd hand me some grub and I'll roll me a bed out on the mesa."

"You haven't eaten supper?"

"Reckon my stomach thinks I plumb gone back on her," Johnny said lugubriously, "sence 'bout yesterday mornin'."

"For Heaven's sakes! I'll get the grub but you're not leaving on Brad's account or any other reason. Dad will want to talk

with you and"—with a swift glance at the two cowboys—"I want to also." She hurried from the room.

CHAPTER

3

Dynamite Trap

Brad didn't show up that night at the home ranch, nor had he put in an appearance when, after an early breakfast with all hands in the mess-shack, Rance asked Johnny if he would like to take a little pasear with him "up yonder." Johnny surmised more to the invitation than the ride and readily complied.

Rance—or Ransford Travers, as Letty had named him to Johnny the night before—foreman of the spread, led the way steadily northward beyond the cupped plateau where a broad, shallow valley rose gradually to still higher foothills than they had surmounted during the night ride, and with the rugged peaks of the Savorans a misty blue in the distance.

Dotted over the valley were perhaps a couple of thousand head, for the most part in the vicinity of a small, winding brook which, heading further north than Johnny could make out, swung with the trend of the valley off to the west.

Johnny noted the Bar O iron on the first they encountered, but made no comment or question. He had sensed, the night before, Rance's cold eagerness for Giff Ord's attacker that predominated all other considerations. Rance was not the sort to discard his purpose suddenly. Hence this ride, in place of an immediate search in another direction, gave Johnny something to speculate upon.

Grimly silent as an Indian, Rance kept his straight course until they reached the headwater, a large spring, fed also from some source further on, that gushed steadily from a ledge that rose to the rocky overhang of a spur a score of yards beyond. Below the spring a fork had been made in the little stream to feed a shallow pond where now a number of cattle were slowly moving about.

Among these Johnny saw a few with a Lazy T on their flanks; more with a Window Sash brand, although both were dominated in numbers by the Bar O. He also observed that the most of the water followed its natural bed and that the spring

alone, without that further source, was insufficient to supply both.

Rance drew up on the shady side of a clump of scrub and pinon, tethered his mount to one of the taller trucks and came over beside the spring to hunker there and roll a smoke. Johnny joined him and took the makings Rance passed over.

Rance gave a wide sweep of his arm across the valley from the eastward far to the westward.

"Few years back along," he said, "this all was T Bar O. Then Bob Tolin got his dander up, cut out his share of stock and set up ten, twelve mile down the stream where she widens off to the west there."

The mention of old Bob's name told Johnny several things. It told him that in all probability Letty had spoken to Rance of the three close friends of the past, Giff Ord, Tolin and Johnny's father. It was given without preamble or subtle question, advising Johnny of Rance's knowledge and the importance in Rance's mind of Johnny's position in the matter.

In striking his match, Johnny stole a quick look at his companion's stern features. So, thought Johnny, this is what matters more than hitting another trail; this is the showdown between us. The danger, he figured, lay in the seriousness of the quarrel between the once rancher friends.

"What-all," he asked quietly, "started the rumpus between the two of them?"

Rance nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Kinder hard to tell," he answered drawlingly. "Mebbe Bob figgered it was a better spread over yonder. Leastwise Brad took to courtin' his gal, a pretty one, something like Letty only with gold hair. Bob put up his buildings an' moved over, but Brad kept comin' around. Gus says somebody down to town told Bob that Giff was siccin' Brad on to her, but that ain't so. Anyways, Bob took after Brad with a shotgun, then came rarin' over to th' ranch, an' me an' Gus had to tackle 'em both or they'd been salivatin' each other."

There was a little silence, and this time Johnny broke it.

"Mind tellin' me who-all is this feller Brad?"

RANCE gazed off into the distance, cigarette neglected between his fingers. "He come here just 'fore I did. Letty never

seed him afore, an' I kinder think Giff never did neither. Told Giff, so Letty said, that he was the son of Giff's sister, from up North, who Giff hadn't seen for more 'n twenty year, which was 'bout Brad's age when he come. Giff took him on and there didn't seem nothin' wrong with Brad, outside of hisself, till he got to runnin' after both gals."

"Both?" Johnny inquired mildly.

"Yeh, when he didn't take to Bob's buckshot, after a time he took a shine to Letty, an' when it got to botherin' her lately, Giff got sore 'n hell."

Rance took a long drag at his smoke.

"How's it between the two old fellers now?" Johnny asked casually. "See each other a-tall?"

"Not in daylight no more," Rance said quickly, "or there'd still be fur flying offen one or both. Other things been happenin' since that ain't made their fires cool any." He paused a moment, then went on. "Mebbe you noticed what Letty said las' night; that she didn't like what she was thinkin'. And I don't neither. Giff whispered to me, when I picked him up, that a plumb stranger had shot him. I kinder think old Giff was lyin' to me. Come to me after Letty showed she knowed you so well."

"That's bad," Johnny said. "What I recollect of Bob Tolin he wouldn't bush-whack nobody."

"I don't like to think it neither," Rance said morosely.

Then Johnny did something that contradicted all his plainwise habits. "You brought me here for two reasons," he said slowly. "The first was to learn where I stand in this ruckus. Well, I was mad as a saddle boil at you last night, but you played her fair, 'cordin' to what you thought, and I don't see no sense in you and me tangling while the real critter gets away."

"What was the second reason, Johnny?" and the use of his name told him all he needed to know.

"You wanted to show me the layout," Johnny said.

Rance stretched an arm toward the pond below them. "I reckon those Lazy T's you see there 're some of Tolin's old stock, but the Winder Sash fellers 're something new. I'll come to that." He twisted around and pointed behind him. "When this was all one spread, Bob or Giff got th' idea th'

spring weren't givin' all the water it should. They went up yonder, under that cliff an' drilled what they called an artesian. To be exact, they started her and run into a mess of water that didn't call for no windmill to hoist it out."

Johnny surveyed the wide sweep of fine grazing that bordered the stream.

"Uh-huh. What about th' Sash?"

"A small spread, compared to the old T Bar O, up yonder through that pass in the hills." He pointed beyond the overhanging cliff. "They come pushin' down here an' Giff don't like it, so we been pushin' 'em back. They reckon with a lucky rain for water an' their grazin' is right sparse."

"Who owns it?"

"Was a nice feller by th' name of Ed Billings. Waller picked a fight with him."

"And Dan Larkin has it now?" Johnny asked.

"Shouldn't wonder. He owns th' bank an' most everything roundabout, 'cept the T and Bar O."

Johnny glanced at the spring and the steady stream of clear water trickling into it.

"Let's have a look at that artesian business," he said.

He swung his body a little sidewise to get his feet under him, and in that instant something tore viciously at his sleeve and splashed the water of the pond, the sound drowned immediately by the spiteful crack of a rifle.

Both men went flat and rolled over as a second slug spanged off the ledge where Rance had been squatting. Keeping low, they made all haste to the pinon clump, with bullets chasing them to hurry their progress unnecessarily. Fortunately the horses were tethered from the sight of the marksman, and tearing their rifles from saddle boots, each took a side of the scrub and poured shot after shot at the point where they'd seen smoke curling.

They paused simultaneously, and there was no response. Johnny laid his rifle aside and drew the Colt he now carried.

"Cover me, will you, Rance?" he said quietly and started at a zigzag rush for a jutting corner of the spur that flanked one outer end of the pass. He reached it, went cautiously around and at first saw no one. Then, raising his glance, his eyes fell on a distant horseman spurring desperately

away. Rance swept up on his cayuse, followed the direction of Johnny's pointing arm and dashed in what Johnny surmised was hopeless pursuit.

Johnny holstered the gun, then looked carefully over the spot and retrieved several empty shells which he pocketed. With his mind still on his interrupted suggestion, he stepped to the overhanging cliff where a small, bubbling pool sent its water steadily down a shallow drain to the spring.

He looked overhead, then clambered up the face of the ledge a little to one side of the overhang. Looking behind that, he whistled sharply and for the next ten minutes was busy climbing up and down, and on each descent, he carried something with him. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he stepped more into the open and saw Rance cantering back.

"I shoulda taken that bay o' yourn," Rance commented. "Matter of fact, I only expected to see the way the yeller critter went." He swept an arm around. "They's a cut-around back there, off to the west toward Tolin's and th' trail to town."

"Old Bob would never have a man who'd do a trick like that," Johnny declared.

Rance dismounted, loosing the rein through an arm. From his belt he drew a black sombrero and poked out the crown to show where a bullet had cut through it from front to back.

"One of us must've riz his hair," he said grimly. "Picked her up 'long of the hoof-prints."

"Recognize it?"

Rance looked at him steadily. "Uh-huh." He glanced over toward the spring. "Giff got his yonder. Tolin 'd sent word he wasn't gittin' his share of the water and Giff come up to see 'bout it. I was down th' valley and heard th' shot. Trailed the feller same way this jasner went. An' Giff told me," he added softly, "that it was a plumb stranger to these parts."

Johnny's mind, for the moment, was on another matter. He wasn't sure of all the elements of his speculative equation but he was making a pretty shrewd stab at them.

"Larkin ever offer to buy out Giff or Bob?" he asked.

"Huh, 'bout as reg'lar 's a feller asks a girl to marry him. He did for a while but lately he quit."

Johnny added more to his problem.

"Either of 'em owe Larkin any money?"

"Don't know 'bout Tolin. Giff's got a sizable note comin' due." He waved an arm toward the wide-spread herds. "He can meet it aw right, an' I reckon that's what's gallin' Larkin."

"He wouldn't like it, huh?"

"Not a-tall," Rance answered with unusual emphasis for him.

"Come over here," Johnny said quietly. He led the way to the bubbling well, pointed at half a dozen objects lying beside it.

"Dynamite sticks, huh?"

"I fetched them from behind that overhang," Johnny told him.

Rance's dark eyes flared with rage.

"I reckon," Johnny said quickly, "I'll run over and palaver with old Bob a little. Then I'll come back."

"Gus will go with you," Rance said tightly. "Mighty glad for the excuse. Let's dump these in the pond first howsomever." He swore below his breath.

They dismounted at the home corral and started toward the house. A girl appeared on the porch, looked their way and came hurrying down, her light, golden hair flying behind her. Johnny groaned inwardly. As she approached she had been looking steadfastly at Gus but near at hand she shifted her gaze to the stranger, changed her course abruptly and flew toward him with outstretched arms.

"Why, Johnny, Johnny Hardluck," she cried in very obvious delight.

Johnny caught her reaching hands before her arms could encircle him. This was too much of a repetition, he was thinking.

"By gor," he heard Gus mutter. "I sure 'nuff ain't got nothin' on Rance. Do they all go at you like that, feller?"

"My my," Johnny was saying. "Why n't I know you'd grow up like this, Sue, when you was nothing but a gangling kid?" He pressed both her hands, then swung them toward Gus beside him. "Reckon here's a feller you know, Sue. Where's Bob?"

"Back in his den and sore as a bear."

"How come?"

"You ask him. He wouldn't tell me. How are you, Gus?"

Johnny clumped up the steps and into the broad living-room. There was no one there.

"Where the hell you at, Bob?" he yelled.

From beyond a doorway, at one side of the huge fireplace, a deep growl answered him. The floor creaked and Bob Tolin came in, six feet of him, big of girth, a sparkle of pleasure struggling against an obvious anger in his blue eyes, a half-sheepish grin on his broad face. He enclosed Johnny's hand in a bear's grip, thumped him on the shoulder, then turning aside, fumbled in a cabinet and came back with a bottle

CHAPTER

Powdersmoke Pards

4

If for no other reason, Johnny couldn't blame Bob Tolin for his choice of homeland. It was sightlier than Giff Ord's, which Johnny suspected had been the home ranch when they were joint owners. The buildings were set on a knoll back of a lush meadow bisected by a fair-sized stream of glowing water, with good grazing land rising gradually to the north and spreading westward as far as Johnny could see.

His companion, Gus, had been rather silent on the ride, asking no questions and offering few comments of his own. Johnny thought he was nervous.



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



and a couple of glasses. They found chairs together.

"How!"

"How!"

Bob wiped a gnarled hand across his mouth.

"Couldn't wait to see me, huh? Had to go wipe out couple, three of Dan Larkin's crowd. That ain't so good, Johnny. You were barkin' up the wrong tree. Dan's a pow'rful man 'round these parts, hard as steel and likely to square up pronto any score against him."

"You owe him any money, Bob?" Johnny asked quietly.

"You little son of a gun," Bob Tolin rumbled. "Sure; like we all owe bankers a-tween drives. I got it covered all right. Fact, takin' up the note in a few days. How come you ask?"

Johnny didn't answer that. Instead: "What's rilin' you special this mornin', Bob? Sue says you like to chewed her head off."

Bob swore deep in his throat. His face darkened and his eyes shone like sparks from red hot iron on the anvil. "I ain't doin' much talkin' an' I haven't been, but I reckon it's gittin' time for a mite of action. Bad enuff for a feller to set his no account nephee after my gal, but when that low-down snake whups a shot at me from the clear, that, son, is a leetle too much to take."

"When did that happen, Bob?"

"Scarce an hour ago. Was comin' back from town an' my fool hoss took the old fork. I was just turnin' back when this Brad skunk come a-tearin' down the trail from here. Seems like he was carryin' his rifle clear the scabbard, an' he ups her an' blasts one at me. Danged near winged me too. He went on to town an' I come back to git me my irons."

And now Johnny was in haste to go. The most of the elements of his problem had fallen into line. He stood up.

"Look ahere, Bob," he said as sternly as he could muster it. "You asked me up here and you didn't tell me how come. There's a few things I want to find out for myself and I'm goin' to take a little pasear around. And I'm askin' your word to stay put till I git back. How 'bout it?"

Bob poured himself another generous glassful, held the bottle toward Johnny who shook his head.

"Jest like your old man," Bob rumbled, "Aw right, son, I'll stay put but I'm awarnin' you I'm gittin' madder by the minnit."

Gus wasn't in sight when Johnny emerged; neither was Sue. He heard the low murmur of voices from around a corner of the house, tiptoed lightly across the porch and down the steps and got away without being seen, as a backward glance assured him. He didn't need Gus on the chore that stood before him. Rance would be sore if left out of it, and altogether he preferred Rance for the gamble.

Johnny guided the bay over the short cut Gus had shown him and found Rance outside one of the barns. It was near noon and none of the hands was about. Johnny slipped from the saddle and stood leaning against the gelding's flank.

"I reckon that was Brad's hat you picked up over yonder," he said without preamble.

Rance nodded soberly. "I knew he would lay for you, Johnny, an' it was plumb careless of me not to be watchin' out."

"That second shot danged near dusted your pants," Johnny pointed out.

"Yeh, and that's kinder funny. He got no call to get me, 's far 's I know."

Johnny took the spent cartridges from his pocket and passed them over. "Where he was shootin' from," and added softly, "I heard Letty say last night the slug in Giff was a .45."

Rance looked at him with deep, troubled concern. "That's what I didn't like to be thinkin'," he said slowly, "'though I knew old Bob could scarcely adone it."

"You wouldn't be so danged certain if you could see Bob right now."

"Huh? How come?"

"Brad come tearin' past Bob, on his way back from town, 'bout an hour 'fore I got there, and let go at Bob from the rifle he was totin' in his hand."

RANCE turned slowly, with a glance at the front yard and porch, then looked back at Johnny. "I reckon now that was what Letty didn't like thinkin' neither." He gave a hitch to his belt, drew out his Colt, spun the cylinder and returned it to the holster. "Want to grub 'fore we go, Johnny?"

"I reckon I do, Rance," Johnny told him.

They turned toward the mess shack, after Johnny had taken care of the gelding.

"That feller, Waller," Rance said, as they walked together, "will sure be where we'll find Brad—an' Waller is mighty sudden with a gun."

No other words of the coming encounter passed between the two young fellows as they ate heartily and then went to the corral where Rance roped out his mount and led the animal to the barn where Johnny was cinching the gear on the gelding.

Both had reloaded their rifles automatically on the spot and they left them untouched in the scabbards. Both, however, looked to the loads and action of their Colt's before they swung into saddle.

Rance led the way in a long arc until they were out of sight of the home buildings, then struck directly for the trail to town. They rode side by side, chatting lightly at times, neither showing to the other any emotion over the approaching gamble with death. . . .

It was mid-afternoon when their horses shuffled in the dusty roadway of the little town. They tethered at the hotel hitchrack and walked leisurely toward the saloon. Their appearance was as carelessly indifferent as if on ordinary errand, but their alert glances beneath their brims missed nothing about them. A few men were passing on the roadway; a cowboy, hunkered, smoking, near a shack wall, spoke to Rance and he returned the greeting in casual, friendly fashion.

They came to the saloon and entered the broad doorway together, then stepped a little apart, adjusting their eyes quickly to the space fairly well lighted by two windows on one wall and the aperture left by the half-doors at the entrance.

Two men were elbowing the bar, near the far end of the long room. One was the man they sought especially; his companion, as Rance had suggested, was Dan Larkin's body guard and gunman, Waller. And Waller, the further away, was the first to observe the cowboys, but without a flicker of recognition showing in his dark eyes, although their purpose was obvious.

For a brief moment, silence hung heavily suspended in the atmosphere, charged with the electricity of pent emotions soon to break the fetters of their stern control. Then Waller turned his head back to the bar, calmly finished his drink and spoke a low word to his companion.

Brad jerked his head and for an instant seemed to shrivel while his heavy jaw went slack. The bartender looked, then backed away to his rear counter where bottles and glasses were stacked, and leaned weakly against it, with folded arms and face suddenly blanched.

Waller stepped a pace from the bar and faced them with a slight sneer twisting his lips perceptibly; a competent journeyman in his craft, confident of his skill in his chosen trade, about to set to work again. Brad shifted also, to move back a bit, seeking protection of the redoubtable man beside him.

Rance drew the black sombrero from his belt and scaled it the length of the room to slap on the bar beside the two, and all four waited its progress. On the side was justice, of the frontier sort; on the other, the will to kill tinged in one instance by defense of guilt: the passions primitive.

"I brought you your hat, Brad," Rance said in quiet, steady voice. "It tells the whole story, 'long with your empties an' the size of the slug outa Giff. Thought mebbe you'd want to be hung, or shot, in it."

"You reckonin' kinder hasty, feller, seems to me," Waller drawled and his hand darted to his gun.

Just before his shot, however, Brad, who had drawn behind him, fired and it may have been the sudden blast at his elbow affected his own aim, for Johnny felt only the brush of death's wing at his shoulder. Following that first shot of Brad's, it might have been thought that only one gun had blasted, save for the suspended roar of the almost simultaneous discharges.

JOHNNY and Rance stepped apart and surveyed their handiwork. Brad's heavy bulk thudded to the floor. Waller was wavering on his feet, gun-arm lowered, making visible but futile effort to raise it, then he too crashed headlong.

The cowboys came quickly forward. Brad was finished, as was immediately evident, while Waller, vitally hurt, still breathed. Johnny kicked the gun from his loose fingers and Waller, on his back, looked up at him with fading glance.

"Never—thought," he muttered, "anyone—could best—me." And then: "Reckon Larkin—can't pay—for this one."

Rance stepped into his range of vision and Waller managed a weak grin up at him.

"Brad," he whispered, "had—you fooled. No kin—of—Ord's." A rush of blood from his mouth ended it all.

Rance placed the sombrero, with its damning evidence, over Brad's face, and they were tasting the drinks which a shakyl-handed bartender poured for them when the dapper Dan Larkin strode in, followed by his shadow, the lanky, walrus-mustached sheriff. Neither man turned from the bar, after their first, alert glance around, until Larkin came over to them from his identification of the dead men.

"I'm not going to be fooled any longer," Larkin raged. "This, I am convinced, was cold murder. Arrest these two, Sheriff."

Rance turned slowly.

"Hall," he said coldly, "If you had the guts your office orter have, you'll do your restin' of this ornery skunk that gets other men to do his sneakin' killing." He faced Larkin, and his eyes blazed. "Larkin," he said, "You're plumb finished here and here'bouts. An' if you want to do any auguring about it, let me tell you there's six sticks of dynamite that could find their way under your house and could go off in 'bout twenty-four hours, which-all I reckon 'll give you time enough to close up an' git th' hell outa this section of land."

Rance turned his back and proceeded with his drink. Larkin started a furtive move of his hand toward the inside of his coat, caught Johnny's alert and hopeful eye upon him, spun on his heel and left the place with his quick, dapper stride.

Sheriff Hall was fussing about, muttering things to which no one paid attention. Finally he spoke aloud. "I'll have to call in the doc to be coroner on this. You fellers want to make any statement?"

"You tell him, Felix," Rance addressed the barkeep and turned to Johnny.

"Who-all d'you shoot at, Johnny?"

"Brad. Saw his aim at you before Waller started his draw. Never did see that."

"That's kinder funny," Rance drawled. "Then I must've got Waller. Reckon I never could've done it if he'd been cuttin' at me." He shoved away from the bar. "Reckon that square's her, Partner. Let's go."

At the fork in the trail, Johnny drew rein. "Reckon you'll want to tell Giff an'

Letty what Waller said. I'll mosey over after a bit an' I'm tellin' you, Rance, I'm bringin' comp'ny with me iffen I have to hogtie the old coot and stick his sock in his mouth to listen to me."

Rance turned in the saddle, a palm on the cayuse's rump. There was a half-amused, half-satirical gleam in his eyes. "You see anything of Sue Tolin while you were over there?"

Johnny groaned, audibly this time. "Lord knows my face ain't purty—" he began, and Rance came as near laughing as Johnny had seen him in their brief acquaintance.

"Wait a minnit, Johnny," and Rance was as suddenly sober. "I been thinkin'. I dunno 'bout bringing' these two old fellers together. Giff's awful set when he makes up his mind an' he's took enuff offen Tolin to make most men go for their cutter. Funny, too. Gus says the same thing 'bout old Bob."

"There you got the whole story," Johnny drawled. "Only thing is you haven't seen between the lines. Too close to you to get the right focus."

"There's one thing sure," Rance said soberly. "You pulled us outa the dangedest mess I ever fouled foot into, an' me blind as a bat. So what you say goes, and I'll stick to that, come hell or high water, Ord or Tolin."

"Aw, hell," Johnny told him. "All it needs now is a little proper persuadin'."

"Persuadin', hell," Rance said wryly. "I'll see there ain't any loose hawlaigs lyin' round Giff's bed an' leave all the persuadin' to you, feller."

He whirled the stocky little paint and went tearing up the home trail, eager, Johnny surmised, to tell the lovely Letty.

CHAPTER

5

Mormon Johnny

Old Bob Tolin greeted Johnny with a somewhat inflamed and belligerent eye, an air of bluster and with two huge Peacemakers strapped to his thick thighs. Johnny's plan of persuasion began to look tough.

However, he grinned broadly, which didn't seem to contribute helpfully to Bob's good nature. Johnny gestured toward the artillery.

"You can shuck those cannon now, Bob. War's over."

"It ain't over by a hell of a sight!"

Johnny decided it was wise to begin at the back end of things.

"Reckon I'll have my drink now, Bob," he remarked, seating himself comfortably and gesturing toward its twin which they earlier had moved up beside the deep upholstered chair. "And mebbe you'll figger I earned it, or leastwise Rance Travers, savin' you a heap of money."

In the act of pouring, Bob checked himself.

"What you mean, savin' me money?" he demanded hostilely.

"Well, now, if you owed a feller and that feller was a crook and a killer and got the idea sudden that it would be healthier somewhere else in a hurry an' loses hisself, you couldn't pay him, could you, and you wouldn't cry over it neither, huh?"

Comprehension, or a guess at it, began slowly to come to Bob.

Johnny yelled: "Hey! You're spillin' that good liquor, Bob."

The big man stretched forth bottle and glass. "Here, you do it." He seated himself, trying to hide the discomfort of his sidearms in the wing chair. "Now you tell her straight, son."

Johnny told him of the dynamite he'd found above the bubbling well, how Rance had pinned it on Dan Larkin and given him twenty-four hours to get far away.

"How come that feller Waller stood for that?" Bob asked.

"Waller weren't standin'," Johnny informed him. "He was lyin' down, 'count of Rance's straight shootin'."

"An' where was you, Son?"

"Me, why I was salivatin' the lowdown cuss that drilled the man who was feedin' him and who tried to bushwhack me an' Rance before he took a shot at you."

Old Bob's mouth fell open.

"You go too fast, Son. I don't git it all. You shot that feller, Brad?"

"Uh-huh."

"An' who'd you say he drilled?"

"Where you been these past twenty-four hours? Brad shot your old partner and friend Giff Ord. We proved it on him."

"Did he—did he kill him?"

"Nigh on to it. I ain't seen Giff yet but I hear tell he's comin' around an' 'bout as cantankerous as you. Waller told us, 'fore he passed out, that Brad weren't no kin of

Giff's. Been foolin' you fellers all these years. An' he ain't the only one been makin' a fool out of you two idjits."

"What's that you say?" Old Bob belatedly. "Ain't no man livin' can put wool over my eyes."

Johnny sighed heavily. "No? Then who the hell d'you think it was making all this ruckus atween you an' Giff? Ain't neither one of you done nothing to the other. Giff didn't sic Brad onto Sue. He begun to raise hell when Brad took after Letty. Same with everything else. Someone was always tellin' one or tother of you what the other feller done. It's plumb shameful way you both fell for it."

Bob tried to get up from the chair and one of his big guns caught in the upholstery, and he swore manfully tearing it loose.

Finally on his feet, he remarked that the danged things drug too hard on him, unlatched the wide belt and tossed the whole dingus into a corner where it clattered loudly. A little sheepishly he faced Johnny.

"I been thinkin' what you said 'bout Larkin runnin' out. Don't suppose the danged sidewinder'd be round first tryin' to collect, do you?"

Johnny came with alacrity to his feet. "Now I never did think of that," he lied nobly and with sober face. "An' old Giff lying a-bed an' not able to raise a hand. We got to go over there pronto."

"Sue!" Old Bob roared, and when there came an answer from around the porch, he yelled: "Come git your things on. We're goin' ridin'."

Sue, when she observed the direction they were taking, was curious as a cat to learn what miracle had come to pass, but Bob, riding ahead with Johnny, refused to break the silence.

Gus, who had stayed on apparently to make up for a long separation, was plainly interested in nothing whatever except the golden-haired girl.

Arrived at the Bar O headquarters, Old Bob led the way to the porch and inside, puffing his importance as a sure-to-be-welcomed visitor, or, better, as if returned to his own. Letty and Rance were in the big living-room, and Johnny was quick to note Letty's flushed cheeks and Rance's demeanor of calm assurance. The girls embraced each other enthusiastically and Letty planted a light kiss on Bob's big jawl.

"Johnny tells me," he bellowed, "that your Dad's been ailin', Letty. How's th' old fossil makin' her now?"

"Letty," a voice called from the adjoining room, "iffen Rance has let a Hereford bull into the house you tell him to chase him out pronto."

"Well, now; well, now," Bob roared, "the old fellow ain't sick a-tall." He advanced, a little cautiously, toward the closed doorway. "Speakin' of Hereford bulls, Giff," he went on, with his hand on the knob, "I got me a dandy that I'll have brung over t' see if we can't sort of improve the stock this side of the grazin'. I'll tell you 'bout him."

He opened the door, went in boldly and closed it behind him, and the rumble of their voices was plainly audible.

Letty's face was shining, and Johnny reckoned that something besides the reconciliation contributed to her radiant happiness. Sue rushed to her.

"For Heaven's sake, Letty," she begged, keeping her voice low, "Dad wouldn't say a word all the way over. Tell me whatever brought this all about."

LETTY pointed her hand dramatically at Johnny, who on the instant wished he were somewhere else. She was just bubbling over and Johnny suspected that anything was likely to happen with the girl's natural vivacious temperament now raised to the danger point.

"Yes, Sir," she said. "He did it, that lovable, freckle-faced codger over there," and she went on to tell the story, and because it was Rance's version, Johnny was made the hero with everything but a halo around his sandy head. And even that was not long lacking. "To think of it," Letty wound up her glowing tale, "when Johnny first showed up, these two good-for-nothings—what makes you blush so, Gus?—were going to shoot him on suspicion. It breaks my heart to think of it. But Johnny, being the noble sort, just went on and did their chore for them!"

"Oh, Johnny," Sue cried. "I've just got to kiss you," and she started toward him. But Letty was not to be outdone.

"You lay off him, Sue," she cut in. "I saw him first."

Then both girls' arms were around him

and his cheeks were firey under their kisses.

"Help, you fellers," Johnny gasped.

"Nothing doin'," Rance told him. "I ain't sidin' you in this ruckus, Pardner."

"I'll tell you what, Letty," Sue suggested. "The three of us can go to Utah; then we both can have him."

Johnny finally broke away and, seeing no other escape, headed for the adjoining door.

But the girls had no intention of letting him escape and rushed pell mell after him, with the two cowboys trailing close.

"Sssh!" Johnny admonished, from the open doorway, and raised a warning hand.

Bob was seated by the bedside, his great, gnarled hands locked together. His voice was rumbling on:

"What I can't unnerstand, Giff, is how come you ever could git the notion I could harm you."

It was then that Johnny in desperation, feeling the hands settling about him, pulled the prize boner of his life.

"You danged hypocrit, Bob. Anyone would think you were at prayer meetin' an' you ready to chew Giff's ear off."

"Gimme your hawlaig, Bob," Giff Ord yelled in surprising strong voice, "an' lemme shoot the critter who says you'd do me dirt."

"I gotta get outa here fast," Johnny called in mock terror and, twisting low, he broke from the restraining grasps, ran full tilt across the big room and out the door.

Gus and Rance came to him as he was strapping his bedding roll behind the cante. Johnny swung into the saddle, turned around and grinned at them.

"Dangedest narrow squeak I ever had," he told them. "Imagine me bein' a Mormon." He waved his hand, touched his spurs lightly and the big gelding sprang into his stride.

The two cowboys watched him heading westward. Then Gus turned to Rance.

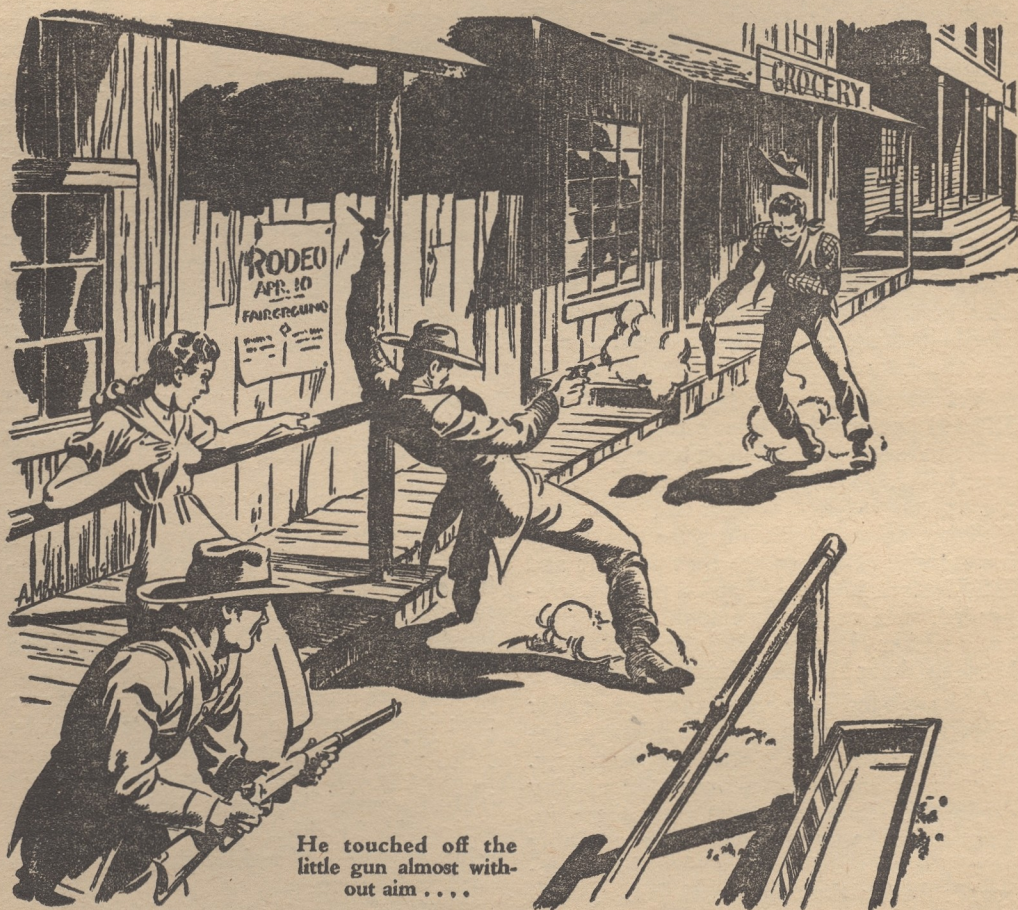
"You don't believe, Rance, that Johnny really meant Bob would bushwhack Giff?"

Rance regarded him sadly.

"I dunno what you got in that round Swedish head of yours, Gus, but"—and he shifted his gaze to the departing horseman and a strange look came into his dark eyes—"I'll tell you one thing. If I ever had to choose ary feller to ride the river with me, that's him there."

★ CODE OF THE DISHONORED ★

An ace from a sleeve, an accusation — and history was repeating itself. But this time the stake was a woman's love . . . or a bunk in boothill.



He touched off the little gun almost without aim . . .

By WILLIAM R. COX

TURK ORDWAY took the stubby derringer from the box in which he had carefully preserved it in oiled rags against this day of need. He removed his black coat and brocaded vest and twisted his suspenders within reach. He was very chary of soiling his shirt.

He tied one end of a string to the trigger guard of the tiny gun. The other end he

fastened securely to his suspenders. He hiked up the suspenders and shrugged back into vest and coat. The sleeve was cut wide enough. The gun hung snug in the sleeve so long as he kept his arm raised and bent, as in holding the slender cheroot upon which he constantly puffed. He had practised this often enough.

He could say that he had waited ten

years for this late afternoon in September, this afternoon when Ed Hitchcock had promised to kill Lieutenant Jeffrey Heater in the town of Silver, New Mexico. He could say it, but it would not be so. Since the day of his disgrace, Turk Ordway had been pretty busy—too busy to call himself waiting for any one event. He had imbibed many bottles, roistered in many capitals, won many a thousand dollars over the tables. He had come to Silver for lung trouble gained in this fashion and found there a lovely woman to adore.

It was no twist of malignant fate which had sent Jeffrey Heater to nearby Fort Sinton. The Apaches were in and out every other week and Sinton was a busy station; the lieutenant was as likely a candidate for a tour there as any other career officer. And it was no coincidence at all that Heater should fall in love with Mary Byrd—because every man in Grant County felt the same.

Yet ten years ago it had happened that Elwood Ordway had been a close friend to Jeffrey Heater at the Academy on the Hudson River. There had been the two of them; the brilliant, mercurial, handsome Ordway, called "Turk" because of his wild impetuosity at the games they played; and Jeff Heater, slow, big-boned, stubborn, tow-headed, one of the last ten in the class but a sticker. Because of the great disparity between them they had been friends.

They played in a silly card game, for chits redeemable at the Commissary, because none of them were allowed money. They were not even allowed the playing cards, but Turk had smuggled these in. Even then he loved cards. He probably loved the slip and slide of the slick pasteboards better than he loved honor.

Honor, in that place and time, was more than a word. At West Point the barracks were Spartan, the aura stiff and cold and forbidding. Only honor and that other thing, glory, were warm and bright. The candidates had to have something, and these two things were military and right, they believed.

When a card, which should have been in the deck, fell between Jeff Heater and Turk and was seen by all, the silence which fell was a most awful thing. Straight-backed youths glared fiercely from one to the other of the two who might be guilty.

They noted without pity the flinching, clumsy blushes of Jeff Heater, the raised brows of Turk Ordway. There was no appeal from those challenging, accusing stares.

It was Ordway who arose, saluted. He walked stiffly out of the room, and from that moment he became an outcast, a pariah to all Army men who had ever known his name. From that moment he was launched upon his life of gaming—and winning.

In ten years he had amassed enough money to buy into a prosperous silver mine, a small bank and some other enterprises. He played poker in Red Morgan's saloon as a matter of habit, and he discreetly wooed Mary Byrd. His lungs were well and would remain so if he stayed in Silver at an altitude of 5500 feet. All would be well, except that Jeff Heater had come to town and Mary Byrd had hesitated.

Last night, in the poker game, Turk Ordway had looked upon Lieutenant Jeffrey Heater with cool hatred. The big man had changed little with the years. He still bumbled—and his luck held. He was winning at poker in his clumsy, off-handed way. Playing against the notorious, long-haired Ed Hitchcock, against Turk and two others, he still won. Hitchcock, the handsome, debonair ex-plainman, had been annoyed.

And then the card had fallen. It was an ace; it should have been in the discards. But it had fallen and everyone had seen it. No one had quite observed from whence it had come. Jeff and Turk had been sitting side by side. Hitchcock was on the other side of Jeff and he saw it first and used bad language.

Turk said quietly; "An accident. Nothing to it, Gentlemen."

Jeff could say nothing. His face was red, bursting, and he stared piteously at Turk, but he said not a word.

Hitchcock spoke thickly, "Yo' can't git away with it, pardner." He was addressing Jeff, who was the only big winner in the game.

Turk's voice was flat, cold. "If you try to draw a gun in here, you're a dead man, Hitchy."

Red Morgan was behind the bar with a shotgun in his hand and Hitchcock knew

this, because Hitchy was a gunman who had lived for years by being aware of such matters. He was careful with his hands, but he was a man with a reputation and to remain alive he must needs live up to this renown. He threw back his long hair and said, "Reckon yo're right, Turk. But tomorrow's another day, like my pappy useta say. I don't reckon the lieutenant will be in town tomorra. If he is, I'll be around at sundown. Just him and me. I don't aim to let a sun set on him."

It was midnight and Jeff, on a pass, had gone to the hotel. There was nothing he could do but linger on the morrow and get shot, Turk Ordway knew. There was plenty of things which he could have chosen had it not been for that word "honor." He could go back to the Fort and remain away from Silver; he could get himself sent on a long scout and hope Hitchcock would move on before he returned; he could even have Hitchy run out of town for threatening an officer during these troubled times of Indian wars. He could do these things, but they would be beyond the boundaries encompassed by that word "honor." Ordway chuckled, thinking of this, thinking of Heater and of Mary Byrd.

SHE came up the street at that moment. She was a fair woman with rather wide shoulders and a graceful walk. She looked at him in the afternoon sunlight, and anyone who cared to could see her mount the steps of his bachelor house.

He bowed from the waist, narrowing his eyes to keep the bloodshot of the muddled whites from showing. He said: "You should not come here, Mary."

She was always direct. She said: "You

can save him. You know you can, Turk."

It pleased him that she spoke without preamble, without maidenly dissimulation. She was a woman in a thousand. He said: "A second time?"

She, too, was capable of gesture. She held her shawl together with her left hand, revolving the class ring so that he could see it. She had not worn it before. It was on the ring finger, too. It was far too large for her, and he guessed at once that she had borrowed it for this appeal. She said: "How do you know he told me about that old thing at West Point?"

"I know Jeff Heater," said Ordway coolly. "He would tell you."

"And you never would," she said, half to herself. "You are two strange men. . . . Hitchcock is a bully and a vain fool. It will be murder if he kills Jeff. If you permit this to happen, you will have murdered Jeff."

He did not allow her to see him look at the class ring. He held her eyes and said: "My dear, I cannot prevent Hitchcock from meeting Lieutenant Heater. This is a matter between those two—none other. My interference would help matters not a bit."

She said: "Jeff never cheated in that poker game. If anyone did, it was Hitchcock. He is notorious—"

Ordway said drily: "He is the quickest gun-slinger in the Territory."

"You are not afraid of him," she declared. "I know you, too, Turk. You are clever. Jeff is not clever. . . ."

"Lieutenant Heater is an officer and a gentleman, by Act of Congress. He has got into an affair of—honor. He knows how to conduct himself in the matter."

YOU GET THEM
ALL IN
THE SOLID COMFORT
LHS
PIPES
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PRICED THE SAME AS BEFORE THE WAR!

She said: "Honor! Chivalry! Balderdash—mumbo jumbo. Playing at games that hurt, You and your Bayards and your Rolands and your Galahads—stupid, dull men doing violence. . . . Turk, you must prevent this. You've got to. Do you understand? You can do it somehow. You're smart, you're fearless, you're—ruthless."

"Ah?" His eyebrows lifted. Like a villain in a melodrama, he thought. It was a vicious thing the way he could stand apart and be a witness as well as participant in these scenes. "I am ruthless?"

"Of course you are," the woman said. "And unscrupulous. But there is in you something which—which appeals to me, to every woman. And there is in you something tougher, stronger than is in the Bayards and the Rolands. . . ."

Even then he felt himself responding, rising to the bait. He almost put back his shoulders into the old-time brace . . . and then he smiled. He said: "My dear, you are a far cleverer person than I. But you cannot interfere in this affair. You can persuade Lieutenant Heater to leave, to return to the post and remain there, and then perhaps I can get Hitchcock out of town. But if Heater remains in Silver until sundown, he will be shot."

She stared at him for a long moment. Then she held the shawl a little tighter with the hand which wore the class ring and said: "All right, Turk. But it will be the end, you know. It will have to be the end. Between you and me, there can be nothing after this. We live here, in Silver; we have our roots here now, you and me. It will be bad, Turk, through the years."

He bowed again and she went down the street. Her walk swayed the long dress so that the hem went back and forth in the most maddening fashion. Ordway bit his lip hard and went into the house. He picked up his hat and stood facing the setting sun, sweating a little.

* * *

Jeffrey Heater moved heavily, for he was a fleshy man, huge, solid. His head seemed carefully set upon columnar neck and everything about him was precise, as though he feared to err through haste. He squinted at the descending red orb of sun and went into the bar of Red Morgan.

The saloonkeeper shoved a bottle of whiskey across the boards and said: "This

here is a tough town. Not noisy tough like Dodge or Abilene, but quiet tough. Hitchcock's allowed to have a right by the folks here. But Turk Ordway sided you and Turk's a mighty respected citizen."

Heater said carefully: "Tell Hitchcock I did not leave." He drank one shot, paid and went out.

He walked around the corner, up the hill. Mary Byrd maintained a shop where she designed dresses for lesser women and made a very fine thing of it, too. He remained on the small verandah, his cap in his hand, bowing to her. He was too heavy to bow and his uniform seemed too stiff and unwieldy for those parts. He said: "Darling, I had to see you again."

She said: "You will let him kill you?"

"I have a carbine." He tried to explain and his voice became dry and curt, as though he were explaining a field problem to Sergeant Geraghty. He tried to alter the tone, but amazingly he could not. He said in the same dry fashion: "I will not go against such a man with a revolver. I shall kill him as though he—as I would a wild animal."

"Just shoot him as though he were a man trying to kill you first," she advised him. Her voice had also become as dry as the high air of Silver.

He could not stop telling her. "Hitchcock will walk the center of the street. It is part of his tradition. I shan't ambush him, of course. . . ."

"You couldn't," she said in that same false voice. "He, too, has friends."

Jeff Heater looked hurt, betrayed. Mary was breaking the pattern, and he could not shift to meet her on other ground than that he knew. He had always been slow at mathematics, at patterns of any sort. At West Point, Turk Ordway had helped him a lot, while Turk was there. . . .

He blurted: "I'm not scared of Hitchcock. I'll meet him face to face and may the best man win!"

"Jeff!" Her face was white and stiff with emotion. "Couldn't you stay away and at least depend upon the superior range of the carbine— But no, you couldn't. That would be sensible. . . . Oh, Jeff, get on your horse and ride! Go back to the Fort and get yourself sent on a scout. Anything but this ridiculous duel!"

He said, honestly shocked: "Mary! You

can't mean that. Why, Mary, you are acting so peculiarly tonight—" He gulped as his own pattern cracked. He drew himself up, stiff as any board. "Mr. Ordway will look after any affairs of mine which come to civil attention, should anything happen to me. I'll go down now, Mary. It is almost sunset."

She said: "Yes, you'll go down now. Mr. Ordway will bring me your sword, or whatever it is. You'll go down now. . . ."

HE HESITATED. Across the street a lace curtain twitched; down on Bullard a small boy ran as his father chased him. There would be bullets, and a wild one could kill even a small boy who had nothing but curiosity to see the great Hitchcock in action. Lieutenant Heater swallowed hard, refrained with difficulty from saluting the fair woman. He wheeled and went stiffly down the hill toward Bullard.

He was, Mary thought, the epitome of the hero of fable, going to meet the enemy without fear, overmatched, doomed to death, stupid—but with an animal courage which was admirable in the eyes of the world. For the woman, she thought wearily, there was nothing.

Yet she would not wait, trembling like a fool, for the men to come and tell her the tale. She put the shawl over her blonde tresses and glided around the block, over back ways. The sun dipped and threw a heavy shadow alongside Morgan's saloon, and there she stood, waiting, jaw firm, eyes burning.

Jeff came from the hotel, walking along the boards, carrying the carbine under his arm, exactly as though he were hunting mountain lion. He came to Morgan's saloon and paused under the wooden awning which stretched across the walk, shouldering a supporting post. Mary was within forty feet of him, in the shadow.

She saw Turk Ordway come out of Morgan's and at once her heart beat faster. She strained her ears shamelessly, eaves-dropping.

Jeff Heater spoke first. "Keep out of this, Turk!" It was a command.

Ordway's voice was lower, but controlled. "Can't do it, Jeff."

Again the words shot out, commanding: "I'll shoot you, too. This is my affair—and

I don't want you in any of my business."

"Why, Jeff, I don't blame you," said Turk, still very softly. "A man can't refrain from certain actions. I am well aware that you are honorable in everything else. I also am aware that I have probably done you a great disservice."

"You always talk like a fool," said Heater furiously. "Damn you!"

Ordway warned: "Hitchy is making his walk. Look sharp. And let me talk to him. Don't be a thorough damned fool."

The dandy of western gunmen wore his pantaloons too tight, his hair a bit too long, but he was as deadly as a rattlesnake. He minced a bit, walking along Bullard. He knew that Lieutenant Heater was waiting before Morgan's saloon with a carbine, and the thought delighted him. Long gun for a bushwhack, he knew, short gun for this sort of street duel. He had killed many men and an army officer was just so much meat to him. He had become calloused through the years, partly because of the ever-present knowledge that death lay in wait for him, too, maybe around the next corner. He walked slowly, giving the populace a chance to peer from safety, admiring him.

Ordway said conversationally to Jeff: "Cheating at cards can be a disease. I am doing this, you must understand, for Mary Byrd. The big thing is that you do not play cards again, not ever. I have known other men who could not help cheating at cards. In fact, I have cheated a few on my own account, just to teach them a lesson."

There was a silence, while Ed Hitchcock walked a dozen paces. Then Jeff Heater gasped: "You—it wasn't you, then, Turk? You didn't—you never dropped that card, back at the Academy?"

Mary Byrd took a step, coming out of the heavy shadow. Her shawl fell away from her blonde hair. A man down the street called sharply to her to get back, but she never heard him. Hitchcock moved a little faster, frowning.

Ordway was saying, as though in prayer: "Oh my Lord! This is ridiculous! Oh, my Lord. I thought you did it, Jeff. I thought you did it, and I knew how rough it would be for you. . . ."

"Me? I'm too dumb," Jeff Heater burst forth. "I'm too slow to ever try it. You ought to know that, Turk."

The cheroot went to Turk's mouth, he inhaled smoke. He said: "Well, now, Jeff. This has all been too damned bad. I've always thought myself very clever, you know. That card *did* fall between us—"

Jeff said swiftly: "And last night? What about that ace? Where did it come from? What the hell, Turk?"

Hitchy had paused and his voice came clarion clear. "Lieutenant Heater! Make your play, dammit."

Ordway said: "Stay out of this, Jeff. This is on me. I arranged this."

Jeff was bringing up the carbine. Turk Ordway's hand went out, stopped him. The sun cast purple shadows, but into the light stepped Ordway, smoking his cheroot.

Hitchcock said immediately: "Ordway? What is this?" He crouched a little, his hands spread for the draw he would certainly make. He was ready; he would kill. The man's brown eyes were almost popping out of his head, he was so far out of himself, so near to homicide that only a part of his brain gave him the pause to speak. "It's not the two of you against me?"

"No," said Turk Ordway, careful to keep his voice calm and low. "It's not two to one. You know better than that, Hitchy."

"Then let that damn jackleg blue-back get out here an' take it," said Hitchcock. A vein at his temple throbbed, plain to see.

"Why?" queried Turk softly. He stepped into plain sight and irresolution held Jeff frozen, held Mary Byrd frozen, as Turk, smoking his cheroot, went in the sunshine toward Ed Hitchcock. He went out of earshot and spoke again. "Why should he come out, Ed? Because you're clumsy?" Ordway whispered. "I always heard you were no good at second-dealing. I always heard you were better with your guns than the deck."

Hitchcock said: "Turk, you don't tote iron. You can't talk to me like that."

"I am armed," Turk snapped at him. He held the cheroot before his face, blowing smoke. "I could kill you—but I allowed this to happen—for a reason. You're a clumsy cheater, Hitchy. Go for your gun!"

HITCHCOCK cursed, but he was quicker-witted than most. None had overheard Turk's accusation. The gun-slinger acted as the occasion demanded, accord-

ing to his lights. He was very quick and business-like in his motion, reaching for the holstered Colt. He got it out and he got it up, and his animal courage and skill was superb as he thumbed the trigger and pumped the trigger, throwing lead.

The sound of the big gun was like the roar of thunder over Bear Mountain in the background. Turk turned, coughing a little, the first time he had coughed in months, he thought oddly. He had not known the bullet would whack him so severely. It turned him half around, and he scarcely heard the cries of Heater and the woman. But nothing, not even the thwack of the .45 caliber bullet into his lean body, could keep him from dropping his cheroot.

And then like magic, the little gun was in his hand. He touched it off almost without aim, for in these affairs, he had always contended, aim was of less importance than steadiness of purpose and coolness of the brain. In his state of shock from the wound, he realized that Hitchcock had missed his second shot, when Turk had turned. The heavy slug from the derringer could preclude a third shot, he thought a bit numbly, clutching at the post, trying to keep from falling.

He tried to brush the veil away from his eyes, because it was important that the little gun on the piece of string should not miss. Hitchy would be capable, in his rage, of shooting Jeff Heater too. For Jeff knew that Hitchcock was the cheater now, and Jeff was not a man to let a thing like this go by.

Then Turk heard the woman cry and dimly saw Jeff lower the carbine. He was very glad that Mary could cry out at his demise, and he judged that Hitchy had been hit by the derringer slug, which was about .44 caliber and heavy enough. He managed to wheel back around the post and stand erect.

Hitchcock was standing, staring down at the gun which he could not raise. He made an effort to get it into his other hand, using the old border shift, but the strength was no longer in him. He sagged, a brave man, a man who had lived according to the peculiar code of the frontier ruffian, a bit soiled, but sturdy in defense of what honor was his. . . .

The woman held the basin, staring at

the pinkish water. The doctor turned and said: "That is all I can do."

When the doctor went out of the room, the three of them looked at one another. A certain exhaustion had set in. Jeff Heater said thickly: "You'll be all right, Turk. It went in high, breaking your shoulder, but missing a vital spot."

"Oh, positively," said Ordway faintly. "I'll be all right."

The woman took the basin to the sink in the kitchen. She emptied it and pumped water to wash down the residue which clung to the zinc. For a moment she clung to the edge of her familiar sinkboard, all soaped and clean. She was very strong and very brave, and in a moment she went back into her bedroom.

Ordway said: "They could have carried me to my own house."

"That's all right," said the woman. "I wanted you here."

Ordway said: "Oh." His tongue was fuzzy.

Jeff's precise, schoolmaster voice was going on. "I thought he had cheated at the Point, but I knew if he had, it was just for the sheer joy of getting away with it. Do you understand? Turk's like that. Taking chances, always. For fun. He is a very flamboyant man."

The woman said: "I know what manner of man he is."

"He rushes in," said Jeff. "Then, you see, when it happened again last night, I thought it was his old tricks again. But the point is, all these years he thought it was me. He quit the Academy to save me, because he thought he could quit easier than I could. And then there was—me and you."

The woman said: "Must you go over it so, Jeffrey?"

"Yes," he said stubbornly. "I love you."

She said: "Please, Jeffrey. He can hear you."

"Of course he can hear me," the voice pounded on, pedestrian but sure. "He knows you were almost ready to marry me, because you thought I needed you. But now you know. You know he is right; he always was right. Maybe it was not smart to accept what he thought was my blame, but we were kids then. And it led into this

situation here. Where he did save my life, because after I have seen Hitchcock, I realize that I could not match him with a carbine. Turk matched him with a little gun on a piece of string and only came off evens. Hitchcock would have killed me."

She said: "Jeff, maybe he could sleep."

"You will nurse him and then you will marry him," said Jeff, almost with contentment. "It will pay him back for the bad years. You see, Mary, I believe in compensation. I believe in justice. There is a square deal for everyone."

When he bowed over her hand his mouth worked a little, but he was able to straighten with a smile. By dint of great effort Turk Ordway opened his eyes and saw the big man stalk majestically from the room. He croaked: "Why didn't you stop him?"

Mary shook her head. She said: "Stop Bayard, Chevalier, Roland?"

He said: "You have his ring."

"Borrowed," she explained. "To use upon you. It worked."

He shook his head. He concentrated, getting the words even and straight. "I went down there to tell him about it. How I didn't mind accepting the blame for him twice, but how he ought to quit cards. But I meant to step aside, and he would get it, too."

She said: "Then why did you go?"

He said feebly: "The old class would know. They would think I was in there, at the end, with Heater. The word would go out. . . . I was twisted, Mary."

"Couer de Lion," she said. "Oh, my dear! You're a fool, too, just like Jeff. Only not so ponderous." She flung herself down, but was careful not to touch him. She was still not sure he would live.

He said: "Hitchcock—he's—dead?"

"No, he will live," she said. "It seems all you foolish, brave men will live. But what of me?"

"Why," he said. He managed to turn his head and her face was close enough. "Why, I love you," he said, as if that settled it all.

And as he was falling asleep at last, he wondered drowsily who *had* been the actual cheater up at West Point, ten years ago. Some incipient general, he thought, and almost chuckled.

FOOL'S LAW FOR DEVIL'S FORK



Mike said: "Reach
for your gun!"



By
**PHILIP
KETCHUM**

THE town meeting was to be held tonight, and among other things scheduled for decision by the council was the appointment of a town marshal for another year. Mike McKeever, who had been the town marshal for as long as there had been such an office, faced serious opposition for the first time. Devil's Fork was assuming the proportions of a city, and there had been talk, recently, of the need for a younger and more active man in the marshal's job. There were a couple of new

Mike McKeever faced a tough fight to keep his marshal's job — and made it tougher by riling every councilman in Devil's Fork.

candidates—pretty good fellows, too. Even Mike admitted that.

He sat on the bench in front of his office on Devil Fork's main street and scowled thoughtfully at nothing in particular. He was sixty-two. Maybe he was getting old. Maybe there ought to be a younger man on the job. Maybe, when George Meyers had talked to him the other day, he should have said he would be glad to step out. It would at least have been easier to quit than have the council give him the boot. The only trouble was he didn't want to retire—and he had been honest and had told Meyers so.

Young Ed Carter, who was top hand at the Bar 90 Ranch, came riding into town, then, and pulled up in front of his office. Carter said: "Hi, Mike. How goes it?"

"'Bout as usual," Mike answered. "Did you get that place up in Spring Valley?"

Ed Carter's face darkened. He shook his head. "I could have but I didn't," he answered shortly.

He was a slender man, tall, and he had good, clean-cut features. His eyes raked up and down the street, and Mike had a notion he was looking for the Kilgallon rig which Sue Kilgallon usually drove when she came to town. It had been the plan, Mike knew, that Sue and Ed Carter would be married when Ed was able to get the Spring Valley ranch and strike out on his own. Mike wondered what had happened.

"That's a mighty nice ranch," he suggested. "You could have made a go of it, Ed."

"I should have been a banker," Ed Carter said bitterly. "Next time I live that's what I'll do."

Mike dug up his pipe and filled and lit it. He saw the Sheridel wagon come down the street and stop in front of Patterson's store. Tom Sheridel, who was driving it, got out and hitched the team and went into the store.

"You quit too easy, Ed," Mike said slowly.

Ed Carter shrugged his shoulders. His face had a tight, scowling look. He said: "See you later, maybe," and rode on down the street.

Mike sucked on his pipe and watched young Carter pull up in front of the High Nine Saloon, dismount, tie his horse and go inside. He shook his head, puzzling over Carter's statement about being a banker.

George Meyers, the banker, was a widower, and Meyers had always been pretty attentive to Sue Kilgallon, but it didn't seem reasonable that Sue would pick Meyers over a fellow like Ed Carter. It didn't seem reasonable, unless her father had been working on her. Dan Kilgallon, Sue's father, was a man with a goading pride. Dan might have preferred the banker over a young chap just getting started.

Mike leaned back and closed his eyes. He was a big man, broad shouldered, and had thin gray hair. His face was square and tanned and not too wrinkled. It occurred to him that it was a mistake to be sitting here, dozing, on the morning of the day when the marshal was to be appointed. He opened his eyes and sat up and scanned the street. Pat Henry, who ran the Silver Dollar Saloon, had just come out of his place and was heading up the street toward the bank. Mike watched him thoughtfully, remembering the game at the Silver Dollar the night before. He called Henry over, and as the saloonkeeper angled toward him, Mike remembered that Henry was on the town council. This brought a scowl to Mike's face but he put the thought aside.

"Something on your mind, Mike?" the saloonkeeper asked.

Mike McKeever nodded. "Jim Brock," he said bluntly.

PAT HENRY was short, thin, and had cold gray eyes. They took on a chilly look. "What about Jim Brock?" he demanded.

"He didn't deal a straight game last night, Henry," Mike answered.

"He'd shoot you if he heard you say that."

"Maybe."

"All the games in my place are straight."

"The one Brock dealt last night wasn't. I know. I saw it. Frank Herwig lost more than a month's wages. He didn't get wise but I know Frank Herwig. He'll get to wondering why he lost so steady. He'll come back and watch Jim Brock and maybe he'll see what I saw, and then there'll be a shooting. Or maybe sooner than that someone else will catch Brock in a crooked deal, and someone will get killed. Brock's got to go."

Pat Henry's lips tightened. "Are you trying to tell me who I hire?"

"Not at all, Henry," Mike answered quietly. "I'm just telling you that Jim Brock's got to go. He's crooked. He's fast with a gun. That combination means that he'll get caught sometime, and one of the boys around here will get killed. I don't want that. I don't think you do either."

"If I catch him cheating I'll fire him. I don't need any help from you."

Mike started to say something, but Henry jerked around and walked away. Mike's scowl came back to his face. He wondered how Henry would vote tonight on the matter of town marshal. He was afraid he knew.

Tom Sheridel came out of Patterson's store and stood for a moment on the porch, fingering a paper he held in his hand. After a moment he crumpled the paper and dropped it, and then moved indecisively into the street. He stood there for a while, looking toward the bank, and after a brief hesitation, moved that way, opened the door, and stepped inside.

Watching him, Mike remembered Sheridel's place out on Red Mesa, and the time he had stopped there and eaten the plain but wholesome meal Ellen Sheridel had prepared for him. He wondered how they were getting along. They were having a struggle, he knew. None of the farmers out in the mesa country were finding it any too easy.

Sue Kilgallon's rig turned down the main street. Sue was in it but she wasn't driving the horses. Her father held the reins. Dan Kilgallon was a short man, but high-heeled boots and a high-crowned hat and the stiff way he stood when in a crowd brought him almost to the stature of other men. The rig passed Mike's office, and Mike waved to Dan and the girl. Dan Kilgallon nodded, but Sue was leaning back and apparently hadn't noticed him. She was a small girl with very dark hair. She was bright-eyed and vivacious, and there was music in her laugh. Dan Kilgallon turned the rig into the lot beside the hotel. He got out and hitched the team, and then stood by the side of the wagon talking to his daughter. Sue didn't seem to be saying anything.

After a moment Dan Kilgallon left the rig and came back to the street. He turned into the bank and almost at once George Meyers came out and headed for the Kil-

gallon rig. From the doorway of the bank Dan watched the banker reach the rig and start talking to Sue. Nodding, Dan Kilgallon turned up the street to the feed store.

Mike McKeever knocked the ashes from his pipe. He filled it and lit it again. He saw Ed Carter come out of the High Nine Saloon and look toward Sue's rig, and then turn abruptly back into the saloon. Meyers helped Sue from the rig and walked to the street with her, holding her arm. It seemed to Mike that there was something very possessive in Meyer's manner.

"Hi there, Uncle Mike," Sue called suddenly, waving her hand.

Mike waved back and grinned. Suddenly Sue pulled away from George Meyers and crossed over toward him. Meyers, still on the board walk, frowned.

"This isn't going to help either," Mike said to himself, thinking of the election scheduled for tonight. But his grin didn't go away.

"You look tired, Uncle Mike," Sue declared, looking down at him. "You're not getting enough rest."

"It isn't that," Mike answered slowly. "I've been thinking. Maybe thinking makes me tired."

Sue laughed at him, shaking her head. She glanced down the street toward the High Nine Saloon, and the warm look which the laugh had brought to her face was suddenly gone.

"Yes, I've been thinking," Mike continued. "Among other things I've been thinking of Spring Valley. It must be mighty pretty there this time of the year."

Sue bit her lips. She gave him a steady, searching look. "What should I do, Uncle Mike?"

"Be happy, Sue," Mike answered promptly. "The days and nights are pretty long if you're not."

Sue Kilgallon caught her breath. She suddenly leaned forward and kissed Mike on the forehead. She said: "Uncle Mike, as long as I live I'll love you. Do you know I almost made a mistake, a terrible mistake?"

Mike chuckled. "I'll be up to Spring Valley sometime to see you," he promised.

A flush of color had come into Sue's face and her eyes were misty. She nodded her head and hurried up the street.

Mike stood up, stretched, then plodded down the street to the High Nine Saloon. He found Ed Carter inside at the bar, scowling at his drink. Mike lined up beside him.

"I still think you quit too easily, Ed," he said quietly.

Ed Carter glanced at him. He said; "Shut up, Mike. What do you know about it?"

"She was headed up the street a minute ago," Mike went on. "Spring Valley was deep in her eyes."

Ed Carter sucked in a swift, sharp breath. He turned abruptly away from the bar and headed for the door.

MIKE stood there for a while, then moved out to the street and walked back up toward his office. Tom Sheridel came out of the bank and stood in front of it, showing the same indecision in his manner which had been apparent when he came out of Patterson's store.

Mike called: "Hi there, Tom. How's everything?" Sheridel looked over toward him, then moved to join him. There was a bleak, frozen look on his face. He said: "I'm all right, Mike. Everything's all right, I guess," and walked along with Mike to the bench in front of the marshal's office.

Mike sat down and said: "Have a seat, Sheridel. No use standing up. How's your wife?"

Sheridel bit his lips. "She's fine."

"Good crop coming up?"

"The best you'd ever want to see."

Mike filled his pipe. He passed his tobacco to Sheridel and noticed the man's mo-

mentary hesitation before he accepted it.

"I've got papers somewhere," Mike said, feeling in his pockets.

"I've got papers," Sheridel answered. "Meant to get some tobacco when I was in the store but didn't."

He rolled a cigarette, lit it and inhaled deeply. Then he took the cigarette from between his lips and stared at it.

"When you heading for home?" Mike asked.

"Pretty soon. It's a long drive."

"Come in for supplies?"

Sheridel stared straight ahead. "Just came in," he said flatly. "We don't need much out our way."

Mike scowled. He glanced toward Patterson's store and then toward the bank, and his scowl deepened. He saw Pat Henry come out of the bank and start back toward his saloon, and the sight of Henry reminded him of Jim Brock.

"Listen, Sheridel," he said slowly. "I've got something I've got to do. Could you keep your eye on my office for a while until I get back?"

Tom Sheridel's eyes showed a mild surprise. "Why, sure, Mike."

"Thanks," Mike nodded. "I won't be long."

He turned up the street to the hotel just beyond Patterson's store. Inside, he nodded to Fred Otway, who ran the place.

"Jim Brock up yet?" he asked.

"Ain't seen him, Mike," Otway answered. "He usually sleeps late."

"What's his room number?"

"He's in eight. Last door on your left down the hall."

Mike McKeever headed down the hall. He knocked on the door of Brock's room,

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and when a voice told him to enter, he opened the door and stepped inside. Jim Brock stood at the wash stand, shaving. He was thin, not very tall. He had dark hair and a pale, tight-skinned face and colorless lips. His eyes clouded at the sight of the marshal, and a slight frown gathered on his forehead.

"What the hell do you want?" he demanded bluntly.

"Thought I'd like to talk to you a minute," Mike answered. "I watched you dealing last night."

"I saw you there," Brock admitted.

"Then you know what I saw. There's a stage leaving here at three o'clock. You'd better be on it."

"I'd *what*?" Brock gasped.

"I said there was a stage leaving here at three," Mike repeated. "You'd better be on it."

A twisted, mocking smile came to Brock's lips. "Say, who the hell do you think you're talking to?"

"A crooked gambler," Mike replied. "The kind of men we don't need around here."

"I ought to kill you for that."

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "Try it. You're supposed to be good with a gun. Reach for it."

Jim Brock laid aside his razor. He was wearing his gun. He looked down at it and then looked at Mike McKeever. The marshal was standing just inside the door, his thumbs hooked in his belt. His eyes were steady and there was a frosty, cold look in them.

"Go ahead," Mike said again. "Reach for your gun!"

JIM BROCK moistened his lips. He had never given much thought to this man who served as marshal. The few times he had considered him, he had thought of Mike McKeever as a rather mild old man who had a soft snap in his job and wouldn't try to make it difficult. This was so far outside the pattern of everything he had considered possible that he didn't quite know what to do.

"What if I don't leave?" he asked slowly.

"If you don't leave I'll come over to the saloon after you. I reckon after a week in jail you might be glad to leave."

"You'll never throw me in your jail."

"Maybe not, Mike admitted. "We don't jail dead men. Brock, it's one of three things. Jail, the cemetery or the three o'clock stage. Take your pick."

"Pat Henry won't stand for this."

"Pat Henry doesn't have anything to say about it. He's not the town marshal."

"We'll see about that, McKeever."

Mike McKeever shrugged. He said: "See about anything you want to, but after three o'clock this afternoon you've got only two choices."

It was almost noon when Mike McKeever left the hotel. The town was filling up with people from the range country. There were a good many wagons and rigs and saddled horses tied along the street. Mike started back toward his office. As he came to Patterson's store he remembered Tom Sheridel, and he looked around for the paper he had seen Sheridel crumple up and drop when he left the store. It had blown into the street. Mike picked it up and scanned it. The paper was a grocery list. Mike stuck the paper into his pocket and turned into the store.

The old man and the boy who clerked for Ollie Patterson were in the front of the store, waiting on customers. Ollie was back in his office. Mike walked that way and entered the small room.

Ollie Patterson was almost as old as Mike. He was short and heavy and bald, and he wore a perpetual scowl. It was on his face now as he looked up and nodded. "I'm busy right now, Mike," he said gruffly. "Why not drop around this afternoon?"

"This won't take long," Mike answered.

"If it's about the appointment tonight—"

"It's not."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"It's about Tom Sheridel."

Ollie Patterson's scowl deepened. "What about Tom Sheridel?"

"He came in here this morning for some groceries. He probably asked for credit until he harvests his crop. You turned him down."

"You're damned right I did," Ollie said.

"He didn't have a long list, Ollie. It wouldn't have hurt you any to have given him the groceries."

"Have you lost your mind, Mike? What the hell's the matter with you?"

Mike McKeever shook his head. "I haven't lost my mind, Ollie, and I don't expect you to support anyone. It seems to me, though, that it's still the business of people to help each other. With a little lift, Tom Sheridel will do all right. Without it he might have to give up, lose all he's put in his place."

"Look here, Mike. If I give Sheridel credit that means I've got to give credit to every dry rancher on the mesa."

"Maybe you ought to."

"I tell you, I can't afford it."

"But you can, Ollie. You didn't have much more money than Sheridel when you came here a dozen years ago. I happen to know how well you've done. When the bank was robbed last fall, George Meyers told me how much you would lose if the money wasn't recovered and the bank had to close. You made that money on the people around here, and you owe it to the community to risk a little on men like Sheridel. Here's his list. I want him to have those groceries."

Ollie jerked to his feet. "No!"

"Then charge them to me if my credit is still good. Sheridel will pay up, Ollie. He's a steady, sober man and a hard worker, and he needs a lift."

Ollie Patterson swung around and stared out of the window. After a moment he looked back at Mike and there was a curiously puzzled expression on his face. He said: "All right, Mike. You win. But only for Sheridel. I'm not underwriting that whole crowd on the mesa."

"We'll worry about the others later," Mike answered.

He left the office, walked through the store and crossed the street. Tom Sheridel was waiting for him.

"Reckon I'd better be going, Mike," Sheridel said, but there was no enthusiasm in his voice. "It's a long drive home."

Mike nodded. "By the way, Tom," he said. "Ollie Patterson said he wanted you to drop in before you left."

Sheridel stopped and looked back, his eyes reflecting the surprise he felt. And suddenly he was hurrying across the street, almost running.

MIKE closed his office and had his noon meal in the restaurant beyond the hotel. He came out and drifted back down the street, stopping occasionally to talk to

someone. Pat Henry was waiting for him at his office. The saloonkeeper had a tight scowl on his face.

"What's this you told Brock?" he demanded.

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "Probably just what he said."

"You told him to get out of town."

"That's right."

"Mike, you can't do things like that!"

"But I have."

"If Brock wants to stay I'm backing him."

Mike sat down on his bench. He stretched out his legs and crossed one foot over the other. He reached for his pipe and filled the bowl, careful not to spill any tobacco. He said: "Henry, the man is crooked. He's a potential killer. We don't want men like Jim Brock in this town and you know it. Back him if you want to, but unless he takes the three o'clock stage I'm coming over to your place after him."

The saloonkeeper bit his lips. He started to make some answer, but apparently changed his mind. He turned abruptly and walked away.

Mike sucked on his pipe. A man he had known for a long time sat down on the bench next to him and they talked for a while. Ed Carter and Sue Kilgallon came down the walk across the street and turned into the lot next to the bank. They climbed up into Sue's rig and sat there, very close together. Dan Kilgallon, moving along the street, saw them. He came to an abrupt stop, then angled suddenly for the rig. Ed Carter climbed out and stood there facing him. Sue got out and stood at Ed's side, and it looked to Mike as though she was holding Ed's hand.

"What are you grinning about?" Mike's friend demanded.

Mike said: "I'm just grinning."

Over in front of Patterson's store, Tom Sheridel was loading groceries in his wagon. After he had finished he climbed into the seat and sat there while he rolled a cigarette. He waved to Mike as he headed back up the street on his way home. "Drop by some time, Mike," he called. "Ellen would be glad to see you."

Dan Kilgallon had gone into the bank. Now he came out with George Meyers, and he and the banker stood on the walk

in front of the bank, talking and looking across the street toward Mike McKeever. After a long time Meyers shrugged his shoulders and went back inside, and Dan Kilgallon headed straight for Mike. Kilgallon was frowning.

"What did you tell my daughter this morning, Mike?" he asked bluntly.

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "Why, I told her to be happy, Dan. Anything wrong with that?"

"Why don't you keep out of things you've no business in?"

Mike looked up at the man. "Why don't you, Dan?"

"She's my daughter."

"Then you ought to want to see her happy, too."

Kilgallon looked over toward the rig.

"I didn't want her to have to go through what her mother did," Kilgallon grumbled. "I wanted her to have it easier. What'll they live on, anyhow? They won't take any help."

"Don't make 'em, Dan. Give them the same break you and your wife had—the chance to build their own lives. Leave them alone."

Kilgallon scowled at him, and after a moment's indecision moved on.

"What was eating him?" Mike's friend inquired.

Mike shrugged. "I don't know."

"He's on the council, isn't he? He's one of the men who are going to decide whom to name marshal."

"Yeah."

"Who are the others?"

"George Meyers at the bank, Pat Henry, Ollie Patterson and three fellows from down valley."

"How'll they vote, Mike?"

Mike McKeever shook his head. He knocked out his pipe and got slowly to his feet. "I ought to make a round of the town, maybe," he muttered. "I ought to act like I was busy." He started up the street.

A little before three the stage pulled up in front of the stage station and three passengers climbed aboard. Just before it left a fourth passenger showed up, Jim Brock.

Mike McKeever didn't go to the town meeting that night, although the deliberations of the council were open to any who wished to attend. He sat on the bench in front of his office during the early evening

hours and made his first patrol and then sat there again.

It wouldn't be long now, he knew. Word would come to him as soon as a decision was reached. He could picture the decision so far as he was concerned. He told himself that he wouldn't mind it if they named a younger man, but in his heart he knew that he would mind it.

Sue Kilgallon and Ed Carter came down the street hand in hand. They stopped in front of him, and Sue leaned over and kissed him on the forehead and laughed. There was real music in the sound. She said: "How's my favorite marshal?"

Mike bit his lips. 'Favorite marshal' must mean they hadn't chosen him. There was a sudden thickness in his throat.

"My favorite marshal," said Sue, "who has just been appointed for another year without a single vote against him!"

Mike stared up at the girl, unable to believe his ears. "You mean—they all voted for me?" he demanded.

"Every one of them," said Ed Carter. "A couple even made speeches. Pat Henry said this town needed a marshal who had the courage to slap down even the members of the council if they needed it. What did you ever do to Pat Henry?"

Mike shook his head. "Nothing. We had a little argument once."

"Ollie Patterson made a speech, too. Come to think of it, he said almost the same thing Henry did. Then they voted, and right down the line they voted for you. I reckon you're not surprised, though. There's never been any doubt about the way they would vote."

Mike McKeever fumbled for his pipe. He drew in a long, slow breath and then got to his feet. He felt humbly grateful to the men who had named him to this job for another year. He hoped he could go on handling it, hoped they hadn't made a mistake.

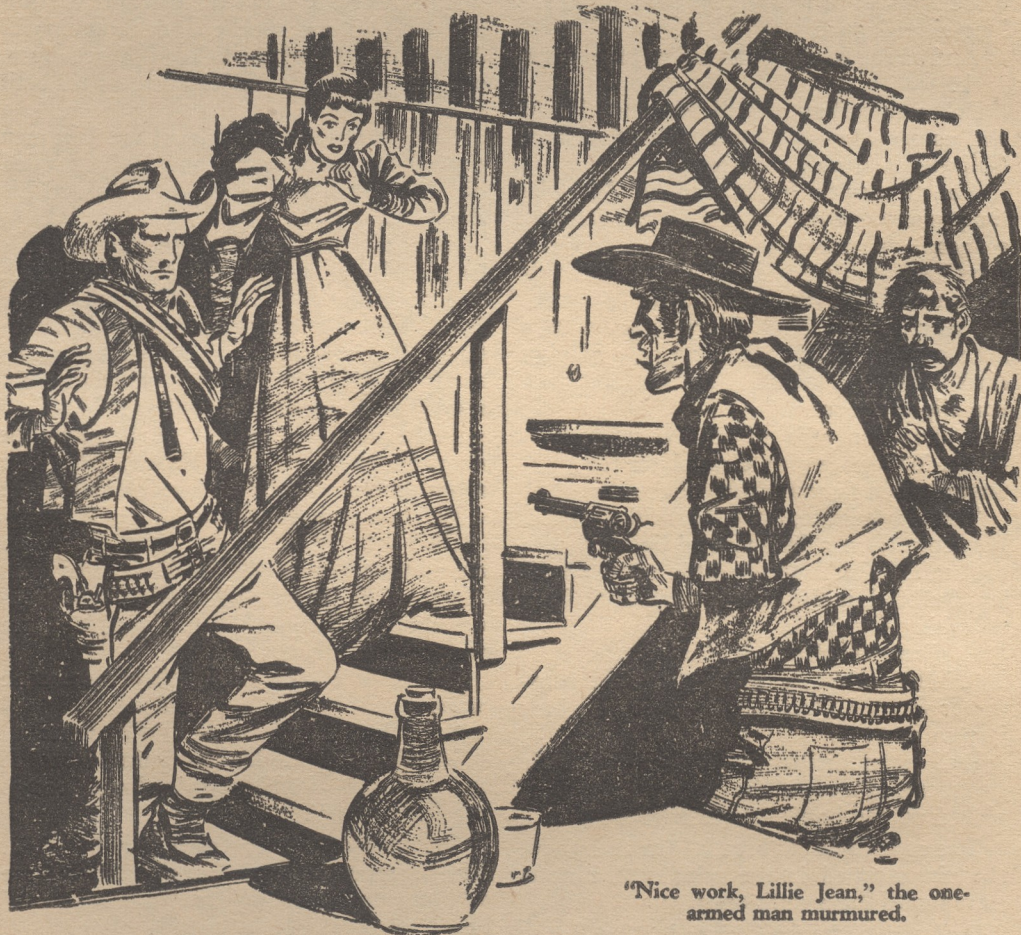
"When are you two going to get married?" he demanded.

"This week. Wednesday. And right soon you're coming up to Spring Valley to see us," Ed Carter answered.

"I'll be up," Mike promised.

He watched them cross the street, then turned and started off on his second evening patrol of Devil's Fork.

BITTER REUNION AT RIMROCK



"Nice work, Lillie Jean," the one-armed man murmured.

THERE were ways, Bull Hubler had learned, that a man could forget. If he buried himself in hard work, kept his mind numb with fatigue, the sharp edges of memories could be dulled.

After Lillie Jean left him, five years ago, he sold the ranch. He got himself elected sheriff of Rimrock County and also took on a freight line through the hills from the county seat. Three afternoons a week he left Rimrock at noon, returned at three-thirty, cracking his famous bull whip over his lathered team, bringing a wagon load of freight to Rimrock merchants.

**By CHARLES
BECKMAN, JR.**

For five years Bull Hubler lived in hell — and then Lillie Jean, who'd made that hell, came back . . . to beg him to save the one man he wanted to kill.

He worked harder and drank harder than any other man in Rimrock. He'd made life unprofitable for the rustlers, card-sharks, gunmen—and he'd made himself a marked man. Twice he had been bushwhacked, and more than once had stopped bullets from long-riders' guns.

And then, one night, Lillie Jean came back.

Bull was ending a hard ten-hour day in the usual way—getting drunk at Mamie Gallagher's Buckhorn saloon.

The air was thick with smoke. Atop the tinny piano one of Mamie's girls, a flaming redhead, sat cross-legged, singing a ribald song loudly off-key. The men were crowding around Bull Hubler at the bar, as usual.

"Hey, Bull," Mick Harper, a weazely little gambler whined, holding up a playing card. "Look. The ace of spades. Let's see you clip the corners."

A chorus of yells echoed the suggestion. A ten-foot space was cleared on the sawdust-covered floor in front of the bar.

"Just a minute," the bartender called. He took down a half pint of liquor, broke the seal. "You'll need a little nerve steadier, Bull." His flabby lips drew back from a flashing bicusped.

A silence settled over the men.

"Hell, don't do it, Bull," an old prospector warned. "A man can crowd his luck jest so far. . . ."

Bull swore, licked his lips, grinned. He swaggered through the men to the bar, picked up the bottle, unscrewed the cap.

The room held its breath. On the piano, the girl stopped in the middle of a note, stared with her mouth open.

Bull tilted the half pint, let the liquor gurgle down his throat. Some of it trickled around the corners of his mouth, sluicing through the stubble on his chin, dripping down the front of the checkered shirt. The gambler's weazely face became greasy with sweat. He whispered an oath, and a liquor glass slid from his fingers, crashing to bits on the bar foot-rail, unnoticed.

Bull didn't let up until he'd drained the last drop. Then he plunked the empty bottle on the bar, drew the back of his hand across his lips. He staggered for a moment, his face whitening as if someone had hit him in the stomach. Then the color seeped back. He opened his eyes and faced the men, grinning triumphantly.

The men breathed again, talk starting up. "One day, Bull, yo're gonna crowd yore luck too fer. I see a man do that oncet—toppled over plumb dead. Too much liquor at one pop stopped his heart from tickin'."

Bull swore. "What the hell? If the liquor don't kill me, mebbe Ham Kramer will do it first. It's a race to see if I get Ham, or Ham gets me, or th' liquor gets th' both of us!"

The room rocked with laughter. The men cleared the space again, and Bull uncoiled his fifteen-foot bull whip from around his shoulder.

The little gambler held the card at arm's length. Bull's whip snaked out, cracked, and a corner of the card fluttered to the floor. The men clapped and yelled. From ten feet away, Bull could clip the card as neatly as with a pair of scissors. He could also have clipped the gambler's hand off with the whip, had he wanted. But the little man wasn't afraid. He knew, drunk or sober, there wasn't a more skilled artist with a bull whip in Texas.

Bull squared off in the clearing to clip another corner of the card. It was then Mamie Gallagher pulled at his elbow. Under the caked layers of make-up, her face was powder white.

"Bull," she whispered, "there's someone wants to see you in your office."

"Aw, hell," Bull swore. "Who is it?"

Mamie swallowed. Her painted mouth twitched. "I—I ain't sayin'. You'd best go see for yourself."

Talk ran down. The men stared at Bull. The big man muttered resignedly, coiled the whip around his shoulder. "I'll be back," he promised.

His office was only a couple of doors down the sidewalk. Outside, the quiet town was bathed in silvery moonlight. Bull noted the strange buckboard tied up in the street before his office. He yanked the office door open.

Lillie Jean was standing with her back to him on the far side of the office. She was staring through the dusty window at the moon coming up over the hills. She didn't turn around, but he knew it was she. And she knew it was Bull Hubler who had entered the office.

She told the dusky little Mexican girl who was sitting tensely on the edge of the office bench: "Wait out in the buckboard."

The girl was trembling. "*Pero, Señora. . .*"

"Now, Juanita. *Pronto, pronto. Ándele.*"

The girl obeyed reluctantly, casting fearful glances at Bull. The door closed behind her, and then there was only Bull Hubler and Lillie Jean in the dusty, cluttered room.

It was a small room. A roll-top desk took up one corner. In the other corner squatted a pot-bellied iron stove used for heating in the winter. The walls were unpainted and unpapered, bare except for a yellow calendar hanging over the desk and a ten-point buck's antlers near the door for a hat-rack. Yellow lamplight spilled from the smoky kerosene lamp atop the desk.

Bull passed his hand over his eyes. He choked softly: "Why did you come back, Lillie Jean?"

She turned, then. She was much thinner, he saw. There were dark circles under her eyes. She used paint on her mouth and cheeks, now, like one of the cheap honky-tonk girls down at Mamie's Buckhorn Palace. "I—" her lips trembled and her eyes fell away from his stare. She began again: "Bull. . . ."

The big man was slowly drawing the whip through his callused hand. His face was rigid, his eyes bloodshot. "I could kill you," he said raggedly under his breath.

"I—I know. I thought maybe you would."

He saw that they were not empty words. She was frightened. The cords in her throat were standing out and her eyes were black with fear.

Bull moved to the desk, his heavy boots dragging against the floor. He was not a very tall man, but his shoulders were powerful, his hands square. He wore a pair of faded levis stuffed into his boot tops and a checkered, sweat-soggy shirt. His blond hair was burned crisp by the sun, and the bridge of his sun-blackened nose was peeling.

He unlocked the desk, poured a drink from the bottle of whiskey he kept there. He faced the girl again. With the whip in his hands he could clip the corners of a playing card ten feet away, or he could cut a man in half. He wanted to use it on the girl. He wanted to cut her with it until she died screaming and writhing at his feet.

And then all of a sudden he didn't want

to any more. All of a sudden he was just tired and lonely and hurt inside. He hadn't realized before just how lonely he'd really been these five years since she'd run away from him.

"Why did you come back, Lillie Jean?" he asked thickly, his voice gray.

She moistened her parched lips. Her wide eyes met his again. What she had to say, what she had come for, was very hard. She was fighting to hunt out the right words.

"Bull. I—I heard a lot about you. How you're fighting the outlaws, driving them from Rimrock. But the main one—Ham Kramer, the boss of the Kramer outfit—you haven't been able to get him yet."

Bull nodded. Ham Kramer, a vicious one-armed killer who holed out up in the hills, was the boss of the most powerful bunch of rustlers in the county. Bull had never been able to find his hideout. As long as Kramer kept operating, Rimrock county really wouldn't have any permanent law because Kramer offered refuge and help to any long-riders who needed it. A sort of king of outlaws, Kramer was a powerful man.

"Bull—I came to make a deal."

Her words faded in his liquor-fogged mind. He was thinking how it had been five years ago. He was thinking about how he'd been a healthy, strong young rancher with his own spread up in the hills. He'd had a family, then, a sweet two-year-old daughter—and a wife who folks had said was too pretty for Bull Hubler. Too pretty, even, for her own good.

Really, it had been like having two daughters, because Lillie Jean was no more than a child. Her mother and father, squatters down on Eiler's Crick, had died in the diphtheria epidemic when she was sixteen. Bull had married her that same year. She was seventeen when their daughter, Jean was born. She was nineteen when she ran away with the gambler, Frank Lindsay. . . .

That day Lillie Jean had cleaned the house spick and span, put everything in order. Then she left the note pinned to her pillow in the bedroom. Bull had come home from town late that evening with Jean. He'd sat there, staring at the note, holding the baby in his arms all that night.

He'd been good to Lillie Jean. He worshipped her because she was so pretty.

Sometimes he'd been almost afraid to touch her. That evening he'd brought a bolt of blue cloth along from town, for a new dress for Lillie Jean.

He'd never been able to understand it—why she had run away from him. . . .

He closed his eyes, digging his blunt fingers into his cropped blond hair. "A deal about Ham Kramer?" he asked thickly. "What do you mean?"

"I—" her hand crept to her throat. "Bull, it's Frank. He's—he's in trouble. He was working for Ham Kramer for a while. He got in some trouble, cheated Kramer out of money. We ran away, hid in the hills. But now Kramer's found our hideout, is coming to get him.

"Frank can't run any more, Bull. He's sick. He's had TB for two years. He's awful sick, Bull. . . ."

The room stilled. From up the street, the sounds of revelry at the Buckhorn Palace, the tinny piano, the whoop of a drunk cowboy, reached the office faintly. A night breeze found a crack in the window pane, stirred the yellow calendar over the desk, fluttering the pages.

"Why did you come to me?" Bull rasped hoarsely in the silence.

He could see what this was costing her. A flush of shame crept up her white, curved throat. But she kept her eyes full open, facing his.

"Frank's life for Kramer's. You see, Bull? Frank can't fight. Ham Kramer's coming to kill him. You could be there. You could arrest Kramer for the things you want him for. Later, when Frank's stronger, we'll leave. . . ."

"No!"

It was an anguished cry. The big man swayed, a vein throbbing in his forehead. Sweat covered his face. The powerful muscles in his jaw knotted. "You think I'd save the life of the rat who stole my little girl—"

She stood very close to him. He could smell the good, clean scent of her hair. She was older, now. He could see it in the tired lines around her mouth, the shadows in her blue eyes. She tried one last plea.

"This will be the last chance you'll have to get Kramer, Bull—to save Rimrock. Pretty soon he'll be powerful enough to run you out of the county, or kill you."

He said, "No!" again, his voice stran-

gled. Quickly he turned his back on her.

She was silent behind him, and then she whispered: All right, Bull. Thank you for listening to me." In a moment he heard the door close quietly.

Bull stood there, fighting with himself. He kept seeing visions of Lillie Jean, up in the hideout, alone with the sick gambler and the little servant girl, Juanita. He saw Ham Kramer riding up, killing Frank Lindsay. Then Lillie Jean, alone there, at the mercy of the killer.

He dragged the back of his hairy hand across his eyes, shuddering. Then he groped for his gun-belt hanging from the stag horns on the wall. He swung it around his hips, buckled the double tongue, staggered heavily out into the night, where Lillie Jean was climbing up on the buckboard beside Juanita. . . .

Lillie Jean and Lindsay were staying with Juanita's parents in a little 'dobe *cantina* far back in the hills near the border. It took an hour and a half of hard riding over the moonlit trails to reach it. Arriving there, Bull followed Lillie Jean into the place while Juanita drove the buckboard around back to the stable.

Inside, Bull blinked his eyes against the lamplight. His head had cleared somewhat during the ride, but his legs were still unsteady on the dirt floor. Behind the rough bar, Juanita's grandfather, a spindly old man whose wrinkled skin was the color of mahogany, stared at him. The old man's eyes were wide.

"In here, Bull," Lillie Jean said. She led the way up a flight of wooden stairs to the second floor bedroom where Frank Lindsay was lying.

Bull heard the gambler's cough, a hollow, wracking sound. Then he heard something else.

He whirled on the stairs, his hand stabbing down for the gun in his belt. But he stopped before reaching it. Slowly, he lifted both hands, swearing under his breath.

Ham Kramer parted the greasy calico curtains over the door to a room to the left of the bar. The one-armed man's thin lips were drawn back in a cold grin. His right hand held a cocked .45 leveled at Bull's middle.

"Nice work, Lillie Jean," he murmured. "Very nice."

The girl was staring down at him, one

white hand on the banister, the other clenched at her throat. "Ham!"—she breathed.

Behind the bar, the old Mexican broke out in voluble Spanish. "I could not help it, *Señora*. He came in with the gun and he said—"

Kramer swung the muzzle of his pistol a few inches in the old man's direction, silencing him. Then he told Bull to throw his pistol down the stairs to the hard-packed dirt floor.

Slowly, Bull complied. He smiled a little, keeping his eyes on Kramer, his back to Lillie Jean. "It was all a lie, wasn't it, Lillie Jean? Kramer didn't come here to kill Frank Lindsay. They're workin' together. It was all a trap for Ham to get me. An' you helped them."

"No, Bull!" she cried. "Please—"

Kramer's eyes flicked up past Bull. He smiled again, a corner of his lips twitching. "Keep your gun on him, Frank. I want to roll me a cigarette before I shoot him. I figger to shoot him in the belly. Then I'm going to set down and finish my smoke while he kicks. There ain't gonna be no easy dyin' for the tin-badge lawman who's killed some of my best boys an' run me up into the hills like a cayote."

The one-armed man thumbed the hammer of his gun closed, thrust the pistol into his belt, pulled a sack of tobacco from his shirt breast pocket.

Bull twisted his neck, glancing up at the head of the stairs. The gambler, Frank Lindsay had come out of the bedroom. He held a small derringer in his hand, pointing down at Bull. His thin, waxen face showed no emotion.

"Frank!" Lillie Jean cried. "You didn't tell me the truth. You said Ham was coming here to kill you—"

"Shut up!" the gambler snapped coldly. He coughed once. Flecks of blood appeared on his blue lips. He wiped them away with the back of his left hand. His beady black eyes didn't leave Bull once.

Bull turned to face Ham Kramer below him at the foot of the stairs. Kramer was a tall, bony man. He had a sun-reddened hatchet face with high cheek-bones like an Indian's. Expertly he spilled the tobacco into the paper, closed the sack with his teeth. Then he folded the paper into a neat cylinder with the fingers of his one hand.

For a second, as he lifted the finished cigarette to moisten the flap with his tongue, his eyes dropped away from Bull.

In that moment, an enraged roar tore from the big sheriff's throat. So fast that his movements were just a blur, he dragged the coiled bull whip from his shoulder. His hand swung back and forward. The whip lashed out, smashing into Kramer's chest.

Screaming, the outlaw fell. He dragged the pistol from his belt, leveled it at Bull.

Again the whip lashed out, coiled around the outlaw's gun-hand. His pistol went skittering across the dirt floor. Bull dropped the whip. He flung himself over the banister, scooped up his own pistol.

The outlaw was struggling to retrieve his gun. At the same time he was screaming an order up at Frank Lindsay.

Bull shot a glance up that way. He caught the blurred image of Lindsay swinging the derringer toward his head—of Lillie Jean throwing herself at his gun hand.

Then Bull concentrated on Ham Kramer. The outlaw had reached his gun, was pointing it at Bull. It roared once; flame leaped at the sheriff. Hubler felt the bullet rattle his hair, heard it chunk into the 'dobe wall.

He aimed carefully. He knew Kramer's trigger finger was already pressing out the second shot. He knew this time the outlaw would not miss.

Above and behind him, he heard the muffled roar of the derringer. Mingled with it was Lillie Jean's scream.

Bull fought to keep his mind on Kramer. He mustn't think about Lillie Jean up there. About what might have happened to her.

He mustn't think about the soft white curve of her throat, or how she used to look, sitting before the mirror at night, brushing her hair. He mustn't think how her voice sounded, crooning their little baby daughter to sleep. He mustn't remember how soft she had once been in his arms.

He blinked the tears out of his eyes. The gun in his hand bucked once.

On his knees, Kramer lurched. He tried to hold his gun up, to finish pressing out that last shot. But it suddenly slid from his grasp. He rolled over dead.

Bull turned, mounted the stairs. The air in the place was heavy with smoke. Through the drifting haze, Bull saw Frank Lindsay struggling to shove a fresh cartridge into
(Please continued on page 97)

SHOOTING-IRON

Chris Defever—actor, senator, derringer artist and genial fraud—was truly championing the people . . . when the frontier scandal broke about his sly old head.



Chris had a fair shot at the man's half-drawn gun . . .

Chris Defever

Novelette

CHAPTER

1

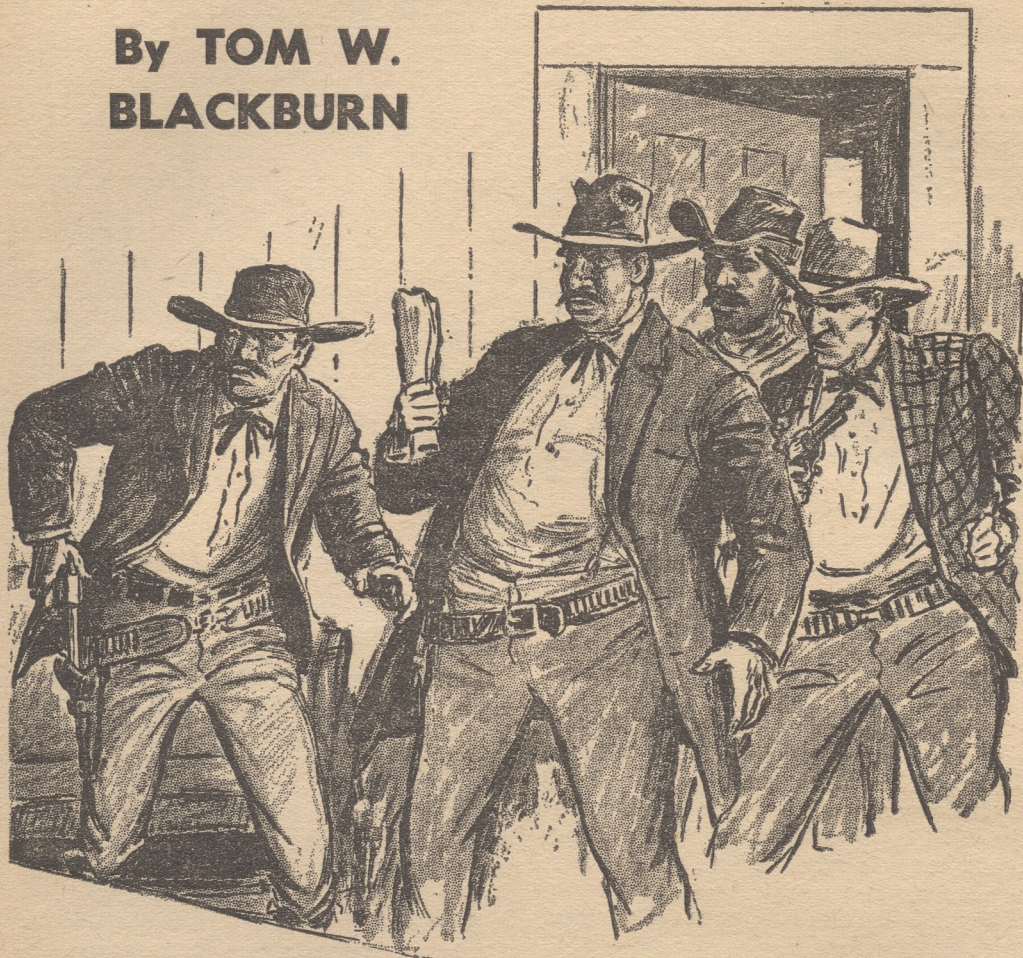
Civic Raiders

She wore about size four shoes—maybe size four-and-a-half, if a man was going to be accurate. And her ankles—well, like Doric columns, maybe, or willow boughs, graceful in a warm spring wind. A face like a dream, smallish and with pert features. And with all this, brains and efficiency.

The Honorable Christian Defever, duly

SENATOR

By TOM W.
BLACKBURN



elected representative of the citizenry of Grass City in the august chambers of the Longbow State Assembly, sat back in his office chair with the spiritual inebriation of a man whose cup runneth over. Invincible politically, lionized socially, and independent financially, Chris figured that this charming secretary was a final gift of the gods. He built a steeple with his fingers and smiled covetously across the desk at her.

Helen Prescott stirred nervously before that stare and spoke somewhat sharply. "Didn't you hear me, Senator?"

"Eh?" Chris Defever said, taking hold of himself with an effort. "Eh? I'm afraid

that I was—er—day dreaming, my dear."

Helen Prescott sniffed audibly. "Paul is here to see you."

"Paul—?" Chris Defever repeated.

"Paul Lanagan," his secretary said with increasing irritation.

Chris Defever tilted back in his chair. "Oh, Lanagan. Show him in, my dear. And with due courtesy. An admirable young man. An excellent contractor. A man of integrity. In fact, my savior, in a way. Are you aware that remarkably fair bid he submitted to me as Chairman of the State Board of Education has enabled me to advance our school building program without exceeding the niggardly sum my par-

simonious fellow assemblymen voted to the cause of education? Are you aware that Paul Lanagan's honesty and my own shrewdness has permitted us to outfox certain nefarious characters who could bleed the feeble treasury of our infant state to extinction? Are you—"

Helen Prescott cut in on Defever's lyricism. "I know," she said. "You're forgetting that I helped you write that speech you're going to deliver to the Assembly this afternoon—and you're quoting from it!"

Defever grinned, swung his chair around, and stood up. "So I am. Show Lanagan in, then—"

The girl went out. The door swung open after a moment and Paul Lanagan came in. An earnest boy, he had a construction man's wide shoulders and swinging stride. Chris had a vast fondness for him. Lanagan had an easy smile and large fists. A happy combination. However, his smile was lacking, now. His brow was furrowed and his eyes were troubled.

He dropped into the empty chair across Defever's desk and spread his long legs out in front of him.

"A short beer might help what ails you, son," Chris suggested with kindly wisdom.

Lanagan shook his head.

"I've been too busy out on the Comanche County schools to have a hang-over," he said wryly. "First time I've been in town for two weeks. I ran into something yesterday that bothers me. I'm afraid we're heading for trouble, Senator—"

Chris leaned back. "Nonsense! You're still worrying about Bull Monahan. Be sensible. You under-bid Monahan handsomely. The lobby he had arranged in the Assembly collapsed before the attack I turned against it. He has friends in the Assembly still, but they are powerless before a man of my reputation in our halls of government. You build the schools, I'll handle Monahan."

Lanagan looked somewhat relieved. Chris saw his attention leave his problem and shift toward the door of the outer office. The young contractor smiled and winked at Chris.

"Think you could get one of *those* for me to keep out on the job?" he asked slyly.

Chris was puzzled. He could see nothing in the vicinity of the door which might in-

terest a construction man. He frowned.

Lanagan laughed. "One of those cute, starchy little secretary things—"

Chris frowned in earnest, then. "Sirrah, I warn you," he said severely, "Miss Prescott is a woman of business. Efficient and impervious to the clumsy blandishments of a mere carpenter. Not only that, she is a jewel, a salvation, a boon without which I could not do. I will tolerate no tampering with the very secret of the despatch with which I conduct my multitudinous affairs!"

Paul Lanagan stood up. "You talk pretty, Senator," he said. "But you better start counting your birthdays. Look, I've got some business in town. I'll see you again before I start back for the jobs."

Sharp distrust rose in Chris. He sought to change the subject, to veer Lanagan's attention from the door and the little lady at the desk beyond it.

"Hold on," he said. "Not that it means anything—not that Bull Monahan could trouble us at all—but what was it set you to worrying? Something that happened yesterday, you said—"

Lanagan said: "Probably doesn't mean anything, but part of the reason I was able to make the bid I did on your schools was that I had a tie-up to get local lumber cut by a little mill down on the edge of Comanche County. I tied up most of their output on a running contract. The arrangement was that I was to be billed monthly. A man came up from there yesterday and told me that since there was a good, active market in lumber, they felt they were entitled to a big deposit in cash to guarantee I'd take all the footage I claimed."

"You refused?"

"No. On the face of it, the request was sound business. I drew the five thousand they wanted and gave it to their man at camp last night. But I was just puzzled as to why they suddenly decided they wanted that guaranty. And naturally, hauling that five thousand out of the cash I've got to work with ran me a little short. I guess I just didn't like it too well, that's all."

CHRIS nodded. A sound business transaction. No cause for alarm. He crossed to the door of the outer office and called to Miss Prescott. She came in, a notebook in her hand.

"When I have the floor of the Assembly

this afternoon," he said briskly to the girl, "I want to request a resolution to advance Mr. Lanagan five thousand dollars against a material bill. Will you make a note for me?"

The girl wrote rapidly in her book. Chris did not dismiss her. Paul Lanagan stood restlessly, eyeing Miss Prescott with approval. Chris smiled blandly at him.

"Was there anything else, Paul?"

Lanagan saw he had been duped, that Chris had called the girl in so that he would have no opportunity to talk to her in the outer office as he left. He grinned good-naturedly.

"No, I reckon not," he conceded. He crossed to the door, turned, and looked at Miss Prescott. "Senator," he added, "I bet you'd cheat at poker!"

The door closed behind Lanagan. With displeasure, Chris saw that Miss Prescott had been impressed with the contractor. This he did not care for. He was about to take verbal steps to counteract this impression when the door reopened and Lanagan stepped back into the room. His easy good nature had vanished. His face was

very grim and anger was up in his eyes.

"I'm afraid we've got company—" he said. Then a dozen men pushed through the door. Several were armed. Fronting them was the wide, flabby bulk of Ben Holt, representative of the Twelfth District and Speaker of the Assembly. The Ben Holt who had been Chris Defever's bitterest enemy on the floor of the chamber and the man who had championed Bull Monahan's efforts to secure the school contracts. With Holt were four or five ring-in-nose assemblymen who habitually followed his lead. Holt had a paper in his hand which he waved aggressively.

"At a special session half an hour ago, a resolution was passed, Defever," he said. "Charges were brought up on the floor against you as an Assemblyman, a citizen, and as Chairman of the Board of Education. The resolution was authority to investigate the charges. Want to read it?"

Christ shook his head. Holt turned to the men with him.

"All right, boys, get to work," he said. "Put everything through a sieve. We've caught Lanagan in Defever's office. Now

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all we've got to do to prove that he's making a kickback on the contract Defever gave him is to find the money he brought here today. Neither one of them have had a chance to get it out of here, so it's got to be in this room!"

CHAPTER 2 *Derringer Diplomacy*

Helen Prescott was the first to recover herself. Bristling with outrage, she stabbed a pencil at Ben Holt. "Get your hoodlums out of here!" she snapped. "This is the office of a senator!"

"Of a mangy, four-flushing old thief!" Holt grunted in answer. "Step lively, boys!"

Roaring with righteous anger, Chris lunged toward Holt. The flabby man ducked back skillfully, squawking at one of his armed companions. The fellow wheeled and began the rather smooth process of un-hanging his long leg-iron. This Chris viewed with grim satisfaction. When the man's belt gun was half drawn, Chris parted the flap of his own coat and the two heavy derringers resting in the reenforced pockets of his vest found their way uncannily into his hands. He had a fair shot at the man's half-drawn gun, and sent the weapon spinning. But Chris suddenly held his fire—as Helen Prescott flung herself across in front of him, the ruffles of her blouse brushing the muzzles of his guns and her slender figure blanketing his field of fire completely.

"No!" she cried sharply. "That's what they want. They'd sacrifice a man to hang you, Senator!"

Ben Holt ripped out an angry oath. This, in itself, seemed proof enough to Chris that this peerless secretary of his had hit the nail on the head. Tossing his guns behind him onto the cushions of a chair, he balled his fists and stepped around the girl. A man was bent over the davenport, slashing it with a long hunting knife. Chris saw Paul Lanagan appear beside this fellow and jerk him upright. An instant later Lanagan's shoulder hunched and the man with the knife rose into the air, sailed a short distance, and skidded across the floor to the far wall.

"Lay on, MacDuff!" Chris quoted joyously, and he swung at the man with the belt gun. The man upended over the desk

and vanished limply behind it. "As the Great Bard saith—or was it Blackstone?—*'damned be him who first cries—hold, enough.'*"

"Tally two!" Paul Lanagan sang out. The boy was good with his hands. Another one of Ben Holt's men was face down on the carpeting. Chris eyed a man who thought he was out of reach and astonished the fellow vastly by breaking his nose with a haymaking sweep of a long and ungainly arm.

This was a scene from days Chris had thought dead. This was a renewal of his distant youth. He mowed eagerly into the fray, well aware that young Lanagan and himself were a fit match for Ben Holt's entire company.

Defever's enthusiasm was short-lived, however. He heard Helen Prescott cry out a shocked warning. He turned his head just in time to see Paul Lanagan go down heavily under a wicked stroke with a gun barrel. And while this picture was before his eyes, something exploded in the back of Defever's head, blotting it out.

CHRIS roused with a skull full of very noisy ache and only the foggiest recollection of what had occurred. He ran a bony hand up under the shaggy gray mane of his hair, found a respectable knot near his crown, and swore with feeling. Drawing his long legs under him, he came to his feet. His office was a chaos. Furniture was stripped of upholstery and padding. Chairs were overturned. His desk had been ransacked and the contents of its pigeon-holes spread about the floor.

Paul Lanagan, with a moused eye and a lump over one temple as large as the one on Defever's head, was sprawled in the middle of the floor. Holt and his companions were gone. So was the lovely little lady who belonged at the reception desk in the outer office. As Chris watched, Lanagan rolled over, parted with a curse even more expressive than the expletive Chris had used, and staggered to his feet. He stared at Chris, shaking his head to clear it.

"In the words of the inimitable Shakespeare," Chris said sourly, "*'I have not been so soundly be-thumped since I first called my brother's father dad!'*"

Lanagan rubbed his hand across the welt on his head and winced. "Save the wind

for an audience, Senator!" he growled. "We've gotten into something."

"Obviously," Chris agreed. "But precisely what?"

Lanagan's eyes had been sweeping the room. They fell on something under Defever's desk. Bending, he picked it up—a limp square of green paper. He waved it under Defever's nose.

"This!" Lanagan said savagely. "They were in such a hurry they dropped a bill. I told you something was funny. I get a demand from a little mill for a cash deposit. I make it. The next day, soon as my withdrawal is on record at the bank, your office is raided by a so-called committee from the Assembly. And wasn't that fat baboon chattering something about you being charged with accepting bribes from me for passing the school contract my way?"

Chris sucked in a long breath. "Zounds! They'd make jackanapes of the both of us, eh? Bull Monahan's work!"

"If it could be proved," Lanagan agreed. "Which it probably can't. That deposit I made to the mill was five thousand dollars. Pick your odds that your fat friend found four thousand, nine hundred and ninety dollars in cash here in your office. This ten in my hand rounds out the figure. We're in the fire, for fair!"

Chris wiped at his damp brow. "Shrewd deduction, my friend. But one thing is unexplained. How did the cash get here?"

Lanagan shot Chris a peculiar look.

"Where's the little lovely you had sitting in the front office for bait? Is she here, now? Wasn't she on the job before you got to the office this morning? Where did she come from?"

These questions struck Chris like so many blows. Helen Prescott was a little lady of perfection. She was personification of efficiency and reliability. Her eagerness to get the job as his secretary had been wholly a reflection of her desire to work for a man of his calibre and note. Or had it been? Could she have slipped tainted money into hiding in his office?

Regretfully and with growing bitterness, Chris perceived that she could. This realization shattered an illusion and caused Chris to glance briefly down his back trail. There had been a charming chit in St. Louis who had professed to find romance in the arms of a gentleman of the stage, but lately

retired. That interlude had cost him a neat six hundred dollars—the entire extent of his fortune at the time.

There had been an agreeable lady in Abilene who had thought a coaching for the theatre at the hands of the Honorable Christian Defever was a better course than dalliance with some callow and immature youth. A bill of sale to the finest riding horse a man ever owned had gotten him out of that one.

And there was an exceedingly clever dancer in Deadwood who had intimated that the man of her dreams had a long and somewhat horsey face, an angular and elongated carcass, and more years than were generally acceptable in a suitor. The loss there had been an extraordinarily deceptive ring with a beautifully set glass stone. History, then, did repeat itself.

"A con game, with an angel for a shill!" he exploded. "Friend Lanagan, we have been dealt the first blow, but the last is yet to fall. We will track these knaves into their lair and emerge with their pelts for our troubles. When a man of honor is not safe to pursue his calling unmolested in the Longbow State, it is time for a political purge in the halls of government. Gird your loins, Sirrah, we are off to battle!"

Lanagan shook his head. "I wasn't finished," he said quietly. "Bull Monahan has had a nice corner on construction in this country—while it was a Territory and since it became a state. I've done a good business since I came in. I've hurt him. If he could hire the fat boy from the Assembly and those others with him—if he could hire that starchy little thing you had in your front office . . . he could hire the Chairman of the Board of Education, too. I'm thinking about that. And a good look at you convinces me that you'd take a knock on the head and even a belly-blow to your official reputation if the price was high enough."

Chris staggered back and clapped his hand to his chest in the vicinity of his heart. "Egad, Sir, you mean to cast aspersions on my integrity?"

"Maybe I should cast a fist onto the end of your nose," Lanagan said bluntly. "I don't know. But I do know that I'm going to protect myself. I was doing well enough without that school contract. I'm not going to ruin myself by trying to hang onto it when the whole thing may be muddy from

start to finish. This is verbal notice I'm surrendering the contract. I'll send a written one to the assembly. I'm going back out into Comanche County and build houses and barns for men I know are honest."

There was a certain justice in Lanagan's suspicions—a certain wisdom in the stand he was taking. Chris could see that. But he could also see that if Lanagan surrendered his contract, Ben Holt and Monahan's other official friends would have damning circumstantial proof of their charges. He laid a hand on Lanagan's arm, but the young contractor had a fire up, and barely held in control. He batted Defever's hand aside, turned, and strode out the door.

GRASS CITY was in an uproar. Christian Defever, Senator of the People, who had long walked the raw planked streets with proud bearing, was now forced to veritably slink along the walk, so bitter and angry were the glances cast at him. An urchin was crying a special edition of the *Grass City Courier* on a corner. He was doing land-office business. Chris parted with a coin and stared at the front page of the paper.

His watch told him that Ben Holt's raid on his office was less than an hour old, yet here was a sordid story on it, crammed to the last column with libel, already in print. Chris had a legislator's healthy respect for the legerdemain of the press, but no magician could get a story set up and printed so fast. The conclusion was obvious. The paper had been provided with the story—before Holt had ever made his raid. Monahan's friends had been very sure, then.

Chris' eyes skipped over the text: The Honorable Christian Defever, respected pillar of the state government, had been caught red-handed in the possession of illegal funds. . . . The Assembly was calling a special session immediately to deny Senator Defever his seat in the hall. Further steps would be taken when legal action could be decided upon. Meanwhile, Mr. Paul Lanagan was being ordered to stop all work in Comanche County. . . .

A pretty kettle of fish! A veritable witches' cauldron!

Walking with long and impatient strides, Chris turned off of the main street and took a pleasant little avenue stretching off toward the mountains. Some distance out this he

came to the home of a Mrs. Macomber whose rooming house was the most decorous of the many within Grass City. A highly polished brass pull-bell was set in the door. Chris hauled forcibly upon it and the bell protested loudly within the house. Heavy footsteps approached the door. Chris shot his cuffs and assumed a severe expression. The door swung open and the formidable form of Mrs. Macomber was framed in the opening.

"Advise my secretary, Madame, that Senator Defever is here," he said.

Mrs. Macomber stared at him out of jaundiced eyes. "She's not to home to the likes of you!"

"I am in no mood to quibble, my good woman," Chris growled. "I demand to see Miss Prescott without delay!"

"Oh, 'demand' it is, eh?" Mrs. Macomber said. An unholy light came up in her eyes. She reached behind her and lifted a bumbershoot with a heavy, silver-ferruled stag handle from the umbrella stand beside the door. "Ye spalpeen! Ye goat-faced old swindler of kiddies and honest voters! Before ye make a demand of Bridget Macomber, be sure you're man enough to make it stick!"

With this, Mrs. Macomber made a pass with the handle of the umbrella. The sort of pass an Irish cavalryman might make with his saber at the head of a heathen. Chris ducked, but he did not take into consideration the towering splendor of his tall beaver hat. It went kiting toward the street.

In a valiant effort to catch it in mid-air, he exposed himself to the return of the swing. The stag handle of the weapon struck him sharply on the shoulder with sufficient force to stagger him. Raising his elbows to the level of his ears in defense, Chris gave ground. But the good woman fronting him wanted a rout rather than a retreat. She followed, swinging lustily.

Turning, Chris ran down the steps. From the top of these, where she paused, Bridget Macomber cut loose with a bellow of vilification which reached the volume of a steam horn. Chris retrieved his hat, clamped it firmly upon his head, and started up the street. He had gone but a few yards, however, before he heard a voice sing out his name. He turned.

Helen Prescott was running down the walk after him. He waited for her, hope

brightening within him. Surely at heart she must be a sweet child. Likely her conscience was troubling her. Perhaps she wished to make a clean breast of her part in Bull Monahan's scheme.

A smile of anticipation widened his lips. However, when Miss Prescott reached him, he saw he had judged hastily. She did not seem contrite. On the contrary, she seemed startlingly bitter and angry.

"THERE'S something I want to know, Mr. Defever," she said grimly. "I was the happiest girl in Grass City when I got that job with you. I thought a chance to work with a man of your honesty and reputation was the finest opportunity in the world. You were even an idol to me. Girls are foolish creatures. . . ."

Chris nodded agreement at this bit of wisdom, searching his mind for the answer to this little lady's tenseness.

"I want you to know I don't care what you do to yourself. Sell your honor. Betray those who voted for you. Make a laughing stock of the assembly for a few dollars, if the dollars are that important to you. But clear Paul Lanagan. He's honest. He wants to make his money fairly. And you've sold him out to that man Monahan—to his enemy. Straighten that out. You've got to!"

"But, my dear girl," Chris protested, "this is none of my work. I suspected that you'd know that. Young Lanagan and I are in the same boat. We've got to sink or swim together!"

"I don't believe it!" the girl snapped. "He would bid for a contract and he'd try to make as much money as he could on it—but he'd do it fairly and he'd build good buildings. However bad he wanted a contract, though, he wouldn't buy one from you. You've done everything else; I suppose it's natural for you to lie, too. But I had hoped you wouldn't. Get Paul Lanagan out of this. Clear his name!"

Chris drew himself up. "I had hoped you could help young Lanagan and myself both out of the trap in which we're caught. I had hoped I would at least have your loyalty. Lanagan has deserted me—and now you. Both of you with the same belief—that I am a tool of that stupid ox, Monahan. There is much you both have to learn of Christian Defever, my dear. As I have

in my time declaimed from the stages of the greatest theatres in the nation, *'He that is maligned without cause doubles in strength, for patient justice sleeps with him!'* Let the seats of the mighty tremble. I gird myself for battle!"

A fair to middling declamation. Chris was rather proud of it. But it left Helen Prescott cold. She turned on her heel and marched stiffly back toward Mrs. Macomber's. Chris headed on toward the center of Grass City again, struggling with perplexity.

Reaching the main street of town again, Chris swung purposefully toward the, as yet unpainted, bulk of the state capitol building. Unable to uncover anything in the way of a conspiracy through Helen Prescott, he had no other course than to go forthwith to the root of the matter.

He ran lightly up the steps of the capitol building. He touched the brim of his hat in greeting to the sergeant-at-arms on guard at the doorway of the legislative chamber. The signal, however, was not returned in the usual fashion. Looking most uneasy, the sergeant-at-arms moved in front of the doorway and gripped the butt of his large gun.

"There was a resolution passed half an hour ago, Defever," he said bluntly and with no trace of respect in his address. "You're barred from the chamber."

"Preposterous, my good fellow!" Chris said. "I'm senior senator. And I've passed more resolutions than you can count. Step aside, Sirrah!"

The sergeant-at-arms looked most uncomfortable. Chris assumed the man would step out of his way. The fellow did not, however. As Chris stepped forward, the guard layed his hands on him. The hands of other men were uncommonly irritating to Christian Defever. He shrugged mightily. The guard was flung loudly against the door. The man bleated, but he clung to his grip.

His anger rocketing upward, Chris cocked his right hand and fired it a scant half-dozen inches into the man's face. The guard spread-eagled against the door of the chamber and slid down it. Chris thrust him aside and reached for the handle. Before he could turn it, a voice sounded sharply behind him:

"Hold it, right there! You're under arrest, Defever!"

Chris turned. The marshal of Grass City, also looking very uncomfortable, was in the outer doorway of the capitol building, his gun in his hand. And two competent deputies flanked him.

"I'm sorry," the marshal went on. "I refused to issue a warrant for you on the charges Ben Holt brought this morning. Told him he'd have to have more proof than he could show me, then. But he said you'd try to break into the assembly after you were barred and I had to come down to guard against that when he demanded it. You should have stayed away from here. As it is, you'll have to come along with me, now, and I'll have to book you for forcible entry to a government building."

Chris wanted to ask the sober officer how much he was getting out of this, but he knew the question would be unjust. The marshal was doing his duty. No more, no less.

This, then, was the real jaw of Ben Holt's trap. He had known Chris would return to the halls of government, drawn as irresistibly as steel to a lodestone, and he had planned accordingly.

"*'This is the unkindest cut of all!'*" Chris murmured. And like Caesar, he bowed to his fate.

CHAPTER

3

Caged Crusader

The calaboose in Grass City was more comfortable than some and no worse than many in which Chris had spent a passing hour or two in the distance of the past. And like most lock-ups, the Grass City jail provided a certain quiet and lack of interruption which was admirably conducive to deep thinking. There was one flaw. Chris could discover no suitable channel for thought—at least, not one which led to correction of the evils which had befallen him.

And when a newsboy passed through the jail corridor with another extra later in the day, Chris found that more woe had been heaped upon him.

Ben Holt had contrived to have the gathered assembly, shocked at Christian Defever's defection from the narrow line of duty, appoint him *pro tem* Chairman of the Board of Education in Defever's place.

And so that the great work of providing schooling for the small fry of the Longbow State should not be set-back by the connivance of those to whom it was entrusted, he had immediately cancelled Paul Lanagan's contracts and issued new ones to Pete "Bull" Monahan. Not a day's work would be lost on the Commanche County Schools.

There was another little squib to the effect that the Assembly had enacted a contractor's licensing law, effective throughout the state, and that among several applicants to file applications for such a license, Pete "Bull" Monahan was the only man successfully qualifying.

Very nice work on Holt's part. Very docile agreement on the part of the Assembly. A very beautiful construction monopoly built to order for Monahan. A piece of political skullduggery which should net Monahan six figures of profit a year.

And Chris also noted a brief notice stating that Miss Helen Prescott, well known employee of a legislator, had tendered her resignation and planned to leave Grass City permanently the following day.

Chris was at an impasse. In the words of the Bard of Avon, he "*knew not where to turn his head for fear of a fresh buffet from some un-pried corner of the darkness about him.*" He was sitting on his cot with his head in his hands, striving to perceive a course of action, when the marshal and a lackey approached his cell, carrying trays of food. One was deposited outside his gate and slid under the bars. Chris, who had dined well since his election to the Assembly, surveyed the poor fare with acid scorn.

The marshal offered comfort. "You'll get used to it, Defever," he suggested. "The way Mr. Holt and some of the others are lining up charges against you, I'll have you on my hands quite a spell." The officer stopped and stared thoughtfully at Chris for a moment. "I see in the paper your secretary quit you. I recollect seeing her. A nice thing. And I could do with somebody to keep books for me. Now, if you was to tell me her address and maybe put in the right kind of word, it might be I could talk the cook into turning you out fixings a little better than ordinary—"

Chris raised his head.

"On your way, Sirrah! he growled in soft outrage. "Your petty chicanery nau-

seates me. Not yet is Christian Defever forced to haggle with jailers for his comfort!"

The marshal shrugged. "That guard you slugged at the assembly door had the whole back of his head caved in when they got him to a doctor's office. He died this afternoon. I figured on testifying that he looked to me like he'd just been stiffened with a chin-clout when I arrested you—and that if he was worse hurt than that, it must have happened afterwards. But maybe like Mr. Holt says, an officer shouldn't volunteer something he ain't absolutely sure about. Too bad you ain't as friendly as Holt, Defever—"

Chris waited until the lackey left.

"About the little lady we were discussing—" Chris said. The officer swung close to the cell gate, his eyes brightening. They ceased to glow and commenced instead to bug out a little when Chris shot a bony hand through the bars and latched it neatly about the marshal's turkey neck. He clamped his grip tight enough to prevent the passage of sound.

As the marshal reached frantically for his belt gun, Chris caught this at the cylinder with his free hand and twisted it from the man's grasp. Thrusting the weapon into his belt and ignoring the thrashing of the helpless and half-strangled officer, he unhurriedly reached through the bars again for the marshal's keys.

It was a little difficult to locate the proper key and insert it in the lock from the outside. But at length the trick was accomplished and the gate swung open with the marshal still on one side of it and Chris on the other. By this time, somewhat more than a minute had elapsed since Chris had

clamped his hold on the marshal's throat. The man was startlingly purple. His tongue was half down his chin. And frenzy was in his eyes. Chris frowned. He couldn't remember, exactly, but it seemed to him he had read that a human being could live something better than three minutes without access to air.

However, there seemed little cause to test the accuracy of his recollection. He freed the marshal. As the man dropped, Chris stepped around the open door and caught him. A rabbit punch across the back of his neck served as insurance of a quiet return to normal breathing. While the marshal accomplished this, face down on Defever's cot, Chris walked down the corridor, jangling the keys in his hands.

At each gate he paused to ask rapid questions. Did the man behind it want out? Was there someone in Grass City to whom he owed a little something in the way of retaliation before he took to the timber? Would he call on this person—if the marshal were guaranteed to be out of the way for three hours?

Wherever he got an affirmative answer, he opened the cell gate. When half a dozen grimly delighted men were gathered at the door leading to the front office, they went through en masse. And efficiently, too. There was scarce a sound in the front part of the building, to tell of their passage. Satisfied that he had loosed upon the legal agents of Grass City the makings of half a dozen very tidy little riots—under cover of which he might be able to accomplish his own work—Chris returned happily to the now deeply breathing but still unconscious marshal.

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ders, he followed the tracks of his fellow prisoners. The two deputies on duty in the office slept peacefully and in such a manner as was not apt to rouse suspicion in the casual passer-by. Chris located his guns on a board behind the marshal's desk, and proceeded with his burden onto the street.

His fellow prisoners had vanished, each to his own errand of retribution. The street was momentarily deserted in the vicinity of the jail. Chris stepped into the first alley and strode rapidly down it, his course plotted to follow such dark passages to the rear of his own office building.

CHAPTER

4

Dry as Powder smoke

There was a large room with masonry walls built deep under the structure which housed Defever's office. The owner of the building had permitted Chris the use of it for storing certain baggage and belongings for which he had no room in his quarters at the Longbow Hotel.

This celler seemed admirably suited for the business he had in mind. He carried the marshal of Grass City down the rickety stairs leading to this chamber and dumped him in a closet off of the main room. . . .

Speaker Holt lived in a large house near the river—an establishment considerably larger than the stipend Holt drew as Assembly man justified. Since Holt and himself had never been cronies, Chris was unfamiliar with the house, but he fell upon a ruse for drawing Holt within reach which discounted the unfamiliarity. Locating the back door of the house, Chris crouched down a little distance from it and commenced as faithful an imitation of a yowling cat as he could manage.

After a little an upper window shot open and a man angrily shouted, "Scat!" Chris grinned and yowled again. He was immediately rewarded with a half-boot which cleared his head by scant inches. Hunching down closer to cover so that he would neither be seen nor struck by further missiles, he continued to yowl. The second boot clumped down near him. It was followed by a porcelain water pitcher which broke nosily and finally by a kerosene lamp, which also shattered in the yard. Chris continued to yowl. The man above swore with ugly emphasis.

The window slammed shut. Chris heard the padding of wide, flat bare feet down stairs. Then the back door, a little to one side of him, burst open and the pudgy figure of Ben Holt, clad in nightgown and cap and clutching a shotgun, stepped into the yard.

The derringers Chris carried were a little heavy in the barrel for really workmanlike slugging; a man had to be mighty careful he didn't bear down too hard. Chris stroked carefully. One barrel of the scattergun in Holt's hands roared a stab of flame upward into the night and the recoil drove Holt's sagging figure handily into Defever's arms.

Grunting with effort, cursing a man who ate so thoughtlessly that his weight near made his body too heavy a burden for a man's back, Chris hoisted Holt up and ran out of the yard just as others of the household poured from the house in alarm.

Holt, in his nightgown, was a startling figure and a startling burden for a man to bear through the town. Chris ran staggeringly, aware of the need of haste. He kept to alleys and back lots, but there were two thoroughfares he was forced to cross. On the second of these, as he had feared he might, he encountered a late and somewhat inebriated citizen on his way home. The fellow stopped in astonishment, staring at Chris and his burden hurtled from the mouth of an alley. Holt twisted on Defever's back and bleated weakly for help. The man on the walk yelled:

"The devil, there! Where you going?"

"The State Block, Sirrah!" Chris answered. "Stand clear, there!"

The man blinked and fell back a step. Chris staggered past him. As he plunged into the opposite alley mouth, he looked back. The man on the walk was headed toward the heart of town at a fast trot.

Chris reached the door heading the stairs leading to the cellar under the State Block without further difficulty and descended them. Two or three broken-down chairs were at the upper end of the basement room. Chris dumped Ben Holt into one of these. He opened the door of the closet in which the marshal of Grass City lay to make certain that the officer could hear all that was said in the outer room.

This done, he took a position against the lower end of the room and drew his der-

ringers. Thirty feet away, cowering in a broken chair with a pair of candle stubs on an old table shedding vague light over him, Ben Holt stared stupidly, his hand going from time to time to the knot Chris had raised on the top of his head.

"And now, my esteemed colleague," Chris said pleasantly, "if you will lend me your ears. As the Bard of Avon once wrote, *'Let the honest man plead his case by deeds rather than the tongue, for the tongue may be of brass or of silver, but the clean stroke of a weapon is its own metal and is well known to all.'* Who put the money supporting your spurious charge of bribery in my office?"

BEN HOLT continued to rub his head. He glared down the room at Chris with galling venom. And he did not answer the question. Chris carelessly waved the barrel of one derringer. The weapon leaped. Sound hammered against the rafters of the room. The candle on the table beside Ben Holt guttered and nearly went out. Dust flew from the back of the chair in which Holt sat. The fat man turned his head a little, stared in the round hole in the back-piece an inch from his left ear.

He looked back at Chris. His tongue came out and ran uneasily along his lips. But a stubbornness held him silent. Chris blew smoke from the barrel of his gun and squinted down the room.

"Bad light," he said thoughtfully. "Mighty bad. Hard to tell shadow from the real thing. Perhaps you'd care to tell me, my good friend, how much Bull Monahan paid you for pushing young Lanagan and myself out of the way and turning the Commanche County school contracts over to him. Perhaps you'd care to admit that the Commonwealth which is dear to the hearts of both of us will pay double for Monahan's schools and that they will be the shoddiest of affairs when they are complete—"

Holt continued to stare sullenly at Chris and lick his lips. The barrel of the other derringer waved. Dust flew from Holt's chair again. The man looked at a hole in the backboard on the other side of his head.

"I toy with you," Chris said pleasantly. "But time and my patience run out!"

The guns fired in unison, each weapon

loosing two rapid shots. Holt's sullen control vanished. He came up out of the chair bellowing and with the palm of his hands clapped to the fleshy protuberance of his jowls. A little blood ran down between his fingers.

"I'll talk!" he cried. "You'll kill me—I'll talk!"

"Kill you?" Chris murmured. "I give you an exhibition of marksmanship such as you never saw and now you're afraid that I'll miss—that I'll really hit you. Tsk! Cowardice does not become a man of the government, Sirrah, and I fear me you're a whopping coward!"

"And a whopping fool, Defever—the two of you—" a voice said behind Chris.

Defever wheeled. A large, thick, blunt-featured man with small and very dangerous eyes stood in the cellar doorway. Bull Monahan. Chris swore silently. Monahan came on into the room. Three men were with him. Men who held iron in their fists and whose eyes kept shifting to Monahan for orders. Monahan smiled.

"Didn't expect me, eh, Defever?"

"On the contrary," Chris said. "I did expect you. But not quite so soon. Not so soon. You've embarrassed me, I fear."

Monahan laughed aloud. "That's a gentle way of saying it," he chuckled. "Anyway, you're making it easy for me, standing there with guns that have got busted shells in them and with a couple of creases already cut in Colt's face. You're going to miss your next shot. Holt's going to be a dead pigeon. And you're going to get into something you can't get out of—a noose—for the killing of the Assembly guard and Holt, both."

Chris blinked. A nasty situation. He was standing half turned toward Monahan. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the candles on the table down the room, Holt standing fearfully beside them. Chris realized that the three who had come in with Monahan had him covered—that there was little chance of facing down those three guns. But the candles. . . .

It was next door to shooting blindly over his shoulder. It was very tricky stuff. And Holt was almost in the line of fire, making the flattened angle of his vision even more touchy. But of a sudden, Chris thought complete darkness in this cellar would be worth certain risks. One moment he was

eyeing Monahan blandly. The next moment his two derringers had flattened at an obtuse angle and spat flame.

One of the men with Monahan was a fast boy. He put a slug an inch in front of Defever's nose. But after an endless split-second, the two candles snuffed and Chris flung himself in a herculean backward leap through the darkness. It was Monahan's turn to swear. He did so luridly.

"That slippery old goat!" he raged. "Watch the door, one of you boys. Don't let anybody out through it. The other two of you start cutting through the room. We've got to nail him, now."

Chris was very careful on the floor. He judged Monahan and his men would make a circuit of the walls. Failing in locating their quarry in this fashion, Chris Defever slowly inched to a position far enough from the wall to be missed in that circuit.

He heard men breathing. He heard the whisperings of careful footsteps. Suddenly a man yelled and a gun jolted down the room. The muzzle flame illuminated the hurt, terrorized, stricken face of Ben Holt. The muzzle flame also silhouetted the man who fired the gun, momentarily, but Chris passed the opportunity up, settling for a shrewder strategy. Bull Monahan roared angrily.

"You fool, that was Ben you nailed. Go easy, blast you, or you'll be tagging me, next!"

There was an answering mutter, then silence. Through it Chris heard the whisper of a man's feet, approaching him. He reversed a derringer to utilize the hammer-like weight of its butt. The whisper came close, almost in front of Defever's face. He calculated nicely and struck savagely downward.

The butt of the derringer bit through a boot into a man's toes. The man yelled with pain, grabbed at his foot, and lost his balance. As he came down, Chris rolled him deftly, located the side of his head, and tapped him with his clubbed gun. This done, he lay carefully still.

Monahan growled, off somewhere to the right. A man started out from the opposite wall.

"Careful, Luke—" Monahan warned. "Something's gone wrong—"

Luke made no answer, but approached Chris, feeling his way. For a moment Chris

thought he would discover his fallen companion too soon, but he didn't. He stopped most obligingly—to listen, likely. Chris struck again with his derringer. It was somewhat similar to shooting ducks, but more sport. This Luke did a little squirming as he came down, clinging to his battered foot, and Chris had to take a couple of licks to straighten him out quietly.

THERE was a long period of absolute silence after this, in which neither Monahan or his remaining man moved. But impatience is such that a man can't contain it long. Chris heard one of the remaining pair coming down the center of the room, just wide enough to miss him. He wriggled out carefully, keeping his movement as soundless as possible.

But this gent was cagey. Or Defever's belt buckle rasped on the floor. At any rate, just as Chris reached out to chop down with his clubbed gun, the unseen foot which was his target shot forward, catching him a wiping jolt across the nose.

Chris swore with hurt and surprise. The man who owned the foot fired downward at a steep angle. Flooring powdered by the slug stung Defever's face. He twisted agilely and fired at the center of the flash. The man's feet left the floor and he came down heavily on his back. Chris bounded up.

"Now, Monahan, you're next!" he exulted.

Monahan's voice grated back from the vicinity of the door. "Not tonight; not when I can't see," he said. "And tomorrow you'll be behind bars that'll hold you—for murder, four times over!"

Chris heard the man haul at the door.

Monahan's escape, however, did not fare as Chris expected. There was some sort of a stir at the cellar door as the contractor jerked it open. A brief struggle, so the sound indicated.

Then Paul Lanagan's voice probed the room carefully!

"Defever—Defever, you in here?"

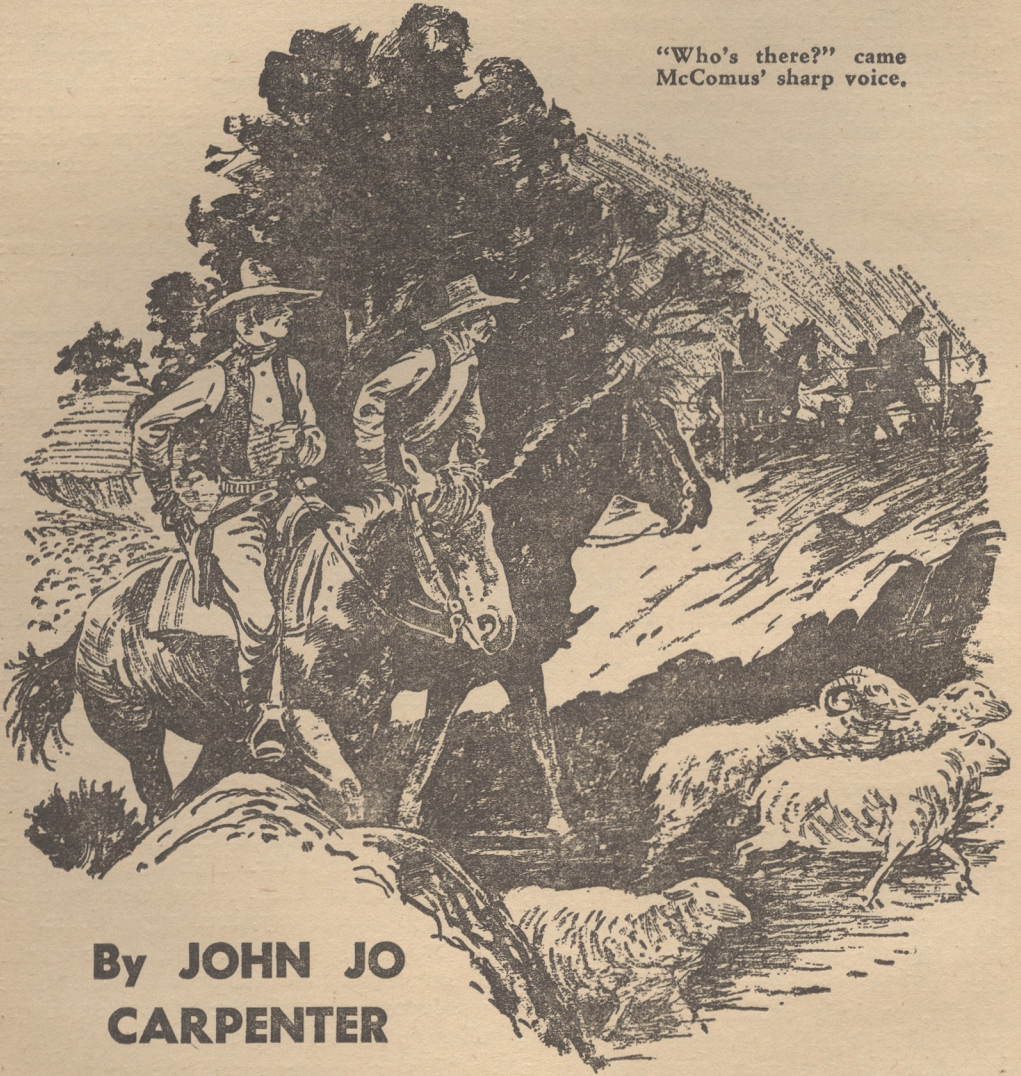
"I am," Chris agreed.

Lanagan sounded pleased with himself. "I got somebody here. He was in too big a hurry, I figured. And I just been out to the mill that clamped down on me for that advance. The owner talked when I got him convinced he was playing with a bad

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COWPUNCHER'S BATTLE CRY

"Who's there?" came
McComus' sharp voice.



By **JOHN JO
CARPENTER**

**Two hates burned in Jeff Riggs' soul —
hate for the rank-smelling sheep de-
stroying his range . . . and hate for the
fat-pursed rancher itching to swallow
him up.**

JEFF RIGGS came out of the scrub timber and saw it first—the whole slope stripped, the grass almost ripped out roots and all, the valley below outraged also, as far as he could see. The rank, pervasive sheep smell hung over everything, and he knew it would stay in the air and soil until it rained. A destructive army

had passed here, a horde of ruinous, nibbling animals with miss-nothing mouths; walking slowly, picking the earth clean, spoiling it as only leisurely sheep could spoil range.

He had smelled the sheep smell, and that was why he had ridden ahead of his companion. He sat here and waited for the older man, with such a heavy feeling of ruin that he was almost dizzy in the saddle. When he heard the careful steps of Ban Barcomb's horse, he turned around with a squeak of saddle leather, but he could not say anything.

Ban's nostrils tried the sheep-smell as his faded, old blue eyes swept over the scoured range, and, with a little hesitation, he said:

"Well, Son, looks like we been beat to it. Sheep! We can't move no cows down here, that's a cinch. And they can't stay up there beyond water. It scares me, the way springs is dryin' up, out there."

"Why couldn't they have gone another way?" Jeff said dully.

Ban started to answer when they heard a voice call to them from somewhere. A tall bay horse emerged over the hill ahead of them, and then a buckskin, and then three more spilled into view. They came toward the two men, riding a little harder than would seem necessary, the buckskin staying close to the tall bay, the three others trailing.

"McComus," said Ban, spitting between his teeth. "I wish I had so much money I could afford to hire four men to ride around and help me look at sheep-tracks."

McComus was a big, bluff man with a close-clipped brown mustache. He pulled in his big bay and nodded to the two and then whirled the horse, shaking his head angrily, to look out over the desolated range. The lean, bow-backed man on the buckskin did not even give the two a glance. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and replaced his peaked Texas-style hat and ranged himself silently, grimly, at the side of his boss. The other three men rolled cigarettes and smoked them, sitting a little apart.

"Bad business," McComus said at last, turning to shake his head sympathetically. "I heard they'd come through this way. I couldn't believe it. Starr, here, said

they'd swept you clean. I see he didn't lie."

Starr, the man on the buckskin, did not even show he had heard his name mentioned. Jeff felt a kind of chill go through him. He had heard that Starr was a killer, a gunman hired for one reason only. It had been hard to believe, yet Starr's own behavior now proclaimed it was true. A dog would have responded to use of his name—would have wagged his tail to hear it, at least. Starr just sat there as though only one thing in the world was to be expected of him, and its time had not come yet.

"Purty bad, all right," said Ban.

Jeff said nothing, although he was aware that McComus was watching him, rather than Ban.

"Of course you'll come down through my place now," said McComus. "We're not going to have any more arguments about my motives, men. I'm a big feller and you're little fellers, but we're both cattle, and we don't like sheep." He pointed with his forefinger. "They're camped on the edge of Scotch Flats, strung out along the wash. Must be eight-ten thousand head, thirty-forty men."

Jeff whistled. The sheep men had "passed the word" that they were coming through peacefully, and once through to their own new lands northward, would not bother the cattlemen again. McComus had sent word back that they were *not* coming through, peacefully or otherwise. He had done so without consulting Jeff or Ban or any of the other small cattlemen, and that same day had hired Starr. This was the sheepmen's answer, then. They were moving through as an army, invading in force.

"At least," he said, because it would irritate McComus and he could not resist the opportunity, "they're below the springs. They're not spoiling the water."

"I suppose we should be grateful for that," said McComus, dryly. He turned suddenly, with a winning, frank smile, and said: "Look, Jeff Riggs, we've been poor neighbors. It wasn't my intention at all. You mustn't resent my having money. Someday you'll have it, too. Side with me. You're going to bring your cattle down through my place tomorrow and no more jabber about it!"

"What'll it cost me?" Jeff said.

"Not a cent," McComus said, instantly. "You and Ban are neighbors of mine. You're short-ranged and the sheep have cut you off from you own cattle. That's all I can see, right now."

Starr, the silent man on the buckskin, sighed impatiently. For a second his bleak gray eyes met Jeff's. Jeff could not keep the hostility out of his own look, and he recognized a like attitude in Starr's. The gunman felt, somehow, that Jeff resented his presence, even looked down on him. It hurt his vanity.

And then Jeff looked at the other three McComus riders. They were well-fed, generously paid, mounted on fine McComus horses. They had jobs as long as they wanted jobs. Yet once—and Jeff could remember the time—they had been independent ranchers like himself. They had "co-operated" with McComus, taken favors from him, and eventually borrowed money. McComus had swallowed them up.

Was this the only choice a man had here, he thought bitterly—ruin by sheep or ruin by McComus? For the big rancher's joviality did not fool him. McComus was hard as a Sioux arrowhead.

AND then the wind raised a little, and the stench of sheep rose from the desolated, dusty slope, stifling him. He met Ban Barcomb's eyes and Ban nodded dejectedly.

"All right, McComus," Jeff said, with a sigh, and suddenly he was glad it was over. He had fought against it for three years, and his nerve was shot. "All right, we'll go up this afternoon and move our stock down as quick as we can get them together. And—thanks!"

The gunman moved in the saddle restlessly, and again his glance met Jeff's. This time, Jeff turned away his eye first. Starr was laughing at him.

"That's more neighborly, Jeff Riggs!" McComus said, putting out his hand. "Why should you and I fight, eh? We're cattlemen. I'll have my boys watch out for you. The fences will be down and you can come straight through." Then his cheeriness vanished, as he added: "And don't worry about those sheep. They won't be here when you get back!"

He waved, whirled the bay, nodded to

his men, and they rode up through the timber, the way Jeff and Ban had come.

"Lookin' over our land," said Ban, with a bitter smile. "He hasn't had a good look at it for a couple of years. Prob'ly forgot how it looks. Your hay-flats and my springs—we'll see his tracks there when we get back."

Jeff looked up and saw the five vanish into the scrub timber. The buckskin was hard at the heels of the majestic bay. The other three were clumped, respectfully, a few lengths behind. And once they had called no man boss!

* * *

The shortest way to their upper range took Jeff and Ban to Scotch Flats, and they had only to follow the broad belt of destruction wrought by the sheep. As they neared the bedded herds in the late afternoon hours, a horseman rode out, shaded his eyes to watch them, and then spurred back toward the cottonwoods where the sheepmen were camped.

Ordinarily this was late summer range for Jeff and Ban, who pooled their resources, almost in a partnership. In the spring they ran their beeves up into the hills, as soon as the snow was off. In the summer they brought them home, away from leased range altogether, and pastured in the timber. After the first fall rains they always counted on late feed from this stretch which had been sheep-ruined, moving their cattle across it to the hills again, for a last "fill" before bringing them down for the winter.

Thus they had always made the upper range do double duty, without harming it, and this device had kept them independent of McComus. They had never once had to buy hay or lease grass or borrow money from him. Thus—but there was no use thinking of it now.

The rider had vanished into the cottonwoods. Jeff and Ban rode on. Now they could see the endless gray masses of the sheep, stretched out all along the wash, resting out the heat of the day. Not until evening would they be moved.

Then, from the cottonwoods, four men on horses appeared, and the sheep parted like a woolly gray ocean to let them through.

"I see what McComus figgers!" Ban

suddenly ejaculated, reining in his horse. "The sheep will move on tonight. With luck, they can be across the ridge and on their own territory day after tomorrow. But McComus won't let them. Look, Son, at what we're ridin' through. Dust, pure dust—that's all that's left, unless it rains quick! McComus will stampede them back the way they came. Shoot a few sheep men and scare the sheep back from the water and feed, over land they've already ruined."

"Sure," said Jeff, somberly, "didn't you figger that from the first? He don't aim for them to get through no way. McComus plays for keeps. Why else did he need Starr?"

The four men came toward them, riding abreast. They seemed peaceable enough, and when they got within a few hundred yards, one of the men raised his hand in greeting. Jeff and Ban stopped and the four came on. Suddenly Ban swore under his breath.

The biggest of the four was a square-shouldered, gaunt old man at least six foot three. He had gray in his short beard, gray in his hair, wrinkles around his eyes; and yet his powerful physique, supple in its saddle-seat, was young-appearing. Of the others, two were enough like him to be obviously his sons, although they would never be as big as their father. The fourth was sandy-haired, middle-aged, worried-looking.

The four rode up, and Ban Barcomb said, with a streak of sarcasm in his voice, "Old home week. Hello there, Tod Kelly. How's everything back in Benton County?"

"Hello, Ban," said the bearded man, without a flicker of surprise, as though nothing could surprise him any more. "Shore didn't allow ever to run into a Benton County man here. These are my boys, Press and Grover. This is Sam Houseman." He turned to the sandy man and added, "Sam, this is Ban Barcomb. We was Missouri neighbors. Why, he spanked my kids as much as I did."

HOUSEMAN nodded a greeting, and Ban, with a glance at the towering Press and Grover, said: "They've growed some since then. Howdy, Boys. Reckon if I'd knowed you'd turn out to be sheep

men, I'd easily drowned you both as cubs."

Press scowled, but Grover and old Tod showed an identical twitch of restrained humor in their mouths.

"This is Jeff Riggs," Ban went on. "It's our range you've ruined."

"It's us you've ruined!" Jeff burst out. "The range will green up when it rains, but Ban and me won't be here."

Old Tod Kelly licked his lips.

"I know," he said doggedly, "but we had to come through. If you put it that way, it was you or us. Somebody has to go broke, maybe—I don't know. But it won't be us."

"I know," said Jeff. "It'll be us."

There was guilt in old Tod's look, and Grover seemed unable to meet Jeff's gaze, although Press stared back insolently. These three, only, counted. Houseman was a question mark, a nobody with a few sheep.

"I pledge you this, you two," Tod said, "when winter's over, we'll send back pay for all the damage we did. Enough to square us—whatever you say it's worth. Sheep are down now; we can't sell; but when we ship, we'll pay you."

"We won't be here," Jeff said. "Come on, Ban."

"See you again, you Kelly people," said Ban.

They rode off. Jeff looked back over his shoulder and saw the three Kellys and Sam Houseman looking after them. Then the four turned and galloped back to their camp.

And everywhere was the smell of sheep. As they rode, Jeff began to realize what a huge undertaking it had been, moving that large flock through hostile cattle country. It was the only thing the sheepmen could do, and old Tod's stubborn leadership merited tribute for the way it had worked thus far.

If they had come through in small bunches, trying to avoid the cattlemen or minimize the damage to the range, they would have failed quickly. No, they had to move as an army, and live off the land like an army. It was somehow pitiful that this grand planning would fail. Jeff hated sheep, but he also hated McComus. It was hard to choose between hates—harder, he found, than choosing between loves.

As they rode, Ban told him something of

the Kelly family. He had nothing but good to say about the kind of neighbors they had been back in Missouri.

"And he'll pay for the range, too," Ban said. "Pay handsomely! It's not his wish that we won't be here to get it. But you're right, Jeff; we won't be. We'll be licked out of the state, like renegades. When the feed fails, a poor man is through. Tod's sheep et up our margin of safety.

"It's funny," he went on, "that Tod turns up to be a sheepman, which makes him my enemy, while at the same time it makes McComus my 'friend.' Jeff, there's something wrong with that there pict'er."

"I'll tell you what's wrong," said Jeff—the first word he had spoken since leaving the Kellys and Houseman. "I'll tell you! It's sheep!" He cursed. "You ought to see Arizona! You know why I've never been home? I'll tell you that, too. It's because my dad's a sheepman! He fought the sheep, and they ruined his range, and the sheepmen shot my brother—and when he was licked, my dad bought sheep! And I'll never go back to Arizona."

The huge flocks had not moved this far without casualties. Here and there they found the carcass of a sheep which had dropped in its tracks, either from age, injury on the road, heat or some other natural agency. Ban waved his arm.

"No water here for eight miles. McComus will run them back here and scatter them and they'll die by the thousands."

Jeff said: "A dead sheep don't make me feel pity."

"They'll stink up the range."

"It'll be McComus range. Come on, Ban, let's get our cows movin' down while there's still meat on them. Let's save what we can to pocket. I'd love to feel money in my pants again, just once. One big drunk is all I ask, Ban. Then I'll be content. I'll work for wages all my life, and never ask to be my own boss again."

"You say that," Ban murmured, "like you meant it. Look!"

He pointed to what at first appeared to be a dead sheep, but even as Jeff looked, it stirred and struggled to get to its feet. They saw then that it was not fully grown; instead, it was an unseasonably late lamb that was not much more than weaned. It stood up and staggered a few steps toward them before it fell down.

Jeff watched coldly as Ban got off his horse and poured water from his canteen down the sheep's mouth. It revived slightly. Ban threw it across his saddle and carried it until they reached the first spring on their leased upper range. Here he liberated the lamb. It frisked away with revived vigor, drank from the spring, and began eating grass. It would live.

"A present to McComus," said Ban, getting back on his horse. "With love, from Benton County, Missouri. Tod lambed it and I saved it—for McComus. And by the Eternal, Jeff, there's something wrong with that pict'er!"

Jeff sat watching the sheep. It had already forgotten them and its earlier terror. Its stupid eyes, with their oblong pupils, held nothing but satisfaction as it tore at the wiry grass. Jeff knew it would not last long here. Alone, sheep were defenseless. Coyotes pulled them down. Rain and cold weather gave them pneumonia by hundreds. Ticks and maggots and disease decimated them. If the lamb survived one hazard, there would be another along in a few minutes.

Like me, Jeff thought. I outlived drouth and short grass and lack of money because Ban and me hung together. Now we're like that lamb. One sheep never hurt nobody. Divide and conquer! I wish Kelly had got over the hump before we found him. His sheep can't do us no harm over on the other side.

And suddenly he knew what was wrong with the "pict'er."

"Ban," he said, "did Tod Kelly ever take what didn't belong to him without a by-your-leave to who owned it? Say, a man's land, or his self-respect, or his future? Is he a forecloser? Safe to owe money to, as you say he's a safe debtor?"

"I reckon," said Ban, "that Tod never set great store by winnin' or losin', so long as he thought he was right. And as to foreclosin', he never had nothin' to lend out. Gave plenty away, I guess, but no loans. I wouldn't be afraid to owe him."

"And you *are* afraid to owe McComus."

BAN shrugged. He did not even need to recall how many corners both had cut, to avoid obligation to the big rancher. Jeff turned his horse.

"Ban," he said, "I hate sheep and sheep-

men and I always will. But looks like we got on the wrong side of this battle-line. We're cattlemen, but we're poor men. I think I'm more of a poor man than I am a cattleman."

Again Ban shrugged, but this time he murmured: "I always kind of let you do our thinkin', Jeff. For a young feller, you're pretty long-headed. I'm just thinkin' of Starr."

"So was I," said Ban. "If McComus hadn't rung him in, I'd string along. But I remember his kind in Arizona, too. Imported killers, and both sides used 'em in the long run, and nobody gained. It was one like that who shot my brother."

Ban tried to argue, to point out, as they rode back, that there was no question of right or wrong about Starr that could be settled. Starr was not a question—he was an answer. That's why McComus had him. You couldn't argue with a man that could use a gun the way he did.

"All right," he said, at last, "I just wanted you to see both sides of the pict'er, Jeff. Now we'll shet up."

Long afternoon shadows paced them back into the sheepmen's camp. Press Kelly, the suspicious one, rode out to meet them and escort them in. The overpowering stench of sheep that flooded up, as they rode through the flocks, turned Jeff's stomach and almost weakened his resolve. But at the same time, it increased his bitterness and fury. He spoke in a low voice to Ban.

"Sheep! Now I feel like an outlaw sure. Bring on your McComus!"

Press kept a rifle at the ready across his saddle. He asked no questions, but old Tod asked innumerable ones. Darkness was falling and the old man, seen in the flickering campfire light, looked like an angry old Biblical prophet.

"We thought this would be where we'd run inter trouble," he said, "and we was fixed fer it. Once they scatter us, we're done. Now you've warned us, I feel purt' nigh relieved to know it's really comin'. You'd best go now, so your rich cattlemen friends won't know."

Jeff remained silent, but Ban said softly; "I guess you misunderstood, Tod. We're throwin' in with you. Why not? The range is already ruined. Reckon you had to do what you did. But why should one poor

man's need turn other poor men against him? No, our fight will always be against the foreclosers, like Solly McComus. Us poor should stick together."

"I'll pay you back, after our first wool clip," Kelly pledged. "Air you boys hungry?"

"I could almost eat—mutton," Jeff confessed.

While they were eating, and just as the moon came up, a single gunshot sounded far up the slope, toward the timber. It had a ringing, heavy sound that reminded Jeff of the big rifle carried by Press.

"I sent Press out a piece to watch," said Tod. "He—"

Then, in lower tone, but fierce as bees, came the rattle of six-guns. Tod stood up, his huge form towering over them, and listened. The rifle did not sound again. Jeff and Ban stood up, too. Grover Kelly came running toward them, and far down the wash, sheep began blating nervously.

"Why didn't Press f'ar that other signal shot?" Grover said, fiercely. "One shot don't mean nothin', Pa!"

"I reckon we know that, Grover." Tod's voice was heavy. He was still listening for more firing, but none came. He turned his dull face toward his son, and Jeff's heart ached for the pain in the old man's voice. "Press was too headstrong. Grover, it's going to be tight for a while. We've got to use our heads."

But Grover was trembling with rage, and his eyes had the angry, unreasoning light that they had seen earlier that day in his brother's. Grover, the calm one, was no longer calm. He stuttered something at his father, turned, and ran to his horse. The sheep blatted in panic as they made way for him.

Tod started to follow, but Jeff grabbed his arm.

"Don't worry about him, Kelly. He won't get into trouble because he doesn't know where the trouble lies. You line your men out around the sheep and try to hold them. Come on, Ban."

"I hope," said Ban, "that you ain't forgot about Starr."

"I haven't. Why else do you think I'd throw in with sheepmen?"

He could hear Tod Kelly bellowing instructions as they rode out. A conch-shell sounded, startling him, until Ban ex-

plained that the shell was both a signal to bell-sheep and to herders in Missouri. And suddenly Ban was lighter of heart. Jeff wished he could be.

AS JEFF had expected, Grover Kelly had ridden wildly up the trail down which Jeff and Ban had come that morning. The two took another route. It was plain to Jeff that McComus might approach that way, but when he reached the edge of the timber he would circle southward. He would want to be between his own range and the sheep when the sheep stampeded. The last thing in the world he wanted was to have eight or ten thousand woolies scattered over his grass.

And it was there that they found them, strung out along the three-strand line fence that separated McComus' range from Jeff and Ban's. The big bay horse gave them away, with its noisy challenge. Like McComus, it was bossy; it resented intruders.

"Who's there?" came McComus' sharp voice.

It was a little edgy, that voice; a little nervous. In the wan moonlight, Jeff grinned to himself. Far away the sheep had started a rippling, continual blating. Tod was getting his men out around them in a hurry. To a cattleman it was an ominous sound; no wonder McComus was apprehensive. Jeff sent out a ringing shout, identifying himself, and he heard Mc-

Comus say something reassuring to his men.

There were ten of them, and they were squatting beside the fence, smoking and resting. As usual, the gunman, Starr, was nearest McComus. The big rancher stood up and came toward them as Jeff and Ban dismounted, and Starr followed him, watchfully, faithfully.

"Thought you boys would be pushing your cows down the hill by now," said McComus, suspiciously. "What's up?"

"Changed our minds, Solly," said Jeff, calling the rancher by his first name for the first time. "They'll weather it out up there a few days. Then we'll bring 'em home. Pasture 'em on the grass till that gets short, and then turn 'em in on my hay-flats. By then there ought to be a market on 'em."

"The hay-flats! But you'll ruin your stand of hay if you pasture it off. I—you mustn't ruin good hay!"

Behind Jeff, Ban chuckled mirthlessly. Jeff took a step closer to McComus and said, evenly: "That breaks your heart, don't it? You counted on that hay-flat for yourself, didn't you? It's all right for me to get run out of Montana, but you want me to leave standing hay, don't you?"

McComus said nothing. Jeff watched the rage pile up in the man. McComus had never been called like this before. Back there by the fence, a man said something



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in a discontented voice—not much, just an exclamation, but it was something that had been saved for a lot of years. That, Jeff knew, would be one of the small ranchers McComus had ruined. And suddenly he felt happy. The thing had needed saying for a long time, and now it was said.

"You're taking a lot for granted, Riggs," McComus said stiffly.

But Starr touched the rancher's arm, diverting him.

"Don't palaver, Boss," Starr said. He had a flat, toneless voice, with a chill in it. "You been double-crossed, don't you see? This pup throwed in with the sheepmen."

"Is that right, Riggs?"

"Of course it's right!" Starr rasped. "His old daddy did the same down in Arizona." The gunman pushed McComus to one side and turned on Jeff, slaty eyes glittering. "All right, Riggs. Try your luck. I killed double-crossers before."

"I know," said Jeff. "I thought I remembered you. *But the other time, you was on the sheepmen's side, wasn't you?*" He paid no further attention to the gunman. He turned to McComus and went on: "Solly, hear those sheep. If there's another shot fired, they'll bolt. They'll scatter all over your range. So it had better be quiet for a few minutes. Take your man's gun away from him. If you value your range, *take his gun away from him.*"

"Starr, give me your gun," McComus said, with quick decision. "Riggs, give me yours. We want no irresponsible shooting."

Starr's face darkened, but when Jeff pitched his gun across to McComus, Starr shrugged and did the same. McComus, Jeff knew, had not been told that Starr hired out to both sides in the Arizona sheep wars. McComus was suspicious, and only by surrendering his gun could Starr hold his place and his reputation as a sheep-hater, a protector of the cattle range.

Jeff walked over and hit Starr in the mouth. The gunman struck back, covered, lashed out with his left, and covered again. The blows rapped Jeff painfully, and with a twinge of apprehension he realized that Starr was a tough, cagy man with his

fists. Jeff bored in, chopping, and took two hard lefts in his chest and stomach without landing. Jeff fell back and covered himself, breathing hard, and as his attack ceased, Starr swung a long left to his nose.

"*Shut up!*" McComus hissed, as his men crowded around, as the distant sheep sounded another nervous signal.

Jeff tried to box, but the gunman fought coldly, and the gunman was the best boxer. Jeff fell back, boxing grimly until something bit into his back, and he heard the fence creak with his own weight. Then the sense of having his back against the wall stirred something in him, and he came out chopping and swinging. He took three blows for every one he landed, but he backed Starr away from him.

Starr kept on falling back until he dropped on his face. Jeff took his gun back from McComus and holstered it.

"Not worth killing," he panted, "but get that gunman out of here before I change my mind."

McComus licked his lips and murmured: "That's pretty bold, Boy."

Jeff looked down at Starr and up at McComus and the exultation of combat died. He remembered his ranch, which McComus coveted, and his hay-flats, and Ban Barcomb's spring.

"You'll do for boldness, Son," McComus went on, thoughtfully. "All you lack is sense. That'll come with age. I was like you once. You say these sheepmen are friends of yours?"

Jeff said belligerently: "Yes!"

"All right," McComus grinned. "They cross tomorrow. See that they don't scatter. And if you run short of feed this fall, don't pasture off that hay-flat, Boy. *When you're a rich man, like I am, you'll want it to remember your young days with.* You see, Riggs, I had a hay-flat once, too."

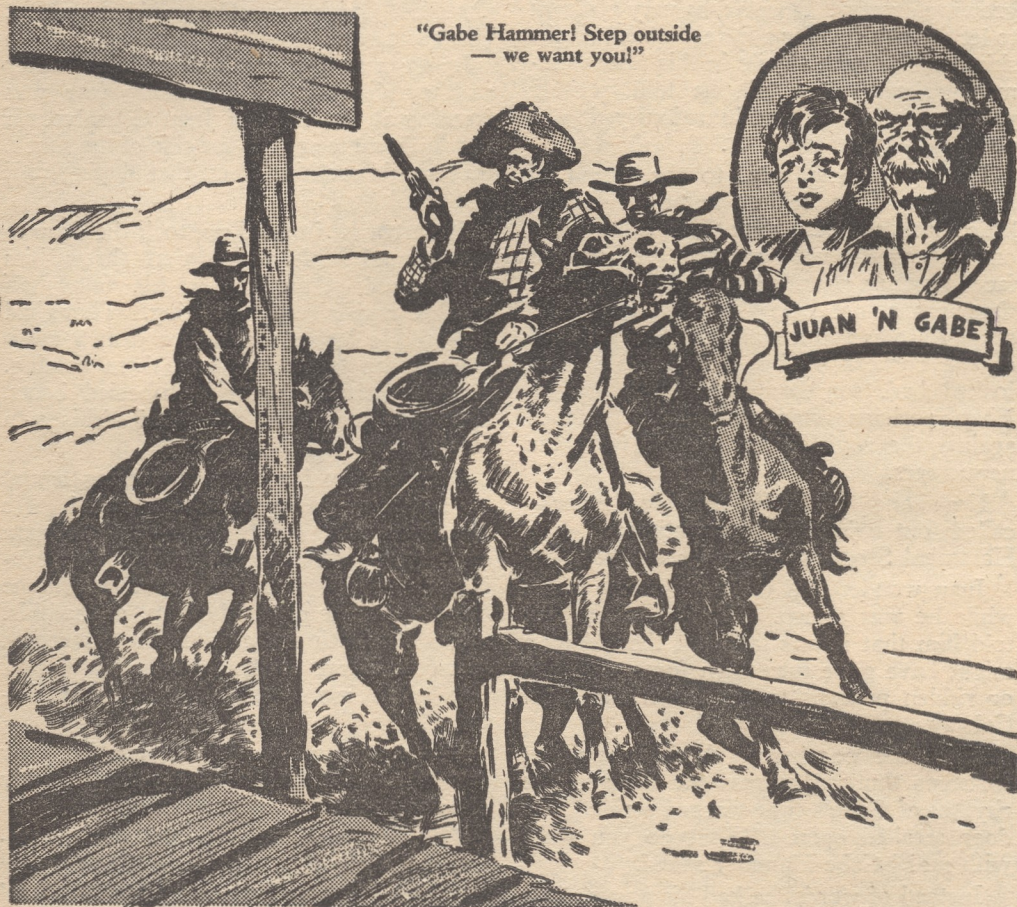
McComus turned and told two of his men to put Starr on his horse, and then the tall bay led them away. And looking after the erect, proud, wealthy rancher, Jeff Riggs knew a man could be licked without being a licked man. It was odd, put that way, but there it was!

"We'll have no more trouble with McComus!" said Ban, softly.

And Jeff answered, with a peculiar lightness of heart: "Nor with anybody, I'm thinkin'. Come on, Ban. Let's tell Kelly."

Bleeding, exhausted, sobbing for breath, young Juan Consalvo ran from a...

BUTTON'S NIGHTMARE



★ ★
By D. B. NEWTON

THESE past few days, young Juan Consalvo had somehow known old Gabe was very worried. That made Juan unhappy, too, for Gabe Hammer was his best friend. His only friend, he sometimes thought—except, perhaps, for the kindly old padre at the mission where he went to school.

When smallpox carried off Juan's family in one stroke—his father, his mother, his

many brothers and sisters—had it not been old Gabe that took him in and nursed him back to health with all the tender care a mother might have given her only child? Had not old Gabe made a home for him, there in his little shack, to replace the one he'd lost? No wonder Juan worried, now, that the old man should look so unexplainably sad.

This afternoon his friend was away, and Juan—thinking to surprise him on his return—had scrambled up on top of the shack, armed with hammer and nails and tin cans cut and pounded into streets, to mend the leaks that made the roof a sieve in wet weather. He could look northward,

far up the valley, from here; behind him, at the south, was the place where rimming hills converged upon a notch and let the desert wind breathe through. The sun was warm. After a bit, Juan found himself growing drowsy. It would be very pleasant to let the work go for a little, lie back on the shingles and bake awhile in this fine, shimmering heat. After all, he told himself, yawning and stretching luxuriously, it was not the rainy season. . . .

He awoke, suddenly, to the sound of hoofbeats. Men seldom came to Gabe's little shack, yet here were three riding in at once. Juan did not recognize any of their faces as they pounded into the dooryard. One was a big, heavy-featured man with shaggy brows and a mustache that drooped at the corners of his mouth. All three looked bad, somehow suggesting danger. That, perhaps, was why Juan flattened against the roof, hiding himself from the newcomers.

Now one—probably the big leader—called out without dismounting: "Gabe Hammer! Step outside—we want you!"

Juan wondered if Gabe had come home while he was asleep. The dip of the sun told him that it was late, but the old man might have gone into town for something, or ridden perhaps to see his friend Tom Colway.

No, Gabe was home. A chair scraped; footsteps thumped across the floor in the rhythm of Gabe's time-warped stride. The door creaked open. "What do you want with me?" Gabe Hammer asked.

Instead of words, he had his answer in a sudden roaring blast as, without preface, three guns opened up at once. Juan heard a cry of pain as the old man thudded against the flimsy wall and fell back through the open doorway, to hit the floor inside. An exultant shout broke from the leader of the murdering trio: "That does it!"

Then, after the far echo of the shots slapping on the hills, came a painful silence that pressed against the eardrums. Poor Juan could not move; could only lie there on the hot tilt of the roof, sick with his terror and his grief.

Old Gabe! How could they have done this thing—without warning, without a chance for his life? The questions beating within the lad's brain were suddenly cut

off by a cry from one of those below him: "Wait a minute, Mantell. What about that greaser kid the old guy had livin' with him?"

The leader cursed. "That's right," he agreed. "Quick—scout around! Don't let him get away!"

There was the creak of saddle leather as they dismounted. Suddenly fear was freezing at the heart of Juan Consalvo. If they only came around the side of the shack, they would see him up on that sloping roof—a fine target!

In terror he jumped up, took the drop to the ground with a jolt that threw him bodily and scrambled to his feet, half winded and already running. They had heard. He looked back, lips drawn away from white teeth, and saw them coming. But in their awkward high-heeled boots, they could not equal the speed of his own strong, bare feet.

Mantell, the leader, was cursing again. "Stop him, damn it!" he shouted. He plowed to a halt, brought up his big sixgun and sent a bullet lancing at the boy's weaving, dodging figure. It did not even come close. And ahead was the slope of the hills, with their footing of chaparral and a crown of trees. There Juan might find safety. A few yards more now—such a vast distance!

For now the men were going for their horses. In the saddle, they would quickly run him down. Despair flooded him.

Looking back, he saw the old mouse-colored mule that had been Gabe's only livestock—that had carried Juan to school everyday at the mission. How sweet school seemed to him now: the quiet, the 'dobe church with its cross, its fluttering pigeons, the deep voice of the bell. . . .

Mantell's gun barked again, and the hand of pain struck Juan across his shoulder and sent him sprawling.

FOR a moment the bullet's shock numbed the boy so that he could not move; could only lie there in the dust looking up at the sky, panting, while his brain reeled with pain and blood from his shoulder ran and dyed the ground.

Then he heard the others coming, and that gave him strength to push up from the ground and plunge wearily toward the protection of the brush.

He stumbled at the brink of a shallow arroyo, went skittering to the bottom in a shower of gravel. Choking on rock dust, he picked himself up and staggered on, along the course of the depression. Minutes more and the killers would be on him. . . . At a place where the mantle of chaparral extended to the lip of the arroyo, Juan scrambled up the bank; dragged his pain-weary body in under the shelter of the thick growth; lay there panting and sick with the bullet in his shoulder.

Here came the three, walking their horses up the bed of the arroyo as they looked out across the sea of dense chaparral that clothed the sloping ground. "We lost him!" one said. "He's got away into the brush, and we'll never catch him."

Mantell grunted: "We got to! The damn kid knows too much now!" Then, after a moment's silence: "That stuff looks pretty dry to me. Do you suppose it would burn?"

"You mean—?"

"Sure! We could fire it in a number of places and smoke him out. Of course, if he don't want to come out, why—that's his business!"

Madre de dios! They would roast him alive! Juan closed his eyes, crossed himself with a hand that trembled wildly. Then he dragged himself to hands and knees, and started snaking off again through the brush, squirming like an animal.

"Hey, look!" a voice shouted. "Something's moving out there!"

"It's the wind."

"There ain't no wind. Mantell! *It's him!*"

With a heavy crashing, the three horses spurred up over the shallow rim and plunged into the brush. And Juan ran for his life, doubled over, scurrying through the growth, forcing his body through. Thorny arms caught and ripped his clothing, lashed at his face and brought the blood streaming. Guns began speaking behind him; bullets skewered the brush clipping away branches and leaves.

But now the ground was lifting under Juan's brown, bleeding feet. Suddenly he had left the brush behind him and was heading up the bare slope for the trees that crowned the hilltop. They saw—were coming right after him, their horses already on the slope. Still their lead missed him, and with lips moving silently on whispered

prayers, Juan panted on until the trees closed overhead.

He was so very tired, so very tired. He could not go on. He glanced up, saw the branches rearing above him. On the thought he was already climbing, dragging his tired body up the nearest trunk, into the shelter of the leaves.

Throwing himself along the thickness of a limb, he lay there trembling in utter exhaustion, trying not to sob too loudly as his panting lungs strained for air. At the same moment, his pursuers hove into sight.

They did not look up. Their horses, blowing from the climb of the slope, galloped straight on through the trees. As they passed directly under him, Juan could see gun-metal in the riders' hands. Then the noise of them was diminishing, losing itself beyond the crest of the hill. Gradually it died completely.

For a long time after, Juan was too worn out by shock and sickness to move. His shoulder had stopped bleeding, but the throb of the wound went throughout his body. He clung to the limb while the blood-red of a brief sunset touched the leaves about him, faded out into smoky gray. An early night wind walked upon the hilltop, riffing in treeheads and swaying the limb gently.

At last he came weakly down from his perch, stood a moment leaning against the trunk of the tree. Mantell and the others must be far away by this time. But no—perhaps, having missed him, they had returned to old Gabe's shack and were lying there in wait. *Por dios!* What was there to do? How in the name of heaven could he save himself—and avenge the killing of old Gabe?

For it was Juan who must accomplish that; he, Juan, must find help to punish the killers. It was the last service he could render the old man he had worshipped. Except, of course, to save his pennies and burn a candle for him, whenever he could afford one, in the little 'dobe church at the mission.

Where to find help, tired and weak as he was from pain and loss of blood? Town was much too far to walk. He thought longingly of the quiet mission, and the kindly, black-robed padre; but that was too far, too. There was, however—he remembered it suddenly—the hacienda of old Gabe's

friend, Tom Colway. That would be perhaps ten miles across the hills. A hard, difficult journey—but he could make it.

For Senor Colway would help. Juan knew what close friends he and Gabe Hamner had been; how, on summer evenings, Gabe had ridden the old, mouse-colored mule over and sat in the coolness of the patio smoking Senor Colway's cigars and listening to the tinkle of the fountain spray upon the flagstones, as their talk ranged over the world and back.

Now there would be no more talks. And Senor Colway would be sorry—big, capable Tom Colway, with his dark, handsome face and quiet voice. Yes, that was Juan's answer! He would go to the hacienda, tell his story—and then old Gabe's murderers would be found and punished. Senor Tom could do anything. . . .

TEN miles! A long, long way through the hills for a lad with a bullet in his shoulder. On bleeding feet, exhausted from pain, and with imagination finding horrors in every shadow and patch of milky moonlight, Juan kept going. Only the memory of old Gabe, and of the faces of those who shot him down, spurred the lad onward.

But he made it—and saw at last the lights of Senor Colway's hacienda, shining on the plain below.

Juan greeted them with a prayer of thanksgiving. As sweet as the glow of candles on the altar, with their promise of safety and peace—such were the lights that beckoned to him now. As he came nearer he could see the men moving there, too—vaqueros who rode for Senor Colway—while the ranch went about its business in the subdued tempo of a quiet evening. Then at last the cool flagstones of the patio were under his tired feet, and the music of the fountain sweet in his ears.

Juan paused, looked around uncertainly; using the last of his strength and will power to keep from falling in his tracks. A cowboy saw the ragged, dirty greaser kid and descended on him. "What do you want, Bud?"

"Senor Colway—"

"He ain't seein' no beggars!"

"But I *must*—please!"

The cowboy raised a threatening arm. "You heard me!"

"Just a minute!" That was Colway him-

self, leaving a lighted door open as he stepped out into the patio. "What's wanted here? Oh, it's you, Juan. . . . Let him alone. It's all right."

The puncher shrugged, melted away into the darkness, and Tom Colway turned his fine, dark eyes on the ragged boy. "What can I do for you, Juan?" he asked in a kindly voice. "Come inside and tell me about it."

"Gracias, Senor!" the lad murmured weakly.

He went with the big man into the room Colway had just left. Here it was bright and pleasant and safe. There was food on the table, too. Food! Juan all but collapsed at the sight and the fragrance of it.

But now Colway had seen Juan's bloody shoulder, the brush-ripped clothing and the ugly scratches on dirt-streaked face and arms. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed, a frown of concern etched across his high, wide forehead. "What's happened, Boy?"

Juan panted forth his story about the shooting, and about Mantell and the others trying to kill him. Finishing, the breathless rush of words left him tired, numb. His job was done. He had brought the news to Senor Colway, and now he could leave the work of vengeance in Colway's big, capable hands.

Senor Colway's dark face was sombre. He shook his head, slowly. He stepped across the room, threw open a door opposite the patio. "Come on out, Boys," he said.

Mantell walked into the room.

Juan Consalvo gaped, reason staggering. The other two were here, also, entering at the heels of their leader. Their eyes blazed like fanned coals at sight of the boy who had escaped them.

"There he is," Colway said.

Juan turned, in a frantic dive for the open door. His tired legs gave and he fell headlong. Now the killer, Mantell, was dragging the boy to his feet.

"Lock the door," Colway ordered.

One of them closed it and turned the key. The faces of the four as they ringed the frightened lad were cold, emotionless. "So he got away this afternoon," said Colway, lifting his eyes to Mantell. "You didn't tell me that. You said you finished both of them."

The man shifted his glance. "We—we thought we did," he lied.

"Like hell! The boy has told me what a fool he made of you—you were just afraid to admit it yourselves!" The next words were like a whipcrack. "Well, don't make a mistake this time!"

Juan's face showed ash-gray under the dark skin. This was Senor Colway ordering his death! He had planned the murder of old Gabe, too—he who was Gabe Hammer's friend. *Madre de dios!* Many times the boy had seen them sitting yonder in the patio, listening to the fountain and swapping tall tales of far places. This could not be!

But it was. For now Senor Colway was telling him: "Sorry, Lad! A long time I tried to keep old Gabe away from home the nights we were running cattle through that notch south of his shack, to the desert and Mexico. But he finally found out—and I couldn't have him going to the sheriff about it!"

Colway stepped back, then, nodding to Mantell. "All right. Do it now—so I can see there's no mistake!" Mantell brought out his heavy gun, pointed it at Juan's head.

The boy started fighting all at once, with strength he didn't know he had. He broke loose from Mantell. One of the others caught him, grunted: "Quick! But be damn careful about it!"

Mantell cursed, moved into position to shoot Juan through the head without plugging the man who held him. At that moment, many hoofbeats stormed across the flagstones of the patio outside.

Heads jerked. Colway, cursing, yanked a gun as he strode to the door, unlocked it, threw it open. Bloody and bandaged, against a moonlit background of plunging horses and running men, old Gab Hammer stood in the doorway!

Lamplight showed a gun in his hand, and the fury in his old gray eyes. "All right, Colway!" he gritted. "Because I thought you was my friend, I swallowed your secret. It's different now—"

The blast of Colway's weapon cut him off; but old Gabe had seen the killer look in the man's eyes, and triggered first. And Senor Colway was staggering, his own bullet lost somewhere in the moonfilled courtyard past Gabe's shoulder. He stumbled, went to his knees—fell full length. But at the same moment old Gabe staggered, sagged limply against the doorframe.

Big Mantell cursed. Juan saw him swinging his gun toward the old man in the doorway. Savagely, the boy broke free from the one who held him—leaped like a tiger. He got both hands on Mantell's gunarm, dragged it down so that when the gun exploded it went wild, missing Gabe by inches.

His face a snarling mask of rage, Mantell shook the boy off. The gunbarrel descended, missed his tousled black head, landed on the aching shoulder instead.

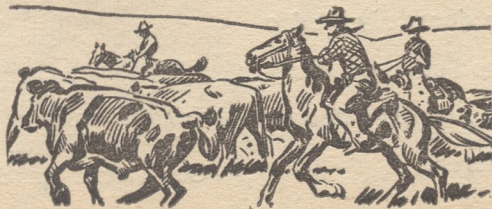
Fire lanced through him. *Santa Maria!* He had not known there was so much pain in the whole world! He went limp, dropped to the floor. Then the racket ended in sudden stillness. Old Gabe was there with arms around him. And the old man was crying.

Juan cried, too, from pain and exhaustion and relief. "You—oh, Gabe, you are not dead!"

"Of course not, little Juan! My luck's too good! Those bullets this afternoon cost me some blood, and I'm pretty shaky yet. But when I came to I rode the old mule to town for the sheriff and his posse. That's what you hear outside, rounding up the last of Colway's gang of smugglers. And with luck like ours, you and me will be as good as new in a few weeks!"

But Juan just closed his eyes and smiled a little. He understood better than old Gabe how much there was of luck in this. Tomorrow an extra candle would burn on the altar of the old 'dobe mission church. A candle of gratitude. . . .

He, Juan, would see to that.



SPECTRE OF RAM'S HORN CREEK



By

GUNNISON

STEELE



The buckskin
squealed again and
bolted



Through the batwing doors shuffled a fantastic figure—a mud-covered, burning-eyed apparition . . . come to accuse his murderer.

GUS TANNER stirred there among the boulders like a disturbed rattler and lifted his head. He expelled a gusty breath of satisfaction, gripping his rifle tighter in sweaty hands. For yonder, dismounting to open the gate that would let him continue on along this dim trail to the main Rosillos road two miles away, was young Tuck Horne.

Gus Tanner was a slab-bodied man with

thin, dark features and off-color eyes. His run-down little place adjoined Tuck Horne's Bridlebit outfit. Tanner's place had good grass and good water; it was run-down only because Tanner spent most of his time drinking and gambling and just plain loafing.

Tuck Horne, hard-working and ambitious, had been trying to buy the strip for the last several months. Now, just an hour ago, Tanner had sold out to the blocky, red-haired young rancher. He had the two thousand dollars, in crisp banknotes, in his pocket—and murder in his heart.

The scheme hadn't come suddenly to Gus Tanner. He'd planned it carefully. He and Tuck Horne had made a verbal deal in town the day before.

"Deed to the place is at home," Tanner had declared. "I'll bring it over to yore place tomorrow and we'll close the deal."

"Bueno," Tuck agreed. "I'll give you a check—"

"Rather have cash, if it's all the same. I'm pullin' out right after you pay me, and cash would save me a ride back to town. I've got a crawful of this lousy range."

"Cash then," Tuck Horne had agreed. And, after paying Tanner an hour ago and getting the deed in return, the redhead had grinned. "Figure I skinned you. I'm satisfied if you are. I'll ride into town in a little while and get this recorded."

Tanner lifted his head to peer again, a sardonic grin pulling his thin lips. Things were working out just as he'd planned them. After closing the gate, Tuck Horne had remounted and was coming along the trail. He would have to pass within a hundred yards of the nest of boulders where Tanner crouched with rifle in hand.

A mile-long strip of Ram's Horn Creek along here had been fenced to keep out cattle, because the bed of the almost-dry creek was laced with deadly soap-holes and patches of quicksand. The dim trail threaded between the fence and the creek along a strip of land that was studded with boulders and cactus. Fifty feet beyond the trail was the cedar-clogged rim of an embankment that dropped off abruptly into the creek bed.

Tuck Horne came slowly along, unaware of the death that crouched there beside the trail. Tanner slid the rifle barrel through a crevice, cursing in bitter silence at the slight scraping sound it made.

Tuck Horne's red head jerked up sharply. Sensing danger, he swayed sideways in the saddle, jerking his buckskin to a halt. The startled horse reared just as the bushwhacker's gun roared.

The buckskin squealed, went to its knees, but hammered to its feet again and started bucking. Tuck Horne, fighting the pain-crazed horse, was staring toward the boulders. Gus Tanner, still swearing with silent and bitter rage, blazed another shot.

Gus Tanner reared up, blazing shot after shot at the horse and rider, until the rifle was empty. A kind of panic had hold of him also—a fear that Tuck Horne had seen and recognized him, and would get away.

Frozen with amazement, he saw the buckskin crash through the thin line of cedars and abruptly vanish—and knew that the terrified animal had plunged over the embankment with its rider to the creek bed fifteen feet below!

Tanner crouched down again, reloading the rifle with shaking fingers, staring at the spot where horse and rider had vanished. Had any of those wildly-fired bullets hit Tuck Horne? He knew that the horse was done for. If not dead from bullets, the fall to the creek bed would kill or badly cripple the animal. The same was probably true of Tuck Horne.

But Tanner hesitated, warily watching the spot where the two had vanished. Then, when there was no sound or sign of movement over there, he got up and went slowly forward, the rifle outthrust before him. A moment later he stood atop the embankment and stared down into the creek.

Wicked triumph flowed through him at what he saw.

HERE the bluff was sheer, slightly overhanging. Halfway down a bush had somehow taken root in a crevice and jutted outward like clutching skeleton fingers. The creek bed, between this and a like bluff on the opposite side, was perhaps fifty feet across. But there was only a tiny trickle of water in the middle of the bed. Between the trickle and the bluff on this side was a strip of ground that looked dry and solid.

But, directly below Tanner, the dry crust over this strip of earth had been broken, exposing an evil-smelling mass of black, slimy mud. From this ropy stuff protruded the hoof and part of the fore-leg of a horse.

The leg was jerking spasmodically. Near the leg lay a partly-submerged hat—Tuck Horne's hat.

Of the redhead himself there was no sign.

As Tanner watched, the horse's hoof became still, slowly vanished into the jelly-like mass. Soon the hat would vanish also, the last of what had been Tuck Horne. Tanner watched the hat, still grinning, confidence flowing back into him.

He'd aimed to kill Tuck, and take back the ranch deed before hiding the body. Now Tuck Horne was safely buried, and the deed with him, where neither would ever be found. It was perfect. He had his ranch and Tuck Horne's two thousand dollars.

It was well after sundown when he reached Rosillos. Lamplight lay like strips of tarnished gold across the dusty street, and the town was beginning to stir. Sheriff Sam Durant, a big man with elegant mustaches, sat with chair tilted against the front of his office, watching the town.

Tanner said affably: "'Evenin', Sheriff," and rode on past to pull up before the Texas House Saloon.

He had a couple of quick drinks, standing alone, for Gus Tanner had no real friends. Afterward he approached a table where a three-handed stud game was in progress. He was grudgingly admitted.

At the end of an hour Tanner was slightly ahead of the game. He'd had several more drinks, and he felt satisfied with the way things had turned out. He kept remembering Tuck Horne's hat as it sank slowly into the soap-hole. Had it, he wondered, been seeking Tuck's red head?

He flipped over the ace in his hole, grinned. "Three blazin' balls of fire!" he said, and reached for the pot.

Then Tanner realized that the room had gotten very quiet. He looked up—and the triumphant grin became a frozen grimace.

The batwings had flapped open, letting in the figure of a man. A strange, fantastic figure, covered from head to feet with a drying coat of ropy, evil-smelling mud—his clothes, his hair, even his face, from which peered two burning eyes. The figure shuffled slowly to the center of the room, stiffly, woodenly, like an automaton.

There it stopped, arms held stiffly at its sides, turning its head to stare with those burning eyes about the room. It might have been a young man, or an old man.

Covered as it was with that gooey filth, it was wholly unrecognizable.

Somebody swore in an awed voice, said: "Danged if it don't look like a ghost—or a dead man!"

With a low moan of superstitious terror, Gus Tanner broke the paralytic bonds that had held him motionless, and lunged to his feet. He snatched at his gun.

With amazing quickness, the mud-coated figure lost its stiffness and hurled itself in a headlong dive straight at Gus Tanner. Flame and lead bawled from Tanner's gun-muzzle. But that cyclonic figure had ducked under the lashing flame, and now crashed into the killer, slamming him violently back against the floor, knocking the gun from him.

Babbling with fear, Tanner tried to claw to his feet. But iron fists battered him back against the planks. Then Sheriff Durant, who had darted in through a rear doorway, pulled the raging Tuck Horne off Tanner.

"Quit it, you sidewinder!" the sheriff snapped. "You tryin' to kill Tuck Horne?"

"Th—that ain't Tuck Horne!" Tanner babbled. "Can't be—I watched Tuck Horne sink into a soap-hole and—"

He broke off, fresh panic gibbering inside him at his admission.

The sheriff's voice seemed to come from a vast distance: "You saw the younker's horse and hat sink into that soap-hole. But Tuck wasn't in it—he'd thrown himself from the saddle and caught hold of a bush that was growin' out of the side of the bluff. Knowing whoever shot at him would be lookin' for him to finish him off, he crawled back under an overhang and lay flat so he couldn't be seen from above.

"Then, after you'd gone, he footed it into town and told me what's happened. We cooked up a little scheme. We went out to that spring hole behind my house and smeared him all over with that gooey mud, figurin' the killer, thinkin' Tuck had died in the soap-hole, would make a break."

Gus Tanner stared sullenly. "But what was the need of all that if he already knew who'd done it?"

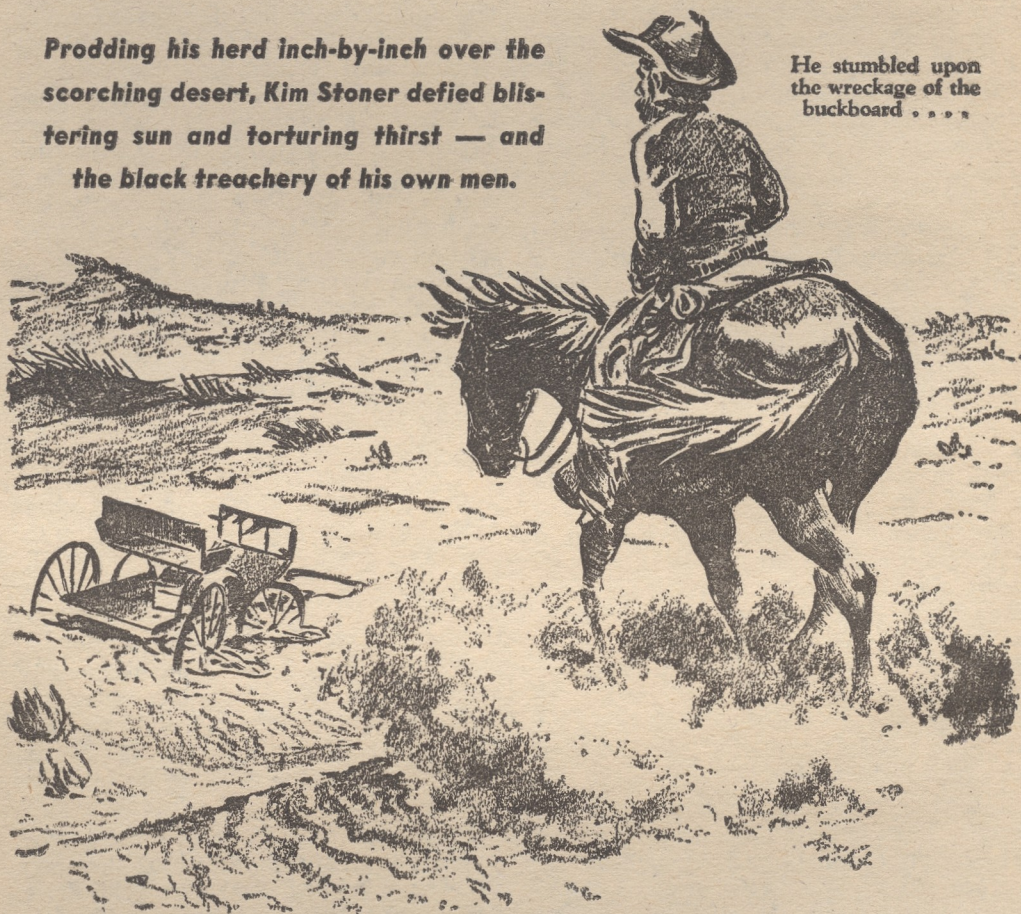
The sheriff shook his head grimly.

"The kid suspected it was you that'd tried to kill him for the deed. But happens, him bein' back under the bluff, that he didn't actually see who it was. You built a noose for yore own neck, Gus, when you got 'ghost' spooked just now!"

TRAIL-BLAZER IN HELL

Prodding his herd inch-by-inch over the scorching desert, Kim Stoner defied blistering sun and torturing thirst — and the black treachery of his own men.

He stumbled upon the wreckage of the buckboard . . .



By BASCOM STURGILL



ALREADY Kim Stoner and his famished herd were three days out on the trackless wastes of Skull Basin, too far out to think of turning back. Three days of dead-still heat and motionless intensity, when the least flurry of air was like a hot breath off the devil's own griddle. But now the breathless calm was lifting, and wailing storm winds lashed out of the north, rolling dust before them like eddies of molten earth.

Even now the sky was blotted out, and

the horizon was little farther away than a man could stretch his hand before him. Hattler's Peak, by which Kim had set his course, was no longer visible across the desert; and he saw with dismay that the herd was beginning to drift.

Turning, he rode back along the slowly plodding line of cattle toward the point where he had last seen the dust-shrouded figure of old Jose Salado, his faithful Mexican vaquero.

Something was wrong back there, Kim

knew. As yet it was nothing definite, only an undercurrent in the manner of his men, some secret knowledge that made them avert their eyes in his presence. He had observed it particularly in the two McGill brothers. And even old Salado had become tight-lipped and silent these past two days.

Suddenly, Kim remembered a statement he had made to Curt Reisner and Steve Benton when they had tried to dissuade him from this Skull Basin drive. "Sometimes a man must ride his luck and pray," he had said stubbornly. "And I reckon this is it for me."

This was it for him, beyond doubt. The TK&W railroad had fixed its rate at a figure that was prohibitive to small ranchers; and the only other route out of southern Arizona to the California market was across these barren and almost waterless wastes.

Damn the TK&W! He had to make California with his drive, had to make it in spite of anything else they could do to thwart him.

Just then a ghostly figure loomed up in the dust out there ahead of him. And almost in the same instant Kim felt the stinging nick of something hot along the outer surface of his arm, followed by the malignant sound of a shot. Glancing quickly down, he saw the blood and knew that he had been shot. Very slightly, indeed, but blood was blood; and who ever had fired that shot had aimed to kill.

Digging spurs into the sides of his big grulla, Kim raced after the shadowy figure. He hadn't seen him clearly enough to recognize which of his men it was, nor did he get another glimpse of the fellow. The man had disappeared as completely as though the storm had blown him off the face of the earth.

This was it, then, he told himself bitterly; the emergence of the undercurrents that had troubled him. And it could mean only one thing. The TK&W had planted somebody in his crew to break his drive, knowing full well that if he did reach California markets and establish a route across the desert, that they'd have to lower their rates. And the TK&W had no intention of doing that . . .

For two hours more the fury of the storm beat against them. Then it fell away and the maddening calm returned. A burnished

sun glared down malevolently, and Hattler's Peak lay off to the north now, haughty and unattainable in the hazy distance. They had wandered dangerously.

Kim motioned his sullen vaqueros to rest themselves and their weary charges. When they had dropped into the shade cast by their mounts, he tried to pick out the one who had fired the shot.

Of the seven riders, only old Salado had been with him very long. The others were last-minute recruits from the saloons back in Saldee, and were of unknown quality, especially the McGill brothers. But he had needed men to make this drive, and good men were not available.

After a moment he turned his big grulla and rode ahead to scout the lay of the land, as was his habit, still pondering the matter. The dunes ran ahead of him toward the mountains, swept clean as by a huge broom, and in orderly waves.

IT WAS beyond one of these rolling hillocks that he stumbled upon the wreckage of the buckboard. Wind and sand from the passing storm had whipped its canvas fly to shreds, and it was buried almost to the hubs in drifts. Nearby was a little mound that told where the team had perished.

With sinking heart, Kim dismounted and climbed aboard. An empty water cask lay on the bottom of the bed, and a woman's light jacket. Under the seat was a box. When Kim saw the gold bullion in it, his eyes bugged out.

He knew this gold. It had been stolen from the vault of the Bitter End Mine only a day or so before he had started this drive, and no trace had been found of either the bullion or the men who had taken it.

For a moment he sat motionless, staring down at the yellow bars. Beneath a thick brush of whiskers his lean face was set and drawn. This disaster didn't portend well for his own success. If these people, traveling light and fast, had failed, what chance had he and his slow-moving herd?

It was then that his roving eyes fell on the little note that had been pegged to the sheltered side of the bed. He pulled it quickly from its mooring and started reading.

"We're headed for the low gap in the mountains," it said, "in the hope that we can find water."

It was signed simply: "Mary Lee Routh."

Strange, Kim told himself, that a woman should be riding this hooligan trail. But some women were no smarter than some men, he decided, after thoughtfully re-reading the little note.

He sat there for a long time, wondering. The note had begged for help, as though the writer had been expecting someone to follow her trail into this maw of hell. There was a chance that this Mary Lee Routh was still alive; a slim one, to be sure, but a chance that couldn't be ignored.

A strange and indefinable mood was coming over Kim, as though this was, perhaps, an important moment in his life. He had no reason for feeling thus, except that—well, perhaps, he believed a little in omens. But when he swung into the saddle again, with the gold in his bags, he knew that the blue nose of Hattler's Peak was no longer his guide.

He would set his course by the low gap in the mountains, and by the instinct of a desperate woman.

Old Salado saw him approaching and knew that something had happened. His brown eyes brightened and he arose, brushing sand from the seat of his levis.

"We're changin' our course," Kim said. "Twist their tails and get 'em movin'."

"But why, Senor?" Salado demanded. "Have you found the water?"

"No," Kim answered shortly.

Then he told Salado and his companions what had happened. He told them about the pathetic little note, and about the low gap in the mountains. But he didn't mention the gold.

"But mebbe, Senor Keem," Salado protested gently, after the manner of his people, "mebbe thees mejuer, she ees dead by now. I think mebbe you make the one beeg mistake, no?"

Eddy McGill came up swiftly, his hawkish face suddenly dark with some obscure anger. "Stoner is the boss of this outfit," he said savagely. "He's the man to say where we go and where we don't."

The old Mexican glanced at McGill, but didn't speak. Kim, also, cast him a swift, enigmatic look—and was suddenly glad that he had not mentioned the gold to anyone.

"I'm sorry, Salado," he said slowly, "but

I reckon we'll still have to change our course."

HE SAT perfectly still and watched his vaqueros mount and haze the stricken cattle into movement again. The dust cloud rose over them and the drive was resumed. But it was not the same as before. The cattle had absorbed just about all their gaunt bodies could stand.

Yet Kim felt better now than he had for several hours. He was telling himself that Mary Lee Routh's instinct would pull her through, and that if he trailed her, he too might be saved. It was only a hunch, to be sure, but a hunch was as good as anything out here where nothing was certain.

Presently, he observed old Salado pushing his way toward him. The oldster waved, and Kim waited, wondering what could be wrong now.

"Eet ees the McGill hombres," said Salado. "They have vamore, Senor Keem." "When?"

"I meess them shortly after we leave the wagon. The cattle were dragging."

This bit of news, startling though it should have been, moved Kim only a little. Already he had suspected that the McGill brothers were here for some reason beyond the small wages they would get from him. And now he was certain that they had gone back to search for the gold in the buckboard.

Kim said wearily: "Go back to your post and keep 'em movin' the best you can. Mebbe they'll overtake us later."

Old Salado retired then, with a puzzled frown on his amber skin; and the herd kept rolling onward. Thirst became a gnawing pain in Kim Stoner. Despair was an agonizing devil that twisted its fist in his entrails, made him curse himself for a pig-headed fool. No man could cross Skull Basin, no matter how worthy his purpose or great his need. Flesh and blood were just not matches for these endless miles of sun-blinding desolation.

Inch-by-inch, yard-by-yard, they kept advancing. After a bit Kim began to see red and white spots dancing on the dunes ahead. He blinked, rubbed his eyes and stared again. He tried to tell himself that he was plagued with sun-spots, that what he saw out there wasn't real.

But it was the woman, after all, lying

on the heat-blistered floor of the desert.

He stopped, then, and got down, and the herd stood behind him. Lifting the girl's head and shoulders in his arms, he looked down into her face. She was young, he saw, and beautiful beneath the mask that suffering had laid upon her face during the past few hours. Her hair stirred with golden tints in the hot sun.

Her full lips moved, but no sound came through. Instinctively, Kim reached for his canteen, remembered it was empty, and cursed. He laid her gently back on the sand and moved his grulla over to stand her shade. That would help some.

Old Salado came up without a word and stood looking at her. Next came the McGill brothers, trying to hide the excitement that was all too obvious on their hawkish features. Eddy McGill swung to the ground and bent over the prostrate girl.

"Think she'll live, Stoner?" he demanded.

Kim ignored his question. "Where you been, McGill?" he asked.

McGill answered lightly: "Frank's hoss throwed a shoe back there. I stopped to help him peg on another."

Kim said; "You're lyin', McGill," and waited.

Eddy McGill came to his feet then, hands snaking back toward the twin guns that dangled at his thigh. Then, abruptly, he stopped his hands, smiled, and turned away.

Kim didn't like that smile, but there was little he could do about it. He'd given Eddy McGill a chance to make his play in the open, and McGill had refused.

A moment later old Salado discovered the body of the girl's companion lying a few yards farther on. He was young and had been handsome in a dark way, and beside him lay a bag with a few of the golden ingots in it. He had lost his life trying to drag that stuff with him, Kim saw.

Frank McGill lifted the bullion. Kim said sternly: "Give that to Salado."

Frank McGill hesitated as though he would not obey the command. Then, at a wink from Eddy, he handed the bag over without a word, a sly grin tugging at the corners of his thin lips.

Kim glanced about him. "We'll scoop

out a grave," he said quietly. "Can't leave him to the buzzards."

OFF TO one side of their course, he and old Salado picked out a spot and buried the young man. And when they had finished, Kim took the unconscious girl up before him in the saddle. He rode thereafter with his arms about her, trying not to think of the outcome of this ill-fated drive. He had put his one last hope in this girl, and his hunch had failed.

For another hour they moved forward, and the only sound was the soft clop-clop of hoofs and an occasional bawl from some thirst-crazed brute. Then, suddenly, a hoarse scream coursed down the stillness to Kim's ears.

"Water—water!" The words came flatly across the sands, as from a great distance.

Kim looked in the direction his man was riding. Water it was, a great greenish pool of it, with grass standing tall and straight along its banks. It was so unexpected, Kim gave a shout of joy.

Yet in another moment he observed something that chilled his rising spirits. His big grulla had not lifted its head to whiff the far-off wetness. Neither had the cattle winded it. That could mean only one thing—there was no water.

That tantalizing scene was nothing but a beautiful picture brushed on the empty desert air. A mirage, a plaything of the devil himself. It would vanish in another moment, and the dead air would reclaim its space on the barren tapestry of the sands.

Even now it was dissolving. The shimmering water and the tall grasses wavered under the barrage of distorting heat waves, then passed into the void from which they had come.

It was one of the bitterest moments Kim Stoner had ever known. It sapped his spirit of what little buoyancy it had left, depressed him beyond words. On and on he rode, despairing and silent, until the sun became a great molten ball beyond the silhouette of the mountains, and evening shadows laid cool fingers across the scorched land.

Then it was that he began mumbling to himself, repeating his last words to Curt Reisner and Steve Benton. *Sometimes a*

man must ride his luck and pray, he had said.

But, he told himself grimly, he didn't know how to pray. He'd never learned to say the words, though he'd always known that sooner or later every man had to call on some power greater than himself to pull him across the hill. Maybe if he just thought the words hard enough, it would do the trick. Maybe it would. . . .

The girl turned restlessly in his arms, revived by the soothing shadows. "Water," she begged piteously.

Kim swore under his breath and brushed a quieting hand across her hot forehead, because there was no water in all this hellish desolation, nothing beneath the heavens that he could do for her.

He continued to listen to her delirious whisperings, half ashamed, but too curious to stop her. "No, Art, no— You mustn't keep this gold. Take it back before those men come again. Even if you are my brother, I'll have to turn you over to the law. . . ."

Provocative bits, that now were beginning to fit into a pattern, giving meaning to the undercurrents.

Presently, the girl lapsed into her stupor, and Kim rode quietly, half dozing, with his arms about her slender waist. He didn't remember much that happened after that until the jolting of his big grulla roused him. Then he gripped the saddle horn and opened his eyes.

He would have shut them again and returned to his comfortable drowsiness but for the lowing of the herd. The sound seemed to come from somewhere outside the small sphere of his own existence. But after a bit it dawned on him what that bawling meant.

Water! there could be no mistake this time. The cattle had winded it, and their judgment was beyond question. They were lumbering forward, and the dust rose high above them.

IT WAS all Kim could do to restrain his big grulla. But he knew that it would be dangerous to crowd into the pool ahead of these thirst-crazed brutes. He and the girl would be trampled to death.

After the herd had passed, Kim glanced about for his men. Old Salado was in the lead, his leathery face wreathed in a smile.

Next came the McGills and his other riders.

"Thees ees eet!" Salado yelled. "We are save!"

It was, indeed a great moment; one that called for rejoicing and giving thanks. But the cold hand of dread still lay upon Kim Stoner. He ran probing eyes over the impassive faces of the McGill brothers, knowing that they had unfinished business.

They camped that night by the pool there in the desert. They killed a yearling and broiled choice cuts for the evening meal, washing it down with scalding hot coffee, and never had food tasted so good. But during all this time the girl did not rouse. She lay in restless slumber on the pallet that Kim had laid out for her.

Kim made it a point to catch old Salado alone. "I've got a notion one of us ought to stay awake tonight," he said. "Something's shore to happen before daybreak."

The old man cast his eyes toward the spot where the McGills had lain down, heads pillowed on their saddles. "You theenk they weel try to take the gold, Senor?" he asked.

"Mebbe try to stampede the cattle too," Kim said. "You turn in first. I'll call you later."

Then, because he didn't want to give the appearance of watchfulness, Kim strode over and lay down by the sleeping girl. He didn't remove his boots, and one of his guns lay within easy reach beside him. Lying flat on his back, looking up at the close brightness of the stars, he waited.

After a bit the low brush fire died down. The soft stirring of the herd, the gentle whisper of night winds induced a comfortable drowsiness that Kim found hard to combat. He dozed and woke and dozed again.

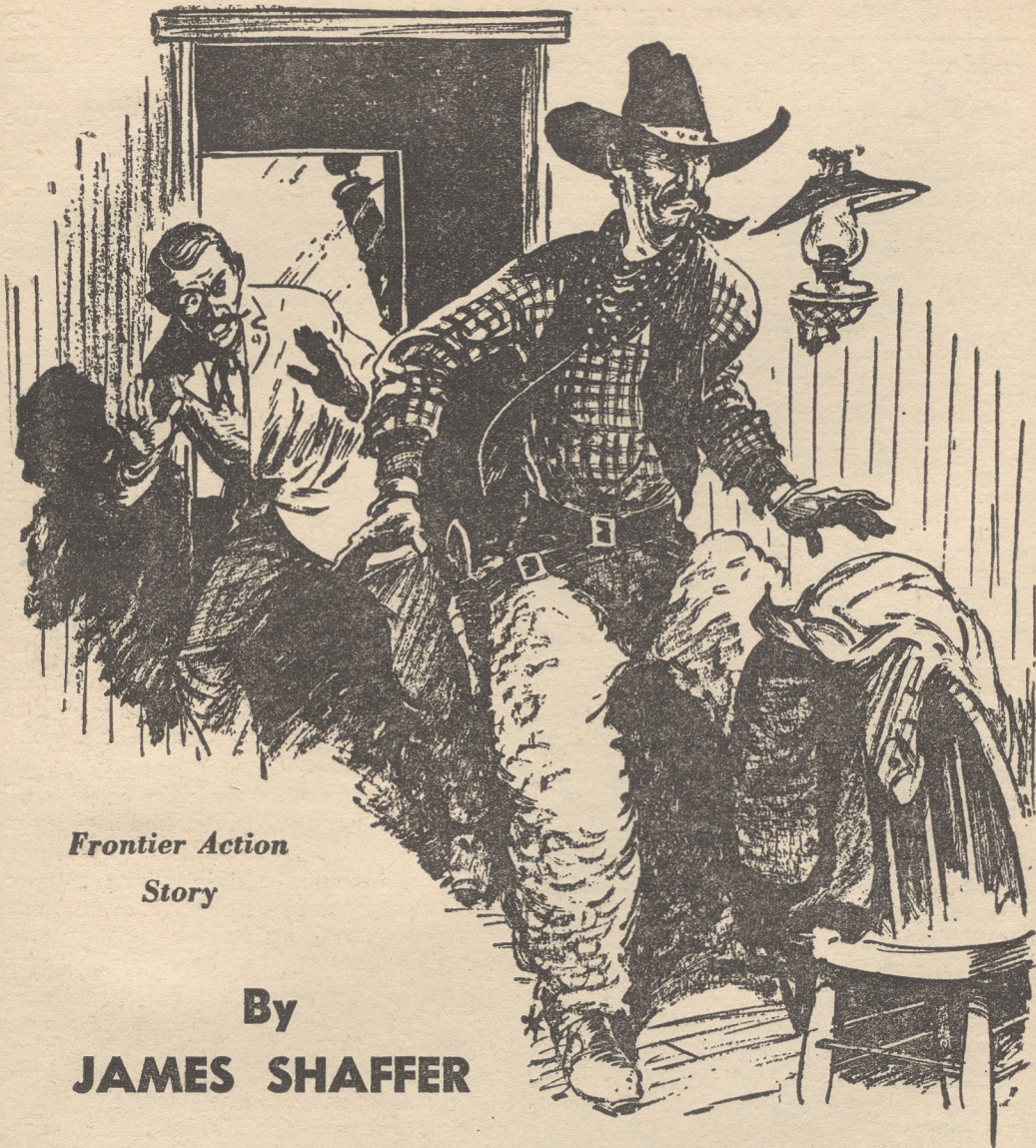
It was in this semi-conscious state that he first became aware of the hushed pulsing of a voice through the stillness. He sat bolt upright, hand darting for his gun.

But it was only the girl. She had awakened and lay on her side facing him. He could see her clearly in the bright moonlight.

"You all right?" he demanded quickly. "Yes," she said. "But who are you—and what happened?"

In a low but steady voice, Kim told her

(Please continue on page 93)



**Frontier Action
Story**

**By
JAMES SHAFFER**



**Big Jim Talley, tarred and feathered,
came back to Dutchman's Creek to
drive a hard bargain with the cattle
king who had banished him.**



CHAPTER *Buzzards and Black Tar*

1 Big Jim Talley rode into Dutchmen's Creek about the middle of the morning. Folks who lived in the Creek had gotten to know Big Jim as a right good dresser—but right now, Big Jim wasn't dressed so good.

The clothes he wore were too small for him, and they were grimy and greasy, and busting out at the seams where his big body filled the garments to overflowing.

Folks had come to know Big Jim as a

HOT TAR FOR HONEST COWMEN!



"My trigger finger's soapy and slick," Big Jim warned, "and might slip powerful easy"

right good-natured gent. And it was true that there was a smile on his face this morning. But it was the kind of smile you didn't smile back at. It was the kind of a smile that reminded you of the bare-fanged grin of a wolf closing in on its kill.

It creased his blistered face and showed his white teeth—teeth that seemed even whiter against the darkness of his matted beard. There were chunks of black still in that beard.

Tar, that Big Jim hadn't been able to scrape off.

He pulled up in front of Itchy Jackson's barber shop, and his greasy, dirt-slick pants gave a few more stitches as he swung to the ground. Dutchmen's Creek had watched Big Jim Tally ride in with open-mouthed astonishment. They figured Big Jim was laying out in the hills somewhere, with the buzzards eating his flesh—and spitting out the tar. Sheriff Ben Wilkins would have bet anybody ten dollars to a two-bit drink of Joe Holly's worst rotgut likker, that Big Jim was out in the hills.

But here he was, big as life, and looking twice as nasty. Sheriff Ben swore under his breath as he hurried down the street. He caught Big Jim's arm as the man started into Itchy's barber shop.

"What the hell?" the lawman sputtered, and then repeated it. "What the hell?"

Big Jim grinned down at the lawman. The muscles under the sheriff's grip rippled and twisted. Big Jim hadn't gotten his name as a joke. He stood six foot two and weighed one ninety. He'd spent most of his twenty-eight years in hard work, and it had built the muscles up on his body, till now they lay like hard slabs on his big frame.

"You look peaked, Ben." Big Jim laughed. It grated on Sheriff Ben's nerves and he wished to hell Big Jim wouldn't laugh like that. "You look jest like a man that's seen himself a ghost." Big Jim laughed again.

"What the hell?" the lawman grunted. "What the hell you doing in town?"

"You mean by all rights I oughta be laying out in the hills somewheres with the turkey buzzards and the coyotes a-fighting over my carcass," Big Jim rasped. "Either that, or still running like a yaller dog that's been kicked in the belly."

"Duff Patch'll kill you," Sheriff Ben said.

"I got tired of running, Sheriff. It made my feet sore. Even with my boots on, it made my feet sore. So I decided not to run no more. I decided to come back to Dutchmen's Creek."

"Duff Patch'll—"

"They left me my boots on, Sheriff," Big Jim went on. "Old soft-hearted Duff Patch. Left me my boots. 'Strip 'im down, boys,' says old Duff, 'but leave him his boots. It's tough on a man, running in his bare feet, and I cain't bear to see man nor beast suffer.' " The laugh that ripped out of Big Jim's twisted lips was like a saw hitting a rusty nail. He scrubbed at his bearded cheek with his fist.

"Didya ever try to git tar off, Sheriff?" he asked. "It's meaner'n hell. Now if I'd had me some coal oil, it'd been different. Woulda come off slicker'n bear grease. But I didn't have none, and that tar was meaner'n hell to git off. Didn't want to turn loose. Didn't turn loose. Took chunks of hide off with it."

He shook the sheriff's hand off his arm and stepped into Itchy's barber shop. Itchy Jackson had seen him coming and had been sharpening a razor. He yanked one of the greying hairs out of his head now and tested the blade. Then he grinned a snaggly toothed grin and waved Big Jim into the chair.

Sheriff Ben followed Big Jim inside. The lawman leaned against the door and fidgeted like a man that's got an itch and doesn't know where to scratch.

"Duff Patch is in a killing mood, Jim," the lawman said. "He'll kill you this time, sure. Shoot you down in the street like he would a hydrophoby dog. Duff figured he was being lenient when he just slapped a little tar and feathers on you. He figured by rights he shoulda hung you."

Big Jim was leaning back in the barber chair and Itchy was smearing lather over his matted whiskers. Big Jim spoke through the lather.

"That old hellion! Why, he robbed me blind, then had the gall to accuse me of rustling his Patchwork beef!"

"Ain't nobody going to b'lieve that, Jim," Sheriff Ben said nervously. "Hell, ain't nobody going to believe that Duff Patch, who owns the biggest ranch in these parts, would rustle cattle off a two-bit spread like your'n. It don't make sense!"

"'Course it don't make sense!" Big Jim half reared up in the chair. Itchy grunted with impatience and tried to push him back. This was gonna be a real job of barbering, Itchy thought. He wondered if that tar would dull his blade.

"It don't make sense that Duff Patch would rob a man," Big Jim grunted. "But he shore as hell did—and then accused me of stealing him blind! That's why I come back, Sheriff. To find out why."

"Duff'll kill you this time," the lawman said. "He told you to dust your tail outta this country, and he meant it."

"He ain't killing nobody," Big Jim spoke through the lather. "'Cause I know something that he don't!"

THE scrape of the razor stopped abruptly. Itchy stared at Big Jim's up-turned face, and then at the sheriff. The sheriff stopped his fidgeting, and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. When he spoke, there was a weary tone in his voice.

"That sounds like you know something about old Duff's grandson. Yeah, that must be it. The kid's been missing since the night after Duff and his crew give you that little party. Duff's half crazy with grief—you know his whole life was tied up in that kid. Big Jim, if you know anything about that kid—"

Big Jim snorted. "Who said anything about Tommy? I come back to Dutchmen's Creek cause I got tired of running. Old Duff made me run; chased me out in the hills stark naked, except for my boots and that tar and feathers on me." He raised up again. "But I got me some clothes, and I come back. Never mind how I got the clothes, and this gun, but I got 'em. And now I'm back."

The sheriff was silent and thoughtful. He'd looked those clothes over that Big Jim wore, and he looked that gun over. They didn't belong to Big Jim, the clothes nor the gun—but the sheriff wasn't asking any questions right yet. He'd seen those clothes before, and he'd seen that gun before, but right now, he couldn't quite recollect who'd been wearing 'em the last time he'd seen 'em.

"I come back to take my ranch back," Big Jim went on. "And I come back to stomp the guts outta every last one of Duff Patch's Patchwork crew. Starting with that

big pot-gutted foreman, Ab Rickey, right on down—"

His voice broke off, and he raised up in the chair, knowing that something was wrong. The sheriff's breath had gusted out in a sigh, and the razor on Big Jim's cheek had jerked a little. Itchy Jackson's hand was usually steady as a rock. Something had made him jerk nervously.

Big Jim raised all the way up and pushed Itchy away. He stared out the big plate glass window onto the dusty main street. His breath hissed through his teeth. "A-a-aah."

Itchy had shaved one of Big Jim's cheeks. It was pink and clean and smooth. Big Jim rubbed the lather off the other cheek with his shirt sleeve. The matted beard was still on that cheek, and it made him look funny as hell; one cheek all pink and smooth, and the other all scraggly and spotted with tar. He came out of the chair with the suppressed litheness that only a big man can achieve.

"Speak of the devil," he grinned. "There's that big pot-gutted son now!" He jerked the apron from around his neck. "Yep, old Lady Luck is playing right in my hands. Ab Rickey in town all by himself—ready for stomping!"

Sheriff Ben was still leaning against the door, but Big Jim brushed him aside as if he'd been a child. He stepped easily into the street; his scarred fist, still blistered from the hot tar, gripping the butt of his six-shooter.

Ab Rickey had pulled up in front of Joe Holly's saloon. The Patchwork foreman was as heavy as Big Jim, but he was built different. He was built like a bear, and he waddled along on short, powerful legs. There was arrogance in his walk; an arrogance bred of ramrodding the biggest spread in the country.

Ab had cast a casual glance at the horse Big Jim had ridden in. It bore Big Jim's Lazy J on its hip. But Ab had shrugged it off. Big Jim's horses had been turned loose that night. They were running all over the country; anybody's horses simply for the catching. He swaggered on toward Joe Holly's.

"Ab! Ab Rickey!"

The foreman spun around. He spun his powerful body around, dropping into a slight crouch. His eyes widened at the

apparition moving across the street toward him. Big Jim grinned as Ab's tongue ran over his thick lips. Big Jim's ragged boots scuffed the dust up as he came across the street. The gun in his big blistered fist was pointed straight at Ab's belly. Its hammer was eared back. Ab could see it.

"Wanta go for your taw, Ab?" Big Jim blared out. "I'll holster this cutter and give you a chance—a helluva lot more chance than you give me the other night. It'd do me good to see you go for your gun. I wanta hear how it sounds when lead splats into that big belly of yours. I wanta see the grease fly."

Big Jim was ten feet away, now. That grin was still on his face. With half of his face shaved, it made him look like hell; like some demon coughed up from the depths of hell. And the too tight clothes he wore; they made him look funny. But nobody was laughing. Least of all, Ab Rickey.

Big Jim deliberately shoved his gun in its holster. He deliberately took his big blistered fist off the handle and let it dangle at his side. He was grinning, and waiting for Ab.

But Ab Rickey was looking at the gun Big Jim wore; and the clothes that were torturing his big frame with their tightness. And Ab's eyes were narrow with speculation. Big Jim saw the look.

"Recognize the clothes, huh, Ab? Well, take a good luck. Take a good look at everything, 'cause I might take a notion to gouge them bulging eyes of yours out."

BIG JIM'S big fist closed over the gun butt and he dragged the weapon out. He cocked it and swung the muzzle to where Ab Rickey could look straight into its black maw.

"Ain't going for your taw, huh? Well, that's all right. I'll beat the juice outta you with my fists. Lift that weapon of yours and fling it in the gutter."

Ab didn't move, so Big Jim stepped forward. His free hand closed over the gun and he flung it out into the street. He was still grinning when he flung his own gun after it, and started for Ab.

"Wait, you damn fool!" Ab gusted out. "Me'n you can—"

But Big Jim wasn't waiting. He was coming and he was coming with fists flying.

Rickey realized the time for talk was over, and he set himself to meet Big Jim's rush.

He met it, but he didn't stop it. Stopping Big Jim was like a man trying to wrestle a threshing machine and pin its shoulders to the ground. Big Jim crashed through Ab's guard to bore in close where he could do some damage.

Ab stood his ground. There was no yelling and no cheering at this fight. It was silent and deadly, only the laboring grunts of the two men and the shuffle of their feet and the thudding of their fists breaking the silence. Ab swung at the half-shaved face. He sunk his fists into the matted beard, and his calloused knuckles took the hide off the freshly shaven pink cheek.

But he might as well have been punching a log. Big Jim Tally came straight on. He took Ab's blows with a snarling grin, and his big fists lashed out at the Patchwork foreman. The meaty thud of his fists landing were followed by the labored grunts of the foreman.

The force of Big Jim's attack carried Rickey backwards. Big Jim's fists were driving like pistons now, and the foreman was backing up faster than ever. Then he was back as far as he could go; against the side of the building.

"Now for the stomping!" Big Jim roared and charged. Ab Rickey flailed out with his fists, but it only slowed the other man down. Big Jim broke through and his fists beat a thudding tattoo on Rickey's face. The people of Dutchmen's Creek saw the change come over Ab Rickey's face.

It changed from a face to a bloody mass of pulp. It was all swollen and lumpy and out of shape. The foreman's eyes glazed and rolled upward till the whites showed. One knee buckled and jerked, and he caught himself from falling, still swinging feebly. Then the other knee buckled, and he was too far gone to do anything. He wobbled; he pawed the air blindly, and then he slid down slowly and rolled loosely onto the sidewalk.

Big Jim backed away slowly, wiping the sweat and blood out of his eyes with his shirtsleeve. He gauged the distance to the fallen man, and he crouched a little as if ready to jump; to bring those high heeled boots and his one hundred and ninety pounds down on the Patchwork foreman. Dutchman's Creek watched and waited to

see if Big Jim Tally was going to stomp the life out of Ab Rickey.

"That's enough, Jim," Sheriff Ben said quietly. "You licked him fair—and that finished it." The lawman's hand was near his gun.

"It finishes it 'till Ab gits the strength to hold a gun—to shoot me in the back," he grunted.

"That's all—for now," the lawman repeated coldly.

Big Jim grinned. He turned on his heel and walked away from Ab Rickey. He picked up the six-shooter he'd thrown down and shoved it back in the holster. Then he went back into Itchy Jackson's barber shop.

"Take 'er easy with that razor, Itchy," he said as he crawled back in the chair. "My face is tender as hell."

Itchy turned from the window where he'd been watching the sheriff and a couple of men pour cold water on Ab Rickey and get the foreman on his feet.

"You shore signed your death warrant," Itchy said, his Adams apple bobbing quickly. "You shore did."

But Big Jim just grinned. "Not me, 'cause you see—I know something that nobody else knows!"

CHAPTER

2

Trail Treachery

An hour later, Big Jim Tally wallowed in the tub. Itchy Jackson had a place in back of his shop where a man could take a bath. After the shave, he and Big Jim had gone back to the bathhouse and Big Jim had stripped.

Itchy had brought some coal oil and together they'd gotten the last of the tar off of Big Jim's hide. Big Jim had laid out the new clothes he'd bought himself, and Itchy had filled the tub.

The tub was little, but Big Jim had managed to kink himself up so's to get his big frame in it. Itchy had left him plenty of strong yellow soap, and the big man was letting the warm soapy water soak the hurts and aches out of his body.

But there was another hurt that soap and water couldn't soak out of Big Jim Tally. A hurt that went deeper than just his skin. A hurt that he'd have to gouge out with blood.

A man don't get tarred and feathered and

chased into the hills like a yellow cur dog without it leaving a scar. And that's what had happened to Big Jim. . . .

They'd sneaked up on him while he was asleep, and the first thing he'd known was the prod of a sixgun muzzle in his ribs and the command to roll out of his blankets. They'd marched him outside and stripped his clothes off. He'd stood there and watched them burn his ranch buildings down, and drive off his stock.

"I'm giving you a chance to git outta the country alive," old Duff Patch had told him, as he stirred the pot of tar. "Soon's we're through with you, you light a shuck and keep going, Big Jim!"

Big Jim had cursed them all; the whole Patchwork crew, singly and collectively. Ab Rickey hadn't liked that and he'd stepped over and smashed his fist into Big Jim's mouth.

That had brought guffaws from all the rest of them. Slim Tetley, Bo-bo Grimes and Carolina Pete. They'd laughed and tried to egg Ab Rickey into doing it again. And Ab maybe would have, except that Mike Gaylord had stopped him. . . .

Big Jim frowned at the memory of that. Mike Gaylord was a queer one. He was quiet, never had much to say. It was plain that Ab Rickey didn't like him, yet for some reason, Rickey didn't cross him. And Gaylord didn't have much to do with the rest of the Patchwork crew.

The other four were thick as thieves, and they'd all gone to work for old man Duff Patch about the same time. Mike Gaylord had been working there longer than any of them, and he continued to work, even in the face of Ab Rickey's enmity.

Big Jim shrugged the thoughts away and laved the water over his big bruised body. He was thinking of the last time he'd seen old Duff Patch; a scrawny old hellion standing in the flickering light of the fire.

"You're a dirty rustler, Duff!" Big Jim had roared at him. "You been rustling my stock, and you know dang well I almost caught you at it. That's why you're trying to chase me outta here. You're afraid of me—afraid I could prove you're a common thief. You gotta run me outta the country to save your own scaly hide!"

Duff had spat deliberately. "Hurry up with that tar, Bo-Bo—"

Big Jim's thoughts jerked abruptly back

to the present. The bell tinkled in the barber shop up front, and a man's heavy tread sounded. Big Jim could hear Itchy greet the man, and then the man answered. The sound of his voice was enough to stir Big Jim to action.

He flicked soap suds off his right hand and reached over to the chair. His wet fingers closed around the butt of the six-shooter laying on the chair. The voices out front grew louder.

"He's takin' a bath, I tell you," Itchy was saying testily. "You better stay outta there—"

"I ain't got time to wait till he's through," the man muttered angrily, and started back. The door knob rattled, but the door didn't open.

"Unlock the door, Jim!"

"It's locked from that side," Big Jim said casually, then raised his voice. "Let him in, Itchy. But don't try nothing, Slim Tetley, you hear me!"

The lock rattled and the door swung open. Slim Tetley stood there, staring into the gun Big Jim pointed at him. But Slim Tetley was careful to keep his hands away from his holstered weapon as he stepped inside.

"No shooting in here, un'nerstand?" Itchy Jackson said nervously. "You two aim to do any shooting—take it outside. That bathtub ain't no good with bullets holes in it, and the freight on a new one is—"

"Git outta here, you damn old magpie!" Slim Tetley snarled at him, and the barber jumped quickly and slid out. Slim jerked the door shut.

"You c'n put up that gun," Slim said with a shrug. "I'm here to talk business."

"It ain't wearing me out to hold it," Big Jim replied coldly. "State your business."

Slim Tetley looked at the pile of dirty clothes that Big Jim had worn into town. Clothes that were too small for him. He looked at the holster and cartridge belt, and the gun in Big Jim's fist.

Big Jim grinned flatly. "You recognize 'em all right," he said coldly. "You know where I got 'em."

Slim Tetley nodded. "I'da knowed 'em, even if we hadn't found Carolina Pete's body. But we found his body with his clothes and gun missing, so we guessed what happened."

"Who," said Big Jim, "is we?"

"Me'n Ab. Him and me was riding the north range the next day and seen the turkey buzzards circling. We figured it was you, so we rode up to make sure."

"Only it was Carolina Pete 'stead of me." Big Jim said, nodding. "I heard him and Tommy Patch riding up the trail. Tommy was crying and Carolina Pete was threatening to beat him to death. Wanted Tommy to tell him where something was buried. That tar kept Carolina Pete from seeing me in the dark. He didn't know I was anywhere around till I jumped him."

SLIM TETLEY shifted his feet nervously as Big Jim Tally finished speaking. There was silence in the room.

"His clothes didn't fit me worth a damn," Big Jim grunted.

Slim Tetley lifted the new clothes off the chair and sat down. "Nobody knows that Carolina Pete is dead 'cept us."

"Who's us?" Big Jim grunted.

"Ab Rickey, Bo-Bo Grimes and me," Slim said.

"And me," Big Jim grinned. "I know Carolina Pete's dead." He paused. "You mean that Mike Gaylord don't know it?"

"Nope, neither him, nor old Duff Patch, nor Lucy Patch."

Big Jim shifted at the mention of Lucy Patch. Lucy had married Duff's only son, Al. Tommy was her son, a kid eleven years old. Lucy and Duff had never gotten along very well since Al had been stomped to death by a bronc.

And the reason wasn't hard to find. Duff wanted to raise Tommy himself; he didn't want Lucy to have any say in the matter. Old Duff was half crazy for an heir to his big Patchwork spread. He'd set a world of store by his own son, Al. And when Al had let that ornery bronc kill him, Duff turned all his affection to his grandson.

It didn't make for harmony between Lucy and her father-in-law, and Lucy spent a lot of her time traveling.

"Didn't know Lucy was home," Big Jim said.

"She got back a few days ago," Slim Tetley said warily.

"When she heard Tommy was missing," Big Jim grunted. He mused, "I'll bet there's been hell to pay on the Patchwork since then."

"To hell with this palaver," Slim cut in roughly. "Let's git down to cases. You throwing in with us or not? I ain't got all day. Ab said not to argue with you. He's pretty sore about what you done to him. He said to get a flat yes or no outta you—and have done with it!"

"First I gotta know where I stand," Big Jim said mildly.

"The same as the rest of us!" Slim snapped. "Once we can prove to Duff and Lucy that we got Tommy—we c'n make 'em do anything we want. Hey! Don't cock that damn thing!"

"Git outta here, Slim," Big Jim said quietly. "Git the hell outta here and thank your lucky stars that I'm naked—or I'd beat the be-jeebers outta you, just like I done Ab Rickey. I'd stomp your guts out—"

Slim's narrow face twisted in a grimace; his thin lips peeled back in a smothered curse. Then he shrugged with elaborate casualness and moved toward the door.

"You're a damn fool, Tally!" he slurred out, his hand on the door knob. "Here's a chanct to git even with Duff for what he done to you, and git your ranch back to—"

"My trigger finger's soapy and slick," Big Jim warned, "and might slip powerful easy."

Slim Tetley grunted and swung the door open. Itchy looked in nervously. Slim stepped outside and slammed the door shut. At that instant, Big Jim Tally came out of the tub. He scraped himself on the side getting out, because he wasn't wasting any time, but he got out. His soapy feet hit the floor with a squish and he hunkered down in the corner of the room. He still gripped his six-shooter.

"Here! cut that out, Slim!" Itchy Jackson's voice was shrill with a mixture of fear and determination.

Slim Tetley cursed explosively, and Big Jim Tally reached over and turned the door knob. His head, and the muzzle of his gun, he shoved around the door jamb.

Itchy Jackson had a shotgun trained on Slim Tetley. The Patchwork rider was standing near the door, his Colt in his fist, getting ready to fire through the panel. He whirled as he heard the door open.

"The last two times I met up with you Slim, I ain't had no clothes on," Big Jim said solemnly. "The next time I aim to be

fully dressed—and you better watch out. Now git!"

Slim holstered his gun and turned his back deliberately. He dragged his spurs across the floor with an insolent swagger and stepped into the street. Big Jim grinned at Itchy.

"Git some more hot water, Itchy—I ain't through soaking."

Itchy Jackson clung to his shotgun. He waved it angrily. "The hell you ain't through!" he yelled. "Git outta my tub. Git out! Before somebody else comes along and tries to gut shoot you while you're in my tub. That tub cost money, and the freight on one of them things is hell to pay."

CHAPTER

3

Paid in Lead

In Joe Holly's saloon, Big Jim Tally had been drinking some of Joe's best-grade bourbon. Joe had dragged it out as sort of a celebration at seeing Big Jim again. Just then Sheriff Ben stepped quickly into the saloon, and there were deep lines of worry on his face. Joe Holly suddenly got nervous.

"That's four drinks you owe for, Jim," Joe Holly said quickly. "Maybe you better settle up, now, huh?"

Big Jim Tally laughed. He jerked his head toward the sheriff. "Ben has seen Duff Patch and his crew riding in—and you figure, Joe, that I won't live long enough to settle up." He sighed and downed the drink before him. "As a matter of fact, it took all my money to buy these new clothes and to pay Itchy for the use of his tub—" His big hand shot out and closed over the bourbon bottle just before Joe's reached it. Big Jim grinned innocently at the saloon owner.

"Hell, my credit's good, Joe. I'll settle up later. Here, have one with me—on me. You too, Sheriff."

"You still got time to git outta town," Sheriff Ben snapped. "Patch and his bunch are still a couple miles out. I seen their dust."

Big Jim's voice was hard and brittle. "I'm looking forward with great pleasure to seeing my friend and neighbor, Duff Patch, again."

Sheriff Ben swore and gulped his drink

down. Big Jim reached for the bottle again, but Joe got hold of it first.

"Don't be so damn chinchy!" the sheriff growled. "I'll settle with you!"

Joe Holly released the bottle and Big Jim poured another round. He was sipping that one slowly, making it last, when he heard the first faint beat of horses at the far end of town. The sound brought the lawman around nervously. He stared at Big Jim, opened his mouth to speak, then shook his head. He sighed.

The hoofbeats grew to muted thunder outside, then horses snorted as their riders pulled them to sliding halts.

Boots clumped on the board sidewalk then; their hollow booming resounding through the quiet saloon like the beat of a tom tom. The batwing doors shrilled protestingly under the violence with which they were opened. Duff Patch called out:

"Tally! Damn your tar-black hide! I told you I'd gut shoot you, ever you come back. Reach for your gun, you skunk!"

Duff Patch wasn't big in stature. Fact is, he was almost on the scrawny side; even puny looking alongside Big Jim Tally. But Duff Patch was big enough to have come into this country when a man's scalp rode on the quickness of his trigger.

He'd laid out the boundaries of his Patchwork spread, and then set about chasing the Indians off it. The very safety his sixguns had brought to this valley had drawn other men like a magnet—and old Duff had fought them off; keeping his Patchwork spread intact.

There were no notches on his gun butts, simply because old Patch thought it was damn foolishness to scar up a good gun with a lot of jackass whittling. But those guns had taken their toll.

Big Jim Tally was holding his whiskey glass in his right hand, and he held the glass high so all could see.

"Careful with that weapon, Duff," Big Jim said quietly. "You're liable to do something you'll be sorry for."

"Shut your lip and make your play!" Duff's graying mustache seemed to bristle as he stood spraddle legged in the doorway, his horny old paw hooked over the worn butt of his gun. "I'm telling you, Tally, I'm giving you your chance to draw. It's up to you whether you take it or not—'cause I'm shooting anyhow!"

Big Jim still stared over the rim of his glass. He stared at the tough crew that flanked old Duff Patch.

Slim Tetley was just inside the doorway, his narrow face cold and set. Bo-Bo Grimes' pale green eyes were watching him with the unblinking stare of a rattler, and beside Bo-Bo was Ab Rickey.

Ab's face made a man sick to look at it. It looked like somebody had deliberately peeled the top layer of hide off, and hadn't been too gentle doing it. You could hardly see the small slits in the black puffiness around his eyes. But Ab was there; and his battered fist rode hard on his gun.

Only Mike Gaylord didn't seem to be particularly interested in things. Mike had sidled through the door very quickly, and had taken up his position away to one side.

You couldn't, Big Jim Tally thought, tell a damn thing from Mike Gaylord's eyes. You couldn't tell which side he was on, or even if he gave a damn what happened.

"Duff, you better not shoot me," Big Jim said quietly, "'cause I know something that you don't!"

Big Jim sensed, rather than saw, the change that took place in Old Duff Patch. He knew without looking, somehow, that the old man's hand which had been so rigid over his gun butt, was now shaking as if with palsy. He knew that Duff hadn't missed the meaning of his statement.

Old Duff Patch knew that Big Jim was telling him he knew something about little Tommy. And that would hold Duff Patch.

Big Jim wasn't paying too much attention to Duff, because he was watching Ab Rickey, Slim Tetley and Bo-Bo Grimes. Those three had stiffened at Big Jim's words. Those three were ready to shoot.

"What—d'yuh mean?" Duff's voice was hoarse. "What you talking about, Jim Tally?" And then, without waiting for an answer, he leaped forward. "You got Tommy!" he blared. "You got him—you dirty kidnaper!"

DUFF PATCH rushed Big Jim then, like a bantam rooster rushing a proud turkey gobbler. Duff's gun was forgotten. He wasn't the old rawhide tough Duff Patch, whose word was law, whose bellow set the rafters shaking.

He was just a scrawny, helpless old man. He tried to claw Big Jim's face with his fingernails; he beat his fists against Big Jim's chest. He screamed, shrill and high-pitched.

"Sheriff," Big Jim grunted, "pull this old leach offa me before I knock some of his teeth out!" He put his big hand against Duff's chest and pushed him away, held him at arm's length.

Duff seemed to come to his senses. He fell back, his horny old hand dipping for his six-shooter, bringing it clear and jamming the muzzle into Big Jim's guts.

"Where you got him?" he bellowed. "Where you got my boy? Talk, damn you! I'll torture it outta you—I'll stake you down acrosst a anthill—I'll wrap green rawhide 'round your head and leave you lay out in the sun—I'll—"

"Hush up, Duff," Big Jim said softly. "Hush your bellering—you ain't scaring nobody."

Big Jim was watching Ab Rickey, Slim Tetley and Bo-Bo Grimes, and he knew the sign wasn't right. He still didn't know what the play was; what secret lay behind all this, but he did know one thing.

If he opened his mouth now about Tommy, he and old Duff Patch would die in a blazing hail of lead. Those three were primed for action; whatever their game was, it was vital that old Duff not know where Tommy Patch was.

So Big Jim leaned against the bar and poured himself another drink of Joe Holly's best bourbon liquor. He poured a drink for Duff Patch and shoved it across the mahogany to the old man.

"Drink up, Duff," Big Jim said heartily. Old Duff drank.

Ab Rickey decided it was time to buy into the play. Ab Rickey was nervous, because Big Jim knew too much, and he still didn't know which way Big Jim planned to play it. He moved forward now.

"Shall we take him, boss?" Ab asked. "Say the word, and we'll—"

"Say the word and you'll never see Tommy again!" Big Jim roared. "You savvy that, don't you, Duff!"

Duff savvied that. He looked around at his foreman and Big Jim saw the look of malignant hate flash in Duff Patch's eyes. He saw Duff's eyes flicker over Slim Tetley and Bo-Bo Grimes, and the same look

was there. It was only when he glanced at Mike Gaylord, that the look died away. And Big Jim filed that away in the back of his mind.

"Let Tally alone," Duff Patch grunted. He half turned and shoved his lean old back against the bar. Thus, he was facing his three tough hands. Ab Rickey grunted, but Ab was in a bad spot now. Big Jim and Duff facing him—and Mike Gaylord standing clear off to one side . . . silent, an unknown factor.

"I hear Lucy's home," Big Jim said heartily into the silence.

"Yeah, she's home," Duff Patch grunted. "Been home a few days."

"Fine." Big Jim said loudly. "Fine." Then he grinned that flat, cold grin. "I'd shore like to pick up my courting where I left it off a coupla weeks ago," Big Jim said. He leaned over close to Duff. "Or have you still got them objections you had then?"

Duff Patch was a beaten man. He lifted the glass of whiskey to his lips. Half the drink dribbled unheeded down the scraggly gray whiskers on his chin. He gulped the rest down and poured himself another—quick.

"Reckon Lucy'd be right glad to see you, Jim," Duff Patch said tonelessly.

"Fine," said Big Jim with a laugh. "I'll be out tonight—while my clothes are still clean and new and while that bay rum Itchy smeared on my face still smells."

Duff Patch set his glass down. He motioned to his crew to follow, and he led the way out of Joe Holly's saloon. There was no word spoken as they tramped out; as saddle leather creaked, and hoof-beats pounded out of town.

BIG JIM TALLY rode warily. He could see the lights of the Patchwork ranch house ahead, but he was still a couple of miles from it. And anything could happen in a couple of miles.

He rode with his six-shooter in his hand and the hammer eared back. He rode hunched over in the saddle to offer a smaller target, and he stopped ever so often to listen.

It was during one of those stops that he saw his horse's ears prick forward, and could hear the animal's wind gust out through its flaring nostrils. Jim Tally

didn't hesitate. He left the saddle quickly and hunkered down on the ground.

Dry grass rustled ahead and Big Jim's teeth bared in a soundless snarl. He glanced quickly to the right and left, and picked the spot he intended to move to. Then he spoke.

"You're skylighted," he lied into the darkness. "One more step and I'll blow hell outta you—claw for the sky!"

"Jim!"

Jim let the gun drop at the sound of her voice. He came out of his crouch and moved forward, his arms going around her automatically. "Lucy, honey—"

"Oh, Jim—it's been so horrible—Tommy gone, and those three men watching our every move. And one of them out in the hills with my Tommy—"

"What's this all about?" Big Jim snapped. "What're you doing out here? Where's Duff?"

"Gran'paw Duff's ready to tell the whole thing, now," the girl said. "Let him tell you the whole story. He's back at the house. He's at an upstairs bedroom window with a rifle. Mike Gaylord's hid out somewhere else. They're watching the bunkhouse. Ab Rickey and those other two are in the bunkhouse. Gran'paw Duff and Gaylord are making sure they stay in it—till after—"

But Big Jim had heard enough. They found Lucy's horse and he helped her into the saddle. Then he caught up his own mount, and they rode for the house at a fast clip.

Old Duff yelled at them as they neared the ranch: "Ride around the back of the bunkhouse, Lucy! Jim! They ain't no windows in the back of the bunkhouse where them skunks c'n git a sneaking shot at you!"

A gun blasted. A tongue of flame leaped from the door of the bunkhouse, and a bullet shattered glass in one of the upstairs windows of the ranch house. Duff Patch jeered at the marksmanship and slammed an answering shot at the bunkhouse.

"I'm making a clean breast of everything tonight, you hellions!" Duff roared. "You better sneak outta here while you got a chance. Come morning and the law'll be on your tail like a duck on a junebug!"

He slammed more shots at the bunk-

house, and during that shooting, Big Jim Tally and Lucy Patch gained the ranch house. They went in the back door, and Lucy led the way to the upstairs bedroom where old Duff held forth.

"Here he is," Lucy said. "Now start talking, Gran'paw."

"There ain't much to tell," Duff Patch said brokenly.

"All my life I wanted a son," old Duff Patch said. "About all I lived for was to see my son grow up and run the ranch I'd built up for him. And then—and then—when Al got stomped to death—"

"That ain't the beginning, Gran'paw," Lucy prodded gently.

"No, I guess it ain't," Duff said. "You got Tommy, ain't you, Big Jim? Tommy's safe, ain't he?"

"He's safe," Big Jim said quietly.

"Once, before Al grew up," Duff said, "I thought I was gonna lose the Patchwork—I was nearly broke. I couldn't bear to think of losing it—to think of my kid growing up with nothing . . . nothing. I lost my head—and I helped rob a bank. There was five of us done the job. Me'n four others.

"I spent my share of the loot building the Patchwork back up—getting back on my feet. The other four—they flang theirs away on liquor and wimmin. And then one of them found out where I was—and that the Patchwork was plenty rich. They moved in."

Big Jim nodded. He remembered when Ab Rickey and his crew had been hired by old Duff Patch.

"Then Al got killed, and I guess I went crazy over Tommy," Duff said. "I wanted him to have the spread. He taken the place of my own son; he was the nearest I had to a son, then." His shoulders slumped. "But they kept crowding me for more money—money I didn't have unless I put a mortgage on the Patchwork. And I wouldn't do that—I wanted it free for Tommy."

"So you rustled stock to pay them black-mail," Big Jim said. There was a lump in Big Jim's throat, and swallowing wouldn't make it go away. "And when I almost caught you at it—you knew you had to scare me out of the country."

"I tried to have a showdown with 'em," Duff said, "but they scared me out of it. They swore they'd kill me and take the

HOT TAR FOR HONEST COWMEN!

ranch away from Tommy. I wasn't skeered of dying. But little Tommy growing up without nothing— Then I had me a idea."

"Big Jim Tally!" Ab Rickey yelled. "You hear me, Tally? Throw in with us and we'll make you a rich man. You side in with that old hellion and you'll never live to see daylight—"

AB'S voice broke off suddenly. There was a commotion in the bunkhouse. Big Jim tried to pierce the darkness, but there was no moon, now. The commotion died down, and Ab Rickey's laughter floated over to them. Big Jim Tally frowned, but Duff Patch kept talking.

"I wrote out a confession of the robbery and buried it in a tin box on the Patch-work," Duff said. "I told Tommy where it was. I told him when I died he was to tell the sheriff where to dig—that would put them three in jail and save the spread for him. Then I got set for a showdown."

"But they got suspicious and grabbed Tommy first," Big Jim put in. "I met Carolina Pete out on the trail that night. He was threatening Tommy, trying to make him tell where that box was buried—"

"You turn me loose, Ab Rickey!" A thin, boyish voice drifted up to them from the bunkhouse.

"Tommy!" the scream was torn from Lucy's lips.

Big Jim Tally was stunned at the sound of Tommy's voice. He'd left the boy safe and told him not to stir—then suddenly Big Jim realized that Duff was gone.

Duff was racing down the stairs of the house. He'd thrown his rifle away, and had his six-shooter out, and he was yelling as he ran.

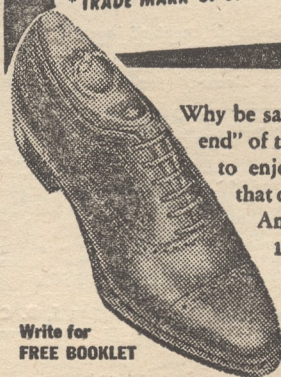
"I'm a-coming, Tommy boy!" Duff Patch roared. "Hold on, Tommy boy—Gran'paw's coming . . . Rickey—damn your black soul—"

Big Jim jerked out of it. He flung himself out of the room and followed Duff. But he couldn't catch the old man. As Big Jim hit the top landing of the stairs, Duff went out the front door. As Big Jim hit the bottom landing, he heard the first shot from the bunkhouse.

He heard the lead slam into old Duff; heard the gasp of pain it drew. But it didn't slow Duff down.



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Hold 'em, Tommy boy! Gran'paw's coming—"

There was something unearthly about the way Duff Patch lived through the hail of lead they flung at him from the bunkhouse. He took it all, and kept going. Big Jim Tally was right behind him, and lead was finding its mark in his big body.

Old Duff was thirty feet from the bunkhouse, then twenty, then ten. Ab Rickey yelled in terror. "Kill him, you fools." he screamed. "Kill him—"

But Duff was taking their lead and still coming. The bunkhouse was alight with flashing gunfire. Big Jim pounded after old Duff Patch. He saw the oldster hurtle through the door of the bunkhouse.

Ab Rickey turned Tommy loose. He flung the boy aside and jerked his gun up. But old Duff was right on top of him. Duff shoved his gun square in Ab's face and pulled the trigger. The two of them went backwards. There were sounds coming out of Ab Rickey's bullet-shattered face; inhuman sounds.

They were lost in the roar of Duff Patch's gun, as the oldster forced the muzzle against Ab's face and kept pulling the trigger.

Big Jim was down on one knee. His gun was flaming red at two men that were racing out of the bunkhouse, racing for their lives. But it was an unequal race. A man can't outrun death. . . .

They buried Duff at the same spot where they dug up the tin box. The other three they took away off the Patchwork spread and buried.

"Duff wouldn't rest easy with them stinking up his ranch," Big Jim Tally said. He put an arm around Tommy's shoulders. "You gotta run the Patchwork like old Duff would want it run, Tommy. He left you a good foreman—Mike Gaylord. And that money in the tin box—it goes back to the bank Duff helped rob.

"That don't mean that you're leaving, does it?" Tommy asked half fearfully.

Lucy laughed, and Big Jim slipped an arm around her. "We'll all live on the Patchwork and run both spreads from here. But the Patchwork is yours when you grow up. Your gran'paw bought it for you—with his life."

THE END

TRAIL-BLAZER IN HELL

(Continued from page 79)

the things she wanted to know. And somehow as he talked, he gathered that this was just about what she had expected from the first, that it was the inevitable end to her wild brother's life.

"You have been good to me," she said, quite a long while after the sound of his voice had died away. "Too good, perhaps. It might have been better if you had left me in the desert to die with my brother."

She stopped and Kim waited.

She said: "I guess you found the gold?"

He nodded and she continued: "My brother helped steal that gold. He was to take it to California and meet his friends. But I learned about it when he brought it home—and I forced him to bring me along. I thought I could persuade him to return it"

Stopping again, she looked steadily into his eyes. "You'll help me get it back to the mine, won't you?"

"We'll get it back somehow, Ma'am," he answered.

THEN, from out of the shadows beyond the fire, stalked the figures of two men—the McGills. Kim saw each had drawn his gun. Kim's hand tightened slowly on his own, and he rolled quietly over on his side.

Eddy McGill did not miss the move. "Steady there, Stoner!" he barked. "I missed you once today. But that ain't likely to happen twice."

Old Salado stirred restlessly, and Kim saw Frank McGill snake a questioning glance at him.

Kim opened his mouth to call out a warning, but realized that to do so might only bring the oldest to his death. So Kim lay quietly until the sickening thud of Frank McGill's blow reached him.

"Now I'll take your guns, Stoner," Eddy McGill growled, starting toward Kim.

Through all this the girl had remained motionless, eyes set in horror upon the two dark figures. Suddenly, she said; "That's them—the men who were to meet Art in California."

Nothing could surprise Kim now.

"Kind of checkin' on the boy, McGill?" he asked softly, parrying for time.

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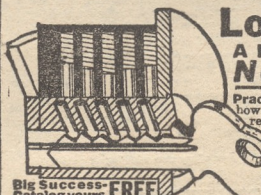
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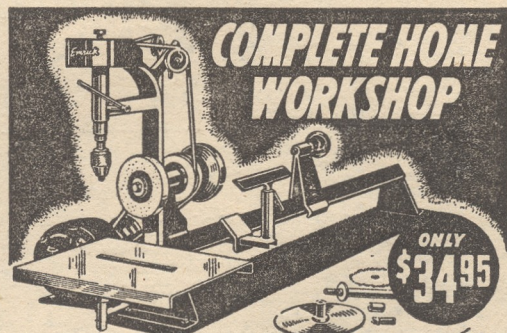
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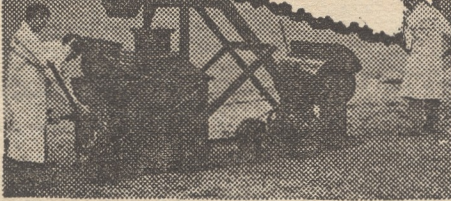
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A malicious grin tugged at the corners of Eddy McGill's lips. "Sort of," he admitted. "But not entirely. We're also doin' a little job for the railroad company on our way to California. All we gotta do is to keep your herd from gettin' across Skull Basin and we will!"

It was hard to tell which shot came first, Kim Stoner's or Eddy McGill's. The still blanket of the night was ripped asunder by the combined sound, and little puffs of dust rose up. Kim was knocked back to the ground; Eddy McGill staggered a pace, then slumped to the desert sand in a quiet heap.

Then Frank McGill joined the fight. His guns blossomed orange death, and again Kim felt the savage swat of hot lead. He fired once at Frank, and saw that his shot had found its mark. The last of the McGills yelped with pain and dropped his guns to clasp a shattered hand.

Kim's head dropped back to the sand. Then Mary Lee was beside him, slipping her soft arms under his shoulders; and his riders were crowding up to take charge of McGill.

Then things began to gradually fade away from Kim. Once again he was back on the desert trail, living again its bitterest moments. Scorching storm winds tore at his face . . . then the endless hours of dead-calm. The deserted wagon and the golden-haired girl on the dunes . . . and the maddening tapestry of mirage . . .

Then he heard a voice in his ear, as soft and soothing as the patter of rain on a board roof.

"We'll reach the mountains all right," the girl was saying confidently. "Then one of you men can go for the doctor for Kim. And you can take Frank McGill with you. . . ."

It was old Salado who answered with droll humor. "Eet weel give me great pleasure, Seniorita," he said, "to send word back to that crooked railroad boss in Saldee that we have not only blaze the new cattle trail to California, but that we have also dispose of the two hombres he send cento the desert weeth Senor Keem!"

"One of them, I shall say, died of the lead poisoning. And the other, I may suggest ever so gently, stretched too long the tweested hemp."

SHOOTING-IRON SENATOR

(Continued from page 58)

bunch of boys. I've got him with me, too."

Chris breathed a sigh of relief, stumbled down the room, and touched the two snuffed candles alight. Lanagan looked very pleased with himself. Bull Monahan was stiff beside the door. One of his men was dead. The third was as stiff as his boss. And Ben Holt was sitting in the middle of the floor in his nightgown, his face palsied with fear and one fat hand clutched over a nasty hole punched through his upper arm. Chris gestured toward the closet door.

"The law of this lusty hamlet lies yonder. Fetch him, friend Paul—"

Lanagan released his grip on a mauled and plainly frightened man with a clerk's hunched shoulders.

"I wouldn't have mixed my mill up in all this for all of Monahan's money," he told Chris, obviously under the impression Chris would judge him. "No more of things like this. An honest account like Lanagan's is enough for me."

"It's too much for a tinhorn like you!" Chris snapped, and the fellow subsided. Lanagan came out of the closet, dragging the marshal, whom he unpinioned. The officer glared truculently at Chris and chafed the strictures where his bonds had been. His eyes touched the fallen figures in the room.

"Senator," he said slowly, "you've cinched my reelection. This is as good a take as a man could ask for. A conspiracy, sheared off short. But blast you, you busted my jail, emptied my cells, and made a fool of me. I'll have to hold you for it. I got my name to think off. If I was tricked like you done me and made no pass at you for it, I'd get a name I couldn't tote in this state."

"A mere surface observation, Sirrah!" Chris admonished. "You do not do your own cleverness justice. Between us, we got wind of this foul connivery which Monahan cooked up. You risked your name as an officer of the law just as I risked my reputation as an elected guardian of the public trust in order to bring these knaves to justice. We have been successful. And, naturally, we planned the whole thing so that it would occur in this way. Who will disagree? Ben Holt, maybe?"



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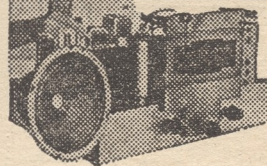
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Chris looked at Holt and rocked a gun suggestively.

Holt swiftly protested. "I'm getting out of town in the morning—out of the state. But before I go, I sign a confession, making it plain that I realize now you walked into our trap deliberately in order to trap us. And you had the marshal's help. I'll write it plain—!"

Chris smiled. The marshal offered Chris his hand.

"Senator, seems as though we're a couple of smart ones, and we've made a nice haul. We'll both of us get enough votes out of this to keep us for life—"

"Fie, Sirrah!" Chris said. "Do you think Christian Defever would stoop so low as to turn that which he did in line of duty to a force of garnering votes? Certainly not! But so you won't think I have no reward from these recent harrowing hours, let me tell you that I can now go out to Mrs. Macomber's and defy that testy haridan. I can now summon Miss Prescott back to her place in my office. I can again look forward to a well-ordered existence and an office run with the despatch and reliability of a Swiss watch. Miss Prescott—ahhh!"

Paul Lanagan made a sound. Chris ignored him, so he repeated it. Chris glanced at him. Lanagan was holding out a small gold circlet. Chris stared at it.

"I was to Mrs. Macomber's a few minutes ago, Senator," Lanagan said. "Helen and I—"

Chris closed his eyes. He steadied himself against the table in front of him.

"Go!" he said. "Build schools. Erect a monument to education in our fair state. Build sound buildings and make yourself a fair fee. Found a family. Live in happiness. But when you do these things, remember that you bought them with my sacrifice. And when your head grays, avoid public life. Weighty are its disappointments and empty its rewards. Helen—ah, Helen—"

A fair curtain line, Chris though. He glanced at the littered floor of the cellar and thought the speech a fitting closing. Lifting his head, his voice reached out to the marshal.

"Powdersmoke makes a man uncommonly dry. Perhaps you have a bottle in your office—a large bottle?"

THE END

BITTER REUNION AT RIMROCK

(Continued from page 45)

the chamber of the single-shot derringer.

Lillie Jean was lying at his feet in a pitiful huddle. A dark red stain was soaking the front of her dress. Her eyes were closed.

Bull moved around her. He didn't look at her any more. He slapped the derringer out of Lindsay's hand with a single sweep of his huge right hand. He said: "I want you to come downstairs with me."

Lindsay cringed, his face dripping sweat.

Bull repeated the words in a monotone.

He led the gambler down the stairs to the bar. "I could never," Bull went on in the same soft, dead monotone, "shoot a man without he was shooting at me."

He picked up a quart bottle of liquor from the bar. Removing the cork, he let the liquid gurgle into a pint beer stein.

"They tell me too much liquor at one pop will kill a man, Lindsay," he said. "I always wondered about that, for sure. Suppose you drink all of this down right now."

The gambler stared at the big glass, his face turning whiter than before. A sudden scream tore from his lips. He ducked away from the bar, clawed up Kramer's pistol.

Bull shot him three times in the head. He said softly: "That made it easier."

It took a long time for Juanita to convince Bull that Lillie Jean wasn't dead. Precious moments lost while she fought through the big man's grief-stricken haze. Then he had to ride fast to bring the doctor back from town before it was too late.

He sat downstairs while the slim little Mexican girl helped the doctor as he operated upstairs in a bedroom.

Afterwards, Juanita crept down the stairs and sat quietly beside Bull while they wait-

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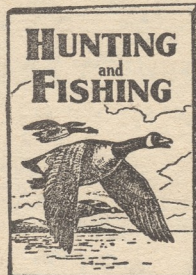
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

ed. She talked steadily, there in the silence of the early morning hours.

Dawn was just creeping through the oil paper covered *cantina* windows when the doctor came downstairs with his black bag.

Bull moved into the room, clumsily trying not to make any noise. It smelled like chloroform in there. Lillie Jean looked like a tired little girl on the bed. All the paint was off her face now and she looked just like he remembered her, only very white.

He sat beside the bed. "Juanita told me—things," he began. "She—she told me how you had it pretty hard with Frank, Lillie Jean. She said he got drunk and hit you. That he made you work in saloons to helped his crooked gamblin' schemes.

"Still, after all that, you were willin' to come an' ask me to help him tonight. I—I guess," Bull choked, "you musta loved him an awful lot. I'm sorry I killed him, Lillie Jean. If I'd known. . . ."

She looked up at him, and her cheeks were wet with tears. "I didn't love Frank, Bull. I made a terrible mistake, but I had to stick with it."

Her voice was so low he could hardly hear it. "Once I ran out on the finest man in the world. A man I—I was too young and too silly to know I really loved. Later, when I realized what I'd done, it was too late, Bull.

"I couldn't run out on the second man. No matter what he did to me, I had to stick this time. I did wrong once, but I couldn't keep running out on someone who—who needed me. You understand that, don't you, Bull?" she asked anxiously.

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, Lillie Jean," he murmured. He fingered the bed quilt with his stubby fingers. "Yeah, I think I do. You mean," he swallowed, "now you might come back to me an' little Jean?"

"Oh, Bull!" she sobbed. When she finished crying, she said:

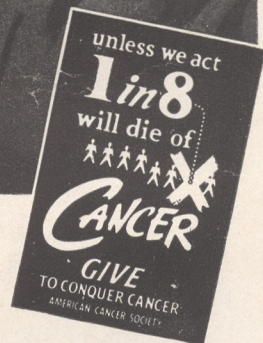
"How is my little baby, Bull? I was nearly crazy with wanting to ask before, but I was ashamed to."

Bull swallowed the lump in his throat. His eyes were shining. "She's swell, Lillie Jean. Mamie an' the girls are raisin' her upstairs at th' Buckhorn Palace. Only," he confided, "I think she needs a real mother to look after her, Lillie Jean. She's learnin' to cuss something awful. . . ."

1 OUT OF 3



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