

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

15¢

DEC.



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FEATURE NOVEL

• **POWDERSMOKE PUPPET**

by **WALT COBURN**

TWO NOVELETTES

• **SATAN SPAWNS
A WOOLIE WAR**

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THOMPSON**

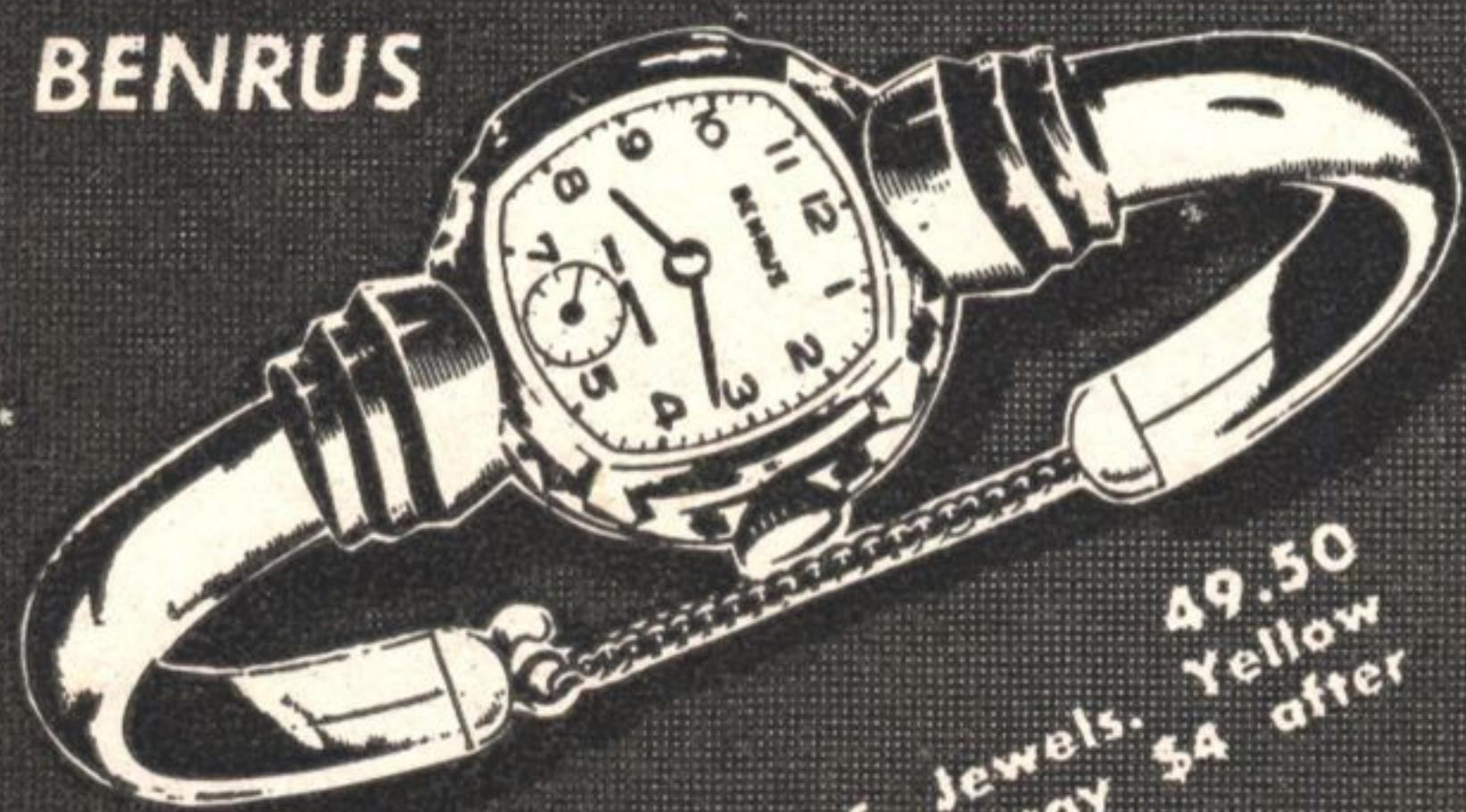
• **GUN FEVER
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by **FRANCIS P.
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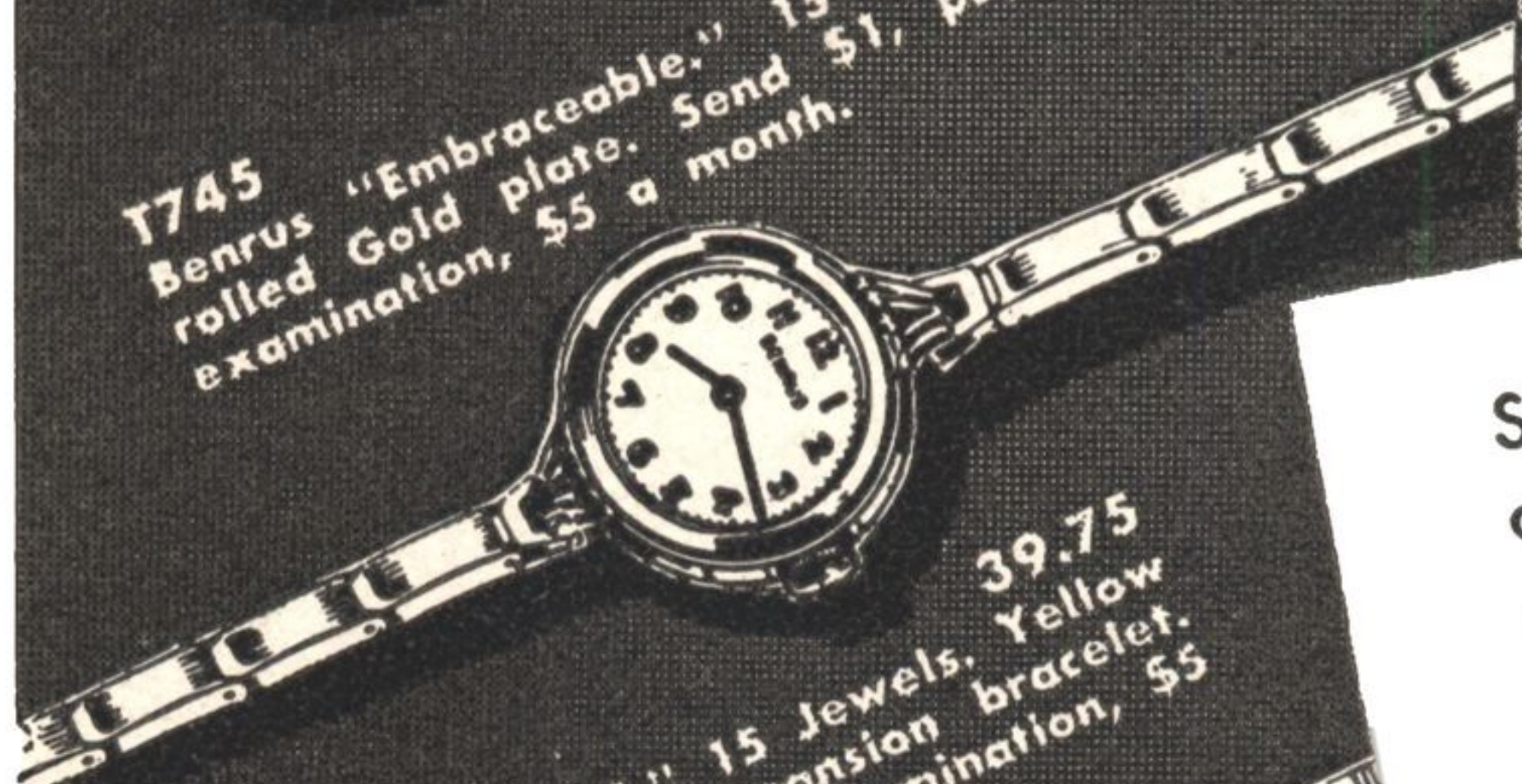
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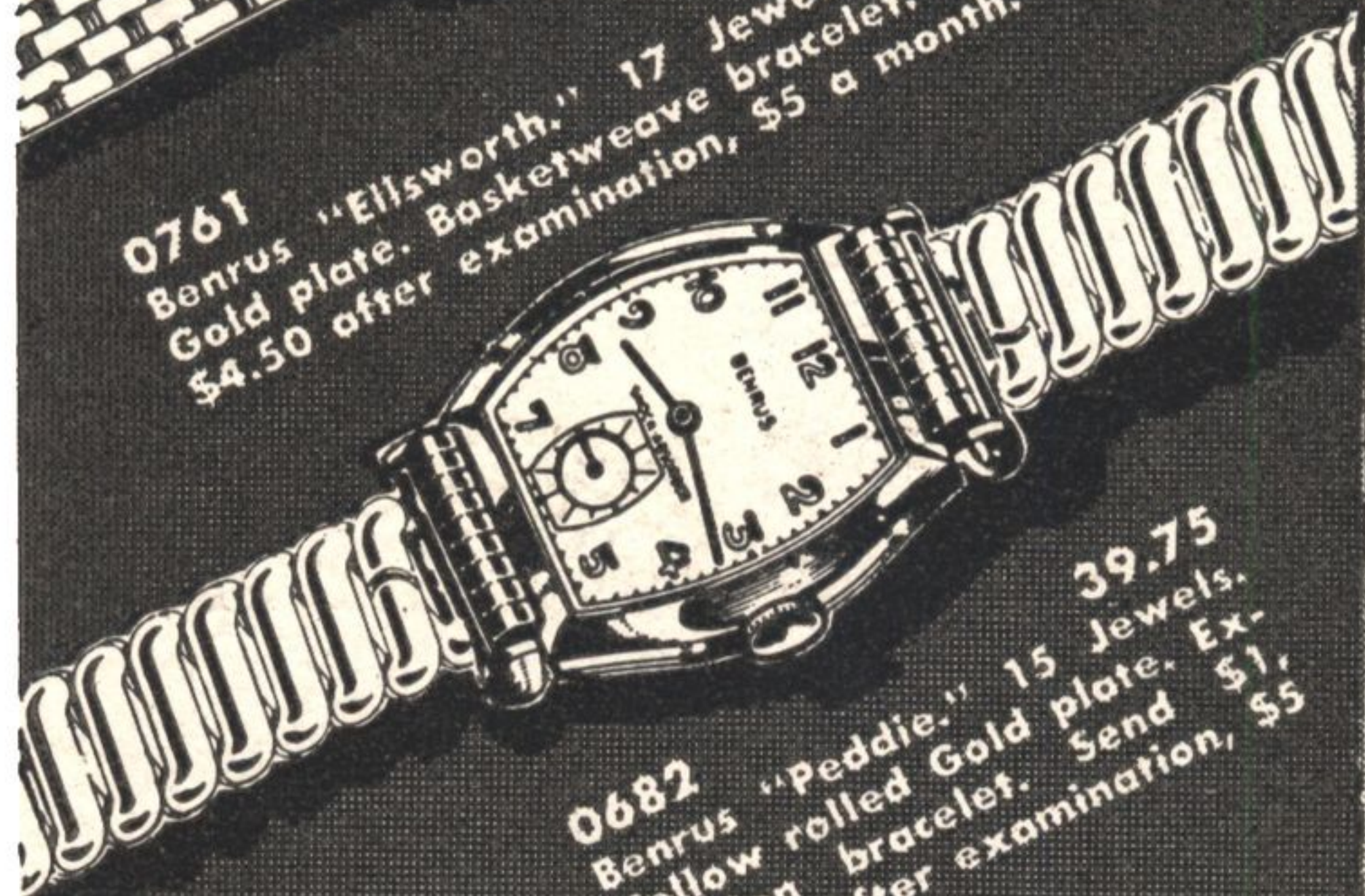
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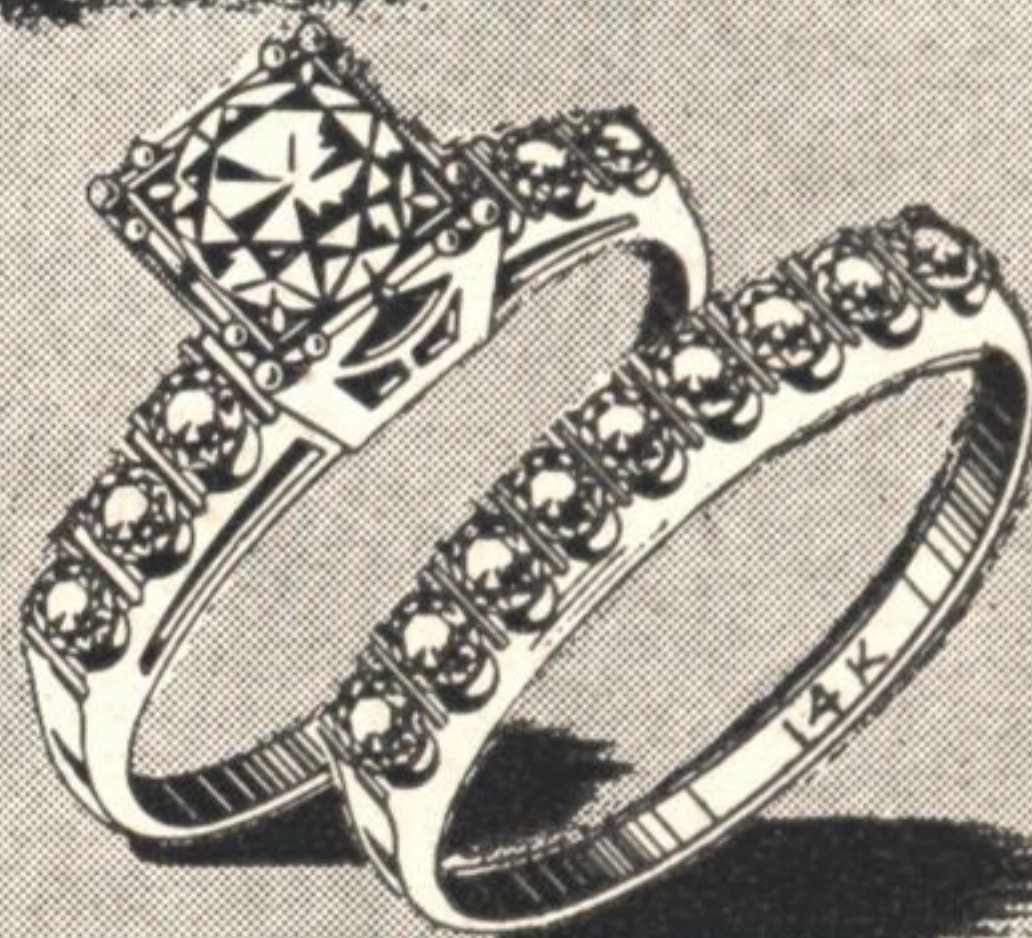
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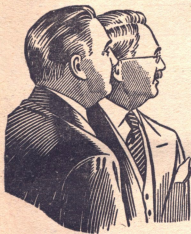
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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It was mad dog eat dog there in the Whetrock country when a greedy tinhorn and a renegade rancher used a tumbleweed Montana cowboy for their . . .

POWDERSMOKE

"The sucker!" McAllister taunted . . . as his bullet creased Brooks' ribs.





PUPPET

CHAPTER

1

Renegade's Horn

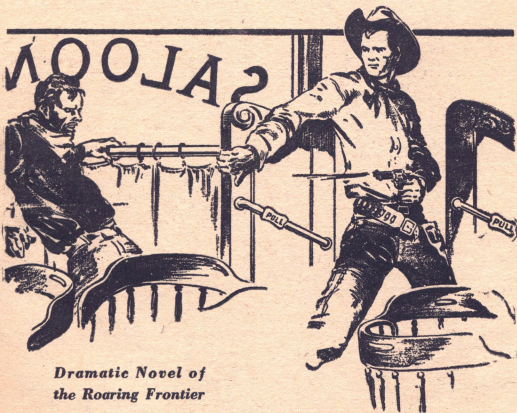
Little old ornery Hank Jackson sat his horse in the cold gray drizzle of day-break with a loop built in his ketch-rope and his squinted eyes watching for the outlaw steer called Calico Jack.

It had commenced raining sometime during the night. A raw wind had driven

the dawn up over the Whetrocks. The rain was like sharp sleet now, cold and bleak and punishing. The steep slanting ground was slick as greased soap, dangerous and treacherous.

A brushpopper cowhand can't wear a saddle slicker in the thorny brush. He has to button up his short denim brush jacket and pull down his hat and sit tight in his saddle and let the rain whip down in behind the flaps of his chaps and trickle down into his boot tops. He can pull his head down in between his shoulders like a turtle, hump up over his saddle horn—and let the cold rain soak through denim and flannel to chill his bones to the marrow.

Old Hank Jackson had no business being there. But he had his mind set on ketching that renegade spotted ox they called Calico Jack. Old Hank had his mind set to hogtie that steer, and saw off a long, sharp-



*Dramatic Novel of
the Roaring Frontier*

By **WALT COBURN**



pointed horn. He'd then turn loose the spotted steer, and take that black horn-tip to the Palace. There old Hank would gouge his Hourglass brand on the polished mahogany bar. He'd gouge 'er deep and show it to that tinhorn Sport McAllister who had poked old Hank Jackson out of his Hourglass outfit when Hank was so soaked with Palace corn likker that deuces back to back looked like four aces. . .



"There's the Hourglass, Mister," Hank Jackson would tell that tinhorn sport. "Read 'er. I gouged 'er there with the tip I sawed off the horn of Calico Jack, the wildest renegade ox in the rough Whetlocks. There's your Hourglass, Mister. But by hell you ain't man enough to hang onto it. . ."

Little old ornery Hank Jackson humped over and shivered and the stubble of white whiskers stood out like wire bristles on his leathery hide that was wrinkled and shriveled and gray from the wet cold. And from that gray leathery mask glittered a pair of eyes that were as bright and hard and cold as splinters of polished steel. He muttered over his speech that he'd gone over and over a thousand times, and the hate warmed him like a shot of booze.

Then the big old black-and-white renegade steer was standing there in the wind-whipped drizzle. There was Calico Jack, as if by some conjurer's trick—gaunt, wild eyed, with a horn spread the width of a man's outstretched arms. The eyes looked sunken and red. The tip of one horn was sawed off. The tip of the other black horn was as sharp as a steel harness awl. That horn point had ripped and gouged the guts out of more than one good cow horse; it

had driven deep through the belly of at least one brushpopper cowboy.

For a long moment the renegade steer and the tough old cowman eyed one another, with hatred, with something of respect. Matched at long last, in a cold gray drizzle and on slick, slanting ground. Calico Jack had the slippery slant in his favor. Old Hank Jackson was forking his Whetrock Dun, the fastest, surest-footed steeldust in the Arizona cow country. Hank Jackson had wasted mighty few loops. He aimed to fill this one.

THE black ears on the Whetrock Dun cocked forward. Old Hank Jackson felt the cowpony bunch and gather for the quick start. Hank had the loop slung back across his shoulder. Perhaps a spur jingled, or an eye blinked. It took only that.

Calico Jack snorted, whirled, and went down the steep slippery mountainside at a wild headlong run.

The dun horse and the old cowman left there with the swift jump-start of a quarter-horse race. Mud showered from the shod hoofs. Tough old Hank Jackson let out a yelp that was as shrill and raw edged as the scream of a saw-file. And the wild race was on.

Down the mountainside, brush crashing, steer and man and horse vanished into the thick blanket of mountain fog that hid the country below. The fog shut them in and shrouded them in its cold misty blanket.

Hank Jackson and his Whetrock Dun were close on top of the spotted steer, so close the muddy gravel from the cloven hoofs sprayed them. Then came a small clearing in the brush and rocks—where a brushpopper could use his rope. Old Hank swung twice, and dropped his loop across the wide longhorn spread. He jerked tight. The spotted steer hit the end of the slack. The dun pony was reined back, forelegs braced, hind legs sliding, losing grip on the slippery ground. The dun rump slid till the hair came off. The spotted steer tipped over when it hit the end of the rope, somersaulting, letting out an angry bawl.

Even on that steep slant horse and man would have won, if the ground had been dry. The Whetrock Dun did everything a trained rope-horse could do. Hank Jackson made no mistakes. Nary a lost motion. But it was the steep slippery slant

that threw the odds to the spotted steer.

Calico Jack was up, gave a sideways jerk. Horse and rider were pulled down, off balance. Hank Jackson kicked both spurred feet from the tapadero covered stirrups. The rope was tied hard and fast to his saddle horn. The dun horse tried to scramble to its feet, but got jerked down again. Then the big spotted steer charged, long horns swinging, head lowered. Old Hank saw the steers eyes, wild and red and wicked. The one awl-pointed black horn ripped the back of Hank's denim jumper when he ducked. The steer charged over man and horse. Hooking, sharp cloven hoofs tromping.

Old Hank Jackson was thinking of his Whetrock Dun when he clawed for the old six-shooter he packed in the deep pocket of his leather chaps. His hand came away empty. He'd lost his gun. It had been jolted out of the chaps pocket in the pile-up.

He went after his jackknife to cut the rope. His voice, creaky as a rusty hinge, was cussing. The renegade steer was jerked off its feet when its weight hit the end of the slack rope.

Hank Jackson was bruised and shaken, his slitted eyes half blinded by mud, and blood that oozed from a cut forehead. His hands fumbling, clumsy fingered, tried to get the knife open. He then used his teeth to open the jackknife blade.

The stranger on the bay horse suddenly appeared out of the cold gray drizzle and billowing fog. The loop in his ketch-rope dipped down and picked up both hind legs of the renegade steer, just as Calico Jack started another charge on old Hank Jackson and the Whetrock Dun.

It was neat heeling. The big bay swung down the slant to tighten the rope. The spotted steer was yanked off balance and downhill and stretched out. The rider quit his saddle quickly. He had his hogging string gripped in his teeth, teeth that seemed to grin a taunt at old Hank.

Even as the stranger hogtied the steer, old Hank Jackson was on his feet and hanging onto the bridle reins and helping his Whetrock Dun up.

he known anything akin to fear. He stood there, mud plastered, bruised, trickling blood. His rain-soggy hat was yanked down, slanting across his hard eyes.

"When I need any help—by the eternal hell, I'll holler fer it! No damn man kin come a-sashayin' up like some damn rodeo-show an' grinnin' like a damn skinned cat, to claim all the credit fer the job I got done. I'll double a wet rope acrost that smart-aleck back of yourn an' whup yuh plumb off my Hourglass range. I'll—"

Old Hank Jackson's left leg gave from under him. Pain from a badly twisted sprained ankle shot up his leg. His muddy, whiskered face twisted with the pain as he went down. "By the hell, if I hadn't dropped my gun—"

The stranger stood there beside the hogtied steer. His chest and shoulders bulged his rain-soaked brush jumper. His leather chaps shaped against saddle-warped legs. He thumbed back his dripping hat from matted, wiry black hair. He had black brows and gray-blue eyes that puckered at the corners; a short nose and wide mouth and clean-shaved, blunt jaw. An almost apologetic grin was on his rain-wet, tanned face.

"I had no business buttin' in, Mister," his voice sounded quiet, matching his apologetic grin. Only his blue gray eyes were twinkling.

He had jerked off old Hank's rope, coiled his own and dropped it over his saddle horn. His rope had no tie-knot in its end.

Old Hank snorted. "A damned dally-man—single-rigged saddle," his voice creaked dismally. "That damned hull will slide plumb from ears to hocks to wear the hide off the back of a good pony. Not even a breast strap. And by grab it'll take breast strap and britchin' to hold a hull like that on a pony's back. What the hell flat country you come from anyhow?"

"Montana, and you're plumb correct. This three-quarter rig Miles City saddle shore slips where the country's stood up an' down. But I didn't have time to change the riggin' or fasten on the breast strap I got in town. There wasn't much time."

"What was your big rush to get here onto the Hourglass range?" In spite of the pain, old Hank was suddenly suspicious. And there was a sick fearful dread inside

OLD Hank Jackson was mad; cussing, fighting mad. Not even in those most dangerous moments of the bad tight had

him, now, that was stronger than pain.

"I wanted to git outa town before my luck run out—before I got shamed back into that poker game. Sport McAllister mighta let me win, so's I'd set back into the game and lose my shirt. Them tin horns call a man a sorry sport if he quits winners."

"So you quit winners?" Old Hank Jackson knew it now, before he got his answer. And it was a gut shot.

"Yes, sir. I won the Hourglass off Sport McAllister."

The stranger looked almost boyish now, though he was perhaps in his thirties. He took an old wallet from his chaps pocket and opened it. Sheltering it from the rain, he took out a folded paper and held it towards old Hank Jackson for the old cowman to look at.

It was the paper Sport McAllister had drawn up and had Hank Jackson sign. It was a sort of informal deed to the Hourglass outfit; land, brand and livestock. The Hourglass outfit Hank Jackson had built up and finally lost to Sport McAllister in a drunken poker game.

A sick, blind rage swept over Hank Jackson. He grabbed the paper with his scrawled signature and Hourglass brand marked on it. He tore it into bits and tromped the bits into the mud.

The black-haired stranger stood there, looking down at him without anger or amusement—and trying not to let pity show itself in his blue-gray eyes.

The cold sick rage left old Hank slowly. And the pain throbbed in the ankle that was swelling inside his boot.

"It's your outfit, young feller. I lost it. You won it off the tin horn that poked me outa it. It's your spread. You don't need no damned writin' on paper."

"What would a man on the dodge do with a cow outfit, Mister?" The stranger walked over to the Whetrock Dun, turning his back on old Hank, and got the de-horning saw. He sawed about a foot off the end of the horn. He came back with the horn tip and dropped it in old Hank's lap. "Crawl a-straddle of your horse, Mister, and I'll turn loose the spotted steer."

He didn't make the mistake of offering to help old Hank Jackson up on his horse. Hank managed to mount and he sat his saddle with his injured foot hanging free.

The younger man jerked off the hogging string and tailed up the big spotted steer. Calico Jack came up bawling and slobbering. The cowpuncher swung on the critter's tail. The spotted steer charged for the brush. The stocky-built cowhand let go his tail holt and grinned after the big renegade steer as Calico Jack headed back up the mountainside.

Then the stranger mounted. Old Hank headed down the slope for his home ranch.

The stranger rode alongside him, and finally broke the silence.

"I'd like to hang around a week or two," he said, "if you reckon you ain't takin' too big a risk hidin' out a man that's on the dodge."

Old Hank Jackson had swung his injured leg up, hooking his knee across the saddle horn and he rode along like that, feeling gingerly of the rapidly swelling ankle. "It's your outfit!" The pain shot up through his leg as he forgot and gave his foot a yank. He cursed in a saw-edged voice; he cursed everything on earth—and this stranger who had helped him out of a bad tight. He ended with:

"It's your outfit. I don't give a tinker's damn how you use it. If you're hidin' out, then keep your big fool mouth shut and hide. I'll clear out when I git around to it. And I'll 'tend to my own chores. I don't want none of your pity."

"You're gittin' no pity from me, Mister. And if you wasn't an old man an' crippled, I wouldn't take that cussin' out."

"Old!" shrilled Hank Jackson. "Crippled, eh? By grab, if I hadn't lost my gun I'd learn you better."

The stranger pulled a six-shooter from the deep pocket of his chaps. There was mud on the gun.

"Here's your hogleg." He held the gun by its muddy barrel, shoving the butt at Hank's gnarled hand. "If you need an equalizer—"

The stranger's eyes were puckered to slits. Hank glared into them. And took his gun. The pain sent waves of nausea through him and the cold sweat soaked him, clammy, along with the rain, and he had to fight off the black faintness that threatened to pass him out. He kept his leg hooked up around the saddle horn to drain the circulation down out of the foot and ankle.

Hank rubbed the slimy mud off his gun onto the faded old Levis. He'd undone the two leather frogs from their tabs to let the leg of his chaps hang down along the stirrup. Now he squinted into the mud-clogged barrel of his gun.

"Damn gun barrel'd bust if I busted the cap on a ca'tridge," snapped the cranky old cowman. And he shoved the gun into the pocket of the dangling chaps leg.

The stranger rubbed away the beginning of a grin. Tough old rooster, he told himself. Tough as a boot. And so almighty prideful it hurt.

They rode along in the cold gray drizzle. Hank eyed the stranger's gelding. There was a blotched brand on its left shoulder.

The stranger grinned faintly. "One I managed for along the trail. My name is Tyler Brooks."

"Nobody asked your name."

"I'm gittin' tired of bein' called cuss names, is all."

Old Hank grunted. The pain was bad by the time they reached the Hourglass ranch. Tyler Brooks had to help old Hank Jackson into the house.

CHAPTER

2

Greasy-Sack Pards

Tyler Brooks was a good hand. Quick and sure about whatever he did. He didn't make many mistakes. And old Hank Jackson watched for the little things that show up a man for what he is and the kind of training he's had. Hank could find but few faults.

Tyler Brooks helped the crippled old cowman into his bunkhouse. Then left him there on his tarp-covered bunk and went out again to put up their horses. That showed he was brought up to look after his horse first. Showed the proper kind of training, from boyhood, the natural way he did it. And it didn't take him long. He was back in no time.

Brooks took the big blade of his jack-knife and carefully ripped down the seam of the boot leg and down to the counter seam of the boot's foot, so that the boot wouldn't be ruined. He slit off the soaked sock, and eyed the swollen discolored ankle.

"Move your toes, Hank."

Hank moved the toes of the swollen foot. The younger man nodded. And he

told Hank to shed his wet clothes and crawl in under the blankets.

"You'll commence havin' chills directly. Shiver an' shake like a houn' dog. Where's your likker?"

He made strong black coffee and spiked it with the almost colorless corn whiskey from the jug under Hank's bunk. Hank drank from it, offering Tyler Brooks a drink.

The younger man grinned as he turned down the booze. "I do my drinkin' in town." He filled a round tub with steaming hot water and told Hank to soak his injured foot in it. Then Brooks cooked a quick meal, never asking where to find anything. He didn't use up any words just talking.

The building was a combination adobe and frame house; adobe bunkhouse and an open doorway into a frame lean-to kitchen. Four bunks in the bunkhouse. Two of the bunks empty. A tied, tarp-covered roundup bedroll was on the bunk across from Hank's. The place was clean. A man batching it alone can be either clean as a woman or dirty as a hog. Old Hank Jackson's place was neat and clean.

Hank stripped to the hide. Sitting on the edge of his bunk wrapped like a buck Injun in a blanket, his injured foot in the tub of hot water, he watched Tyler Brooks taking in everything with those sharp eyes.

"What'd you expect to find here?" creaked the old cowman. "A boar's nest?"

"Yeah."

"They told you I was boozin' away my outfit. That I got drunk an' let that tin-horn Dan McAllister poker me outa the Hourglass. That I let my outfit go to hell."

Tyler Brooks tossed a clean dishtowel at the cowman. "Here's your cryin' towel." He opened the door and went outside, closing the door behind him.

Hank threw aside the dishtowel and snarled profanity at the closed door until he ran out of cuss words. Then the hard gray eyes lost their glitter and a slow grin spread across his leathery face.

Tyler Brooks caught him grinning when he came in with a big armload of stove wood. Brooks kicked the door shut and carried the wood into the kitchen where he stacked it in the big woodbox behind the sheet-iron cook stove. He said:

"Looks like she'll rain for a week."

He went out again. Came in a little later with his saddle and a new breast-strap rigging. He shed his rain-soaked jumper and hat. He was soaked to the hide but said nothing about it when he cleaned the mud off his boots with a gunnysack just inside the door. He squatted on the floor near the round-bellied heating stove and began rigging the breast strap to his three-quarter-rigged, single-cinch saddle.

"Where's your six-shooter?" creaked old Hank Jackson.

"In my chaps pocket at the barn. Why do you ask?"

"For a man on the dodge," said old Hank, "you're almighty careless about sheddin' your gun."

Tyler Brooks looked up with a grin that puckered his eyes to thin slits. "I kin borrow yours," he said, "in a tight."

Old Hank grunted. He said somebody better clean the mud out of that gun barrel if it was going to be used for anything more dangerous than pounding fence staples.

Tyler Brooks said he'd get around to cleaning Hank's gun when he got his Miles City saddle rigged for ketching cattle in the rough Whetrocks. "I counted three-four big mav'ricks between town and the Hourglass ranch. Tomorrow I'm goin' to tackle a job of range brandin'. What's your range boundary lines, Hank? I don't want neighbor trouble."

Hank told him. "So you aim to make a hand." He grinned faintly.

"A man puts on taller and gits callouses in the wrong place, round-sidin' at camp."

"What'll I tell some law badge polisher that shows up while you're off range brandin' mav'ricks?"

"Tell 'em anything comes into your head."

"I've knowed a lot of fellers that traveled ten jumps ahead of Jawn Law. I've yet to find one didn't look back, coyote-like, acrost his shoulder."

"Don't sprain your brain, Hank, tryin' to figger me out."

HANK said: "Sport McAllister can't run nothin' beyond the town limits of his Palace Saloon an' gamblin' layouts. He'd have to turn the Hourglass over to a real cowhand. He's smart enough to hire a rank stranger too ignorant to savvy what he's gittin' into. I got a few neighbors that

ain't what you'd call too friendly. Li'l ol' greasy sack outfits. They swing a hungry loop. And they make bunch quitters outa ary Hourglass man they ketch off his range. Ain't every man would hire out to ramrod this Hourglass fer Sport McAllister."

"I told you I won the Hourglass from McAllister in a poker game."

"That's what Sport McAllister would have you tell Hank Jackson."

"Have it your own way, Mister."

Hank said: "You'll need a six-shooter, mebbysso a saddle gun—just as much as you'll need a runnin' iron—when you commence range brandin'."

"Quit tryin' to throw a scare into a stranger, Hank. And haul that game leg outa that water. It's cold by now. And crawl in under the blankets. You're shakin' with chills. Want a hot toddy?"

"Ruin good likker?"

Old Hank crawled deep in under the tarp-covered blankets with his jug. He was shaking from pain and the shock and the chill that had seeped into the marrow of his brittle old bones. His eyes were blood-shot and glittering.

Outside it rained steadily. Water dripped off the roof and puddled. The gray day ended in an early twilight that thickened into night. Tyler Brooks finished rigging his saddle and carried it to the barn. He had his six-shooter shoved into the waistband of his Levis when he came back. He cooked supper and they ate in silence. Tyler washed and dried the dishes. Then they smoked there in the lamplight.

Hank had cleaned his six-shooter and shoved it under his pillow. He told Tyler to use the bedroll on the other bunk:

"Belongs to the last man had the guts to hire out to the Hourglass. Them greasy sack cowmen run him outa the country. He never come back fer his bed."

There was a bulgy warsack. Tyler Brooks found shirts and underwear and a new pair of Levis in the warsack with a shaving outfit and other odds and ends a cowpuncher packs around. The clothes were new and they fit Tyler fairly well. He'd worn wet clothes all day. He growled at Hank:

"You coulda told a man there was dry clothes here."

"You was too damn busy actin' smart-alecky."

"Too dumb to look after myself."

"No argument there."

Tyler Brooks blew out the light and crawled into bed, clad in the long red flannel underwear he'd found in the warsack. He heard old Hank chuckle in the dark, a cackling sound.

"Tellin' yourself comical bedtime stories, Hank?"

"Nope. Just a-thinkin'. Fer a man on the dodge, you're almighty careless. You left your six-shooter somewheres in the kitchen where you taken it off while you was cookin' supper. And you never barred the doors. Downright careless—fer a outlaw."

Tyler Brooks grinned in the darkness. "Quit strainin' your brain thataway, Hank."

"How'd Sport McAllister come to put up the Hourglass in a poker game?" Hank Jackson wanted to know.

"I had a little money on me. I told him I was sorta lookin' around for a small-sized outfit that could be picked up cheap. He showed me that bill of sale you signed and marked with the Hourglass brand. Said he'd won the outfit in a poker game. But now he had it he didn't know what to do with it."

"The hell!"

"That's what he said. He priced it at what he said was rock bottom. And we had a few drinks and wound up playin' poker. He put up the Hourglass against my bankroll. When he found out I'd played poker with tin horns before he didn't try to crook me. He had to play a square game. I got lucky. And quit the game winners. I've still got my bankroll. I won the Hourglass. Then I got outa town while I was still healthy."

"And Sport McAllister claimed he didn't know what to do with the Hourglass he'd poked away from Hank Jackson?"

"That's what he said."

"It don't tie in right. What else did this Sport McAllister say about the Hourglass?"

Tyler Brooks grinned in the darkness. "McAllister got kinda poetic. He said take an hourglass and turn it over and watch the sands o' time trickle through. That he liked to watch the sand trickle through the Hourglass—when it was turned over. He said that give him a lot of satisfaction. That

he'd have to tell Whit Matlock he'd turned the Hourglass over. . . . Because Whit Matlock was an impatient man. And Matlock would try to run the sand through faster. McAllister said he'd have to send the news out to Whit Matlock at his Bench M ranch that the Hourglass was turned over. So that Whit could mebbysso hurry up the trickle of sand through the Hourglass. . . . Sport McAllister sounded a little drunk."

"Sport McAllister," Old Hank Jackson's voice snapped, "never gits drunk. You crawl outa them blankets. Bar the doors. Take your gun to bed. And don't sleep heavy. You never won nothin' Sport McAllister wasn't anxious to lose. And when you got Whit Matlock gunnin' for you, by the hell, you better commence gittin' over your careless habits."

THE darkness hid Tyler Brook's grin. He got up and barred the back and front doors and picked up his six-shooter and took the gun to bed with him.

Little old Hank Jackson moved around restlessly. He took a pull at the jug to ease the pain. Finally he loaded his old corncob pipe and lit it. The match flame cupped in his gnarled hands showed his eyes, glinting wickedly. "Sport McAllister is playin' you fer a sucker." His word blew out the match flame. "Whit Matlock wants the Hourglass," he said, when Tyler Brooks kept silent. "Whit Matlock wants all the half dozen little greasy-sack outfits that fringes on his Bench M outfit."

Tyler Brooks finally spoke. "Then why don't Whit Matlock buy 'em?"

"He figgers it's cheaper to run us all off, or kill us off. It don't matter which, to Whit Matlock. Anyhow, Whit ain't got the ready money. He's runnin' what he's got at the Bench M on a shoestring. He stole what he's got now—with a gun. And he's foxy enough to git somebody else to do his killin'. He ribs up quarrels betwixt these greasy-sack outfits. They shoot it out and Whit Matlock moves in when the shootin's over. That's what I bin tryin' to tell these greasy-sack fellers. They was commencin' to listen when I got poked outa the Hourglass. You won yourself a handful of trouble, Mister, when McAllister unloaded the Hourglass on you—when he got scared to hold onto it any longer."

"McAllister didn't look to me like a man

that would get scared quite that easy."

"Scared ain't the right word fer it. Sport McAllister ain't scared of Whit Matlock. Fact is, them two gents is pardners, business pardners. And it's crooked business. Between 'em they aim to grab this whole big cow country. What Sport McAllister can't win with his booze an' marked cards, Whit Matlock and his tough cowhands take by force. They don't trust each other. And when they've grabbed all these little outfits they want to throw into one big spread, mebbysport Sport McAllister and his pardner Whit Matlock will shoot it out to see who rakes in the big jackpot."

"Why did McAllister lose the Hourglass to me?" asked Tyler Brooks.

"Because, like as not, you overplayed your hand. If I kin read your hole card, it's a cinch a smart tinhorn like Sport McAllister could've taken a look at it."

"Meanin'—?"

"You ain't just a driftin' cowhand with a bankroll, lookin' fer a cheap ranch to buy. And you ain't on the dodge. But you've shore got the earmarks of a man that wears a law badge pinned to his undershirt."

"That's how you've got me figured out?" Brooks' voice sounded quietly in the darkness.

"That's how I read your earmarks. That's why Sport McAllister has sluffed you off for his pardner Whit Matlock to kill—unless I killed you when you showed up to claim the Hourglass. Or unless Whit Matlock lays back and lets my greasy-sack neighbors cut you down. Anyhow, you looked like a lawman to Sport McAllister and he got shut of you as quick and easy as he could—"

Old Hank Jackson broke off in the middle of what else he had to say. He sat up, gripping his gun.

Tyler Brooks quit his bunk with a swift easy movement, his six-shooter in his hand.

Somebody outside in the rainy night was pounding on the barred door.

"Open it up, Hank! You want a lady to drown out here?"

"May the howlin' wolves never cease!" creaked old Hank Jackson. "Let 'er in, you danged bonehead. Let 'er in!"

Tyler Brooks slid back the heavy wooden bar. He yanked the door open. The wind blew the rain in, and with it a moving black figure. Tyler Brooks slammed the

door shut against the storm and the rain.

Old Hank Jackson struck a match and lit the stubby candle in its whiskey bottle holder on a bench alongside his bunk.

Its flickering flame threw shadows across the girl in the glistening yellow slicker. She pulled off a dripping Stetson hat, and shook the rain from a mop of dark, copper-colored hair. Freckles sprinkled a short nose and her eyes were slate gray under black brows. Her red lips parted and showed white teeth in a sort of boyish grin. She looked at old Hank sitting up in bed with a nightshirt on. His injured ankle bandaged and smelling strongly of arnica. Then she looked around and saw Tyler Brooks standing there. Her boyish grin widened and then she laughed.

Tyler Brooks reddened to the ears, red as the red flannel underwear he had on. He ducked around behind her and grabbed his Levis and pulled them on. He had his back turned and he could hear her laughter and old Hank's chuckle. He belted the Levis and shoved his gun into the waistband.

The girl had shed her dripping slicker. She was dressed like a cowhand; chaps and boots and denim jacket, spurred boots.

"One of your greasy-sack neighbors," chuckled old Hank. "Judy Strang. Ramrods her own outfit. Only female brush-popper cowhand in Arizona. . . . This is Tyler Brooks, Judy. He won the Hourglass off Sport McAllister in a poker game."

"That's hard to swallow, Hank." Her voice was flat toned.

"Sprinkle salt on it. And wash it down with corn likker."

"It still won't go down," she said flatly.

Tyler Brooks felt those slate-gray eyes studying him, cold, unfriendly, suspicious.

Old Hank Jackson was watching them from his bunk, enjoying Tyler's discomfiture.

"Then just mark me down as a liar, lady," anger overrode Tyler Brooks' embarrassment, "and let it go at that."

"You don't get off that easy," said Judy Strang.

BROOKS noticed now that she packed a gun. The ivory butt of a six-shooter showed from the deep pocket of her lightweight chaps. She looked like she'd use a gun in a tight.

"Then let Hank Jackson deal you in. He's got me all figured out. Brand and earmarks."

"Earmarks," creaked little old Hank. "No brand. And I'd durther Judy done her own job of brand readin'. Reckon you could spare one of your neighbors a pot of fresh hot coffee, Mister?"

Tyler Brooks grabbed up his shirt and took it along into the kitchen, glad to get away from the girl's cold-eyed scrutiny. He put kindling on the dying coals and got the fire going and coffee started. While he worked in the kitchen he could hear the girl and the old cowman talking him over in low tones. Cold anger had him in its grip. He had his boots on by now and they clumped on the scrubbed pine board floor as he came into the bunkhouse through the kitchen doorway.

The girl looked hard at him, then turned to the old cowman. "You're wrong, Hank. Tyler Brooks never wore a law badge, outside or on his undershirt."

Tyler Brooks stood in the kitchen doorway and the cold rage came out in slow, hard bitten words. "Hank Jackson's got me figured out for a range detective." Tyler looked straight into the girl's slate gray eyes. "Let's have your opinion."

"You're a hired man," Judy Strang spoke coldly. "You were sent here to take over the Hourglass. Either McAllister hired you, and that poker game was a show put on for the country boys—or Whit Matlock is paying you to hold down the Hourglass till he moves in with his Bench M cowhands. And Whit somehow ribbed McAllister into bettin' the Hourglass and you won it for Whit Matlock. You work for Sport McAllister. Or you work for Whit Matlock. But you don't work for 'em both. And it's a sort of contemptible job of spy work you're paid to do. With mebbysa a bonus-bounty on any man you have to kill while you're on the job—Hank Jackson, for instance. Or any of the greasy-sack cowmen. . . . That's my one guess. You asked for it. And you got it."

"I'm obliged," Tyler Brooks spoke stiff lipped, "for your high opinion."

Judy Strang smiled. It was a bitter kind of smile that left her eyes as cold gray as a winter sky. "I'm no better than you are, Mister. When all the chips are down, it'll be a big jackpot. Whit Matlock and Sport

McAllister will shoot it out, man to man, to see who rakes in the chips—and Judy Strang goes to the winner, willingly, of my own free will. I get a half interest in the big Bench M spread for a wedding present. It's written down in black ink on paper and signed. I drew up the contract myself. . . . Now what does that make me, Mister Tyler Brooks?" But she gave him no chance to voice whatever opinion he had of her. "How would you like to sit in on the high-stake game? I'll stake you to a few dirty white chips."

Her eyes were cold. There was no warmth in her smile. A thin shiver ran like a wire down the spine of Tyler Brooks. Somewhere Tyler Brooks had read that the female, animal or human, is by nature and instinct, more cruel than the male. He had discarded it as the falsehood of some damnfool crackpot philosopher. Now he saw proof of it in the slate-gray eyes of Judy Strang. And it chilled his guts and made him sick inside.

It must have showed in his eyes. Because her red lips twisted with a bitter contempt.

"What's the matter?" Her voice whipped him like a rawhide quirt. "Scared?"

"No. Not scared. You're dealin', lady. Spread mine face up."

"Hank Jackson has the greasy-sack cowmen partly organized. Hank's got you sized up for a man with enough guts and savvy to ramrod that greasy-sack pool outfit. I'll tell 'em to take your orders. When Whit Matlock shows up with his tough Bench M cowhands, kill 'em off, to the last man. Kill Whit Matlock. Cut down that tinhorn Sport McAllister. And rake in the jackpot."

"The jackpot includes Judy Strang?" Tyler Brooks spoke flatly.

"The jackpot includes Judy Strang." Her cold-toned voice matched his.

"Deal me in." Tyler Brooks' eyes met the challenge in the slate-gray eyes of Judy Strang.

CHAPTER

3

Mad-Dog War

These greasy-sack cowmen looked tough and talked almighty tough, but not one of them could be trusted. They all eyed Tyler Brooks with cold suspicion. Brooks rode a Miles City saddle. He came from

Montana. That made him an alien down here in Arizona. And they didn't trust foreigners, and said so.

"When we need a rank stranger to ram-rod our outfit," they told Judy Strang, "we'll holler for him."

Judy Strang had left the Hourglass at daybreak. And she had returned after dark, fetching every greasy-sack cowman in the Whetlocks with her. Now they were crowded into the bunkhouse, squatted on their hunkers, smoking and passing a jug of corn likker.

Little old Hank Jackson sat in a big old barroom armchair with one boot on and his injured foot propped up on a low bench. Fully dressed, even to the battered old Stetson he wore indoors as well as outside.

Judy Strang remained standing, looking more like a boy than a girl in her man's shirt and faded levis and boots, her hat tilted back on her mop of chestnut-red curls.

Tyler Brooks sat on the edge of his bunk, the only man there who wasn't drinking plenty when the jug passed. This was partly because he didn't want a drink, and because the jug wasn't offered him. He was a rank outsider and stranger, and it was plain from the start that these greasy-sack cowmen wanted no part of Tyler Brooks from Montana. And from what he saw of them, he wanted nothing to do with them. That they were cattle rustlers was as plain as if the brand had been burned on their tough hides. Tyler Brooks never let his right hand get far from the six-shooter he now wore in an open holster fastened to a filled catridge belt. Tyler Brooks was as tense as a coiled rattlesnake.

Judy Strang's tanned face had lost its color. Her slate-gray eyes were cold. Her fists were clenched till the knuckles showed bone white. She saw that her hopes of organizing these greasy-sack cowmen were fading.

"Clear out!" little old Hank Jackson's voice creaked like a rusty hinge. "Take your damn coyote stink outa here! Git off the Hourglass range! Don't set foot on my side of the boundary! Git!"

Little Old Hank Jackson reached in under his bed tarp and slid out his sawed-off shotgun. It's short twin barrels pointed at the men squatted on the floor. His eyes were slivers of steel, wicked.

The greasy-sack cowman almost tromped

one another in their confusion and rush to get out of there and away from old Hank's sawed-off shotgun. They piled on their horses and rode off into the night.

"Shut the door, Judy," creaked old Hank. "Bar it. I told you how they'd act. Now you know where you stand with them greasy-sack things. When they tangle with them Bench M renegades it'll be mad dawg eat mad dawg."

Judy Strang was still standing where Tyler Brooks had shoved her, with one swift rough yank, in behind him. And Tyler Brooks had his six-shooter in his hand. It had been his six-shooter, just as much as old Hank's shotgun, that had sent that greasy-sack outfit stampeding.

Judy had to step around Tyler Brooks to reach the door. She gave him an odd sort of smile as she stepped around him, her slate eyes softened, brightened, like sun shining through gray sky.

She was starting to close the door when they heard the sudden outburst of gunfire. It came from perhaps a mile away, about the distance the greasy-sack cowmen would have traveled. Judy stiffened, her hand gripping the door. She stared out into the night. The storm had gone and the night sky was cloudless, star filled, with a big lopsided moon shedding its white light.

"Shut the door!" creaked old Hank Jackson. "Don't open it to no damned man on earth." Hank Jackson was grinning like an old gray wolf as he reached for the jug. "Mad dawg eats mad dawg out yonder."

They knew what had happened. Whit Matlock and his Bench M cowhands had trailed the greasy-sack bunch to the Hourglass, and set their gun trap. And the greasy-sackers had ridden into it.

Hank Jackson told Tyler Brooks to lift the trapdoor under his bunk and fetch out the saddle guns and cartridges he had cached there. And he pointed out the gun slits in the adobe wall that were covered by removable cupboards and shelves. This adobe cabin was built to stand siege, back in earlier days when the Apache Kid and Cochise and Geronimo were on the prowl.

Tyler Brooks wasn't surprised when Judy Strang took one of the saddle carbines and loaded it quickly and expertly. Tyler handed one of the carbines to old Hank, and the little cowman blew out the light.

"Shoot any man you kin line your sights on," Old Hank's voice creaked in the dark. "They all need killin'."

The three of them must have waited an hour or more before the shooting in the distance dwindled down and finally ceased, leaving the silence of the moonlit night charged with ominous danger.

Then out of that moonlight-and-shadowed silence came a lone rider.

"It's Whit Matlock." Judy Strang's voice had a brittle sound.

WHIT MATLOCK was a big, powerfully built man. Black haired, with a drooping black mustache. His skin was swarthy, glistening now with sweat. And from under beetling black brows his eyes glittered, pale yellow as the eyes of some dangerous animal. There was a saddle carbine across his saddle.

Whit Matlock was half drunk, sure of his toughness. He rode boldly and alone across the moonlit clearing and reined his big Bench M gelding to a halt not twenty feet from the front door of the Hourglass bunkhouse.

"You missed one hell of a rookus, Hank Jackson." Whit Matlock slid his carbine into its saddle scabbard. "Damndest rookus a man could want to watch. Not nary a son of a snake left alive. Cost me every damn' Bench M cowhand I had. But we wiped out them greasy-sack fellers. . . . I mopped up what was left. Greasy sacks an' Bench M's—regardless. Wasn't a man amongst 'em worth savin'. I got no use fer cripples. Renegades kin be hired cheap. By the hell, it's a purty night's job done.

"But thirsty work. I run outa likker. Open your door, Hank, an' me'n you'll pass the jug an' I'll cut you in on somethin' big, you damned ol' warthawg. . . . I hear Sport McAllister sent some stranger here with your bill of sale to the Hourglass. Trot the skunk out, and I'll take care of him for yuh. Then I'll borrow one of your Hourglass horses an' ride to town to settle with my pardner, Sport McAllister. That double-crossin' son! Pokerin' the Hourglass off to a damn' range detective.

"Open your door, Hank. You got that Tyler Brooks badge polisher on ice. Shove 'im outside. I'll gut shoot 'im an' wrap his badge in that bill of sale an' hand it to

you with the compliments of Whit Matlock. . . . Damnit, you ornery ol' warthawg, you scared to open your door to Whit Matlock?"

Tyler Brooks didn't know old Hank was standing there at the door until the tough little old cowman had flung aside the heavy wooden bar and yanked open the door.

Little old Hank Johnson hobbled out through the doorway. A six-shooter gripped in his gnarled hand.

"Fill your hand, Matlock!" Old Hank's voice creaked. "I'm killin' yuh!"

Whit Matlock's gun was already in his hand, hidden behind the fork of his saddle. It spat flame. Hank staggered and pitched headlong, the gun in his hand spitting fire. The heavy .45 slug whined so close to Whit Matlock's head that he ducked.

Tyler Brooks shoved Judy back so hard she fell sprawling on her back. Then Tyler's bulk filled the doorway. The six-shooter in his hand was splashing streaks of fire as fast as he could thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger. His first shot was a gut-shot that doubled big Whit Matlock across his saddle-horn. Brooks' second slug struck the big cowman's chest and tore through the ribs into the man's heart. Tyler Brooks shot Whit Matlock through the head as his big bulk toppled over sideways—dead when the two-hundred-pound hulk thudded to the ground.

Judy scrambled up onto her feet and shoved past Tyler Brooks. She knelt there on the ground, old Hank's head pillowed in her lap. Then the tough little old cowman was sputtering and cussing and she helped him sit up.

"Shot my other laig out from under me! The big drunken ox—"

The bullet had torn a flesh wound in old Hank's thigh and he was losing blood. Tyler lifted Hank and carried him inside and laid him on his bunk. He cut away the leg of the other Levis and got a tourniquet fastened. Judy barred the door before she got busy with as swift and expert a first-aid job as any doctor could do. Not a whimper of pain out of the tough little old cowman. He gulped whiskey from his jug, and cussed in his creaky voice. He told Judy to make a pot of coffee and rustle herself and Tyler Brooks a bait of grub.

Tyler Brooks unsaddled and turned loose the Bench M gelding. He saddled a fresh

Hourglass horse. He dragged Whit Matlock's dead bulk off at the end of his saddle rope. Then rode on to where the bushwhacker fight had taken place.

Whit Matlock hadn't lied. Dead men were strewn around. Horses with empty saddles stood, bridle reins dragging. He unsaddled the horses and turned them loose and piled the saddles there beside the dead men. It was breaking day when he rode back to the Hourglass ranch.

Judy Strang had a team of Mexican mules hooked to the old buckboard. Old Hank Jackson's tarp-covered bed spread out on the flat space behind the buckboard seat.

"I'm taking Hank Jackson to town," Judy said quietly.

"You done all any cow country doctor kin do for him. He's better off without a rough joltin' buckboard ride to town. Hank'll do better if he ain't moved."

Then something in the slate gray eyes of Judy Strang stopped him. Her voice quirted him:

"Hank Jackson lost his Hourglass ranch. He's quitting it. He says he wants to go to town—to my wedding."

"Your wedding—?"

"Old Man Strang's daughter Judy," she said flatly, "don't go back on her word. Whit Matlock lost the big jackpot. Sport McAllister will be expecting to rake it in. Judy Strang goes to the winner."

The blood drained from Tyler Brook's face. "Mebbyso you forgot," Tyler Brooks said, stiff lipped, "you dealt me in with a few dirty white chips."

"I don't forget anything that quickly, Mister."

"Quit that damn' augerin' out there," yelled old Hank Jackson. "Pack me out to that rig!"

* * *

It was a slow anger that smoldered like the banked coals of a fire inside Tyler Brooks as he saddled an Hourglass gelding and headed alone for the little border cowtown called Whetrock.

Old Hank Jackson had told Tyler Brooks why Judy Strang was so hard and bitter and cold blooded.

"Somebody bushwhacked her daddy, Old Man Strang. And whoever done the job got paid fer it. McAllister footed the bill. And Whit Matlock done the shootin'.

Because they wanted Strang's outfit, but mostly because Old Man Strang hated their guts. He had told Whit Matlock and Sport McAllister both that he'd druther see his daughter Judy dead than married to either of 'em. So they had to kill Old Man Strang. And they did. But when they tried to lay the blame on Hank Jackson, Judy saved my hide."

"Judy Strang went fu'ther than that. She drewed up that contract. Got Whit Matlock an' Sport McAllister to sign it. Signed her name to it. And Judy Strang will keep her end of that bargain."

"Judy Strang would marry the man who killed her father?" asked Tyler.

"Yeah. It gives her the Bench M. Everything Whit Matlock and Sport McAllister has stolen. She's cold blooded thataway. Eh?"

"Cold blooded as hell."

"That's one weddin' I aim to attend," Little old Hank Jackson had grinned and patted the butt of his six-shooter. "I'll be packin' this widow-maker."

Now Judy Strang was on her way to Whetrock and her wedding. Old Hank Jackson had gone along—packing his widow-maker.

And Tyler Brooks was headed for town, burning inside with slow anger.

"Still a damn' sucker," Tyler Brooks told himself. But he kept on.

CHAPTER

4

Hourglass Jackpot

Only one of the Bench M cowhands had ridden away alive from that gun battle near the Hourglass ranch. He had followed McAllister's instructions and coyoted. And he had trailed Whit Matlock to the Hourglass ranch, and saw Whit Matlock get killed. Then he had hightailed it for town and taken the big news to Sport McAllister.

Sport McAllister was living up to his name. This would be the biggest wedding Whetrock ever witnessed. Free booze. A big barbecue. The wedding would take place right here in his Palace Saloon. He even had a parson. He'd been keeping this circuit rider preacher handy for months, feeding him, housing him, giving him free drinks.

The circuit rider was no ordained

minister. He was a grubline rider who preached ranting fire-and-brimstone sermons. And he was never sober when he could get hold of a jug.

McAllister had the circuit rider cleaned up and partly sobered. The Palace closed to customers while his bartenders and swampers got the place slicked up. Everything was ready, when the buckboard rattled down the street. But there was no cheering, no gaiety, in the crowd that lined both sides of the street. The citizens of Whetrock and the cowmen and cowpunchers, who gathered in town for the wedding, looked grim.

Judy Strang pulled up in front of the Palace. Her tanned face was dust powdered, a little pale. She kicked on the brake, and wrapped the lines around the whip socket.

"Here we are, Hank. And it looks like Sport McAllister is expecting us." Her voice sounded toneless.

Sport McAllister, dressed in his best tailored suit, came out of the Palace. Tall, slim, hard eyed, smiling thinly, he had his hat in his hand.

When he reached out to help Judy down she ignored it and jumped down. As she had driven down the length of the street her eyes had searched the crowd. She was watching for Tyler Brooks. She'd expected him to take the shortcut trail to town and beat the buckboard here. But there was no sign of him. And Judy Strang felt the cold dread of fear gripping her heart.

Looked like Tyler Brooks had pulled out of the game with his few dirty white chips. Not that she blamed him. But she'd hoped. Now that hope died. And in its place crept a cold anger and desperation. Old Hank was cussing in his creaky voice as two cowpunchers helped him from his tarp-covered bed at the back of the buckboard. Judy smiled thinly. She still had little old Hank Jackson to back her play.

Sport McAllister fancied himself as a ladies' man. And now he mistook her faint smile.

"You'll want to doll up, Judy. I've got your wedding gown and all the bridal trimmings at my place. Couple of Mexican women to help you. Hot bath ready. A bottle of champagne there on ice. Get the dust off. You'll make a beautiful bride. How long will it take—?"

"I'm ready. Hank Jackson will give the bride away. Trot out that booze-soaked preacher. Let's get it over with."

McAllister's handsome face colored. He started to say something but the look in her slate-gray eyes stopped him. He went poker faced.

"You're still the prettiest thing—"

"Save your breath," Judy cut him off.

Little old Hank Jackson hobbled in through the swinging doors. He used a pair of crude heavy crutches he had from some previous accident that had lamed him. He hadn't bothered to shave off the stubble of white whiskers. He and Judy were both dust powdered and the dust on their faces streaked with sweat. Both were in faded Levis. A cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter was buckled around the old cowman's lean flanks.

The crowd came in slowly, grimly, behind them. All men. They took their chairs quietly, their hats off.

This was not the way Sport McAllister had it planned. But it had to do. He stood, poker faced, beside Judy Strang. Hank Jackson was on her other side. And the almost-sober circuit rider stood on the raised platform a little above them.

Panic gripped Judy Strang. She fought it down. Her hands were clenched at her side. Her gray eyes were bleak as she listened to the nasal voice of the tipsy circuit rider.

Words pounded against her eardrums—her hope dying a little with each word spoken.

"... and if there be any man here who can show just cause why this man and this woman should not be joined together in the holy bonds of matrimony, let him speak now, or forever after hold his peace!"

"I'll call that bet!"

TYLER BROOKS stood just inside the swinging half-doors. His hat was slanted down across his eyes. His right hand was close to his gun.

There was a tense hush. Then old Hank Jackson yanked Judy aside. Men crouched low in their chairs. Tyler Brooks and Sport McAllister faced one another.

Sport McAllister's white teeth bared. "The sucker!" He slid his six-shooter from the shoulder holster under his blue serge coat.

Tyler Brooks pulled his gun with a swift smooth draw. It spat fire as it left the holster, a second before the gambler pulled his trigger. McAllister's bullet creased Tyler Brook's ribs but his legs were braced and he kept his balance. Brook's bullet struck McAllister in the neck just above his carefully knotted polka-dot tie. Blood spurted from the severed jugular and splashed down the front of his white shirt.

Tyler Brooks shot a second time and the heavy .45 slug bored a hole between the gambler's pale eyes. Sport McAllister's long legs buckled and he pitched headlong, dead when he hit the scrubbed floor.

The crashing roar of the two guns was deafening. The echoes hung, then silenced.

"Every weddin' I ever went to," creaked the voice of little old Hank Jackson, "when the preacher said them words, I always itched to rear up on my hind laigs an' holler."

That broke the tension. More than a few men had slid from their chairs to flatten out on the floor. They got up grinning sheepishly.

Brooks shoved his smoking gun into its holster. He was watching Judy. She was coming towards him. She had to step over and around the dead body of McAllister. Then she stood there close to him. Her slate-gray eyes were dark. The hardness was gone. Her smile was soft lipped, trembling at the corners of her mouth. Her voice barely audible:

"Rake in your jackpot, Tyler Brooks."

Tyler Brooks stood there, looking deep into Judy's eyes, searching for something. He must have found it, because he reached out and took her in his arms. Judy's arms went up around his neck and her lips crushed hard against his mouth.

"I love you, Judy," he whispered

Her moving lips gave him the answer.

Old Hank Jackson was waving the crowd of men towards the bar. Tyler Brooks led Judy Strang outside. Old Hank hobbled after them.

Whetrock boasted a one-storied adobe hotel. It was across the street from the Palace. They went over there.

Hank Jackson's leathery face spread in a grin. When the Mexican woman who ran the hotel came into the little lobby he jabbered at her rapidly in her own tongue.

She beamed and nodded and trotted out.

"There is a padre at the old Mission near here," Judy answered the puzzled look in Tyler's eyes. "Padre Juan will marry us. Hank sent word to him that we would be coming along as soon as the barn man hooks a fresh team of mules to the buckboard. Or is that crowding you too fast?"

"I've waited too long—" grinned Tyler Brooks—"a whole lifetime."

Judy said they'd have to wait until she bathed and changed into a decent dress. And a shave and slicking up wouldn't hurt Tyler and Hank. A wedding at the Mission was something different than that farce McAllister had fixed up with a drunken circuit rider in his Palace Saloon. And there would be a fiesta. Mexican music and a real barbecue and a baile where they all danced until everybody was too worn out to dance any longer.

Tyler Brooks said he wanted to clear up something right now. "I never hired out to McAllister. Never wore a law badge. Never was on the dodge. I just kinda blundered into this—" his arms went around her again—"and raked in the jackpot."

Judy was sitting beside him, gripping his hand tight. "McAllister and Whit Matlock murdered my Dad. I was going to kill McAllister when that drunken preacher finished—unless Hank Jackson beat me to it. . . . I didn't have a kindly thought in my heart—until you come in. . . . Now—I think I'm going to bawl."

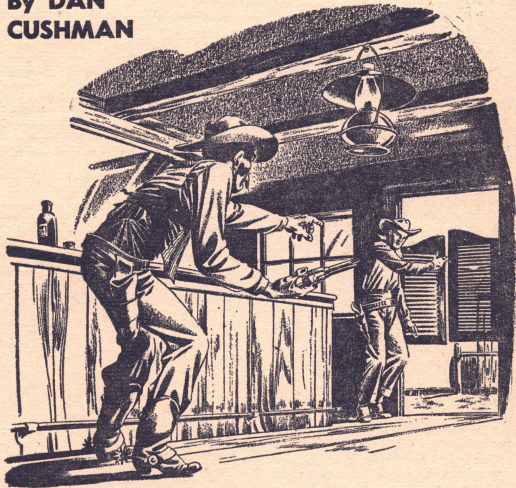
That was how Tyler Brooks from Miles City, Montana, got Judy for a wife, and the big Bench M for a cow outfit. They changed the brand to Hourglass.

Little old Hank Jackson was made ramrod of the big outfit. And whenever he hit town he took the horn tip from his pocket and with awl-sharp black horn tip he gouged the Hourglass deep into the polished mahogany bar at the Palace that now belongs to the Mexican family who own the hotel across the street. And no man dared interrupt the often repeated yarn he told about the sawing of that horn tip.

"Calico Jack still prowls the Whetrocks. And that spotted ox will roam forevermore. Older than them Whetrocks, is Hank Jackson an' Calico Jack. And too tough to die! Drink up! It's on the Hourglass!"

RABBLE SOLDIER'S PRIVATE REBELLION

By DAN
CUSHMAN



He snarled, "Shoot, you
yellow rebel—"

*Before road-agent apprentice Coe
could kick over the bloody traces of
his past, he had to spike his partner's
bland treachery.*

H E'D PICKED up the song in Abe-
line, and because it contained some
words about a "rabble soldier"
that seemed to fit him, Millard Coe liked to
whistle it.

He whistled it now as he crouched on his
booth heels, an extinct cigarette in his lips,
his narrowed blue-gray eyes watching the
stage road that wound like an uncoiled
snake across the light-dun Wyoming prairie

from Sage Creek bottoms to Point of Rocks.

Millard Coe was about thirty. Wind and sun had turned his skin to something resembling moccasin leather, had printed bird-track wrinkles at the outer corners of his eyes, had given his face a look of hard inflexibility. He was about six feet tall, slimmer than average but with strength lying in his sinewy body.

He moved suddenly, spitting out his cigarette and looking up at Tom Baker who stood beside him. "See it?"

Baker nodded very slowly without taking his eyes off the road.

Baker was older and smaller. He was dressed in cross-weave California pants, very neat small boots, a shirt of checkered linen. Less sinewy than Coe, he was more deft and quick with his movements.

He said, "Looks like they have the Concord coach on today instead of the old mud-wagon. Maybe that's a good omen."

The coach and its four horse team were at least three miles away, but so dustless was the rarified air a man could see them in excellent detail.

Baker looked over at Coe, showing his perfectly even teeth in a smile, "You seem pretty cool for a man on his first robbery."

Coe jerked his head back with a short laugh. "You an old hand at this business?"

"I've tried my hand at this and that—when the pasteboards weren't falling right." Baker touched a small mole at one side of his chin, and his long, tapered finger trembled just a little. "It's no worse to rob a man with a gun than it is with a legal paper, the way those Yankee cattle buyers robbed you."

"Don't worry about me backing out. I'm not losing my stomach for the business."

The coach crept up the rising bench country and disappeared beneath the steep brow of the hill half a mile away.

"Time for you uniform," Baker said.

Coe did not smile. He tossed aside his hat and draped a blanket over his head, capote fashion. It had been prepared especially for the task and covered him to his thighs. Arranged to hide his face was a black silk kerchief with eyeslits. Baker was similarly disguised.

"Better take off the ring," Baker said.

Coe twisted a heavy gold band from his finger. He inspected the loads in a ten

guage sawed-off. There were no further words between them. The thing had been planned and rehearsed. Foss Snavley, their informer, a young man who worked at the Stockman's Trust in Maverly, had told them about a good chunk of cattle buyer's greenbacks being expected on this coach. Now they planned to remove it as painlessly as possible.

A boulder had been levered over to block the way by Point of Rocks. Coe was to wait in a mass of rocks which would command the coach from above and behind; Baker would hide in a crevasse just beyond the road block. Baker figured it would be easy as killin' Injuns with trade-likker.

The coach seemed to stay from sight a long time. Coe crouched low, hidden by rocks. The afternoon sun shone on him, and it was hot inside the heavy, cotton blanket.

Suddenly shod hoofs clattered. There was a jingle of harness chains, a creak and rattle from the Concord coach. The sounds died, and came again louder than before. He could hear the driver whistling a bit of tune.

Coe crouched lower, for the driver on his high seat was almost even with the rocks. The coach passed beneath so closely that Coe could have leaped atop it had he wanted to.

There was a sudden stamp of horses coming to a stop. The driver cursed. They had turned the bend and almost stacked up on the boulder.

COE waited for the sharp, commanding voice of Tom Baker, but there was only the muttering apprehension of the driver. Staying down, he clutched the shotgun while seconds strung out one after another.

"What's wrong?" a man's voice asked.

The driver's boots sounded on the hard-baked earth. He bellowed:

"A couple o' you dudes will have to roll off the cushions and help me git this thing out of the way. Damned if I didn't think it was a holdup—but it must have rolled down from yonder."

Coe rose carefully, peering between two wind-rounded boulders. The coach had stopped thirty or forty feet away, and two men were out front, helping the driver roll

the rock away. But there was no sign of Tom Baker.

There were two still in the coach, an old man he had seen in Maverly, and a girl.

The girl was about twenty, and not of the kind one generally sees traveling in the West. She was not painted; there was none of the hard glitter. Her face was lovely beneath the white kerchief which was tied around her bonnet to keep off the dust.

She lifted a finger to touch her chin, and Coe had a sudden feeling that he had seen her before. The movement, though not her face, was familiar. He tried to place it.

When she glanced around, her eyes seemed to be meeting his. He stayed unmoving, realizing she was actually looking at the sculptured sandrock pillars beyond.

It took only half a minute for the boulder to be moved aside. The driver resumed his seat, rolled out his long lash, and the coach dropped quickly from sight on the downgrade toward Maverly.

The hooded form of Tom Baker emerged from the cravasse. He walked forward, watching its disappearing roof.

"What the hell?" Coe asked, clambering down, stripping off the oppressive blanket-hood. His face was lined with anger.

Baker turned to face him. He answered, sounding short of breath, "Damn it—I couldn't."

"You lost your guts."

"No. There was a reason. Not with—"

"With what?"

"None of your damned business."

The two men faced each other, and the receding clip-clop of hoofs came over the tense silence.

"Let's not quarrel about it, Coe."

"All right." Coe shrugged, and his voice was once more a soft drawl. "Maybe next time it'll be my turn to back down. Or have you reformed?"

Baker forced a short laugh in answer to the question, rolled his sawed-off shotgun in the blanket, and cached it in a natural cave formed by three slide-rocks. He caught his horse and waited impatiently for Coe. Then, leading the way, he struck out cross-country for Maverly.

The coach was less than a quarter-mile ahead of them when they reached the scattering outskirt shacks of town. Baker reined in at Latouche's Livery Stable and

watched it roll to a stop before the express office.

Coe asked, "What in the devil's wrong?" "Not a damned thing!" Then, toning down, he added, "There was somebody in the coach. A fellow. He'd have recognized me, blanket or not. That's why I couldn't go through with it."

Coe hooked one knee over the horn and with strong, tanned fingers fashioned a cigarette. "Was it that fellow in the black hat?"

Baker didn't answer. His jaw was hard, his eyes narrowed as he watched people unload from the coach. Several minutes passed while the teams were being changed and the driver was having his station drink.

"Did he leave?" Coe asked, when the coach rolled out of town.

"Did who leave? Oh—that fellow. Yes, he left." Baker rode inside the livery stable, dismounted, and tossed the reins to an hostler.

"I'll see you tonight," Coe said.

Baker was so preoccupied he didn't even hear. Coe watched him leave, and then walked down a succession of platform side-walks and climbed to his room in the Montana House.

The room was tiny, with a window overlooking the tar-papered roof of a Chinese washee. He flopped down on the sagging, iron bed, tossing his hat to one side, sweat sticking to his scalp where the hatband had been. On the unpainted pine door a few feet away someone had written in lead:

*Oh girls of loose morals
I've known you of old,
You've robbed my poor pockets
Of silver and gold.*

*Johnny Lane—the Fadaya Kid
July 3, 1872*

Coe had lived in the room for two weeks without noticing the lines before. He thought how it jolted a man when he saw a pretty woman not of their number. That girl in the coach, for instance. He closed his eyes, trying to remember her face, but it escaped him. She had not been aboard when the coach rolled northward toward Miles City.

He washed up, carefully combed his hair, and went downstairs. The lobby of the Montana was in deep, late-evening shadow, smelling of floor oil and supper. The grub bell jingled and he went inside the dining

room. He expected to see the girl come in for supper, but she didn't.

He finished, and after a while went upstairs to Baker's room. He started to rap, and the door swung to his touch. He inhaled sharply and stood, very straight.

LOOKING at him, her lovely face full in the lamplight, was the girl of the stagecoach. "Were you looking for Mr. Baker?" she asked.

"Yes." He quickly swept off his hat. "I'll come back—"

"He went down to get me some supper." She stepped to one side in order to get a better view of his face. She must have found it reassuring, for she said, "He won't be long if you'd like to wait."

She seemed to realize that he might think her being there strange. "I'm Linda Baker, Mr. Baker's daughter. I just got in on the stagecoach."

"I never knew Tom had a family," Coe said, leaning against the door casing.

"I'm the only one—now."

"Reckon he was mighty pleased to see you."

She hesitated. "I've wanted to come West for—well, since last year, anyway. He wouldn't let me—said I had to go through school." She smiled. "I got a letter from him saying he was here at Maverly, so I just picked up and came without saying anything. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Yes, Ma'am. I guess it was sure enough a surprise."

In the silence that followed he could hear the clatter of dishes being washed in the kitchen below.

"You're well acquainted with my father?" she asked.

"Pretty well."

"What does he do?" She seemed overtaken by embarrassment. "What is his line of work, that is?"

"He—didn't tell you?"

"No."

"Why, he's sort of in the coach business. It makes him travel around some. I guess that's why he didn't fancy havin' you come out—right now."

Coe broke a second silence by saying, "You'd still be in time for supper in the dinin' room, Miss Baker."

"I couldn't go *there*."

"Why not, Ma'am?"

"It's not—well, Dad said it wasn't for women. Not for—"

"Not for decent folks? I guess he thought you were too tired to go down. It ain't painted up like dinin' rooms back East, I guess, but it's respectable."

"I couldn't go." She indicated her travel-weary dress. "Not in this."

"Just like you are you're the prettiest girl in Maverly."

She made a little, deprecating gesture and tried to look irked, but her pleasure showed through. Coe was obviously sincere.

He said, "You'd better come along. We'll catch Tom downstairs and have a bite together. We're partners, sort of, Tom and I—" He stopped, hearing Baker's boots on the uncarpeted stairs.

"What do you want?" Baker asked in a brittle tone when he saw him standing there.

Coe answered softly, "Just business, Tom, but it can wait."

"All right then, let it!" He stepped to one side waiting for Coe to leave the room. Coe didn't seem to notice.

"I was just tellin' Miss Baker she ought to come downstairs to supper. It's a heap pleasanter than eatin' up here in the room."

Baker walked inside. He looked at his daughter and decided to smile. "You'd like to, wouldn't you?" His words were a reluctant admission of what he saw in her face.

She nodded.

"All right. The rough crowd seems to have pulled out now."

The dining room was dim and quiet. A Chinaboy was preparing a tray to carry upstairs, but instead set places at one end of a long table. There was the regular stewed beef, dumplings and canned tomatoes—and later a special delicacy, leaf lettuce with vinegar and honey.

"You'll like it here in Wyoming," Coe was saying. "It looks like desert at first, but after a couple months it sort of gets in your blood—"

Baker snapped his long silence. "Linda is not staying in Wyoming."

She said, "Dad doesn't think this is any place for me. Not for a decent woman."

Coe said, "Then I reckon it's about time for it to commence reformin' itself."

She responded eagerly, "Really, every-

one has treated me so nice! I don't want to go back."

"Maybe you can talk Tom into letting you hang around a few weeks, just to see how it works out."

"She's going back!"

Tom Baker half rose from his chair. The eyes he fastened on Coe were hard as quartz. Coe simply smiled and waited for Baker to sit down. He tapped the edge of Linda's salad dish and said:

"Reckon you don't realize how these Western folks are caterin' to you, Miss Linda. Right in front of you there you got just about Wyoming's whole lettuce crop. The cook raised that out back and packed water to irrigate it. Reckon he pulled it up by the roots to get enough for that dishful."

NEXT morning Millard Coe stood in the window of his room, looking down on the southbound coach as it lurched from town, leaving a slowly settling veil of dust. Linda was not in it.

He went below to the Chinese washee, changed to a freshly laundered shirt, and left his soiled one behind. He returned to the hotel porch, sitting with boot heels hoisted on the rail.

The girl must have been watching for him; she came out half a minute later. She looked lovelier and younger in her fresh cotton dress and sunbonnet.

"I was going to walk to that hill," she said, pointing to a little rise of ground between the town and the brushy bottoms of Maverly Creek.

"Then I reckon I'll go along."

They spoke only a few words in walking the length of the street.

"Guess you're going to stay after all?"

"Dad's going to let me stay a few days. Then I'll have to go. He says there's nothing I can do here, and his business takes him around a lot. What *did* you say his business was?"

"Why, it's sort of the coach business. I'm his partner. Coaches carry money and such, you know, and there's them which would steal it. We sort of keep watch on the trail and check on suspicious characters. Insurance. But secret, Miss Linda. You can see how it might be if them robbin' folks knew what we was about. They might see to it we didn't bother 'em. Now I guess you understand why your dad hasn't talked much about the business he was in."

She seemed fully satisfied with the explanation.

* * *

That night when Coe was getting ready for bed, the door opened and Baker walked in. He closed the door and stood nervously plucking at the pearl handle of his pistol.

"I've always liked you, Millard," he said, unexpectedly calling Coe by his first name.

"And I've liked you too, Tom."

"I can't blame you for feeling a certain way about Linda. You're young, and she's young—"

"Go right ahead and say it."

"All right, it's this. You're not the marrying kind, and you never will be. You're a drifter. You'd never be any good for a girl like Linda."

Coe sat on the bed, rubbing a burned match stick back and forth with his pointed boot toe.

"You must see that it would never do."



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! ★

Coe didn't answer.

"We're still friends, aren't we?" Baker asked.

"Sure, Tom. Still friends."

* * *

She was standing on the hotel porch next morning, the slanting sun very bright on her starched dress and rolled-up parasol. He went out the back way and was gone until evening. It was night of the day following when he accidentally met her on the stairs.

"Mr. Coe! I saw Mr. Graves, and he has hired me as the new school teacher."

"Linda!" It was the first time he had called her just that, but it seemed to fall naturally from his lips. "I'm not sure I was right in asking you to stay. This town—it's just a rough-tough dust hole on the prairie. It's no place for a girl like you."

"It is the place for me!" The unexpected fierceness of her tone made him stop. "I'd like to teach school here. I'd like to stay here!"

"I didn't know there were any kids in town."

"There are six—all of them growing up without knowing how to add two and two, unless it's by counting the spots on cards."

"This is no country for you," he repeated doggedly.

"But you yourself said—"

"I don't care what I said. I wanted you to stay because—" He stopped, unwilling to say it.

"Why did you want me to stay?" she asked, with all sharpness gone from her voice.

"It was because of me. Because I liked you."

She was standing very straight, smiling up at him. "You *do* like me, don't you?"

"Yes. But it doesn't make any difference. Don't look at me like that. I'm a drifter. I'm a part of this no-good country, too—"

She didn't seem to be listening. He tried to go past and leave her there, but instead he was drawn by a force stronger than his will. He seized her two shoulders and drew her close in his arms.

Her lips were willing, and he kissed them. After many seconds in the dimly lit hall, he let her go.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She remained close, her hands clutching the front of his blue shirt.

A door suddenly opened, sending a shaft of lamplight along the hall.

"Linda!" Tom Baker stood in the door, looking at them. She released the front of Coe's shirt and stepped back. Baker walked up, his hard heels loud on the uncarpeted floor.

"Oh!" he said, as though recognizing them for the first time. "It's you!"

"I'd better go," Linda said, and ran to her room.

Baker stood for a few seconds, staring at Coe. His face seemed to be hollow and old. He would have turned away without speaking.

"Tom!" Coe said to him.

"Yes?"

"Don't get the wrong idea. I been keeping out of her way. Just now I tried to tell her this was no country for her."

"I understand," Baker said, the velvet softness of his voice contrasting with his savage eyes. "I understand how it is, Millard."

Coe went to his room. His nerves were jagged. He poured a drink of water from the pitcher. It was warm and stale and slightly bitter of alkali. The faint scent of Linda's perfume still clung to him. He thought of Tom Baker—of the tone of his voice. There had been a rattlesnake quality in its sleekness.

HE DIDN'T sleep well that night. He went down next morning just when the hotel bar opened.

"Eye opener?" asked the beefy-faced barkeep.

"Just a pony of beer."

The barkeep shrugged and filled a tiny glass. "Reformed?" he asked, grinning.

Coe sat in the lobby, waiting for Linda to come to breakfast. Her face was worried. She hurried toward him.

"It's Dad. He left last night right after you saw him. I was worried when he didn't come back. I went down looking for him. He was at a place called the Last Chance—"

"You went there *alone*?"

She nodded. "I saw him through the window. He was drinking. There was

something about him—I don't know what it was. I was afraid—"

"You'd better have some breakfast."

"But my own father. A person shouldn't be afraid of her own father."

After breakfast he hired a rig and took her driving. Shortly after noon, Coe walked into the lobby where the clerk handed him a note. He glanced at his name written on the outside in Tom Baker's excellent hand.

I'm waiting in your room. Important.

That was all. He twisted it to a tight roll and slipped it in his pocket. He climbed the stairs. His door was closed. He walked to it quietly, and flung it open. Tom Baker was standing with hands clasped behind him, looking from the window.

He turned and met Coe's gaze. He'd been drinking, but was not drunk.

"Hello, Millard," Baker said, controlling his voice. "Something has come up. Something big. Come in and close the door."

"What is it?"

"I just saw Foss Snaveley. He tells me those cattle buyers are expecting a big wad of cash. From Cheyenne. Ten thousand, maybe. The afternoon coach. Foss will have a wagon hitched back of the bank. You just get in the seat and drive down the creek road. I'll be hidden under the tarp in the box.

"We can hide the wagon and ride bareback to Point of Rocks. That way nobody will suspect. We'll pull it off the same as we planned before, only this time you'll be out front and I'll take over from above." Baker smiled, rubbing the mole on his chin. "Ten thousand dollars, Coe."

"I'm not going in on it, Tom."

It seemed to take a moment for the words to register. "You're not going in on it! What the devil do—"

"Listen. Providence in the form of a girl stepped in the other day and saved me from being a coach robber. I've thought it over considerable since then. I ain't aimin' to spoil it now."

Baker tensed forward, palms rubbing the thighs of his tailored pants. "Damn you! You can't back out now."

"It's no use, Tom."

"The influence of a good woman did this!" Baker sneered. "It dragged you up from the gutter. You're in love with her,

and she's in love with you. And you expect to live happily ever after. With *you*. Do you think you can wash blood off your hands like that? You're a killer, and you have a dead man in Miles City to prove it—"

"I was cheated by a Yankee in a cattle deal, and he sent his gunman around to get me when I raised trouble. I shot him in self defense—"

"You're a killer and a drifter. You got a sawed-off shotgun and a blanket with eye-holes in it hid up on Point of Rocks. Do you think that makes you a fit man for that girl?"

Coe didn't answer.

Baker's voice became a tense, snarling whisper, "It won't do, Coe! It's enough for her to have a gunman for a father, she won't have one for a husband too—"

There was a rustle of movement in the hall. A moment later Linda's voice called, "Dad! Are you in there, Dad?"

He opened the door. "What do you want?"

"Dad—" She paused, shocked by the expression of his face. "What's the matter, Dad?"

"Go to your room."

She didn't move.

"Go to your room!" he shouted.

She turned and went without another word. Baker watched his daughter leave, then strode away.

Coe stood in the middle of the tiny room, looking at his reflection in the rusty bit of mirror nailed over the wash basin. He saw a hard face, embittered. "*It's enough for her to have a gunman for a father, she won't have one for a husband, too.*" Those had been Baker's words. He was right.

He sat on the bed and his eyes once again traveled to the bullet-scrawled words:

*Oh girls of loose morals
I've known you of old. . . .*

They were the proper women for him. He remembered other lines:

*I ride the wild prairie
I ride it alone,
I'm an old rabble soldier
And Dixie's my home.*

He stood up suddenly as though this time the familiar words carried some spe-

cial message to him. He went downstairs.

"Pony beer?" asked the bartender.

"Rye."

The bartender laughed. "It's like I always said, there's two things you can't reform—a redheaded woman and a Texas man."

Coe tossed down one drink, and poured another, letting it stand a while. There was a shot-up clock back of the bar with its pendulum swinging. Twenty-five past two. He wondered if Baker would try playing a lone hand against that coach.

AS SHADOWS from Maverly's false-fronted buildings commenced reaching across the street, Coe came to a decision. He turned abruptly away from the bar, and climbed to his room where he commenced tossing things in his canvas warbag. He jerked the drawstrings tight, hoisted it on his shoulder, and walked down the hall.

He saw her then, just entering the front door. The hurt and scared expression on her face was like a dull knife in his heart.

She came close enough to touch the front of his shirt. Her eyes rested on the warbag. She asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm—goin'. North. To Montana. There's considerable country up yonder."

She was too shocked to say anything.

He pulled himself roughly away. "I'd be no good for you. Your father told you I was a killer, didn't he?"

She looked in his eyes and slowly shook her head. "No. I don't believe—"

"I killed a man. In Miles City. He came into a hotel like this. I drew my gun and shot him. He died half an hour later on a table in the back room—"

"No! Don't say those things. I don't—"

"And that's not all. I'm a road agent. A thief. I lied when I told you I was in the detective business. I was up there at Point of Rocks, hiding, waiting to rob the coach that afternoon you came. I helped roll that rock in the way."

"You didn't do anything though. You didn't rob it."

He laughed. He turned away from her, walked to the desk and hammered for the clerk. He paid his bill and strode outside. The stagecoach was just rolling in.

He noticed there were four passengers inside—all of them men. They climbed out at the express office platform, sawed-off shotguns on their arms. Coe walked up

just in time to see the sheriff hurry up.

A man with a heavy black moustache broke his sawed-off shotgun and dug out the cartridges. "False alarm," he growled. "They either got wise to us, or else Tom Baker was lying."

Coe carefully leaned his warbag against the building. He stepped to the edge of the sidewalk and looked inside the coach. Two shots had been cut through the front, just beneath the driver's seat. The slots were just large enough to accommodate shotgun barrels. It would be simple for men to wait inside and mow down any road agent who stepped into their line of vision.

He remembered Tom Baker's words, "Only this time you'll be out front and I'll take over from above." He had planned to sneak off, leaving Coe to die in a hail of buckshot.

Coe's eyes became slitted and hard. His jaw was set, his face looked unusually hollow beneath prominent cheek bones. His hand rested on the gun at his hip.

Men were stringing along the sidewalk, headed for the express office. He walked against the crowd. Men moved to make way for him and stared at his face as he went by. He reached the Last Chance, knowing that Baker would be there.

COE went inside. The sun was shining against two alley windows, making it hard to see in the deep, shadowy interior. He paused and located Tom Baker standing alone at the far end of the bar.

Coe said, "I just met the coach, Tom."

Baker smiled with his teeth. He was tense, his thumb hooked in the band of his California pants. The butt of his pearl-handled .41 pistol showed in its holster.

Coe had seen him draw and knew that that right hand was fast and certain as the head of an uncoiling snake.

Feet thumped swiftly on the platform sidewalk. They came close, and a shadow cut the light at the door. Baker's expression made Coe spin around.

Linda stood in the door.

"Get out of here!" Baker cried.

She did not move. Baker turned to the house man. "Johnson. This is no place for that girl. See to it she leaves."

Johnson, a slow, hulking man, didn't quite know what to do. He took Linda's arm, and she twisted away.

"Millard!" she cried.

Coe did nothing. He stood as he was, muscles knotted at the sides of his jaw, watching Johnson force her outside.

Linda's sudden appearance had unnerved Baker a little, but his hand still hovered over the gun, his deep-set feverish eyes were still on Coe.

"You came here to kill me, didn't you?" He laughed. "Why, you cheap gunhawk. Go ahead—if you have guts enough."

Coe's hand swung toward the pistol at his hip. As he made the movement, he realized how futile it was. He couldn't outdraw Baker. He couldn't kill him if he did. Not her father.

Baker saw the movement, hesitated a bare fraction of time, then he unholstered the .41 with a movement swift and deadly. The gun angled up, its muzzle ripping flame, concussion hammering the room.

His bullet was wild, driving through the door transom above Coe's head.

Coe stopped, his gun drawn. He looked down at the heavy, blue-steel Colt as though he had never seen it before.

Baker waited. He snarled, "Shoot, you yellow rebel!"

Coe knew that Baker had deliberately aimed high, expecting to be shot down. Baker knew he'd never be able to go back to Linda with that kind of blood on his hands.

With a numbed movement, Coe dropped the gun back in its holster. He turned.

"You coward!" Baker screamed at him. He fired again, the bullet brushing the broad brim of Coe's hat. He kept cursing but the words beat without meaning on Coe's eardrums.

Coe went outside and walked along the

succession of high and low platform side-walks. He noticed his warbag leaning against the front of the express office. He hoisted it to his shoulder.

Linda ran up beside him. "You didn't—kill him!"

"No."

He thought she was going to collapse. She steadied herself. "You're going?"

"Yes."

She made no sound of weeping, but there were tears on her cheeks.

He got hold of himself and said, "Linda. You couldn't love a man like me. Not a man with a notch in his gun and a handkerchief with eyeslits in it."

"You're not a road agent." She had hold of his shirt sleeve, pulling to make him look at her. "I know why you're not. It's because of me. That's why you wouldn't go with my father today."

"How did you know that?"

"I heard what you were saying up there in your room."

"You mean you could love me—still knowing the things you do?"

Instead of answering directly, she said, "I'm leaving. On the coach. Tonight. Dad won't know where I'm going."

He looked at her, and hope drained from his face. "Oh," he said dully.

"I'm going to Cheyenne."

He watched her turn and almost run as she crossed the street, her slippers deep in Wyoming dust. He walked on to the livery.

"I better pay off," he said to Louie Latouche.

"Driftin'?" asked Latouche.

Coe smiled.

"Driftin'," he said. "Maybe I'll see how things are—in Cheyenne."

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CONESTOGA GETS

John Stafford knew people thought he was afraid to face sadistic, bullying Doc Fleck—but the fear gnawing inside him was not of Fleck's guns . . . but his own.



THE cry of pain was sharp and uncontrollable. There was terror woven through it, which intensified its ugliness. It came from the doorway of the Open Trail Saloon, and it halted the two riders passing by.

John Stafford swung his rangy, mustard-colored gelding toward the hitching rail, worn thin in places by the teeth of many horses. His nephew, Dave, wheeled his paint pony in the same direction.

The cry came out again, followed by hoarse, tumbling words, "No, Doc! No, no!"

John Stafford swung himself to the ground, and his saddle-weary legs were still springy as they took his weight, two hundred pounds of it. He was wide of shoulder, slim of hip. His face was broad and amiable, with wrinkles at the corners of his lips from smiling. But he wasn't smiling now. His eyes, a powder blue, were sober, watchful.

He let them move about, recording what they saw; the other horses at the rack, and particularly the buckboard. Hay had been piled in the wagon bed, and blankets had been spread across the hay. He had seen the arrangement many times before. The imprint of a body was still visible, and the mustangs hatched to the buckboard were latter-splotched, still breathing heavily.

Dave started to step down. He was a wiry youngster of thirteen with alert gray eyes and cleanly moulded features. His uncle stopped.

"No, Dave. Stay put. I'll look things over first."

John Stafford entered the saloon. His big hands checked, unconsciously, the position of his gun belt, and his fingers slid across the walnut handle of his Colt. He brought them away swiftly, grunting with irritation at the quick tingle which had traveled up his arm.

It was dim inside. He tilted back the

Stetson which had protected his eyes from the glare of the Montana sun. It was several moments before his pupils could expand sufficiently to let him see the things about him clearly, and when the picture formed, he felt a tautness in his muscles.

He couldn't understand his wariness at first, then gradually he knew the feeling was imparted by the atmosphere about him. It was frozen to a stiffness which appeared to stem from hate and horror. An undertone of fear was also there.

Stafford saw nothing, at first glance, to justify this. The outward aspects of the scene were ordinary enough from Stafford's standpoint. A cowpoke, the man who had been yelling, was stretched on a faro table. His right leg was bare, swollen from a bad infection. A small wound had obviously been neglected, and his friends, in last-minute panic, had rushed him into the town of Conestoga for belated medical attention.

A scattered group of townfolk and a few cowhands were watching from a careful distance, and the set expressions on their faces could hardly have been caused by the mere sight of an infected leg. Their emotions had a deeper root.

Stafford began to get a partial answer when he studied the man who stood beside the injured cow hand. He was a small man in a rusty black frock coat, obviously the local doctor. But not until John Stafford got a clear look at the doctor's face did he begin to understand the tension in the room.

The features of the doctor's face were sharp and evil. His thin lips smiled. His pale blue eyes were filled with pleasure, a greedy, sadistic joy. John Stafford felt repugnance creeping through him, but he held it down and kept his senses clear.

He saw the doctor reach long fingers toward the swollen leg. His fingers closed about the spot, and then contracted viciously. The cowboy blubbered curses. John Stafford winced, accustomed as he was to

A SIXGUN SURGEON



seeing ranchmen cry out in pain.

The doctor said in a soft voice, almost musical: "You see? I'll have to take it off—a beautiful, clean job. We'll do it now. It's dangerous to wait."

"For God's sake, no!" the cowboy plead once more. The watchers remained silent, hypnotized.

No one had seen John Stafford yet. They had all been too intent upon the doctor and his patient. Stafford started toward the faro table. Those who saw him made no comment. The doctor was the last to see

His Colt was level when it
thundered. . . .

By
**JACKSON V.
SCHOLZ**

him. He didn't turn until John Stafford said:

"The leg looks sound. I'm sure that amputation won't be necessary. I happen to be a doctor, too, and I've saved worse legs than that."

The doctor wheeled with slow deliberation. His eyes seemed paler at close range, obsidian, hard, brittle. They studied Stafford carefully, and Stafford felt their force, completely venomous and ruthless. The doctor said:

"Indeed? A colleague, eh? My name is Doctor Fleck."

"Mine's Stafford."

"Probably I heard wrong, but did you dispute my diagnosis?"

Fleck spread his words, as thin as smoke, upon the air. There was more implied by them than challenge. It was the warning of a diamondback. Fleck's coat had fallen back as if by accident. A gun butt was exposed. John Stafford watched him carefully, and felt the heady stimulus of danger.

THE feeling frightened him with its sharp warning, but he dared not pay attention to the warning at the moment. He was a doctor by profession and by instinct. He could save a man from being crippled uselessly for life. He said:

"I didn't hear your diagnosis. I merely heard you say you intended to amputate the leg. I say it isn't necessary. I can save it."

John Stafford's hand was dangling at his side, his muscles loose, his senses tuned. The instant hung suspended by the filmiest of cobwebs—another word, another breath, the flicker of an eyelash.

Fleck said: "The operation first, my friend—you later. You may call it vanity if you wish, but I intend to let you watch a master at his trade. Hobb will take care of you in the meantime. All right, Hobb!"

Stafford reasoned instantly that Fleck was trying to throw him off guard by one of the oldest tricks in the game. Stafford didn't fall for it, didn't let his concentration waver for the fraction of a second. He was taken completely by surprise, therefore, when a pair of huge arms wrapped around him from behind, and tightened like the coils of a boa constrictor.

Stafford acted through swift instinct. There was bound to be a head above the arms, so he brought his own head back with

all the explosive power of his neck muscles. He felt it smash against a face. He heard a grunt of pain, and felt the expulsion of hot breath on his neck.

The arms about his body slackened briefly, and before they could draw tight again, Stafford, with a violent jerk, was able to free his arms. His hands flashed up and back. His fingers locked behind the neck of the man who held him, and the rest was comparatively easy.

He dropped into a crouch and heaved with muscle-cracking force. There was a critical instant when the ponderous weight behind him wouldn't budge. And then it came, slowly at first, then with increasing speed as Hobb's feet left the floor.

The big man's body crossed John Stafford's shoulders in a hurtling arc. Stafford had not intended to use Hobb's body as a weapon, but that's the way it happened. The whole thing occurred with such speed that Fleck was trapped beneath the avalanche of human flesh. Hobb's bulk crashed down on him and knocked him flat. The momentum of Hobb's flight spun him past Fleck's sprawled figure on the floor.

The finish of Stafford's mighty heave found him on his hands and knees. He saw Fleck clawing for his gun.

The only part of Fleck's anatomy within John Stafford's reach was Fleck's left foot. Stafford grabbed it in both hands, and jerked with all his strength. He heard a muffled snap, and then Fleck's scream. Stafford knew, with detached professional interest, that he had yanked Fleck's right hip from its socket, but Fleck's gun was out, a matter of immediate concern.

Fleck fired an instant late. Stafford's fingers were about Fleck's wrist, and the bullet slammed into the ceiling. With his free hand, Stafford tore the gun from the snarling doctor's fingers. He sent the weapon slithering across the floor.

He saw Hobb scrambling to his feet, apparently not injured. He saw Hobb reach for his empty holster. The gun had flown out during Hobb's journey through the air. John Stafford pulled his own sixgun and tossed it to a nearby cowhand. Hobb's face lit up with satisfaction.

He was a flat-faced, ugly brute, with the low forehead of an ape, and piggy eyes. His lips peeled back to show his yellow teeth. He made low noises in his throat,

then rushed at Stafford, swinging mighty fists.

John Stafford stepped inside the first great curving slash, and drove two wicked blows into Hobb's barrel body. His fists sank deep into Hobb's belly—found it soft. Hobb gagged, then tried to lock his crushing arms about John Stafford's body.

But Stafford wasn't there. He moved outside the grabbing arms, and flashed a right against Hobb's jaw. It was like hitting the tail-board of a chuck wagon. It barely rocked Hobb's head.

Hobb swung a wild blow which would have torn Stafford's head from his shoulders if it had landed. It didn't. Stafford ducked and let it whistle past. Then from the braced position of his crouch he thundered two more blows into Hobb's belly.

Hobb couldn't take it there. His breath whooshed out. His face turned green, his eyes went glassy, and he pawed the air. He made a final lunging effort to get Stafford in his arms, but he ran unto a savage, lifting blow, and uppercut with all of Stafford's strength behind it. Hobb swayed for a senseless moment on his feet, then crashed head first into the floor. His body twitched a moment, then went limp.

JOHN STAFFORD hauled a deep breath in his lungs, and looked about. He was prepared for almost anything other than the stunned and almost bovine silence of the watchers. They watched him with disbelieving eyes, as if a miracle had happened. He caught the cautious approval in their expressions, it is true, but heard no words of commendation. He saw the swift glances shot toward the fallen sawbones, lying pale and malevolent on the floor, and then John Stafford knew that every man in the saloon was vitally afraid of Fleck.

Stafford shrugged. "Two of you hold Fleck's shoulders while I pull his hip back in its socket."

Two men hastened to obey. Stafford pulled the hip in place. Fleck sweated, paled, but made no sound. His chill eyes never left John Stafford's face.

Hobb came to about that time. He climbed groggily to his feet. Stafford said, "Get out!", and Hobb, still semiconscious, left the saloon like a docile horse.

"Better get Fleck out of here, too," suggested Stafford. "He ought to be in bed."

Fleck, still silent, was carried away gingerly by four men. Stafford then turned his attention to the cowboy with the infected leg.

Before he had a chance to make an examination, the man said: "Look, Doc. My name's Jim Teal, and if you ever need a man to do a favor for ya, yuh better give me first chance or I'll drygulch ya."

Stafford grinned and said: "It's a deal, Jim. Now let me see that leg."

He examined it gently, and confirmed his first opinion. "Not as serious as it looks. I'll have to drain it, but it hadn't ought to lay you up for long."

He turned to the others who were grouped, now, about the table, in sharp contrast to their attitudes toward Fleck. There was open friendliness in their faces now. He said to the men who were obviously Teal's friends:

"Move him to a hotel room. I'll fix him up there. Then I can keep an eye on him for awhile."

Another man spoke up. "I'm Hodge, Sam Hodge. I own the hotel. I got a room for you, too, Doc, and it won't cost you a cent."

Stafford looked at Hodge and liked him. He was a bald, weather-beaten man of undeterminable age. He had a withered leg, and Stafford pegged him as an old cowhand no longer able to spend hours in the saddle. A horse had probably rolled on him.

Stafford grinned again, and said: "Thanks, Mister. Let's get going."

He settled Teal in a hotel room, and deftly went about the job of reducing the infection. His nephew acted as assistant, a work in which, to Stafford's pleasure, Dave showed intelligent and active interest. Stafford wanted him to be a doctor, and up to now the prospects looked quite bright. As an orphan, Dave was Stafford's ward, and Stafford, though only twenty-nine himself, regarded his brother's child almost as his own son.

When Teal was resting comfortably, Sam Hodge showed Dave and Stafford to another room. Hodge showed a reluctance to depart at once, so Stafford took advantage of his hesitancy.

"Sit down, Sam," he invited. "And tell me what I walked into today."

Hodge eased himself to a seat upon the creaking bed and said, "A mess."

Dave, rigid with curiosity, could hold it in no longer.

"Uncle John," he blurted, "what happened in the bar?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out, Kid," Stafford told him. "A big ox jumped me and I had to cool him off." He turned to Hodge. "How about it, Sam? What's wrong with this Conestoga town?"

"Doc Fleck. The man ain't human. He loves pain, loves to watch it, loves to cause it."

"I caught that much today," said Stafford.

"He loves to cut and saw through bones. It's almost like he's *got* to do it, just like most people got to eat. You saw him back in the saloon. He couldn't *wait* to cut Teaf's leg off. There're too many people around here without hands, feet and fingers, and a good doctor could've saved more than half of 'em."

"The man sounds crazy," Stafford said. "Crazy?" Hodge said mildly. "Sure he's crazy. Crazy as a locoed steer."

John Stafford thought this over as he rolled a cigarette. He pulled the Durham sack closed with his teeth, tucked it in the pocket of his shirt. He lighted the cigarette, took a couple of deep drags and said:

"I feel sort of foolish making such an obvious suggestion, but why don't you get rid of him? Or, more sensibly, why *can't* you get rid of him?"

"Any town of this size needs a doctor. Doc Fleck's a damn good one in his way. He's good on fevers and bullet holes—unless the holes are bad enough so he thinks he's got to do some cuttin'. Yeah, Conestoga needs a doctor. But"—he shrugged—"we'd rather get along without one than to have Doc Fleck."

Stafford eased smoke through his nose and waited.

HODGE ran a hand across his bald head and went on. "As for getting rid of him, we're scared to try. Conestoga's a peaceful town. We ain't got any gun fighters—no one who can stand up to Fleck. He's greased lightning. Next to cuttin' he enjoys shootin'. He used to supply plenty of his own patients, but no one goes against him now. He's got us buffaloed, Doc, and that's a fact."

John Stafford asked, "The man Hobb?"

"Hobb Krantz. A sort of half-wit, who obeys Doc Fleck like a dog. Hobb's good with a sixgun too, but he'd rather use his fists. He's valuable to Doc Fleck because he keeps Fleck pretty well supplied with customers." He eyed Stafford speculatively, and said, "Nobody around here's ever seen Hobb licked before. You'd be a good man to have around. Why don't you settle down in Conestoga?"

"No, thanks," said Stafford promptly. "I'll admit I've been looking for a town like this to settle in, but I want a peaceful town. This isn't it."

"The way things stand right now, it ain't," admitted Hodge. He passed a thoughtful hand across his head again and said, "We need a doctor bad, someone who ain't crazy. Didn't I hear someplace that all doctors had to take an oath to do their honest best to help people who needed 'em?"

Stafford shot him a quick, resentful look, realizing Hodge was applying pressure where it hurt. Stafford nodded, saying:

"The Hippocratic oath."

"Well?" asked Hodge.

A cold breath of premonition passed across John Stafford. He felt its chill, and felt the perspiration form upon his forehead. Hodge saw the symptoms, interpreted them in his own way, and tactfully averted his eyes. There was no implied criticism in the gesture. He had seen men react that way before to the very thought of the malignant Fleck. Hodge apparently did not blame Stafford in the least for a very natural reluctance to face the fury of Doc Fleck.

Stafford shot a glance at Dave, met the steady, appraising eyes of his nephew, and felt the chill along his spine increase. He exhaled smoke gustily.

"I'll have to stay for a few days, anyway. I'll have to keep an eye on that infection for Teaf."

Hodge nodded and said mildly, "That's fine, Doc. We'll be glad to have you—even for a little while."

He left the room. Stafford and his nephew sat awhile in silence. Stafford stared at his big hands sightlessly, then finally, with an effort, raised his eyes. He was briefly shocked at the expression of subdued amusement on Dave's face. It was a mature expression, out of place in a young-

ster of Dave's age. Stafford stared at him a moment, wondering how he had overlooked the fact that Dave was growing up. Then Stafford asked abruptly:

"How much do you know, Kid?"

"More than you think I know."

"Let's hear it."

"Mr. Hodge thinks you're scared of Doc Fleck. I know different. You're scared of yourself, and scared of what might show up in me."

Stafford let his breath out slowly. "I'll be damned."

"I know all about my father," Dave went on. "You thought you got me away from Texas in time, but I found out. He was no good—a killer—until a posse shot him down. You're afraid that both you and I might have a streak of it in us."

Stafford, still incredulous, stared at Dave. "And I thought you were still a kid," he said.

"Maybe I am," said Dave. "But I've got eyes and I can think. We left Arizona last month because of that man Beeker. He was getting on your nerves, and you were afraid you might kill him."

"Yes," admitted Stafford, "that's the truth."

"And now you're afraid you might have to kill Doc Fleck. You're afraid that if you kill one man, there'll be others, just like it was with my father. You're scared it's in your blood."

"I guess I am," said Stafford soberly.

"I also know how fast you can pull and shoot. I guess I'm the only one who knows it, because I've seen you practice."

"You've seen that?"

"Sure. I guess all kids like to do a little scouting. And I'll bet I know *why* you've trained yourself to be so good."

"Why?" asked Stafford weakly.

"Because," Dave told him with complete assurance, "if you have to shoot, you want to know where the slug's going. You don't want it to hit a vital spot."

Stafford rolled another cigarette, spilling ashes from fingers which weren't quite steady.

"You hit it right again," he admitted slowly. "But here's something to remember, Kid. When a man shucks a gun to shoot another man, it's safe to bet he's either scared or crazy mad. In either case it's his instincts working, not his brain."

"Your instincts are all right, and so are mine."

"I'll bank on yours," said Stafford positively. "But that hombre Fleck affects me in a funny way. I can't consider him as human. That man is more like a sidewinder than a human."

"Quit worryin'," said Dave. "You can't keep runnin' away from people for the rest of your life. This town of Conestoga is as good a place to stop as any."

John Stafford hauled his breath in deeply, feeling a great load lifted from his mind. He had suddenly found a companion, an adult companion in his nephew Dave. It gave him a sustaining backlog of new confidence, a new assurance to combat the fear he'd known for many years. He had never dared to trust his anger in the past. It was an ugly thing, coiled deep inside him, always ready, but it seemed less deadly now. He said:

"We'll stick around awhile."

THEY kept their room at the hotel, and Stafford soon lost the belief that time might hang heavy on his hands. Jim Teal, whose leg was improving rapidly, was not his only patient, and it wasn't long before he recognized the fact a doctor had a lot to do in the vicinity of Conestoga.

His calls came almost entirely from the surrounding ranches, a matter Stafford found significant. Fleck, unable as yet to sit a saddle, or even use a buckboard, could not reach patients in the outlying districts. Stafford learned, however, that Fleck was hobbling about his own house by means of a cane, and when the townfolk took their ailments to Fleck's office, Stafford knew the reason.

The citizens of Conestoga were not ready yet to alienate Doc Fleck, not until they knew more about Doc Stafford. They had, it is true, seen his efficient handling of Hobb Krantz, and some of them were fortunate enough to see the final episode.

Hobb Krantz made a lot of talk, but didn't have the guts to back it up. John Stafford would have avoided him if possible, but the second meeting came upon them both quite unexpectedly.

Stafford was striding along the raised board walk in front of Lesser's General Store. There was the usual bunch of loafers enjoying the shade of the over-hang. Krantz

came suddenly from the store, and Stafford had to stop to keep from bumping into him.

Both men were surprised. Krantz's jaw dropped open, then closed with a snap. His eyes went mean. His huge hands balled into fists. Stafford watched him carefully, balanced on his toes.

"Looking for more trouble, Hobb?" asked Stafford gently.

"Yes, damn it! I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what?"

Memory crowded in on Krantz, the battering memory of Stafford's fists. John Stafford saw it in his eyes, and knew that Krantz was licked without a blow. He folded like a wet bar rag. John Stafford held his place, and Hobb Krantz had to walk around him. He did so sullenly, with sweat upon his face. He muttered words which sounded like: "Some other time."

But Stafford knew there would be no other time. And so did those who watched. They knew Fleck's handy man was through as Conestoga's bully. But they also knew that Doc Fleck hadn't even started—not against Doc Stafford. That time would come, if Stafford had the nerve to wait for it. Meanwhile, Conestoga citizens with ailments took them to Doc Fleck, risking his knife rather than his later wrath.

The situation tightened up considerably for Stafford on the day Doc Fleck was able to leave his home and make his way slowly through the streets of Conestoga. Stafford, through his deliberate, careful planning, saw Fleck only at a distance, and Fleck's shuffling progress brought to mind the stalking of a lean, malignant spider.

On these occasions Stafford felt the numbing chill of premonition. His feeling toward the man sliced viciously into his self control. His skin crawled with the urge to face Fleck for the very joy of cutting the man down, and the aftermath of these emotions left him weak and panicky.

He recognized his cowardice, not physical, but moral. Yet he temporized. He knew a meeting was inevitable, but chose to wait until he'd disciplined his mind to rule his instincts.

The waiting was made harder by an incident involving Dave. The boy showed up one evening with a swollen nose and a cut above his eye. His uncle asked:

"A fight?"

Dave nodded grimly.

"What about?"

Dave hesitated, then admitted; "You. The Jarvis kid shot off his mouth. I licked him."

"I see," said Stafford slowly. "He said that folks are saying I'm scared of Fleck. Right, Dave?"

"Why, yes," said Dave surprised. Then, "How'd you know?"

"It wasn't hard to guess."

The boy's eyes rested steadily on Stafford's. The eyes asked, "What'll you do now?"

"I'll look him up tomorrow," Stafford said.

He spent a restless night. Hard knuckles on the door awakened him at dawn. A weary cowhand told him of an accident at the Bar-H spread. A bull had gored another cowhand in the leg. The injured man could not be moved, so Stafford had to go to him.

He didn't mind. In fact, he was strangely grateful, as he started on the ten-mile ride. He resented the feeling, in a way, because it wasn't like him to avoid an issue he had set his mind to. Yet his excuse, this time, was sound, and he was glad. His meeting with Doc Fleck would have to be postponed.

He sterilized the wound and sewed it up. He started home in the middle of the afternoon. His horse was not too fresh, yet he pushed it hard, beyond the point of common sense and kindness. He didn't know quite why, but he felt a strong persistent urge that haste was necessary. It was a hunch, a powerful one, and Stafford always played his hunches.

HE HAD passed the half-way mark along the road to Conestoga when he saw a cloud of dust approaching him. The rider soon appeared, driving his mount hard. As he rapidly drew closer Stafford saw he was leading a saddled horse. Stafford touched spurs to his own horse, knowing, without doubt, that his hunch was bearing fruit. The two men pulled up sharply when they met. The rider said:

"I've come to meet you, Doc. Jim Teal sent me."

"What's wrong?" asked Stafford tautly.

"Dave. Your nephew. He's been hurt."

"Bad?"

"I don't think so. Just his hand. It was bloody. He was ridin' behind another man

who was bringing him into town. I was up in Jim Teal's room. I told him what was going on. Dave must've told the man who brought him in that you was out of town, because the hombre yelled, 'Where's Doc Fleck?' Then someone yelled back, 'In the Open Trail.' Then Jim Teal yells at me, 'Go get Doc Stafford! He went to the Bar-H. Take a fresh horse for him! A big, fast one!' So here I am."

"Thanks," said Stafford thinly.

He whirled his own mount beside the fresh horse, and vaulted to the other saddle. He spun the animal about and raked hard with his spurs. The big beast gave a startled snort, then broke into a run.

As Stafford rode, his mind divided into two compartments. The first was filled with paralyzing fear for Dave. The other was a room closed off to everything but savagery and hate.

He tried hard not to visualize the scene in the saloon, but the picture formed upon his mind in wicked, clashing colors. Fleck's twisted, insane brain could work in only one way now. He would recognize his chance to hurt John Stafford in a way which even Fleck's own deviltry could not improve upon. He would amputate Dave's hand, and no one there would dare prevent him. No one had ever done so in the past.

John Stafford forced himself to believe he would arrive in time. Fleck would want to cause Dave pain before he operated. He would also have to send back to his home for saw and knives.

John Stafford dug his spurs in deep again and cursed.

"Run, damn you! Run!"

The horse was strong and fast and willing. John Stafford had to fight to slow him

down before the Open Trail Saloon. He hit the ground upon bent legs before the horse had stopped.

He raced for the doorway, snugging his belt and loosening his gun. He checked his pace and stepped inside, careful not to silhouette himself against the outside light. And for the second time the drama in the room was taut enough to cover his arrival. No one noticed him come in.

The scene was as he'd seen it once before. Young Dave was on the faro table, ashen faced, but game. And the thing which left John Stafford weak and shaking with relief was the fact that Fleck had not begun to operate.

He was ready, though. A knife was in his hand. His face was bright with evil as he turned to the cowed spectators and explained:

"The hand, you see, is crushed and useless, so of course I'll have to take it off."

John Stafford said: "No, Fleck, Not now—or ever."

The shock of silence hit the room, and froze each man to immobility. Heads turned stupidly toward Stafford. Fleck whipped around with snakelike speed, his eyes contracted into slits.

The silence ended with the fall of Fleck's knife to the floor. The noise was loud and shattering. It broke the spell, and scared men scrambled from the line of fire.

John Stafford moved toward Fleck with short stiff steps which kept him constantly on balance. John Stafford's face was bleak as weathered stone. His eyes bored clean holes through the smoky air. His gun hand dangled loosely at his side.

Fleck watched him come, and moved his

(Please continue on page 98)

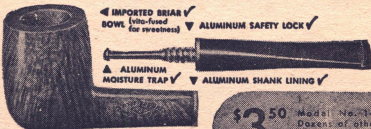
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BUTTON'S TERROR TRAP

By GUNNISON
STEELE



Just then the whole world
seemed to explode behind
us. . . .

The weasel who had
bushwhacked Pap was
still around—but I
couldn't forget him . . .
or kill him.



I WAS only thirteen when Sid Bogart killed Pap, and it was like the wind had stopped blowing through the pines and the sun had gone out in the middle of the day. I figure Mom felt that way, too, but I never saw her shed a tear. Mom was

like that—and a mighty religious woman.

Sid Bogart owned a run-down little outfit next to ours there on Bucktail Creek on which he pretended to raise cattle. But he spent most of his time in the settlement, drinking whisky and gambling and making up to the dance hall flossies.

Sid was a no-good bully and braggart, and nobody liked him. Maybe he wasn't guilty of all the things he got accused of, but folks wondered where he got his money. It was certain he didn't get it raising cattle.

We'd been losing an occasional steer or two for a long time. Pap didn't come right out and say he knew Sid Bogart was taking them. But he knew all right, and so did I. He'd warned Sid a time or two. Then it came to this day of the fight. Only I never did believe there was a fight.

It happened at a water hole between our place and Sid's. Sid claimed that he'd been there fixin' fence when Pap rode up, wild drunk on corn whisky, and started cussin' and threatening him. He said he'd tried to reason with Pap and begged him to go on back home, but that Pap had sworn to cut out his heart and had come at him with a knife.

He said that in self-defense he'd had to shoot Pap.

That's why I knew from the start, deep inside me, that Sid Bogart had murdered Pap. The sheriff found Pap there on the ground, all right, a smell of rotten whiskey about him and a long-bladed skinning knife in his hand.

But Pap never drank whisky and he'd never owned a knife like that. Besides, there never was a more peaceable man than Pap. He believed in law and justice and religion. He never would have knifed anybody, not even a skunk like Sid Bogart.

Sid never was even arrested. No evidence, the sheriff said. Maybe not, but I knew he was guilty.

"The ding-donged sidewinder murdered Pap!" I told Mom. "I know he done it. Likely 'gulched him from behind them boulders there beside the water hole. Then he poured some of his rotgut whisky over Pap and into his mouth, and put that knife into his hand. If the law's too con-sarned dumb to see it, then I'll make Sid Bogart pay! I'll—"

"Hush such scandalous talk, Nicholas!" Mom said sharply. "Maybe Sid Bogart did

murder your father—but it is not for us to judge. But remember this: If he is guilty, he will be punished!"

"How? The sheriff said—"

"I don't know how," Mom said. "You get to the chores now. You're the man of the place since—you're the only man I've got, and I want you to be a good one. Put thoughts of vengeance out of your mind."

I guess I just didn't have the religion Mom had. I tried hard to do what she said, but I just couldn't. For, with Pap gone, the water in the creek didn't make soft music anymore, and the snow on the far mountains didn't look at all like a white banner against the blue sky.

We had a swell little outfit. Even without Pap, Mom and me could make a go of it. We didn't have to worry about that.

"We'll spread out, take in more land. Some day, Nicholas, we'll have one of the biggest outfits in the basin. Then maybe you'll marry some nice girl and—"

Mom was smiling when she said that. But there was a far look in her eyes, like maybe she was hearing a man's whistle in the barn, or feeling his big arms, or maybe watching him eat a steaming supper she had cooked.

I tried awful hard. But I couldn't do it.

ONE day, a month after it happened, I saw Sid in the settlement. Sid was half drunk and he was strutting and talking big. I heard him just the same as brag how he had put Pap away.

When he saw me, he said, "Why, hello, Nick. How you makin' out over to yore place?"

I frowned, and said, "None of your business, Sid Bogart! You ain't got me fooled. I know what you done."

"I ain't done a thing," Sid grinned. Then his mean, black little eyes narrowed like he was thinking hard. "You got a mighty nice place over there, Nick. And yore mother's still a mighty fine lookin' woman. Yes, sir, mighty fine lookin'—and a lot too young to pull in single harness."

If I'd had a gun I would have killed him right there.

I got onto old Blue, the long-eared mule I always rode, and headed out for home. I decided not to tell Mom about what he'd said. I was thinking hard as I rode along. I knew I had to do somethin' about Sid

Bogart. It would be, well, sinful, to let him get away with it. It had bothered me so that I hadn't slept well of nights lately.

I couldn't forget the swell times Pap and me had had together. The times we'd fished together in the cold, clear streams. The times we'd hunted deer up on the side of Thunder Peak, and the frosty nights we'd spent coon hunting in the bottomlands. Pap had taken me nearly everywhere.

Pretty soon I saw Sid Bogart coming along behind me on his high-stepping black. He had a jug slung on his saddle and he was singing the kind of song Mom would have strapped me for singing. I pulled old Blue into a thicket and let him pass.

When I came to where the trail forked, I took the weed-grown trail that led to Sid's two-bit outfit. I hid old Blue in a hawthorn thicket and sneaked up to the clearing that held Sid's shack, barn and tumbled-down corral. The black was unsaddled and in the corral. Smoke was coming from the cabin chimney, for it was a cold autumn day with a raw wind blowing.

Not knowing just why, I sneaked up and peeked through a window. Sid was cooking supper over the old sheetiron stove which served for both heating and cooking. I watched him for several minutes, knowing he was guilty and wishing there was something I could do.

Finally, when the meal was cooked and he was about to sit down at the table to eat it, I went around to the door and pushed it open a crack.

"Better not eat that grub," I said.

Sid Bogart jumped, swore, whirled toward the door. There were fear and guilt in his eyes as he stared at me.

"What're you doin' here, Kid?" he asked harshly.

"I just dropped by to see if you was all right," I said.

"Why in tarnation wouldn't I be all right?"

"I dunno. I just figured maybe somethin' might happen to you, is all. That grub you're fixin' to eat might be pizened, or a sidewinder might have bit you—"

"What makes you say them things?" Sid snarled.

"You killed Pap," I said. "You hid behind some boulders and shot him. Then you poured whisky over him and put a knife into his hand to make it look—"

"Why you—you—" Sid jumped to his feet and grabbed for his gun.

But I jumped back and ducked into the thicket. I didn't stop till I got home. I didn't say anything to Mom, but I was surer and surer that Sid Bogart was guilty. It had been there plain on his bony face.

I thought about it a couple of days. And then I thought I knew a way to do it.

Pap had been blasting out some stumps, and I knew where there were several sticks of dynamite in a box in the tool shed along with caps and fuses. I'd watched him enough that I figured I knew how to use it.

I figured to get even with Sid Bogart, all right, but I didn't want to get in any jam over it. Mom didn't have anybody but me to take care of her now. So I sneaked out some of the dynamite when Mom wasn't looking. And next day, I saddled old Blue and said I was headin' out to fix a break in a line fence.

Instead, I rode straight to Sid Bogart's shack. I figured he would be away in the settlement, and I was right. I hid old Blue back in the thicket and sneaked into the cabin. There was a bed of coals in the old stove, for the wind still blew hard down from the snowy peaks and there was a thin drift of snow.

Behind the stove was a wood-box filled with different size sticks of wood. I picked out just an average stick, and went to work with the brace-and-bit I'd brought along. I bored out a hole in the end of the stick of wood, just big enough and deep enough for a full charge of dynamite to fit into it snugly. I already had the fuse adjusted.

When I'd finished—after I'd plugged a thin sliver of wood into the end of the hole, shutting the dynamite up inside the stick of wood—anybody would have had to look mighty close to suspect that it had been tampered with. And Sid Bogart wouldn't look close. He would be cold, and half drunk.

I placed the stick of wood right on top of the stack. Then I went back outside and hid in the thicket to wait for Sid.

I could picture what would happen. It would maybe take several minutes for the fire to burn through to that fuse. By that time Sid would likely be hunkered over the stove, cooking his supper. I'd seen what a full charge of dynamite would do. That

sheetiron stove would go into a million pieces.

I shivered a little, my stomach feeling kind of heavy inside, for it was pretty cold. And just then I heard hoofbeats, and knew that Sid was coming home.

After corraling his horse, Sid went into the cabin. I crept through the underbrush right up to the window, and looked through. Like I'd figured, Sid was laying kindling on the coals in the stove. Then, when the kindling blazed up, he tossed in wood.

NEARLY the first stick he got hold of was the one with the dynamite inside it! He tossed it into the stove without even glancing at it.

In just a few minutes now, I thought, he'll pay! I'd have to get back away from the window before it happened. I tried to feel glad. Nobody would be sorry Sid Bogart was dead. He was a no-good thief and killer.

The fire was roaring inside the stove by now. Sid had a skillet on the stove and was dumping sow-belly into it. He had his face all screwed up into a frown as he stared at the bacon, like he thought maybe there was something wrong with it.

I was shivering worse than ever now, and that cold lump was still inside my stomach. And all at once I knew that I couldn't do it!

I jumped up, raced around the cabin, flung myself against the door.

"Get out of here, Sid!" I yelled. "I'n just a minute this cabin's goin' to explode!"

Sid stared at me, his jaw hanging slack.

"Get out!" I screamed at him.

When he still didn't move, I jumped at him, grabbed him and fought with all the strength I had to get him through the doorway. By that time he had begun to sense that something was wrong, and he started running, me beside him. We tore through the hawthorn thicket and tumbled headlong into a shallow gully.

And just then the whole world seemed to explode behind us. There was a *whooshing* rush of air over us. The earth trembled, and remnants of the cabin showered about us. But neither of us was hurt.

Sid Bogart slowly sat up. His face was like chalk.

"What happened?" he moaned.

"I put some dynamite in your stove," I said.

"D-dynamite?" He shuddered. "You mean, you tried to murder me—"

"I *wanted* to kill you, like you killed Pap. But I decided not to do it—yet."

"That bacon," Sid whispered. "I was suspicious after what you said the other day. I—it didn't smell right."

"Didn't it?" I got to my feet. I'd seen Sid didn't have a gun. "Maybe grub won't ever smell right to you again, Sid. Maybe, every bite you start to take, you'll wonder whether it's been poisoned. Everytime you start to kindle a fire in a stove, you'll look to see if there's a stick of dynamite inside it."

"Maybe, every time you start to pass a thicker or boulder, you'll wonder whether there's a gun behind it. Or turn your saddle over with a stick every time you need it, for fear a sidewinder's been cached under it. There's lots a ways a man might accidentally get killed, Sid."

"Wait, Kid," he whimpered. "I—surely you wouldn't—"

But I climbed up out of the gully and left him. I never saw a man scarer.

Next day Mom sent me to the settlement with a sack of corn to be ground. I left it at the grist mill and went to Sam Bean's store to get me some hard rock candy, and it was there that I heard the talk.

"So Sid Bogart pulled out?" I heard somebody ask.

"Fast," old Sam chuckled. "He was waitin' here on my porch when I come down to open before daylight. Looked like he hadn't slept much last night, Sid did."

Sam Bean frowned.

"Sid done something I can't hardly figure out. He ordered a hunk of cheese, and when I cut it off he looked at it kind of suspicious. 'Anything wrong with that cheese?' I asked, and he said, 'I—I just wondered if maybe it hadn't been pizen.' Don't that take the rag off'n the bush?"

"Danged if'n it don't! So then Sid pulled out?"

"Like the devil was on his coattails!"

They all had a good chuckle over that. Then old Sam saw me and waddled over.

"Somethin' for you, Button?" he asked.

"Some hard-rock candy," I said, not batin' an eye. "Mom says it's near about as good as salts for a growin' younker!"

SATAN SPAWNS A WOOLIE WAR

CHAPTER

Blood on His Head

1

There were two things that Frisco would never admit to. One was being a kid and the other was being afraid. And yet, right at the moment, there couldn't have been two things that would have been more true.


If there had been anyone to keep track of such things, he would have discovered that Frisco was around sixteen years old—not the twenty-two that he claimed and passed for. He was just a shade over six feet now, and the thinness of his face and the hardness of his eyes gave him a feigned mature look. He was smart enough not to try to raise a moustache.

But as to being afraid, that was something that was strictly between Frisco and himself, and he was trying hard now not to admit it. But as he lowered himself over the face of the twelve-foot granite cliff and dropped to the grass-matted ground below, that gnawing feeling in his stomach could



*Powerful
Old-West Novelette*

**By THOMAS
THOMPSON**



He was nearly there when
something smashed against
the side of his head.

**Somewhere, somehow, Frisco would learn the black secret of
his lost life—and find the man whose very name turned him
into a raging, blood-mad killer.**



be called only one thing. It was fear. Fear of the unknown. For this was Frisco's first big job.

Regardless of how a man learned to pack his gun or how fast he could learn to draw it—regardless of how much red-eye he had learned to put away or how good he was with a deck of cards—it was still different when it came right down to the real thing. Stealing a hundred head of spirited thoroughbred horses was tricky business. Knowing that other humans might be out there in the night—and if they were you'd have to shoot and shoot for keeps—didn't help matters any. Frisco caught himself wondering if a man ever got over it. He hoped so, because he planned for this to be only the first of a series of such nights.

He paused now and looked back and up. There was just enough starlight so that he could see them there on the top of the cliff. They were leaning forward, looking down at him, motioning for him to go on. Volney Thau—Three-Legged Jack—Johnny Ringo—Monte Brault.

Frisco rolled the names around on his tongue, and he liked the feel of them. Good men. Men who could joke and laugh and look deep into the embers of an evening camp fire and not notice the dead man's eyes that stared unwinkingly back at them. Frisco felt a slight shiver run through him and then he was calm. It gave a man confidence to have friends like that.

He had been lucky to get in with Volney Thau. It was whispered that Volney Thau hadn't taken in a man since his brother was killed. Lawmen cursed and hung their heads and said Volney Thau didn't need to take in a man. He had a crew that no one could stop the way it was.

Frisco had known them by reputation for a long time. Now he knew them in person, and it gave him a bursting glow of pride that made him want to tell the world, for he had found them just the way he expected. It was like meeting characters out of a good book, face to face, and not being disappointed with the meeting.

It was Volney Thau who was his real hero. Small, dark, wiry—handsome in a way. He was brains on horseback, someone had said, and that about summed it up. Volney Thau had a way of thinking things out and making plans, and his plans did not backfire.

Then there was Three-Legged Jack. A little terrifying until you knew him. That black stubble of beard and the glittering eyes. The wooden peg leg fastened at the knee with about a foot of his real leg sticking straight back.

Johnny Ringo and Monte Brault were front men, the way Frisco saw it, and that was what he wanted to be. Johnny Ringo and Monte Brault were men who could go anywhere and be at home. They had that certain polish about them. Maybe it was their soft Southern drawl, Frisco didn't know. But they were as deadly as addlers, according to the reports in the papers, and Frisco didn't doubt it.

Yes, he had been lucky to get in with a gang like Volney Thau's. It was even more than he had hoped for.

Maybe it was the way he handled his liquor or the way men kept away from him at the bar. Maybe it was just that he knew the lay of this horse outfit so well. Frisco didn't know just what it was that had made Volney Thau pick him out, but whatever it was Frisco was glad. A man couldn't ask for a better teacher in this game.

Frisco knew about such things for sure, because he had studied about them for a long time now. It wasn't any sudden decision. He had made up his mind a long time back what he wanted to be, and then he had set about doing everything he could to ready himself for his career.

He had been born back in Kansas and raised in Arizona, as far as he could remember, and at some time or another in those fifteen years everybody inbetween had had a hand in his raising. Hawk-beaked old women with salvation in their talk and damnation in their soul. Rum-soaked old rannihans who couldn't ride a sawhorse. They had all taken a fling at raising him, and they had all sooner or later given it up as a bad job. Frisco didn't care. He had found something to take from each one.

Jessica Buttress had a pet place for hiding her two-bit pieces. Now and then he could swipe a half-drained whiskey bottle from Dad Sims and sell it to the Indians for a couple of bucks. It wasn't a bad life, as Frisco saw it, and there was opportunity everywhere.

And yet with all his planning and conscientious training, walking across this planted pasture now with those four men up

there on the ledge watching him was somehow not as easy as he had expected. That big white gate that stood between him and a hundred thoroughbred horses seemed a long way away. That crawling, squeamish feeling in his belly was fear.

It was crazy to think this way, too, because they'd back him up—every inch of the way. He knew they would, because that's the way things were with the owlhoot breed.

Just tonight they had gone over it once more, and Volney Thau had told him then that if anything should go wrong—if there was a slip of any kind—all Frisco had to do was start running and remember that his four pals were backing him up, there on top of the cliff.

"You're packin' that gun like you know how, Kid," Volney Thau had said. "You look like a good boy to me. Don't he look like a good boy to you, Monte?"

"Yeah," the thin-faced Monte Brault had said in that soft voice of his. "He looks like a good boy."

The fluttering in Frisco's stomach quieted a bit and he stood up straighter and went on toward the white gate that loomed up in front of him. He had his hand on the peg, ready to pull the draw-board back, when the rifle cracked and the lead thudded into the gate post about three inches from his head.

IT WAS funny how he reacted. He just kept standing there, his hand frozen to that board on the gate. For months he had trained himself to trigger-fine action, but for some reason he couldn't move. His throat went dry and his tongue seemed to swell in his mouth. Then he found his legs and he started running down the fence line, plunging crazily through stands of brush to a clump of cottonwoods.

There was more than one rifle now. There were a dozen. Something had gone wrong. There had been a tip off. The rifles were all around him, stabbing the night with their wicked yellow tongues of flame. And gradually the lump went out of Frisco's throat and he became deadly calm. This was it. This was the real thing. Those men out there in the night were shooting at him. They were trying to kill him. It was up to him to shoot back and kill them before they killed him. He had four of the best in the

business backing him up with their lives.

That was the thought that was in Frisco's mind as his hand dropped swiftly and smoothly to his belt and drew his six-shooter.

He remembered everything now that he and Volney Thau and Three-Legged and Johnny and Monte had talked over that night. They had laid it all out with precision. Exactly how Frisco would open the gate and spook the high-spirited horses and head them up the draw to where Volney Thau and his three sidekicks could haze them into the trail that would take them across the sagebrush flats and the night-cooled sand toward the border.

And if by any chance anything did go wrong—Frisco was to head for the cottonwoods. Volney Thau and the others would lay down a covering fire, then, and they would stick until Frisco could make it to his horse. They had promised him that, one by one they had promised.

All these things Frisco remembered as he fired back at the orange stabs of flame in the darkness. But they were closing in. Men were shouting at each other. They were saying, "There's only one of them! He's over there in the cottonwoods!"

It was hell. It was like being a helpless, hunted animal, crouched here among these trees, firing blindly at stabs of light, seeing nothing, knowing only that it was death-dealing lead that was nicking the bark off the trees and spraying it down his neck.

He couldn't stand it now—not knowing—so he dodged out from behind the trees to where he could see the top of the cliff where his four pals would be laying down the covering fire. Why hadn't Volney and Three-Legged and Johnny and Monte started shooting? One good barrage would stop those rifles in the flat and Frisco could make a run. But there was nothing there on the cliff. No sound. No outline of forms.

Crazily terrified, he ran out into the open to look for the horses, but he couldn't find them. Again that terror-stricken fear was in him, and loudly he called the name of Volney Thau.

His voice drew a concentration of rifle fire. Something struck him high in the arm and spun him around like a dry leaf in a whirlpool. He stumbled along, half falling, half standing, and tried to get back to the shelter of the cottonwoods. Once more he

called, and his voice was a sob. "Thau! Thau! For God's sake, help me!" Then he ran on stumbling toward the trees. He was nearly there when something smashed against the side of his head.

It blinded him. But he didn't think of that. All he thought of was that horrible ringing in his ears, and he kept thinking that he would never be able to hear again. And yet he knew he was hearing the yelling of the men and the sound of guns. Then he drew his hand across his forehead and found it was covered with blood.

He knew then that his whole head was smeared with blood, and things started reeling around crazy. The stars dipped down and brushed by his face and swung back high in the sky, and he thought they were swings hanging from the limbs of the trees. Sometimes he had to dodge to miss them as they arced down toward the earth.

And then with a lurid rush the stars exploded, and the night was red around him, and he was left with one single thought. And that thought was that he had been betrayed by Volney Thau and by Three-Legged Jack and Johnny Ringo and Monte Brault. They had used him as a cat's paw and then left him alone when he needed them most. He was just a local punk they had used to find out for sure if the gang was safe. . . .

They were closing in all around him. The thunder of guns was continuous now, like the bass notes on a piano being beaten over and over again until they became a fearful thing. And those were not stars he saw now. They were pieces of lead. Hot, searing lead. The kind that killed a man or left him maimed for life.

Frisco knew that he must run. There was still life in him, and the only way to save that life was to run. And he did that. Running he didn't know where, but the fence posts went by him and leaned toward him and were gone, and then he was running only in a soft darkness that tangled his feet.

Until finally he didn't know why he was running so he stopped. He remembered thinking: "There's water here. I can feel it closing up over my head. It's cool water and I'm thirsty."

Then he was screaming madly, for it wasn't water at all. It was blood, and it was closing in over his head. There would

always be blood on his head, he knew then.

CHAPTER

2

Fugitive From Hell

There was a curtain that was made of too many layers of gauze. Someone kept drawing it back and forth. There were times when Frisco could see through it and there were times when he couldn't, so sometimes he didn't try at all. He'd just lie back in the soft, white bed and close his eyes, and he would see green pastures and white fences and thoroughbred horses.

But at other times he didn't dare close his eyes, for if he did he would get to screaming. And then they would come and tie down his arms, and the other men in the beds around him would curse and yell and threaten to hit him over the head. And that was something Frisco couldn't stand the thought of. He didn't want anyone to touch his head.

Somehow that was always part of the terror. It seemed that someone had poured scalding water on his head and then he had fallen into a deep pool, pit-black and stagnant, and he kept dropping and dropping and dropping. And then he would scream until they came and tied his hands.

And then one day it wasn't so bad. The sheriff came, and the town marshal and a couple of men who said they were lawyers. A hawk-beaked woman who said her name was Jessica Buttress was there, too, and so was Dad Sims, who smelled of whiskey. They always came and sometimes they brought some fruit or cake, but usually they just asked questions that didn't make sense.

Today they sat in a ring around his bed and they asked him all about himself. He looked at them and laughed, for he didn't know the answers to any of their questions and he didn't care to know. He heard the hawk-beaked woman sniffing and he heard the bewhiskered drunk cursing, and he heard the sheriff and the lawyers say they'd have to go on with the trial. But it didn't mean a thing to Frisco.

Frisco. He laughed and shrugged his shoulders when he said that name. It was, after all, as good a name as any, he guessed, and it seemed to be the name that everyone claimed was his. Outside of that he couldn't find out much about himself except what Jessica Buttress and old Dad Sims

told him. He got the idea that they weren't just right in the head, either one of them, so he paid little attention to what they said.

But he had to listen to the marshal and he had to believe him. He had committed a crime back there in the dark space that was his past, and he was going to be tried for it. When he tried to find out exactly what crime, they always hedged. As far as he could determine, he was guilty of lurking around someone's horse pasture. He said the hell with it, and he was dressed and ready when the marshal came for him.

He stood outside the hospital, breathing deeply of the good clean air. Some people stopped and spoke to him and some went out of their way to avoid him, and he cared little either way. He grinned at all of them and breathed deeply of the air, and began to wonder if he had strength enough to overpower the marshal and make his escape. The marshal gave a tug on the steel bracelets that were clipped to one of his wrists and said, "Come on, Frisco." And Frisco decided he would wait for a better time.

When he was alone in the jail, he sat down on the bench that was along one wall and put his face in his hands. He knew now that he was not right—that the long, jagged scar on the side of his head had done something to him that couldn't be cured. He could remember nothing clearly beyond the time when he had awakened in the hospital.

He got up then and paced back and forth across his cell and gradually he quit worrying about the past. What difference did it make? If he tried to find the truth there were some who would gild it and some who would tarnish it, so what the hell? He'd start from now.

That brought a laugh to his lips. It was

not the laugh of a *crazy* man, but the laugh of a man who is *starting* out with bitterness. So he was going to have a trial, was he? What the hell was he being tried for?

He strode over to the jail door and took the bars in both his hands and rattled them until a chink of 'dobe fell out of the wall. The jailer came running in to see what was the matter.

The jailer was a squat little Mexican with one chalk eye. He leered up and said, "Hey, what the hell's the matter weeth you, Fresco? Don't you know I got to sleep?"

Frisco said, "They're gonna give me a trial tomorrow."

The jailer shrugged, yawned, and pulled a big silver watch out of his left shirt pocket. "Today, Fresco. Eet ees after midnight. Go to sleep."

But Frisco was not to be put off. He reached one sinewy arm through the bars, grabbed the jailer by the shirt front and hauled him close to the door. He said, "I want to know what the hell it's all about!"

The jailer rolled his one good eye. Perspiration popped out across his forehead. He said, "*Por Dios, Fresco.* You tell the truth? Don't you know?"

Frisco's face was pressed hard against the bars. He said, "Don't I know what?"

The jailer licked his lips. "Don't you remember you lived here in this town? I used to come visit and play crib with old Dad Sims when you was staying with him. Don't you—" The Mexican's face paled and he tried to pull away. His voice was thick when he said, "Fresco—don't. You and me was friends. You was not a bad boy. Don't look at me like thees!"

Frisco relaxed his grip suddenly and shoved the jailer back across the room. The



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jailer stood against the wall, his hands spread out behind him. He whispered: "Fresco, I thought you was just act crazy so you couldn't tell where is Volney Thau." He backed further down the wall, terror on his face. "I don't blame you, Fresco. I wouldn't want to have Volney Thau mad to me." He turned then and ran back to the office, out of sight.

For a long time Frisco stood there looking after him, a puzzled frown on his scarred forehead.

HE WAS still standing there and he hadn't slept when they came to get him, and the puzzled frown was still on his face when he went to trial. He stood in the little courtroom that was jammed to the walls and he heard men whisper and say he was crazy, and he heard others say he was just crazy like a fox.

Jessica Buttress sat prim and proper and straight, and from time to time she turned her head and her hawk-beak nose pointed like a weather vane and quieted whispers that were too loud. Sometimes she took a tiny handkerchief and touched the crow-footed corners of her steely blue eyes.

Across from her was the white-bearded old Dad Sims who sometimes snored, and once when he slipped sideways in his seat a bottle fell out of his coat pocket and clattered noisily on the floor.

In time the judge called on Miss Buttress. She stood straight as a ramrod, and her steely blue eyes seemed to bore into Frisco's soul when she took the witness chair. The lawyer who questioned her had a soft voice with a Southern drawl, and for some reason that he could not explain Frisco hated him.

The lawyer said: "Isn't it true that this Frisco stole money from you when you were keeping him—giving him a home?"

"He was just a little boy," the woman said.

The lawyer cut her short. "Did he or did he not steal?"

Frisco started to get out of his chair. There—when the lawyer had raised his voice. There was something going around in Frisco's head.

Miss Buttress said: "Yes, he stole from me. But—" Again she was cut short. She was sent back to her seat. Frisco put his face in his hands. He would pay her back. He didn't know he had stolen from her.

They tried to get Dad Sims to the witness chair then, but it was no use. The crowd laughed until the judge had to pound with his gavel, and the pounding roared through Frisco's head and made the perspiration stand out on his lip.

He heard a lot of other things there in the courtroom, but out of all the arguments and testimony the only thing that stuck with him was a man's name. Volney Thau. It kept going through his mind, over and over, but he could not tell them when they asked him again and again. He did not know Volney Thau. He did not know where he could be found.

And after the perspiring attorney had given up and the judge had dismissed the case, that name still stayed with him on his mind.

He went out into the street in front of the courthouse, and he breathed deeply of the air. It was while he was standing there, his head bared to the sun, that Jessica Buttress and Dad Sims came to him and asked him if there was anything they could do. When he found that he had owned a horse and saddle and a gun, he asked to have those things. There would be nothing else. Dad Sims nodded his head and said he'd have them.

The thick smell of whiskey on Dad Sims' breath somehow seemed to linger in Frisco's nostrils. It tantalized him, and at last he made his way to the nearest saloon. There was silence when he entered, but soon the voices rose and men he did not know offered to buy him a drink. He accepted readily.

The first shot was raw in his mouth and seared all the way down his throat. But when it hit his stomach it lay there like a warm spark, and gradually the warmth spread out through his veins. Quickly he poured himself a second drink and gulped it down. There was no sting from this one, so he tried a third.

Men were standing there, looking at him, and some moved back a bit. The lawyer who had tried to convict him came and stood near him. He still had that soft Southern drawl. He said, "Drinking pretty fast, aren't you Frisco?"

Frisco grinned and said, "Yeah," and he poured himself another drink.

And then he had that feeling of a curtain made of too many pieces of gauze being

drawn back and forth across his eyes. He kept brushing his hand across his face, and then he turned and poured another drink. He didn't gulp it down this time but kept staring at it. Finally he raised his eyes and looked at the lawyer.

He said, "You wanted to convict me of something I didn't do."

The lawyer did not back down. He said, "That's my business, Frisco. No hard feelings. You were found not guilty, so you're not guilty. All you have to do is stay out of trouble and you'll be all right."

He started to down his drink, then he spit it out on the bar, and there was a madness in him that he couldn't control. He grabbed the lawyer by the throat and he heard his voice harsh and grating in his throat. "You kept asking me about Volney Thau. You kept asking me that over and over. Why did you keep asking me that?"

A dozen men sprang forward and grabbed him and slammed him back against the bar, but he fought like a wild man. He took a bottle from the bar and smashed it across a man's skull, and another time he picked up a chair and slung it into the middle of the close-packed mob. He kicked with his feet and jabbed with his elbows until the blood was hot in his mouth and red across his eyes. And then as quickly as the rage had come it was followed by fear, and he knew that he would have to get out of here quick or they would put him back in jail.

His mind was perfectly clear now, and he started beating his way through the seething mass of men, toward the back door. He could hear the shout of the town marshal and then gunfire. He saw the square light of a window and Frisco made a dive for it. The sash splintered and the glass tinkled around him. He landed on his shoulder on the packed ground outside and rolled quickly to his feet and started running the pasture.

Someone whistled shrilly and called his name. He half turned and saw old Dad Sims weaving toward him, leading a saddled horse. He said, "Here's your horse Frisco. Ride like hell, Son, or they'll have your scalp sure this time."

Frisco had no misgivings about the whiskey-soaked old man now. He took the horse and thanked him and he said, "Some-day things will be straight in my mind,

Dad. When they are I'll come back and say thanks the way I should."

"You jest get goin'," the old man said, "and don't be wastin' time with me. If you was to go to Miss Jessica's place, she'd have your other stuff."

Frisco said simply, "I don't know where she lives."

The old man shook his head sadly, said, "At first I thought you was foolin'." He stepped to one side, shaded his eyes with his left hand and with his right pointed to a white house near the end of the street.

Frisco thanked him and rode that way. When he got to the white picket fence, the woman came out and handed him a bundle.

"A couple of blankets," she said. "Ain't no call for you to freeze to death, even if you are crazy." She sniffed and wouldn't look at him. "Your gun's in there, too. I suppose you'll get yourself killed with it."

He tried to thank her but he couldn't find the words so he said, "I'm sorry I stoled from you, Ma'am. I'll make it up to you. Every cent."

She turned toward him now and her eyes seemed brighter. She said, "You gonna wait here until they come and put a rope around your neck? Get out and good riddance!"

So Frisco left town at a full gallop. As he looked back, he saw the men pour out of the saloon. They were headed by the marshal. Frisco dug his heels deeper into the horse's sides and he kept trying to decide if the woman had added, "God Bless you."

CHAPTER**3** *One-Man Massacre*

He put as much distance between himself and the town as he could, and he wound up in the narrow corridors where the desert hills stand pale brown and pink sided, their grotesque spires breaking abruptly against the brassy skies. There was a throbbing in his head and a hot burning spot in his stomach that was not entirely from the whiskey.

But with it had come a sort of cunning—an animal-like shrewdness that was replacing his loss of memory. He reined up his horse and took stock of his surroundings; dry and sear, with only the deathly pale

green of the cholo cactus and the scattered phlegmatic blotch of the greasewood.

It was not a place for a man to be alone, and somehow Frisco knew that from here on he would be alone, so he headed his horse north, riding tortuously over the shoulder of a sandstone butte to where he could get his bearings.

Behind him was the town and the verdant green valley. Behind him too was the life that he had lost in one single moment of terror. Ahead of him lay the forbidding, broken terrain of the wasteland, stretching as far as the eye could see, ending finally, he knew, in the piney slopes and the high meadowlands of the sheep country.

So he went that day; a lost soul in a lost land. And yet somehow he was not entirely lost, for thudding through his brain was the name of Volney Thau, and always, knitting tight furrows across his scarred forehead, was that trail back there.

He rode on, beckoned by the distance of the hills, pushed forward by the nearness of the heat. . . .

For the first year he drifted—trying to find himself and his place in the scheme of things. He found a good job here and there, but they never lasted long. He was seized by dizzy spells from time to time, and he was not dependable.

He kept his chin up and his temper down, and during the second year he tried it again, turning mostly to bronc busting now, for the violence of it seemed to do something for him. Most men, when they paused to consider it at all, took him for about twenty-six. He had filled out and was brown and lean and saddle hardened. And the fact that he was a drifter coming from nowhere with nowhere to go made him seem older.

Bit by bit he picked up the story of Volney Thau and his three henchmen. Alone in some deserted line shack, smoking one cigarette after another, he came to realize that he must have been part of that gang that had so long terrorized the country and which now, it was rumored, was hiring its guns to some huge cattle combine that was finding it hard to legally get enough graze for their ever increasing herd.

It was toward the end of the third year that he signed on steady with the XB's. It was a good job and Frisco decided it was the place he would settle down. He was happy. The men liked him and he liked

them, and he had a peculiar nostalgic softness in his voice that quieted the cattle when he rode night herd, singing songs he could not remember where he had learned.

Then came the night when the storm lashed out of the blackness with the suddenness of a serpent's tongue. Thunder crashed and roared and lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the wild rolling eyes of the cattle, jerking them to their feet like puppets on strings. With it came the ominous throating of sounds and the wickedness of clashing horns. The two other night riders stayed with the herd and they sent Frisco back for help. The lull in the storm gave him plenty of time. He had only to ride the short distance to camp and rouse the crew, and they could mill them sure and hold them here.

He was halfway there when the dizziness seized him. He fought against it, cursing himself in anguish. Then the next he knew the rain was falling in his face and men were bending over him, water running from the cupped brims of their hats. They were grim-faced men, their eyes red from the lack of sleep, their jaws hard set. The owner and the foreman of the XB's were there, too, and Frisco read it in their eyes.

"Five thousand dollars worth of tallow gone to hell," the old man said. "Crippled cows and some lost fer good. It'll take three weeks to a month to round 'em up out of this broken country, and by then the market will be shot." And then, as if more were needed, "Shorty Franzen was killed out there last night."

Frisco didn't wait to draw his pay. He took what gear he had, caught up the one horse that was his and left the camp that day. He knew now for sure that when the pinch of excitement was too great he was not a man who could be counted on.

Then the plains gave way to foothills, and the foothills to tall timber, and this to jagged peaks white with snow, cruel with black jutting cliffs. Then down through timber to rolling hills again and grass-deep meadows where thousands upon thousands of woolly sheep stood patiently white against the green of the grass.

By the time he reached the checkerboard of farm country, he had sold his horse and saddle and had been long afoot. His clothes were torn and patched now, and a beard

had grown along the line of his jaw. He had trimmed it some with a pair of shears, pointing it at the chin.

He got jobs here and there, and people gave him food, but still there was something inside Frisco that he knew was due to explode. It kept growing—a tumor of resentment and rebellion. Someone had cheated him out of part of his life. Somehow he'd have to know.

THE steaming manure piles under the square windows of the red barn had to be moved, the farmer said; so Frisco took the job. They stood and watched him and marveled, for he worked like ten men, loading the big wagons that were to haul the manure out to the spreaders.

The day was hot so he removed his shirt, and he was conscious of the huge knots of muscles that rippled up his forearm and across his shoulders with each swing of the pitchfork. His chest was as round and as solid as a barrel, and his waist reed-thin and latticed with muscles.

He did a four-day job in one, and he grabbed the money in his grubby hand and stalked off down the lane, still carrying his shirt in his hand. He was bareheaded. The sweat ran down and followed the channel of the ugly scar across his forehead. It dripped into the corners of his mouth, and it was salty and made him thirsty. He went straight on, looking neither to right nor left until he came to the little crossroads settlement where the false-front store carried an ill-painted sign: *Dry Goods and Wet Goods Both*.

He stood in the center of the room and he glared around, and he saw the two men at the table in the corner laugh at him. They were big and burly with guns hanging at their sides. Cowboys, such as he had known further south. Men reared in the saddle and born to danger and loving both.

He walked on to the counter and ordered a bottle. The proprietor of the store peered up and out over his square-cut, silver-rimmed glasses and said, "You got any money?"

With his right hand Frisco took the money from his pocket, and with his left hand he grabbed the storekeeper by the throat. "I said give me a bottle."

The two men at the table half raised, then they let back down. The storekeeper

got the bottle from the shelf and slid it across the counter. Frisco pulled the cork with his teeth, then stood there and drank half the contents.

The liquor burned into him and cut through his belly like a thousand knives. It seared and bubbled through his veins like the witches brew of a demon alchemist. It reached his brain and thundered there, pounding against the back of his eyes. He glared at the two men still sitting at the table in the corner of the room and he said, "Well, what the hell you starin' at?"

When he got no answer, he went to the opposite corner and sat down at a table. He buried his bearded face in both his hands and began to cry softly. The tears seeped through his interlaced fingers and splashed onto the table top, and for awhile he completely forgot the world around him.

And then he heard the vicious curse and the sharp thud of a blow followed by the sound of a body slamming against the wall.

He jumped to his feet quickly, his hands clenched to his sides, and he saw the two cowboys who had been at the table standing on their feet. One of them was cursing foully. He was standing there, his cracked lips pulled back from yellowed teeth, and he was looking down at a little old man who lay groveling on the floor. As Frisco watched, the cowboy drew back his foot and kicked the old man in the ribs.

"That'll learn you to keep yer ideas to yourself, you damn stinkin' sheepherder!" the man growled.

There was a blinding red curtain across Frisco's eyes when he lunged in. He felt his fingernails rip across the bare flesh of his shoulders. He felt teeth sink into the lobe of his ear. He felt blood streaming into his mouth, but it meant absolutely nothing.

His fists were finding solid flesh, and that was all that mattered. It started esthetic thrills that ran up his arms and into his soul. He was killing, and it was good. It was the thing he wanted. He could see the bearded faces of the men and that was all he wanted to see, and he knew that these two men—or twenty—could never stop him now.

He heard the terrible rumbling of sounds and he knew that the counter had crashed over. The canned goods were falling from the shelves, the bottles were breaking and

splashing across the floor and the tables were being shattered. It was a tremendous, tumultuous roar, and he knew what it was. And yet to him it seemed to be only the sounding of a name. Volney Thau. Volney Thau. *Volney Thau.*

And each time he heard the name he would fight again with renewed fury until at last there was nothing left to smash and he was standing alone in the middle of the room, his trousers ripped from his body, his face and shoulders smeared with blood, his chest heaving with the horrible exertion he had been through.

But his mind was clear and he was stone sober. He saw the two broken bodies groaning there in the rubble, and just outside the door was the little old man who had been kicked. There, too, was the storekeeper with the square-cut, silver-rimmed spectacles.

And Frisco felt ashamed. Just the way he had when he had discovered that he had stolen money from Jessica Buttress. He helped the two beaten cowboys to their feet. He started out the door to tell the storekeeper he would try to make it up to him some way. But the storekeeper ran a dozen yards, then stopped and looked back, terrified.

The little old man who had been kicked did not move. He stood there and there was almost adoration in his wide, brown eyes. He was a Mexican, Frisco saw now. A Mexican with the stamp of sheep about him. Greasy pants that had been patched too many times, a narrow brimmed hat that had lost its shape—if indeed it had ever had one—a hickory shirt and a tattered vest, and a small Bible protruding from one of the vest pockets.

He looked at Frisco adoringly, his lips moving, and then a gleaming, black-leather-upholstered buggy came up the road, drawn by two beautifully matched prancing bays. The weight of the man in the white suit made the buggy lean sharply to his side. The girl in the frilly pink dress had to cling to the side iron to keep from sliding out of her place.

Frisco dodged back inside the building, but not until he had met the eyes of the girl. He stood pressed against the wall, surrounded by the destruction he had wrought with his hands, and his heart thudded high in his chest in a way that

was new to him, an exciting feeling.

The Mexican had run to the buggy and was talking so fast Frisco could not make out the words, but in a short time the big man in the white suit came to him and he knew that he had a job if he wanted it. The man in the white suit would pay for the damages to the store. There were no strings attached. The man in the white suit wanted Frisco just as he was.

It was in that way that Frisco became a herder of sheep for Vance Ferguson. Thousands of sheep that ran in the lonely high pastures where God was in every flashing stream and in the very wind that threaded the needles of the pine trees, and the Devil himself, in need of more grass, was lurking there in the foothills.

CHAPTER

4

Volney Thau

There was a meadow that was sweet with grass. It was a place where the sun always seemed to stay, even when it was dark on the slopes that surrounded it. Dog tooth violets grew there, and the tiny stream that ran through the center of the meadow never made a sound.

But at the far end of the meadow there was a mountain. A mountain with thunder-splintered pinnacles that clawed jagged holes in the rain clouds and the snow clouds that constantly fought there. It was furrowed with scowls and foreboding, and if deer went there at all it was because they were pressed by danger.

Frisco stood there bareheaded, alone, and he looked at the meadow and then up at the mountain, and he saw that it was exactly the way his life had become.

For weeks on end he would be a sheep-herder, just as he was now, a canteen slung around his shoulder, a rifle in the crook of his left arm, a curved stick clutched in his right hand. He wore a light jacket with copious pockets, and in those pockets, beside his pipe, were a couple of magazines worn thin with reading, and a Bible and a book of the philosophy of Nietzsche. She had given them to him. Paula Ferguson. The niece of Vance Ferguson, the great sheepman.

She came here sometimes, riding in alone from the summer camp. They would talk together for hours—senseless conversations

that had no endings and no answers. But at such times he felt near to her and at peace with the world. He was like the meadow then.

But at other times he was like the mountain, and he knew she feared him then and hated him for what he was, just as she hated every part of the violence that the coming of the cattle was bringing. But still they came—mottled long-horned herds, and they threatened the grazing land of Vance Ferguson, the sheepman. Land that he felt was rightfully his to use, and land that he intended to keep.

He was a gambling man and a sporting man, this Vance Ferguson. He kept prize fighting cocks and a dozen pit bulldogs, and his eyes were strangely bright when he spoke of them. And in time Frisco came to realize that he kept one thing more in his sporting stable. Vance Ferguson kept Frisco. Frisco, the wild man who could tear down a saloon singlehanded.

Paula talked to him about it and pleaded with him. She said, "Don't drink when they offer it to you. It'll just lead to more and more trouble, Frisco, and then there'll be killings. They're making a sideshow freak out of you, Frisco."

He nodded dully. He knew it was so, what she said. But they seemed to know just when the loneliness was too strong within him and the thirst was growing fast.

It was like being sucked into the vortex of a whirlpool. He could never stop then until the time when he would find himself standing there sobbing softly, his clothes ripped from his body. Standing there in the middle of wreckage with anywhere from four to eight cattlemen draped brokenly across upset tables or smashed counters.

Vance Ferguson was always there with his white suit and a cigar in the corner of his mouth and green bills jutting out from between his fingers. He would be saying, "I told you to keep your cows out of those upper pastures. Now maybe you'll listen. That's sheep country up there and it's gonna stay sheep country. Come, Frisco boy. There's never been another like yuh, Frisco boy. Never another."

And afterwards Frisco would go back to his valleys and his sheep, and there he would be alone with the understanding of the sunshine and the tolerance of the wind, and he would be sick and broken in spirit

until Paula would come to see him again.

When Frisco was right he knew he loved her. When he was wrong he knew nothing but smashing and breaking, and he heard nothing but the name of Volney Thau. He knew that unless he could clear this out of his mind he could never have her, so he spoke to her about it one day. She didn't seem to hear at first.

"I've been thinking about it for a long time, Frisco," she said. "If we could clear up a few things in your past then you would be all right. I know you would." She was saying that when he broke in with the name of Volney Thau.

She stopped suddenly. Her face was pale and her eyes were full upon him. She said, "Then it's come to that?"

He didn't know what she meant and he told her so. She hurried to tell him that Vance Ferguson's stand against cattle was not the only stand. It was going on all around them. In the Tensleep country, a thousand sheep had been driven over a cliff. Herders were found with their skulls bashed in. Saltpeter in the water holes. Poisoned range. "The cattlemen are hiring guns," she said softly.

Frisco looked off into the distance. He said, "Vance Ferguson will hire guns, too. He's that kind of a man."

She nodded and said, "I know."

HE WENT on one more rampage for Vance Ferguson after talking to her, and then he knew that from here on it would be guns. So he was not surprised when the four riders came over the rim of the hill and sat their horses there and looked down on him alone in the meadow with his five-thousand sheep spread over the many hills. He knew who they were, for he had heard it from Vance Ferguson himself. There was a strange excitement running through him. Volney Thau, Three-Legged Jack, Johnny Ringo and Monte Brault.

The Law was too close in the Southwest, it was said, so they had come on north a year back and had found a ready market for their talents in the ever-growing fight against the woolies. Frisco was stone sober, and yet the thought was in him that perhaps if he just killed them the gnawing memory would be out of him and he would be normal again. Then he decided to talk to them.

But even stronger than that was the thought that he had a job to do. Those helpless, cloven-foot, split-lipped charges out there were his, and it was his job to protect them. This time he wouldn't fail. He moved back out of the sunlight of the meadow into the more sombre shade of the mountain, and he holed himself up between the rocks there, fishing out the box of cartridges and placing them within easy reach.

He was good with a rifle, he knew. The men would have to come this way. If they moved toward the sheep he'd pick them off, one by one. Maybe he could wing them, and then he would force them to tell him what they knew.

He was as steady and as cold as the rocks around him. There was no doubt in his mind but what he could handle all four of them.

The gunmen split and turned, two going down one side of the V-shaped canyon, two down the other. They'd meet at a point about a hundred yards in front of him, Frisco figured. The range was just right for the kind of shooting that he wanted.

A slow excitement started coming into him, then. Gradually it seeped through him until his heart was beating hard against his ribs. He felt it pulsing in his temples, pressing against his eyes, and he tried to calm himself. He was beginning to feel a little dizzy and the breath was catching in his throat. He looked at his hands and they were still steady, but when he sighted over the rifle the sights blurred.

He became panicky. The riders were coming closer, two down one side, two down the other, headed toward that spot there in front of him where he could pick them off as easily as he could swat flies off the side of a bunkhouse wall. Now they were close enough that he could see them, and he sat there wide eyed and staring, hidden from them, and his hands were frozen tight around his rifle like a tender-foot hunter with his first buck.

He could see them more vividly than the eyes have any right to register, and he catalogued every feature of them, unable to pull his gaze away and yet unable to do anything to stop them from the thing they were about to do.

The man in the lead was small and wiry.

He was handsome in a way. He looked like a smart man. Brains on horseback, Frisco thought. Brains on horseback. He knew this was Volney Thau himself, and yet for the life of him he could not tell how he knew.

Behind Volney Thau was a grotesque man with a stubble of black beard sprinkled with grey. He had black glittering eyes that were visible even at this distance. He had a special stirrup on the left side and through it was thrust a wooden peg leg, fastened at the knee. There was about a foot of the real leg sticking straight back.

He forced himself to look across at the other two and he saw them riding, arrogant and sure. Overdressed men, both, with too much trappings on their saddles. They had a cold, deadly polish about them with the hot flush of temper lurking visibly near the surface. The pounding in Frisco's ears was getting unbearable. There was a jumble of unrelated thoughts. Blind flashes of pain. A soft southern drawl. "You look like a good boy to me. We'll take care of yuh."

And the next he knew he was running out into the meadow, his rifle cracking as fast as he could lever in the shells. But there was nothing to shoot at. There was nothing there. He thought it had all been a trick of his mind, this coming of Volney Thau. And then he saw the broken bodies of clubbed sheep.

He ran panting up the hill and across the flat to where the bluff dropped straight down to the roaring churning waters of Crazy Horse Creek. He did not need to look because before he leaned over the dizzy heights, he knew what he would see down there on the jagged rocks below.

* * *

She must have been able to read what was in his eyes, for she tried to talk to him. But he didn't stop to listen to her—the one person in the world who had ever been able to reason with him. Now even she was out of his realm of reasoning. It was as if his eyes had been suddenly focused between two shutters that were drawn close from either side, leaving only narrow slits through which he could see only one object. Volney Thau and his henchmen.

He was vaguely conscious of Paula's

sobbing as he left her there at the summer camp, and he was vaguely conscious of the appearance of rifles and sawed off shotguns as Vance Ferguson gathered his warriors. He knew now that the war clouds had ceased their gathering and were due to break.

But to him it was not a war. It was the fulfillment of a one-man quest. It was the fulfillment of a one-man quest. It was something like a man alone at night trying to build a fire while the storm thunders in the background.

CHAPTER

5

Woolie Warrior

He took the horse without asking, and he rode it hard. His long hair reached nearly to his shoulders and his pointed beard added to the angular hardness of his face. There was an unblinking red light burning deep in his cavernous black eyes. Those few on the road who saw him moved aside to let him pass, and then after he was back in the meadow he saw no one.

The clubbed sheep had bloated some in the heat of the day, and the stench of death seemed to lie over the verdant valley like a stagnant green mantle. He breathed it in, and it was like the sting of whiskey burning through his veins as he crossed and recrossed the series of undulating meadows and finally picked up the trail he was seeking.

He never lost it after that, and he rode erect in the saddle with the reins gripped tightly in his left hand, the rifle gripped in his right. In time the trail became too obvious, and he knew he was being led into a waiting army. There had been a declaration of war, and the trail was there to be followed. That was the purpose of it. He didn't give a thought to Vance Ferguson and his warriors. He rode straight on, alone, and his hand tightened some around the stock of the rifle.

They were down at the cross roads store where the ill-painted sign said: *Dry Goods and Wet Goods Both*. There were perhaps a dozen of them. They were men who had declared the war and were waiting now for the counter attack.

The air was charged with the twanging tension of a too taut bow string. Men's voices were too high—eyes too bright.

Jokes that wouldn't have been funny before were now hilarious, bringing forth high-pitched peals of laughter that died as quickly as the crack of a pistol shot on an ice-filled morning.

They made no move when they saw Frisco, because it was senseless. There were twelve men against one. This was no barroom brawl. This was guns against guns. This was war, and the crazy sheepherder didn't have a chance, and besides he was sober. But they knew his strength, and two men barred him at the door. One said, "What's on your mind, Sheepherder? You decided to get out of the fight?"

Frisco shook his shaggy head. "I want to see Volney Thau," he said. "I want to talk to him."

They considered it for a while. The men looked from one to the other, and some of them made circular motions with their forefinger against the side of their head. Then the one who was the spokesman said, "You can't go in there with a gun, Sheepherder."

Frisco didn't argue. There was no violence in him. He hadn't come here to fight. He had come here to find out something. He felt like a boy with a forbidden book—wanting to miss nothing on the page before him, yet resenting its holding him from the next page. It was the next page that won out. He handed the rifle across and emptied his pockets of cartridges and said, "I want to see Volney Thau. I want to talk to him."

He saw the men shrug their shoulders, and a couple of them tapped the six-shooters that hung at their hips. They moved aside and let him in, and there in the corner he saw them. Volney Thau, Three-Legged Jack, Johnny Ringo and Monte Brault. He tried to smile when he walked toward the table, but somehow he couldn't make his features work.

The men stood up and Three-Legged's peg made a queer thumping sound against the floor. Monte Brault's voice was soft. "It's the sheepherder."

Frisco stood there looking at them, his hands away from his side, his face burning as with a sudden fever. He said, "Do you know me?"

Monte Brault's voice was a little lower in his throat. "I said you was the sheepherder, didn't I?"

"I'm Frisco. I come from Ganton's

Crossing. I stood trial there once, about four years back. They said I tried to steal some horses. They kept asking me about Volney Thau and Three-Legged Jack and Johnny Ringo and Monte Brault. They asked me over and over."

He could see now what had given these men their deadly reputations. It was there in the eyes of Volney Thau. It was in the brutal mask that crossed the face of Three-Legged Jack, and it was in the smooth way Johnny Ringo and Monte Brault reached for their guns. It was Volney Thau who said, "What did you tell 'em, Boy?"

"I didn't tell them anything. I couldn't remember. I've come to ask you now what it's all about."

He saw the men relax, and he saw the smile that twisted the thin lips of Volney Thau. The gunman said, "I remember you now, Frisco. You was a good boy, wasn't he, Monte?"

Monte Brault said, "Yeah. He was a good boy."

Then it started to come back—a slow undulating wave of sound that rolled in from a distance, came through the doors of the room and settled in his head. It started throbbing and beating there until it was a cacophony that made him want to scream. He felt his eyes dilating wider and wider, and he could see four men standing there.

No, they weren't standing. They were kneeling on top of a cliff, looking down. The mountain rim above the meadow, where they had killed the sheep. No—not that. It was a lower cliff. There was a green pasture there—like the meadow. But it was not like the meadow because there was a white fence and a gate. He was reaching out for the gate. . . .

The blinding explosion was right in his face, and even before he knew for sure that it was Volney Thau's gun he had lunged in, his muscle-hardened body crashing the table to splinters under his furious onslaught.

He could smell the sting of gunsmoke in his nostrils and feel the sear of flashing flame across his face. With each blinding roar, it came back to him clearer and clearer until he knew for sure that these four men had been responsible for his damnation to hell on earth, and that he would kill them all if it was the last thing he ever did.

But as the past rolled closer and closer, the gigantic, maniac strength went out of him. He crumpled under the impact of lead and fell under the slashing wickedness of gun barrels raked across his head. He fell to the floor, and it was this that saved him.

He could hear the thick curses of men—the clatter of hoofbeats and the sharp-tongued condemnation of rifle fire. He was vaguely afraid as he crawled toward a darkened corner and lay there crumpled and bleeding. There were a thousand thoughts crowding his mind and he wondered if there would ever be hours in a lifetime to devote to thinking of each one of them individually. Old Dad Sims. Jessica Buttriss. Catfishing, with a string tied to one toe so a fellow could sleep on the creek bank. He had wanted to be plenty tough. He laughed at that. It had been a childish whim—like a too sharp desire for candy. The years hadn't been all wasted, then. He had grown up in his thinking. . . . The darkness that came finally was a merciful thing.

CONSCIOUSNESS came quickly like a curtain being whipped aside by the wind. He saw that he was not alone. On the hard-rammed earth floor of the shack across the road from the crossroads store, there were others, swathed in bandages the way he was. Some moaned and whimpered and some lay still. There was a doctor there, working feverishly, and Paula Ferguson, her face chalk white, her lips bloodless. She gave a quick glad cry when she saw that Frisco had opened his eyes, but she did not come to him because there were others to be helped.

He saw then that there were sheepmen and cattlemen standing side by side. There was no hatred in them now—there was only horror at the thing they had allowed to happen. In time he learned that Vance Ferguson was dead—shot in the face with a load of buckshot. Two of the leading cattlemen had fallen, too. There on the floor next to him, the Mexican shepherd rolled his eyes toward a Texas cowboy who was gasping against the pain of a slug in his belly. Gray-haired old men—wealthy cattlemen and wealthy sheepmen—stood there and let tears run down their cheeks unashamed and he heard one of them say,

"What have we done? What have we done?"

Finally the wagons came out from town and took away the dead and moved the wounded to where they could be cared for. Frisco held back, and motioned to one of the men, but Paula Ferguson came forward and said, "I'll tell you, Frisco."

He didn't want to hear it from her, but she motioned the man out of the room and stood there, not meeting his eyes. She made it a cold-blooded recital.

"You caved in the side of Volney Thau's head with a chair leg," she said. "They found Monte Brault with his neck broken. The one called Johnny Ringo had three different bullets in him. Three-Legged Jack was still alive when the men got in there. He was screaming horribly. We could hear him far off. He's dead now."

She turned her eyes on him quickly then and they seemed hopeful through their mask of horror. She said, "Does it all mean something to you, Frisco?"

He nodded his head to let her know, but he couldn't answer. He felt himself getting violently sick and he said, "Please leave me alone."

But when he was finally up and around the world had never looked so good. Everything had a comical side to it and everything made him laugh. Everything, that is, with the exception of when he thought of having to leave Paula.

They were working out agreements now, the cattlemen and the sheepmen. Paula would keep the flocks. She was wealthy. It hastened his decision that he couldn't put it off forever, and one day he was ready to ride. He looked down from the saddle and saw her eyes and the pain that was in him was worse than the four years of nameless hell that he had lived.

He didn't try to say it, because it wouldn't have sounded right in words. He wanted love, not pity. He wanted to be a man that a woman had to have. A man that a woman would lean on and need. He didn't

say it, but beyond those things he knew that he wanted Paula Ferguson so much that there could never be another woman.

She said only, "Where are you going, Frisco? What will you do?"

He tried to smile when he said, "I owe a woman some money, Paula." Then he left quickly before she could see the mist that had come across his eyes.

The town was exactly as he remembered it, but Jessica Buttress was older by far than when he had left her. There was a brown knit shawl pulled around her thin shoulders, her eyes were still bright with that same damnation-of-sinners light. He smiled at her and saw the light soften.

He said, "I'm all right now, Miss Buttress. I come back to find out how much it was I stole from you."

Her eyes flashed hard for a second. "Most a dollar and a half!" Then the hardness was gone completely. She reached out quickly and took both his hands in hers and pulled him close. She laid her face against his chest and started to cry.

Dad Sims, he found, had died, so he saw to it that there was a decent headstone on the grave. He was coming back from tending it immediately, and he went running across the yard.

Paula didn't say anything soft and sentimental. She just said, "Frisco, there's so darned much to do I'm all mixed up. The lambing and the shearing and the book-keeping, and whether I should sell now or hold the wool, and when to move the sheep." She compressed her lips and her eyes went wide. She looked very young and helpless. She said, "Frisco, whether I like you or not, I've got to have you to help me run that place. I can't do it alone."

He took her in his arms and held her as tight as he could without hurting her.

She pressed her face close to his and said: "Of course, the fact that I like you makes it just that much nicer."

Frisco didn't say it, but he agreed that it was so.

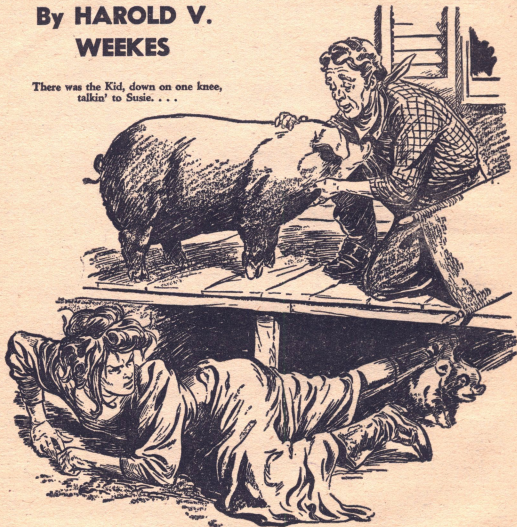
THE END



PONOKA KID'S DILEMMA

By **HAROLD V.
WEEKES**

There was the Kid, down on one knee,
talkin' to Susie. . . .



★

**With a yellow-haired widow and a
lady pig both loco over him, the Ponoka
Kid had about as bright a future as a
snowball in hell.**

★

MOST of us boys at the X Bar B (said Alkali Peters), had some good point, like not drinkin' in his sleep, or being able to draw to a inside straight seven out of ten, but for plain, ringtailed goodness, you couldn't beat the Ponoka Kid. I don't mean there was anything sissy about him, mind you, but when it came to adding up virtues, he was loaded.

First of all, he was better lookin' even than me, bein' tall, and slim, and sort of graceful, with just enough freckles to make his eyes look bluer, and that sort of yellow

hair with waves in it like they have in the catalogues. He had manners, too, good ones, that seemed to come natural and wasn't put on for special occasions like ours was. As if that wasn't enough, he'd just inherited enough money from an uncle of his to have bought out Joe Bates lock, stock and barrel, and maybe three or four other outfits like this one.

Most important, I guess, was the way he took to animals, and that queer sort of understandin' he had with them. Why, he just about knocked the sense out of Jess Tulley once, for usin' a whip on that team of sorrels of his. The Kid just seemed to talk animal language, and it sure was a lucky thing for him he did.

Right up to that time in '06 when prices all went sky-high, we was content with raisin' beef and gettin' what supplies was needed from the store in town; but when bacon jumped to twelve cents a pound, Joe Bates got to figurin'. There weren't no sense, the way he saw it, to pay money like that when we could just as well grow our own supplies.

Anyway, he thought it over for quite some time, and then he came back from town one day with a sow in back of him in the wagon. She sure weren't no beauty, not even for a pig, but she had got expectations, and the boss made it plenty clear that it was up to us to treat her good if we wanted bacon come fall.

The prospect of playin' nursemaid to a female bacon factory didn't go down too well with the boys, though, and we grumbled plenty—that is, all of us did but the Ponoka Kid. He seemed plumb delighted with the whole thing. I got one good look at the lady pig and I knew we was in for trouble.

It started, all right, that evenin', when it come time to feed her. Sam Perkins drew the low card and went swingin' over the fence into her pen with a big bucket of swill. We was in the bunkhouse, and the next minute we heard Sam yell, and crowded to the door. We just got there in time to see Sam scramblin' for his life, the bucket of swill all spilled, and that lady pig so mad that for a minute it looked like he wasn't goin' to get over the fence before she done him in. He did, though, jumpin' clean over without touchin' the top rail, and landin' in a heap on the outside.

Sam was mad clean through, and us laughin' didn't do him no good. He picked himself up, usin' language that wasn't fit for no lady's ears, pig or not, and made it mighty clear he was havin' nothin' more to do with that critter if it cost him his job. We was ready to agree.

The Kid, though, was standin' beside me, and he just looked over Sam and grinned. "You ain't got the personality to deal with the female sex, Sam," he said.

"Why, you long-eared, pig-kissin' dough-head," Sam yelled. "Just let me see you do somethin' with that ornery, mud-wallowin' lady pig!"

"I'm givin' lessons," the Kid told him. "You just watch me and learn how it's done."

Well, the Kid got another pail of swill and climbed into the corral with that there pig. She seen him comin', and started out to meet him, snuffin' and gruntin' and watchin' the Kid out of her little mean red eyes, and if it had been me, I'd have been high-tailin' it out of there.

The Kid, though, didn't seem worried, but set the pail down on the ground and squatted beside it, rollin' a smoke. The sow seemed kind of took back, and she stopped to watch him. The Kid didn't even look up.

"Come on over," he said to her, "and get acquainted. This is the Kid talkin'. Come to think of it, you need a name. It ain't right to call no lady like you just 'pig', so right now I christen you 'Susie'. Come on over, Susie, and get acquainted."

The boys was linin' the fence by this time, and they laughed, and hooted the Kid, but he didn't pay no attention. He just kept callin' that pig, and darned if she didn't walk right up to him and look him in the eye!

"Susie," the Kid said, lookin' back at her, "I gotta apologize for that low-down polecat that come in here just now. He just ain't got no brains, so you'll have to excuse him. I don't blame you for not takin' no swill from him," he said.

THE pig just grunted a couple of times and looked over at the fence where Sam was sittin' with the rest of us, and Sam sort of slid away from the look she gave him. Susie turned back to the Kid, waitin' for him to go on. He took a drag of his

cigarette, blew some rings, and done so. "Now here, Susie, I got somethin' that's different. In this here pail I got the best, hunderd per cent, genuine championship swill you ever tasted. You come on over to the trough and just see if it ain't."

Th Kid got up and carried the pail over to the trough, and Susie walked right along with him. He poured the swill out, and she got to work. If the sounds made meant anythin', why, darned if that swill wasn't good.

The Kid waited until she was finished, and then walked back to the fence. Susie come along with him, and before he climbed over, he turned and scratched her ears for her.

"Goodnight, Susie," he said. "I'll be seein' you in the morning." Susie grunted sort of soft as she watched him go. "You just got to be a gentleman," the Kid told Sam.

Well, after that, the Kid wouldn't let nobody have anythin' to do with Susie, and we wasn't arguin' for the honor. Three times a day he'd take her a pail of swill and talk to her, and in between he'd give her carrots or turnips when he was passin'. The day them little pigs arrived, why, he was back and forth a dozen times, takin' her little special things, and the way he talked about her in the bunkhouse was plain loco.

Susie though was sure one healthy pig, and anybody could see she was mighty fond of the Kid. When the baby pigs got bigger, he got to lettin' her out of her pen, and she followed him all over while he worked around the place, the ten little ones chargin' after her. Pretty soon he started gettin' me to let her out when he was somewhere else in the yard, and she'd snort and snuffle around till she found him.

It sure was plumb domestic, as you might say, till the boss and Mrs. Bates brag that yellow-haired-widow from Winnipeg for a visit.

The day she come there with her mother, I was invited up to the house for supper, bein' foreman of the X Bar B, and the Kid with me, him bein' so polite. We was introduced real formal all 'round, and nothin' happened till it come time for the Kid to shake hands with that widow. Then things just naturally happened.

The Kid stood there like a dummy, with his hand part way out, them specially blue

eyes of his fair to buggin' out as he looked at her. I will say, too, she looked mighty pretty, what with that sort of yellow-gold hair of hers, them big gray eyes, and that pink and white skin of hers showin' more than it needed to.

Somehow, though, the way she held her mouth sort of reminded me of a horse I had once—Jinx, I called him—just about the meanest thing on four legs. I kind of got the idea maybe that this huband of hers had been lucky to die off. Of course I didn't say so, and from the way the Kid was lookin', why, he wouldn't have listened if I had.

The supper was all right, though not so good as we was used to, and there wasn't no bacon or beans. I guess it what they call conversational dinners, where everybody talks all the time because there ain't nothin' to eat. From where I was, I could see the Kid had got over his quiet mighty quick, and was makin' them fancy remarks the ladies is fond of.

Every so often, though, the widow would look at him, and her eyes would get sort of red, like a rooster's when he spots a worm, and the Kid would shut his mouth and get sort of a sick-cow look all over his face. I got mighty tired of it by the time they let us go back to the bunk house.

The Kid walked along beside me, but he sure didn't know where he was goin'. "Ain't she wonderful?" he asked me, dreamy like, when we was beddin' down. He stopped gettin' undressed and sat there with a sock in one hand, while the sick-cow look come over him again. "Susan Martin," he sort of moans. "She says I can call her Susan. Ain't that a pretty name?"

"Sure it's pretty," I said. "I guess maybe that was how come you give that name to that pig friend of yours."

The Kid didn't say nothin', but the look he gave me said plenty.

Well, me and the Kid was handed the job of ridin' herd on them two guests, Joe bein' too busy, and Mrs. Bates not up to entertainin'.

Bein' stuck with the old girl wasn't so bad, she not ridin' much and bein' mostly willin' to set on the ranch house porch, at least after the first day, but that shiny-haired girl had the Kid out every wakin' hour. They'd start out around sun-up, and wouldn't be back till dark, which left me to

look after Susie the pig and her family. I'm tellin' you straight, I never knew a pig could be so dogged sensitive.

RIGHT from the first day that the Kid was too busy to feed her, that pig started to get restless. No matter how much I'd try to coax her, she just wouldn't eat nothin', and all the time she'd keep pacin' back and forth in her pen. When I'd speak to her, why, she'd stop for a minute and look at me, and then she'd grunt kind of disappointed like and start off again.

I'd never had much use for pigs, lady or otherwise, but I sure felt sorry for Susie. The worst of it was, I couldn't even let her out of her pen for a little exercise, or she would have gone lookin' for the Kid. By the end of the week, I was gettin' real worried, and I mentioned it to the Kid.

"That pig Susie is missin' you, Kid," I said.

The Ponoka Kid just looked at me, vacant like. The Susie on his mind wasn't no pig. I sure didn't think that was no way to treat an old friend, but I knew it wouldn't do no good to say anythin' more. I just waited, and while I was waitin', I heard somethin' that started me worryin' about the Kid himself.

Maybe it wasn't good manners to sneak up on the widow and her mother like I did, but I found out plenty by doin' it. The two of them was arguin' on the porch, and I

sneaked along the side of the house till I could hear what they was sayin'. They was talkin' about the Kid.

"Why, Susan," the old girl was sayin', "the Kid ain't no person for you. He's just a common cowboy." She sniffed.

"There ain't no better lookin' man in Winnipeg," the widow snapped back at her, "but it ain't him I'm thinkin' of. That there cowboy has enough money to buy a dozen ranches like this. He don't need to work here for ten minutes if he don't want to," she says. "With his money, the Kid ain't no ways hard to take," she says.

Like I say, I waited, but after I'd heard them two buzzards makin' plans to get the Kid's money, why, I was worried sick. When I heard the Kid sort of hummin' the weddin' march under his breath, I figured it was high time to do somethin'. I was still tryin' to think of somethin' when I went out to feed Susie.

That evenin' I was a little earlier than I usually was, havin' got out of takin' the old girl up to the top of Bald Hill so she could see the mountains at sunset, and it was still pretty light when I reached the pen. As I carried the bucket of swill over, I saw the Kid and the widow come in from ridin' and sit down on the porch. From where I was, it looked like they was sittin' pretty close together.

Anyway, Susie was still pacin' up and down in her pen, and she didn't pay no



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**STAR
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attention to me at all. The little pigs weren't worried none, though, and they cleaned up the swill fast enough without her, and then they got to squealin' somethin' fierce. Bein' worried like I was, I figgered somethin' must be wrong with them, and I went over and opened the gate, intendin' to take a look-see.

Well, I'd hardly got to the gate when there was a rush, and that Susie pig was out the gate, darned near bowlin' me over on her way, and when I turned around to see where she had got to, why, all them ten little ones come climbin' out after her. In two seconds flat there wasn't a pig in that there pen.

Most of the boys, when they heard of it, swore up and down I done it on purpose, but I ain't sayin'. Right way, though, I knew what that Susie pig was goin' to do, and I high-tailed it toward the ranch house to get in on the fun.

I wasn't nowheres near in time. Susie was onto that porch while I was twenty yards away, chargin' past the widow to get to the Kid. It don't seem to me Susie had any idea of hurtin' the widow, mind you, but maybe she did brush by a trifle rough. Anyways, the widow let out a howl you could have heard over at the line fence, and just as I got there she grabbed up the ridin' whip she always carried and walloped Susie hard where it ain't polite to hit no lady.

"You filthy pig," she yelled, usin' words that ain't printed only in high class books. "Get away you—" and then she tripped over a couple of little pigs and went sprawlin' off the porch. There was so darned much racket out there then, what with pigs gruntin' and squealin' and that widow yelling her fool head off, that for a moment I didn't notice what the Kid was doin'.

When I got around to lookin', though, I sure got the surprise of my life. There was the Kid, down on his knees, talkin' to Susie, and payin' no more attention to the widow than if she hadn't been nowheres near.

"That was a doggoned dirty trick, Susie," he was sayin', and then the widow stamped back up on the porch and grabbed his shoulder.

"What about me?" she yelled.

"There wasn't no call for you to hit

Susie," the Kid told her, reproachful like. "That ain't the proper way to treat a lady pig."

That there widow looked more like that Jinx horse—the mean one—than ever, and even if it was gettin' kinda dark you could tell that she was too mad to care what she said.

"Pigs," she yelled. "You get rid of those pigs this minute. You're through with pigs, and cows, and all the rest of this filthy place. We're leavin' for Winnipeg in the morning. I won't have my husband mixed up with this disgusting place another day. You get rid of those pigs!"

The Kid looked surprised. "I thought we was goin' to stay here," he said.

"Don't be such a fool," she raged. "I couldn't stand living here, with nothing but hills and cows, and that man with his filthy pig!"

I hadn't noticed I was getting close enough for her to see me.

For a moment the Kid didn't say nothin'. He just looked at her, like maybe he hadn't seen her right before, and then he put on his hat.

"I christened that there pig," he said. "I called her 'Susie', on account of that means a lily, which is mighty nice. When you come, thought you was that way too. I see I made a mistake."

He turned around then and walked clean away without lookin' back, with Susie followin' him, and all the little ones tumblin' after her. I just waited long enough to lift my hat sort of ironical like, and then I left too, and went and set on the bunkhouse steps, rollin' a smoke and thinkin' how close the Kid had come to gettin' tied up to that designin' female. Yep, that Mr. Martin sure was lucky, dyin' so early.

From where I was, I could hear the Kid's low voice talkin' to the pig. It sounded to me like he was tellin' her that he'd thought that Martin woman was sweet and honest and good, like she was, and would follow him wherever he went, same as she would, only now he'd found out different. I guess he was sort of apologizin' for leavin' Susie alone so long.

I must have set there for an hour, I guess, before I seen the shadow of the Kid loomin' up against the sky as he climbed over the fence, leavin' a low happy sort of gruntin' behind him.

Fiddlefooted Jimmie figured escorting a love-struck couple was child's play—until the deadly Halloran boys joined the party with a . . .

GUNSMOKE WEDDING WREATH

He hit the ground running fast. . . .



THE SHOT came as a surprise, left him blankly terrified for a moment. It came over his left shoulder—he could actually see it scream past his horse's head, a heavy rifle slug that drilled into the trail fifty yards ahead.

"That's Halloran's gun," he thought. The gun boomed again. He felt the horse stiffen under the impact, and rolled from the saddle. He hit the ground running fast. "Halloran!" he thought, streaking behind the protection of a huge boulder. "What's wrong? Don't they recognize me?"

**By JOHN JO
CARPENTER**

He saw the horse struggling on its side in the trail. Blood was streaming from its nostrils. He looked at it bleakly, leaned there against the hot boulder and watched it die, wondering why the Hallorans had done this.

He had a gun, his father's .45, in his soogan-roll behind the saddle. It was no trick to get it. The Hallorans, all three of them, were pretty good with that big gun. But not this good. A straight-shooting .30-30 with a clean, direct trajectory he would have feared, but the Hallorans' big .45-70 threw a monstrously big slug as a man throws a ball, in a downward-curving path that was hard to figure. They were shooting from above him, too, and into the sun.

He could make out where the shot came from. The gunman had stopped halfway back, at the forks of the Mariposa trail. He shot three times while Jimmie Bird was getting his gun. Each time, Jimmie saw the gust of flame belched out by the muzzle of the big rifle.

"All right for you, Hallorans!" he whispered. He lay by the dead horse and filled his pockets with .45 cartridges—forty-eight of them. Then he scuttled back to the protection of his boulder, where he faced about, grinning. "Fade or cover, Hallorans. I'll play these, thanks." The .45 felt good in his hand. It was worth a dozen big rifles here. They would have to come after him. . . .

He waited there until dark. It was still three miles, by trail, to the meeting place with Tex Mayfield. For once, the crow's route was the best. Tip, Joe or Phil Halloran would cover that trail. With a horse, and no moon, he would have risked it—indeed, it would be less risk than cross-country. Afoot, it was a different story.

At dark he collected his canteen from the saddle horn. It had been badly smashed by the horse's fall, but enough remained in it for one good drink. He had it, and threw the canteen away. He took his time stripping off the saddle. He hid it as best he could—the Halloran's were not petty thieves, anyway—and set out to meet Tex Mayfield.

He was hungry, and he hated to walk. It had not been much of a horse, but still it was *his* horse. The Hallorans would pay for it, of that he had no doubt, just as they paid for windows they broke and merchandise counters they overturned when they were "having a good time." The Hallorans had money and guts and a wild, odd sense of humor. They ran the town.

"Wonder what I said or did to ride them?" Jimmie puzzled, growing angrier

with each step in the hot, shifting sand. He kept Big W mountain ahead of him like the rear sight of a gun, and crossed the winding trail twice without meeting a Halloran. "A man just drifting through, a man holding a job the best he can, ought to watch what he says. But I don't remember saying anything."

The sand cooled with night, and so did his anger. Tex was a friend of the Hallorans, and he was loyal to Tex. Tex would square it, whatever the trouble was. Tex would collect for the horse.

Tex was the only man who, year in and year out, could "neighbor" with the Hallorans without friction. His small place, his small stock of cows, his bachelor house, centered in range that had once been Halloran range, near what had once been exclusively a Halloran water source. Yet Tex—easy-going, friendly, good-natured Tex, with his sense of fairness and justice—always got along with them.

He found Tex waiting impatiently, and he understood at once why the Hallorans had shot at him.

Jim: Meet me at the post-oak stub where we branded last Christmas. I got some personal business I need some help with. See you there Monday night at about nine, say. This is between us. Sure will have some news for you then. Hasta luego, Tex.

He might have known it, had he taken the trouble to read between the lines of that note. He walked up and saw two horses instead of one. Tex's spectacular pinto reassured him, looming up brightly in the dark. Farther on he could hear Tex's soft, drawling voice. He stopped to look at the second horse, a small brown gelding. His fingertips traced the brand—Halloran's Flying H! At the same instant, he heard a girl's voice.

Mollie Halloran! He understood, then, what Tex's "personal business" was. Mollie was seventeen, but still a child as far as her three brothers were concerned. Two interested men had been escorted off Flying H property at gun's point, not because their intentions were dishonorable, but simply because they had intentions. Tex was thirty or better, perhaps twice Mollie's age. He owned six hundred acres of range, two springs, a shanty, a corral or two, a hundred and fifty heifers and a purebred bull, and three mortgages.

Jimmie grinned in the dark, whistled a low, amazed whistle, and went forward, calling softly, "Hi, Tex! It's me!"

TEX'S tall form jack-knifed up from the ground. He was half again as tall as Mollie, who clung to his arm. Tex was wearing a gun-belt around his middle, and it looked odd. It seemed to make him more ill at ease than the girl.

They shook hands, and Tex tried to explain. Mollie's teeth were chattering with fright. Curiously, Jimmie's presence seemed to reassure her. *She can't know I'd give a pretty to be out of this. Oh well!* Jimmie thought.

"We run off," Tex said. "We planned it three times, but the boys was suspicious, I reckon. Every time there was one of 'em stayed home. Three Saturday nights straight we planned it—and they must of suspicioned something, Jim, because they took turns stayin' home. First time there was one home on a Saturday night."

"They suspicioned something," Jimmie said grimly. He told them about the dead horse, and Tex promised, miserably, to make it up to him.

"We're safe enough here," Jimmie interrupted. "They won't prow down here in the dark. Only—what do you want of me?"

"Help us down to Los Encinos," Tex pleaded. "You know the desert trails better than I do. But most of all, Jimmie—help us stand off the boys until we're hitched. They won't dare raise a hand when she's Mrs. Mayfield. It'll be safe enough then."

"Jim, I've got buttermilk in my veins now. My knees tremble. I—Jim, I'm scairt stiff! I got Mollie to be responsible for, but besides that, *I want to live!* I own up to it, Jim—until we're married, I'm a plumb coward. It's somethin' I been waitin' for so long—somethin' I wanted so bad—well, did you ever look down the barrel at a seven-point buck you tracked for six hours, and didn't have the nerve to pull the trigger?"

Jim looked at Mollie and understood, at least a little. There had been girls enough in his own twenty-four years. He supposed sometime, when he wearied of going from place to place, sometime when he had seen all there was to see, some girl would take him in the short ribs that way. He'd take

up a little patch of land, a few heifers and a bull, and things would just naturally mean so much that he couldn't stand losing.

He hitched up his pants and grinned at the girl, and she smiled back. Tex seemed to recapture a little courage with the long breath he pulled.

"Three persons, two horses," Jim said. "I could leave you two hid out and go back to Duke's for a horse." Duke James was the man he worked for. "But that'll lose us twenty-four hours, even if I can make it, even if the Hallorans haven't scared the daylights out of Duke by now."

"No, we'd better start off now. It's bad going by night, but we're going to have to take it slow anyway. The boys will count on us holing up somewhere, since they know they killed my horse. Maybe they'll forget a man afoot *can* find his way down to the mesa. We'll hope so, anyway."

Tex drew another long, hopeful breath.

"Jim, that's thinkin'," he said. "Knowed you'd know what to do! Knowed you'd take holt of things." He turned to Mollie. "Honey, I met this scallywag four years back, when I was ramrod on a place down to the Rio country, and he was a smart-aleck kid rider. I said he had sand in his craw then, but no sense. Now he's got both."

* * *

Los Encinos lay approximately fifteen miles westward, again as the crow flies. They were up about thirty-five hundred feet, in barren, brazen foothills that were more a part of the desert to the west than of the Sierras to the east. Halloran's range, and indeed a whole vast cattle empire in which the Hallorans played only a part, lay in the valley that dropped off to the east behind the tops of the foothills. Here the greenery began, and ran without interruption over eleven ranges. It was known as the Big Tree country, although the giants of the forest were a hundred and fifty miles of hard, winding trail from here.

Below them, a thousand feet down, lay what looked like the bottom of a brassy desert valley. It was not the bottom, however, but only a flat aluvial shelf, a mesa that supported a little sage and a few scrub post-oaks. At its western edge lay Los Encinos, and here the country dropped again, to a lower desert level. It kept on

dropping until it reached the far coast.

To each of the horses was tied a big half-gallon canteen. There would be no water until they reached the Mexican settlement a few miles this side of Encinos, but it would be enough to get them there. Mentally, Jimmie cursed the confusion that had made Tex fail to warn him in the note. One line would have done it—*Bring plenty of water, extra canteens*. Or he could have tied an extra one on his own saddle, and one to the girl's. But a man in love—

Tex wanted to walk, but Jimmie distrusted his ability to get them anywhere. Tex seemed to be half dazed by the girl's presence—by his luck in winning her, by his nerve in daring to steal her from under her three brothers' noses.

"No, you ride!" Jimmie said curtly. "You can take your turn afoot when we're down on the mesa."

"I'll make it up to you," Tex vowed.

Jimmie grinned wryly.

"Just collect my back pay from Duke James and mail it to me," he said. "I won't dare go back."

THREE times he led them to blind ends, where it was impossible to go further. Each time they had to turn the horses carefully and retrace their painful steps. There was no trail. A small, pale moon came up, just enough to show them the vague outlines of the larger obstructions, but not enough to illuminate the trails used by cattle. Critters worked up and down this slope, Jimmie knew, going down to the mesa for winter greenery or to hide out and drop their calves, mounting it again when the feed shortened. But mostly they travelled by the well-defined trail that went downward from Mariposa Forks. He wondered how many night-restless cattle would loom up in the dark to spook the Hallorans who would be religiously guarding that trail!

For the farther they went, the more foolhardy the expedition looked to him. No one went over the side, even in daylight. It was bad planing by a man whose mind was so excited that he was incapable of anything but a bad plan. A man in love!

The Hallorans would wait there until daylight, if they were dumb enough. Then they would follow his tracks—or at least one or two of them would. Surely they

would anticipate their course, surely one or two would ride down, in leisurely fashion, to intercept them on the mesa!

Twice Jimmie sat down and took off his boots to cool his aching feet. Within sixty seconds after he sat down, he began to chill. It was incredible, how swiftly the heat left this thin air. It would boil the water out of a man by day, freeze it to ice in him two hours after sundown.

Tex and Mollie sat in their saddles while he rested. Mollie was trusting him completely, relying on him to bring them safely to Los Encinos as a kid trusted an adult. Tex was just too mixed-up and abashed to do anything but sit.

He cautioned them about saving their water, but there was no need. The girl drank sparingly from her canteen, but Tex refused to drink at all. Once Jim took a long, slow, cool pull from the girl's canteen, and even then Tex refused to drink.

"I'll make out," he said. "You drink, Jim. You're doin' all the work. But I'll make this up to you, I swear to goodness."

The first gray streaks of daylight were welcome. It exposed them, but it also exposed the trail. Jimmie was ravenously hungry by then. Another thing Tex had forgotten to warn him about! Jimmie had eaten lightly, because he hesitated to ask Duke James' cook for travelling supplies. You can't do that, not when you're knocking off work early besides.

They were two-thirds of the way down, and had found a cowpath that would take them the rest of the way, when they heard the first sign from Hallorans. It was a .45, and it spanked the air crackingly twice from what they judged to be a mile away. In a moment, another sounded, also shooting twice. And in another moment they heard the big rifle boom. And then again—it took a little longer to jack out an empty and load again with the .45-70.

Mollie shivered.

"They—they're close!" she murmured, teeth chattering.

Jimmie took another look at her. He had seen her before, of course. He had even danced with her—the Hallorans permitted that because he was just a drifting rider who could not be seriously regarded as a suitor. But he felt he had not really seen her until this moment, and he understood, a little, what had happened to Tex's wits.

She was small and fair. She had a sweet look of innocence that would always make her look a little childlike, but there was a robust vitality in her small body, too. She would be a good wife and mother. She had enough Halloran blood in her to make her a fighter. She would fight with Tex, too—enough, anyway, to budge him out of his easy-going ways. She would make something of him and make him like it.

She'd put a halter around a man's neck—but he'd kill to get to wear it, Jimmie thought. Poor Tex—and lucky Tex!

"Yes," he said, "they're close, but not too close. They've spread up and down the Mariposa trail. I suppose one is about halfway down the slope, with a .45. The other .45 came from up above. Somebody's down on the mesa with the big rifle. At least we've got a head start on one, even—seven with one, and only one in front of us. I like the odds."

"But you're afoot," Tex worried.

"Me?" Jimmie said. "I don't have to get to Los Encinos! I'll pick my place and stand 'em off while you two ride on to Los Encinos."

They argued as they went down. It went against Tex's grain, but insofar as it was possible to plan, it was the only plan they could count on. With a third horse—but there was no third horse.

They did not hear a gun again until they were almost down to the floor of the mesa. Here there was a dense growth of scrub, dry and gray this time of year. When they left this, they would be out of cover, visible for miles. The sun was coming up, dispelling the last pockets of cool night air. In an hour it would be blazing again.

It was a .45, and this time it was fired only once. The other guns did not answer. It worried Jimmie, but he said nothing, and he hoped that Tex would not notice. Two shots had obviously been the Hallorans' signal for checking with each other. A single one might mean that one of them had encountered a rattlesnake. Or it might mean that the fugitives had been spotted from the trail. During the night they had veered across the slope toward it, following the natural contour of the land. Jimmie did not know how close they were to it, and he had not been over the Mariposa trail enough to know it well. He remem-

bered there were several "switchbacks," where the path made a hairpin turn to double back almost under itself. From these turns, stuck out on a ledge on the side of the slope, it might be possible to see someone picking a path through the brush below.

HE SAW the bluejays then, and cursed. The birds had started following them with the first daylight. There had been a pair, and they made very little noise. With the scolding, buttinski habit of jays, others had collected. He could look up now and count ten of them dashing back and forth over their heads, every now and then uttering their raucous screams.

He caught Tex's eye, and Tex said worriedly, "I just noticed 'em too. Do you reckon—?"

The girl seemed half asleep in her saddle. "I reckon!" Jimmie said quickly, but her eyes flew open, and she paled. She looked up at the jays and understood.

Jimmie forced a stiff grin. He stopped to catch his wind, and the two horses pulled up behind him. "Fool jays!" he said. "Reckon they're Halloran jays. Seems to me, though, they'd know you're a Halloran."

The girl tried to joke back, but her concern worried him.

"The jay side of the family came out in the boys," she said. She lost her smile. "Even the birds are against us. That's the kind of luck we have."

Some of Jimmie's anger, that he had felt at the killing of his horse, began to come back. He knew why, too—he was getting worried. It had been something of a prank up to now. An elopement, and it had not been quite possible to take that kind of danger seriously. There was always something funny about the family rage that went with an elopement, but it always died down. This would, too, if they got away with it.

But they had killed his horse. They had spread out methodically, covering the main trail in almost military fashion. He looked up suddenly and saw a dot on the slope above him—a Halloran! One of them, probably the youngest, Phil, had picked up their trail at daybreak and was following them. It was a fool thing to do, in a way, since they had only to cover the Mariposa trail. But he knew how the man up there

had reasoned. One man afoot—that made it worth the trouble.

The rider was coming down at reckless speed, and he could do it, because they had broken trail for him at night. He had only to follow their tracks, and he had daylight to do it. Jimmie wished he had a pair of distance glasses. The sun was high enough to create a heat-shimmer in the air above him. This Halloran could creep up on him behind that as effectively as behind a screen of trees.

The gun to their left sounded again. Another Halloran was keeping track of the bluejays, notifying the other two that he had them in sight. There was something ominous, deadly serious, about this. The Hallorans had not spent this week-end carousing in town. They would be tired, hungry, and in bad tempers.

Not a pleasure trip for anybody, Jimmie thought. And, after a look at Tex's drawn, worried face: *Not even for the bridegroom.*

An idea came to him, and he said, hopefully, "I don't suppose you brought anything to eat? They shook their heads, and he went on, "It was just an idea. If we had something to throw to those jays, we could lose pursuit for a few minutes. Give us a chance to fox something up when we come out of the brush."

They rode on a moment, and then the girl exclaimed, "Biscuits! I've got three of four in my pocket for Jabber." She patted her horse's neck, and the horse turned his head back. A pet, picked out for her as a colt by her three doting brothers and never ridden by anyone but her. She reached into the pocket of her coat and broke off a corner of biscuit and tossed it ahead of her. A jay screamed down, but the horse grabbed the tidbit expertly and swallowed it.

"Give them to me," Jimmie said eagerly.

He crumbled them up as fine as he could, to give the jays harder hunting. He walked back up the trail a hundred yards and scattered the crumbs through the sand. The bright-eyed birds left Tex and Mollie at once and followed him. They coursed down and began hunting avidly. He looked up and saw the rider coming down the slope. He was close enough by now to recognize him. It was Phil, all right. He ran back to the others. A thousand feet down was

half the world at night, afoot. By day, with a nimble horse under you—and the Hallorans had no other kind—it was a rough ride but a short one.

Two shots sounded a moment later. It was the Halloran on the Mariposa trail. He had lost sight of the jays and was "checking it" to the others. They were still hidden, Jimmie knew, since no other shot came from above. He was running hard now, trying to reach a draw to the south of them. It was a wet-weather water course that carried winter drainage down into the mesa from the upper slopes. It extended out quite a ways, and might give them protection after they left the cover of the scrub.

They reached it, just as the man behind them reached the jays. They were close enough by now to hear his yell. The draw was not as deep as they had hoped. The moment they left the cover of the brush, the man above them fired once, to show he had spotted them. Then came an answering shot from the trail.

"But that can't be!" Jimmie thought. The draw would not protect them from view from above, but the trail was invisible to them, as was the whole north slope. Then he understood! The Halloran on the trail had seen the jays rise above Phil, and had mistaken him for them! He grinned a little.

THEY reached the end of the draw and found themselves standing in plain sight on the flat, level floor of the mesa. Three guns sounded almost at once, and now they were able to pick out the third Halloran, the one with the rifle. He was only a mile of two away, slightly ahead of them and to their left, or north. He came riding toward them easily. He stopped once to fire the big gun into the air—this second announcement that he had seen them.

"That'll be Tip, the oldest one," Tex murmured. "He wants to take charge now. Show everybody he's head of the house."

Then firing broke out abruptly on their left. Phil, above them, and Joe, on the trail, were shooting at each other. It mystified Tex, but Jimmie understood. Joe, when the bluejays rose again, had left the trail and pushed toward them, eager to be the first to intercept the elopers. He had opened up the moment he saw a man's

head through the brush, and Phil, rattled, had fired back. They exchanged a half-dozen shots, a round dozen yelled oaths, before they recognized each other.

"This is it, I guess," Jimmie said. Tip was loping steadily toward them, a big man who carried the big gun as a kid carried an air rifle. It was Tip who had killed his horse, Tip who set the bullying pace for all three bullying brothers. "I guess this is it," Jimmie said, his voice quivering a little.

He was mad clear through, and his mouth was dry, and for the first time in his life he had the sensation of being cornered. He looked at Tex, and something in the look steadied Tex. His mouth took on a sharper, straighter outline, and some of the elopement excitement went out of his face.

"Will they kill, Tex?" Jimmie asked.

It was the girl who answered. "Yes!"

Jimmie shrugged and said, "It's just as well, I guess. Because that's the way I feel now. In every town there's Hallorans. Oh—they have different names, but they're the same. They're rowdy with their fists, touchy with their guns. They own a lot and they acquire a lot, and they shove people like me off the sidewalk. Well, I'll get me a mouthful while they're getting a meal."

"The main thing," Tex said stiffly, "is that Mollie ain't hurt."

"The main thing," Jimmie said, watching Tip Halloran ride up, "is for you two to get to Mariposa. You take one horse and both canteens. Don't drink any water yourselves, and halfway there you can spell your horse, and water him. I'll take the other horse and stand them off. He'll be in better shape than theirs. When you're married, Tex, leave Mollie there and come back. Only hurry—hurry—hurry!"

"Jimmie," Tex said, "the only trouble with that is, I ain't got no water in my canteen. I—I forgot to fill it."

"No water?" He understood then why Tex had refused to drink all night. The girl's canteen, though sparingly used, was half empty. A quart of water was all they had left. He turned around and laid his hand on the butt of his gun and suddenly he was burning with thirst as he watched Tip Halloran ride slowly toward them. "No water," Jimmie whispered, seeing

dimly Tip Halloran's two big canteens.

Tip pulled up a dozen yards away. He had punished his horse brutally to beat his brothers here. There was considerable rivalry between them; Tip had whipped Joe several times to keep his authority as the eldest, but Phil was a big man now, and resentful of all authority. This rivalry could have been helpful to them, Jimmie thought bleakly, had they been in a position to utilize it. But—no water. . . .

"You thought you could sneak away!" Tip bellowed at them. "Mayfield, you had your chance. We let you move in and didn't cause you no trouble. We lived to regret it, and so will you."

He paid no attention to Jimmie. A Halloran wouldn't. A Halloran never noticed drifting riders—never even took the trouble to learn their names. While Tex was thinking of an answer, Jimmie went over and lifted the canteen loop from the girl's saddle horn. He took a good drink—all he could down. The rest he allowed to trickle on the ground.

The other two Hallorans rode up as he pitched the empty canteen away. Tex was talking to them, talking to empty air. The three sat their horses, tired and hungry and angry, and listened to him. The girl began crying hysterically. She got her courage up for one scream of anger at them, but Joe snarled, "Wait till I get you home!" She subsided.

Jimmie walked around in front of her and gave her his hand. She took it and dropped down from the saddle, and he gigged the horse with his elbow. It throtted away, and Tex looked after it curiously and went on talking: "Man's got a right to a place he takes care of if he don't bother nobody. Girl's got a right to—"

Jimmie took his dad's gun out of the holster and bounced it in the palm of his hand until Tip said gruffly, "Put that gun away, Cowboy, before you get hurt."

Jimmie let the gun sock back against the palm of his hand. He squeezed the trigger twice and blew holes in both of Tip Halloran's canteens. Tip's horse reared. The water gushed down its side, and he had to pitch the big rifle to Joe and pull the horse down with both his powerful arms. Jimmie looked at Joe and Phil and this time he did not bounce the gun. He did not have to. They forgot all about Tex and Mollie,

watching it. He saw Phil's hand clasp and unclasp over his own.

"Help yourself, Halloran," he said, not recognizing his own voice. "You're a pretty good shot at saloon lights, but you can't shoot with me. I'm pretty handy with this thing. I started learning to shoot when I was fourteen. I figgered it up a while back—it costs me nearly forty-five dollars a year, the ammunition I burn up in it. You're pretty smart, Halloran, and you've got lots of money, and maybe you feel like taking a chance."

Phil muttered at him, "Hide behind a woman!" and Jimmie pushed the girl away. She had served her purpose—he had only wanted to get those two shots off. He could take his chances with them now. He tipped the gun up and took two steps toward Phil.

"Lift your left arm a bit, so you won't get hurt," he said. He watched Tip and Joe out of the corner of his eye. Phil lifted his arm involuntarily, and Jimmie's gun spurted once, puncturing both canteens.

Joe went for his gun, but just as his hand reached the butt he changed his mind. He licked his lips and lifted his eyes to Jimmie, who said, "No you don't. I don't want to kill anybody, but so help me Hannah, you'd better not try it."

Tip roared an oath at him, and Jimmie began bouncing the gun again, only this time he held fast to the butt.

"You're pretty good, you Hallorans," he said. "Sure you could wipe me out. Go ahead! But—I'm not going to shoot a Halloran when I shoot. I'm going to shoot the other canteens!"

His gun came down steadily on Joe's canteens and held there, and Joe shifted uneasily in the saddle.

"We'll be in a bad way here in a little while," Jimmie said. "There's not enough water to go around. You can play rough if you feel like playing rough—but the first shot goes to the canteens. You can do it my way, if you've got sense.

"My way is this: Tex and Mollie will take Joe's canteens and head for Los Encinos. They can bring back water this evening from Encinos—*after* they're married. We can sit here, you Hallorans and I, and wait for them. We'll get pretty thirsty, but *if* they get away safely, and *if*

Tex sees I'm still alive and well when he comes back with the water, and *if* Joe drops his two canteens to the ground *right now*, I reckon everything will be all right."

He waited a moment, and Tip started cursing, and then Joe. It was Phil, the young one, the rebel who was almost as big as Tip, who went for his gun. But he swivelled it around on his brothers, not at Jimmie.

"Wait a minute, you fools!" he bellowed. "It'll be Mollie who'll suffer. You been outfoxed, Tip. Oh, you and your big mouth! Joe, give them both of your canteens."

Joe hesitated. He looked from gun to gun, and Phil yelled stridently, "Cover Joe, Cowboy—I'll take care of Tip." Joe looked over at his elder brother. There was a long, strained moment, in which Tip's heavy, brutal face purpled with rage. Then the breath went out of him in one explosive sigh of defeat, and slowly, Joe lifted the two canteens and dropped them to the ground.

* * *

It was midnight when Tex got back. He hallooed from a distance, and Jimmie yelled back, and still Tex came in cautiously. He was his old self again. A married man, all his nervousness had vanished, left back in Los Encinos with his bride. He was sure of himself. He had come alone, carrying two ten-gallon canvas water bags behind his saddle.

He came in carrying his gun in his hand. They had built a small fire against the night chill, and they stood up to greet him. He looked from Halloran to Halloran to Halloran, and then at Jimmie.

"These boys leave you alone, Jim?" he asked.

It was Phil who answered. He grabbed one of the water bags and gulped from it thirstily.

"Don't bother my buddy!" he said. "You can take over my share of the family chores, Tex. You're a Flying H man now—you've got to earn your keep. Me—I'm riding high, wide and handsome with Jimmie the Bird."

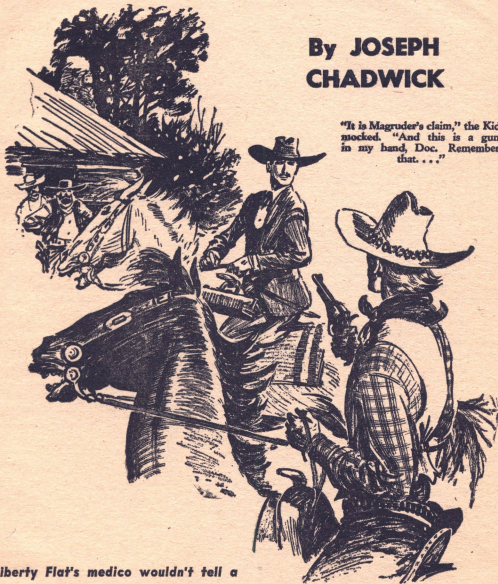
Jimmie grinned.

"A Halloran," he said, "is almost human when you make him be."

MYSTERY OF MAGRUDER'S CACHE

By JOSEPH
CHADWICK

"It is Magruder's claim," the Kid
mocked. "And this is a gun
in my hand, Doc. Remember
that. . ."



Liberty Flat's medico wouldn't tell a miser's deathbed secret to Honkatonk Sally who came preened to cash in—nor to the ruthless killers who came to give the doc a halo . . . for free.

YOUNG DOC WYLER had come to realize that a medico, like a priest, was entrusted at times with soul-shaking secrets upon which he must seal his lips. Bending over the dying man, whom neither medicine nor surgery could

help, Doc Wyler said huskily, "Hank, you're sure—?" He did not want to believe the ugly truth. "You're sure it was Len Saunders who drygulched you?"

He received no answer, as Hank Magruder was beyond speaking. For a long moment, Tom Wyler stood idle and gripped by a sense of defeat. Magruder should not have died. Yet he knew, without finding comfort in the knowledge, that no earthly power could have kept the man alive. There was not always an antidote for the lead poisoning caused by a .45 slug.

Doc Wyler shook himself mentally, covered the body, turned down the oil lamp. He stepped into the other room, and the man waiting there asked, "He's gone?"

"There wasn't anything I could do, Marshal."

"Did he come to—and talk?"

"Not a word," Doc Wyler said, and wondered if the lie didn't show on his face. It seemed to him that there was a flicker of suspicion in Ed Tobey's faded eyes. To forestall further questions, he said, "You'll have the body removed?"

The lawman nodded. "I'll stop by the undertaker's place," he said, and went to the street door. He paused there, slowly looked around. "Thought I heard you talking to him, Doc."

"I talked, trying to rouse him from his coma," the medico said. The words came slowly, for it was hard for him to lie. "He muttered something, in delirium, but nothing clearly. If he had regained consciousness, I'd have called you in to question him. You know that, Ed."

"Sure. . . ."

The lawman went out, quietly closing the door after him. Doc Wyler took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. He was sweating, even though the night was chill.

After Purd Anders, the mining camp's undertaker-carpenter, and his helper came with a wagon and removed Hank Magruder's body, Doc Wyler put on hat and coat, took up his black bag, and left his boxlike frame house. Instead of walking toward the main part of the town, he headed out along Kettle Creek.

It was a quarter of a mile to the Saunders' claim, and when he reached the ramshackle house—a patchwork of logs, planks and canvas—he shuddered. It was

no place for a sick woman and a six-months-old baby. Smoke and sparks were pouring from the crazily leaning stove pipe jutting from the roof. Lamplight leaked from a dozen cracks and crannies in the rickety walls. Still, Doc Wyler knew, it wasn't the worst house in Liberty Flats. That much must be said for Len Saunders, a man forever down on his luck.

Knocking, he said, "Doc Wyler," and pushed open the door. He stepped into a confusion of untidy housekeeping. The woman was seated in a rocker, holding her baby, and the man was clumsily busy at the stove as he tried to cook a meal.

"Evening, Folks," Doc said, trying to sound cheerful. "You're looking a bit better tonight, Mrs. Saunders."

The woman was pale, haggard, but she smiled. It was clear to Doc Wyler that she once had been an attractive woman. Poverty, worry, and hardships had marked her. She showed a mother's pride as the young medico bent over her baby to pinch gently its chubby cheek.

"Fine boy," Doc said, and moved to the table. He opened his bag and took out a small bottle of pills. "I've brought your wife some new medicine, Len. One pill every two hours."

The man said, "Doc, I can't pay you for more medicine." He spoke harshly, bitterly. He was tall, gaunt, sullen looking—beaten looking. "All the money I get, goes for food. That Mex woman charges me two dollars a pail for cow's milk, for the baby. You don't know how they charge a man for grub, in a boomtown, Doc."

"Pay me when you can, Len."

"Look, I'm not asking for charity."

"And you're not getting it," Doc Wyler retorted, matching the man's blunt tone. "Don't be so touchy, my friend—and so proud."

Saunders started to flare up, but his wife whispered, "Len—please!"

DOC closed his bag, glanced at the stove and saw that the man was cooking some sort of stew. He said, "If you can leave your cooking a minute, I'd like to see you alone."

He put on his hat, took up his bag, nodded pleasantly to the woman. Saunders followed him outside. Walking up to the road, Doc said, "Your claim's no good?"

"My luck's no good," Saunders said sourly. "I filed my claim where the creek's all rock bottom, with not enough sand to show color. I've been working at odd jobs, but I can't make ends meet."

"Your wife shouldn't have been out of bed today," Doc said. "Like I told you before, she should be taken to another climate. Maybe another climate would be better for you too."

"What you mean?" Saunders demanded. "I'm not ailing."

"An hour ago, an up-creek man came into town with a dying man packed on his mule," Doc told him. "Ed Tobey, the town marshal, brought the dying man, Hank Magruder, to my place. There wasn't anything I could do."

The medico had braced himself against a flare-up, but Saunders seemed too frightened to move or speak. "Ed Tobey wasn't in the room when I worked over Magruder, so he doesn't know that the man talked before he died. You want to know what Magruder's last words were?"

"A damned lie!"

"A dying man doesn't lie, my friend. Magruder said he was shot from ambush, but he saw the man—saw you, Len."

Saunders said nothing, but his face seemed grayish in the gloom.

"Magruder lost consciousness, and you figured he was dead," Doc went on. "You were after his poke! Everybody in Liberty Flats knows that Magruder was a miser who didn't trust the express company safe, where the other boomers put up their dust. I didn't tell Ed Tobey because of your wife and baby, Len. I'm not going to tell him, even though I should. You ought to hang—"

"Damn you! I ought to kill you for saying that!"

"Don't try it, Len," Doc said calmly. "Your hands are bloody enough. For your family's sake, I'm keeping quiet—but only if you clear out of these parts. You stay here, your wife won't live through the winter."

A choked sob came from deep within Saunders.

Doc went on, "If you got Magruder's poke, it'll take you to Arizona and set you up there. You don't need to talk poor to me, for I know the old man had plenty of dust cached away up on his claim."

"I got nobody's poke! Magruder lied!"

"You got it," Doc said. "He told me where it was cached, and a blind man could have found it. You take your family and clear out of these parts, my friend. Because I might change my mind about keeping quiet!"

He nodded and turned away, leaving Len Saunders standing there in the darkness. It was not until he was well back toward the middle of the grubby town that he realized that his meddling might cost him his life. With guilt on his conscience and fear in his heart, Len Saunders might try to silence him. And Doc knew that he would be an easy target for an ambush bullet. He felt in sudden need of a drink, and so turned into Liberty Flats' biggest saloon, the Bonanza.

As Doc Wyler entered the combination dance hall and gambling house and made his way to the bar, he was greeted with nods and friendly words. A red-bearded miner offered to buy him a drink. The medico was popular, not only in town, but from one end of Kettle Creek to the other.

He drank his drink with the miner, then lighted a cigar handed him by a town merchant. He listened to the more serious talk that was woven through the tinny music and blatant laughter, and it was talk of Hank Magruder's murder.

The merchant, stout Adam Shares, said, "Doc, didn't Magruder talk before he died?"

"Not a word."

"Too bad. When one murder goes unpunished, others happen."

"Let's hope not," Doc said, and signalled to the bartender for another drink. He was an honest man and lying worried him. He hoped that this second shot of whiskey would dull his conscience. Taking up his refilled glass, he made his way to a table in the far corner and close to the piano.

Some roughly clad miners were paired off with percentage girls and making the floor quiver as they danced. A blonde girl in a bright green dress came from somewhere above, and, seeing the medico, frowned as she left the narrow staircase and crossed to the piano.

Changing the tempo of his playing, the pianist accompanied the girl and she began to sing. A scattering of applause came from the crowd, then there was silence

except for the singer's low and pleasantly husky voice.

She sang of sentimental things; of the homes men had left behind, of the girl who waited somewhere—a sweetheart, a wife, a mother, the half-sad, half-joyous melody that hardcase men loved. And when her voice finally faded, and she smiled, the crowd thundered its applause.

Coins and nuggets and small pokes of dust showered at her slippered feet, but it was the pianist who grabbed up the tribute. The girl stepped away from the piano, moved gracefully toward the corner table where Doc Wyler sat alone.

Doc rose, doffed his hat. "Good evening, Sally. It was a nice song." His smile was a little strained.

"Thanks, Doc. That's real praise, coming from you. I'm surprised to see you here. I didn't think you'd ever come into a place where I sing—where I earn my living."

"Sally, let's stop feuding."

"Sure, let's," the girl said. She was smiling but her eyes were chill. "Let's forget all the ugly things we've said to each other, and be friends. What did you come here for, Doc—to treat somebody to a heartache?"

Doc felt his cheeks grow hot. "All right, you hate me," he said. "I made a mistake, and you won't forgive me."

"Should I forgive you, Doc?"

"Since I'm in love with you, yes."

"**I**N LOVE with me?" Sally said, gasping. "Don't make me laugh, Doc! If I start, I'll never be able to stop. I'm a honkatonk girl, and you're in a respectable profession. Don't you remember?" The bitterness of her voice was knife-sharp. "No, Doc; I don't forgive you. I'll never forgive you. I wish you'd stay away from here—you and your holier-than-thou airs. Stay away! Do you hear?"

She whirled about, her face white and stiff with anger. But when she reached her place at the piano, and began to sing again, she managed to smile.

Doc Wyler listened to her voice and watched the loveliness of her face in misery. He had hurt Sally Barton, three months ago. In one crazy moment, he had lost his chance at happiness.

It had happened when he made a trip to Carson City, to replenish his stock of

medicines. He had been at dinner in the Ormsby House, and a young woman—pretty, fashionably dressed, with the manners of a lady—had been placed at his table in the crowded dining room.

They had talked, politely at first, then in friendly fashion. Doc had been enchanted by the girl, and he could see that she found him interesting. After dinner, they had taken a short walk about Carson—to beyond the edge of town. There was a moon, and they were young. Doc had taken Sally into his arms and kissed her.

The next day, they were on the same stage. They were surprised and pleased to find they were both heading for Liberty Flats. Doc had said, "You're visiting relatives there?"

"No," Sally had replied. "I'm going to work there. I'm going to sing at a place called the Bonanza." She had stared at him. "Why—why, what's wrong?"

Doc had been fool enough to blurt out, "You're a honkatonk girl!" That had jolted Sally. Whatever feelings she had had for him turned in that moment to hate.

She still hated him, Doc knew. And he did not blame her. Like a self-righteous fool, he had blurted out words which had stripped her of respectability. His apologies, then or since, could not ease Sally's hurt. She was neither proud or ashamed of working in a honkatonk; it was simply something she could do to earn a living.

The pianist had told him her story. Her mother had died when Sally was very young, and her father had owned a honkatonk in Frisco. Jack Barton had died when Sally was seventeen, and she had been forced to shift for herself. She could sing and honkatonk proprietors were willing to pay her to sing.

Doc downed his drink, rose, walked from the Bonanza. He felt miserable. The truth of it was he wanted Sally to marry him.

* * *

The next morning, Doc was called over to Amity, a nearby camp, where a family of boomers had been struck by cholera. The messenger transported him to and from Amity by buckboard, but it was after nightfall when the medico got back to his house. He was hungry and dog-tired, and he just

dropped into a chair and sat there in the dark. He was lonely too, and his thoughts went to Sally Barton.

Doc thought, *A man grows tired of his own company.* He needed laughter and cheerful talk, more than he needed a meal and rest. Low in his mind, Doc rose and lighted the table lamp. He began to fill his pipe. Then a knock took him to the door. Sally was standing there.

"Hello, Doc," she said airily. "I was passing, and saw your light. I figured I'd stop and talk a bit. No use you and I not being friends."

"That's fine, Sally."

"You meant what you said the other night—about being in love with me?"

Doc was silent a moment, confused. He took time to strike a match and light his pipe. He was puzzled by this abrupt change in the girl. Deep in his mind, something warned him to be careful. But he said gently, "I meant it, Sally. You know I did."

Sally leaned against the outside wall, her hands in her coat pockets, her face up-tilted. She was gazing at the dark sky. Then she said slowly: "I'm tired of this ugly mud-hole of a camp, Tom. It's no place for a girl. I do expect a little something out of life. A decent home in a decent town, a chance to make friends with other women. It's not too much to ask, is it, Tom?"

"No, Sally. You're right in that."

"You're not going to stay here forever?" she went on, still not looking at him. "I mean, you'll move to some town where you can have a real office and a better practice?" She paused, waiting for Doc Wyler to answer. When he did not speak, she said, "Tom, wouldn't Magruder's cache set you up right—somewhat else?"

Doc frowned. "What do you mean, Sally?"

"They're saying around town," Sally said, "that Hank Magruder did talk before he died—that he told you where he cached his dust." She looked at Doc now, searching his face. "It's true, isn't it?"

Doc Wyler couldn't lie to Sally Barton. He remained silent.

"Where did he hide his gold, Tom?" the girl asked, moving closer. Her hands crept up the lapels of Doc's coat. Her manner was a caress. "You'll tell Sally, won't you?" she coaxed. "And we'll share his

dust, you and I both—won't we, Tom?"

Doc was keenly aware of the warmth and softness of her. He caught the fragrance of her perfume. He pocketed his pipe, and would have put his arms about her. Then suspicion gripped him. And anger came. He pushed her from him.

"I guess I savvy the sudden change in you," he muttered. "Last night you hated me. Now you want me—because of Magruder's gold. You want me to tell you where it's cached—not because you want it shared, though!" Never before had Doc Wyler permitted rage to get the best of him like this.

"You're after it for yourself. Or maybe you're playing somebody else's game! That's it. Some man put you up to this. But it won't work. Go back and tell that blasted no-good that you couldn't bait me. Tell him I can't be tempted!"

He swung around and slammed the door against her, not heeding her wail, "Tom, you've got to listen—"

Dos grabbed up his hat, went through the house and left by the back door. Sally was still pounding on the front door and calling his name as he strode away through the darkness. Doc didn't know where he was going. He just kept on walking.

MIDNIGHT came before Doc's anger was spent and he returned to his home. Sally was gone from the front door, and now a young fellow was waiting there. His horse was standing ground-hitched nearby. The Kid came to meet Doc Wyler. He was maybe twenty years old, and now he was very excited. Words spilled from him.

"Doc, I've been waiting and waiting. There's a man bad hurt up at Rock Point, and you've got to come. He set off a powder blast and got caught in a cave-in. He's too bad to be moved. Will you come, Doc?"

"Rock Point?" Doc said, trying to bring his mind to this. "That's seven miles. I'll have to have a horse."

"I'll get one for you, at the livery barn."

"All right. I'll be ready when you get back."

Doc watched the Kid ride off into the darkness, then went inside. He put some surgical instruments into his bag, considered a moment, then took a bottle of chloroform from his medicine cabinet. Doc Wyler was a progressive yet cautious practitioner,

and inclined to use chloroform only in extreme cases. This badly hurt man at Rock Point might need an anesthetic. Doc thrust the bottle into his coat pocket.

He stepped from the house when the kid got back with the extra horse. He tied his bag to the saddle cantle, then mounted and swung away with the Kid. Doc said, "I don't know your name, Friend."

"Just call me Pete, Doc."

"You're new around here?"

"That's right," young Pete said.

They swung along Liberty's main street, passing the express office, Hanlon's Restaurant, and the Bonanza. A girl came from the Honkatonk, and it was Sally.

She called, "Tom—Tom, please—I!" She almost screamed it.

The Kid gave Doc a look. "She calling you, Doc?"

The medico muttered, "It doesn't matter."

Once out of town, they lifted their mounts to an easy lope. They had the dark road to themselves except for a couple of freight wagons and an occasional rider. It wound through the foothills, past numerous diggings, and then at McDade's diggings, five miles from town, the Kid said, "We turn off here," and led the way along a narrow trail through brush and timber. This was wilder country.

A jagged rock loomed through the darkness, reaching up like a crude church steeple, and Doc knew they were near their destination. He remembered vaguely that the dead Hank Magruder's claim was near the Point. Doc had been this way several times before. Finally a light showed, glowing from a cabin doorway. Pete drew his sixgun and fired a shot into the air.

"What's that for?" Doc wanted to know.

The Kid grinned at him. "To let the boys know you're coming."

They swung by a clump of scrub pines and came into a clearing. Reining in, the Kid said, "This is it, Doc."

The medico protested, "But this is Magruder's claim!"

"It is Magruder's claim," the Kid mocked. And now he no longer seemed so young. His face lost some of its boyishness. "And this is a gun in my hand, Doc. Remember that. Climb off that horse, and head for the cabin!"

Two men had emerged from the cabin

and stood watching. Doc was not too surprised that one of them was Len Saunders. He had his wits about him now, but too late. He realized bitterly that he might have suspected he was being led into a trap, if he hadn't been thinking of Sally and of how she had killed his love for her. Doc dismounted. He started toward the men by the cabin. One of them said, "So you brought him, Kid?"

"You see him, don't you, Faro?"

The man with Len Saunders was a burly hardcase. He guffawed and said loudly, "The Kid's a card. There ain't anybody like him, Doc."

Doc Wyler didn't laugh along with Faro. He felt empty inside. He had shielded Len Saunders, and it brought him to this. These men figured he knew where Hank Magruder had kept his dust cached. They meant to make him reveal the hiding-place. It seemed to Doc Wyler in that moment that men—and women, too—would do anything in their greed for gold. He looked at Len Saunders.

"I did you a favor," he accused, "and this is how you repay me."

Saunders' sullen eyes slid away from him. "Cut the talk," he muttered. "All you've got to do is lead us to Magruder's cache. We figure the old fool told you about it. I got Faro and the Kid back here—they having been in on Magruder's killing—so we could finish this up."

"To hell with you, Len," Doc growled. "If I show you the cache, you'll kill me. You can't afford to let me live, after this. I'll bargain with you hombres. You ride back to town with me, so I'll be safe, I'll tell you about the cache."

It was a straw of hope, and Len Saunders nodded. "Seems fair enough," Saunders admitted. But the burly Faro cursed him.

And Pete muttered, "Nothing doing. We do that, he'll have the law after us—and we won't be able to come back here for the loot. Me, I'm tired of waiting!"

The Kid's arm swung up and down. The barrel of his sixgun crashed down upon Doc Wyler's head.

DAZED by pain, Doc only dimly knew that he was dragged into the cabin and that his coat and shirt were ripped off him. New pain finally cleared his mind,

and he found himself sprawled on his back atop a crude table. A lantern hung from the ceiling, its glare making his eyes ache. Pain stabbed at him again. Faro was standing over him, a brute grin on his ugly face and a knife—it's blade red hot—in his hand. "Talk, Doc—talk!"

The hot steel was thrust against Doc's naked chest, and he had to grit his teeth to keep from screaming. A voice in his mind seemed to cry, *Tell them. Save yourself, you fool!* But he knew that if he talked, he would spare himself only pain. His life was no longer his to save. "To hell with you!" he muttered, and again knew torment.

His brain was reeling. Faro's grinning face whirled before his eyes. Distortedly, he saw Len Saunders across the room. The man's thin face was ashen. The Kid was there, and now Doc felt the weight of the Kid's fist in his face. It went on and on, a hellish torment.

Len Saunders said, "Faro, you hear something—something outside?"

Faro swung away from his work. "Kid," he ordered, "you go take a look outside."

The Kid went out, gun in hand, and for a brief interval Doc Wyler was untouched. Then the Kid came back. "Nobody around here," he stated. He eyed Saunders. "Damn you for a yellow-belly. You tried to keep Faro and me from killing Old Magruder, and now you can't stomach this!"

A lifetime of hard knocks had taken the guts out of Len Saunders, but now he showed some spirit. "Sure, not! No man could stomach this. You'll never make that fool medico talk!"

"Maybe you can do better," Faro broke in. "Go ahead, try it."

Saunders shuffled over, and mumbled, "Save yourself, Doc. You tell us where the cache is, and I'll see that you get back to town—alive."

Doc saw him through a red mist, and he tried to curse Len Saunders. But the words clogged in his throat, and he uttered only an empty jumble of noises. Len Saunders turned to his companions. "You see?" he demanded. "Reason with a man. It always works!"

Faro growled, "Hell; he didn't talk!"

The Kid pulled his sixgun, yelling, "You lying fool, I ought to gut-shoot you! You didn't savvy what he was trying to say!"

"Sure, I did," Saunders retorted. "He said the dust is cached under that big stump outside. What do you take me for—?"

Excitement gripped the Kid. "The stump? I saw it but didn't figure—" He whirled toward the door, but Faro grabbed him.

"You stay here and guard the medico," the burly hardcase ordered. "There's something fishy about this. I didn't hear Doc say anything about a stump. Len, you come along. If this is a trick, so help me, I'll make you wish you'd never been born!"

Len Saunders face was bleak, but he moved resolutely across the room and picked up a shovel from beside the fireplace. "We'll have to dig," he explained, and walked out with Faro following.

Through lingering pain, Doc Wyler knew that this was merely a reprieve. For some reason, Len Saunders had halted the torture. But it would start over again, once Faro discovered that there was no gold cached at the stump.

The Kid, vicious as a mad dog, stood at the door, peering out into the darkness. Doc gave a violent heave that rolled him from the table and dropped him crashing to the floor. He lay still, feigning unconsciousness, and the Kid came to kick and curse him. After a moment, the Kid went back to the doorway. He stepped outside.

Now! Doc told himself, and reached out for his coat that lay on the floor.

FROM where came his strength, how his dazed brain hit upon the idea, Doc never knew. He acted mechanically, instinctively. He got the chloroform bottle from his coat, a handkerchief from his jeans. It took his trembling hands an eternity of time to uncork the bottle and saturate the handkerchief with the acrid stuff. Then he forced himself to his feet and lurched across the cabin, catching the Kid stepping backwards into the room.

The Kid gave a startled gasp, and got his lungs full of the chloroform fumes—for Doc had the sodden handkerchief clamped over his mouth and nostrils. Doc's left arm was around the hardcase's middle. Doc slammed him against the wall, held him there.

The Kid made one wild spasm of effort to break loose. But all the while he was gulping in the fumes, the drug dulled his warped brain, turned his nerves senseless,

loosened up his muscles. His last act, as he grew limp, was to grab hold of his sixgun and fire a shot without getting the weapon out of its holster.

Outside, Faro yelled, "Kid! What'd you shoot at?"

The next instant, Faro screamed. His gun blasted. He cursed wildly. "Damn you, Len—damn you!" Doc Wyler heard the thud of a blow. Then there was silence.

After a moment longer, Doc let the now unconscious Kid drop to the floor. He grabbed the Kid's sixgun, then turned unsteadily to the door. Len Saunders appeared, gray of face, a bloody shovel in his hand. He gasped, "You got him, Doc? I downed Faro with this shovel."

"What are you up to, Len?"

"This is all my fault, Doc," Saunders muttered. "After you told me about Magruder saying I drygulched him, I figured I'd have to clear myself. I knew nobody'd believe I wasn't the killer, unless I proved that somebody else did it. So I sent word to Faro and the Kid, telling them you knew where Magruder had cached his dust."

"You're loco, Len! You blamed near got me killed!"

"I'm mighty sorry, Doc. It just didn't work out like I figured," Saunders said unasily. "I left word for Marshal Ed Tobey to follow you tonight, when the Kid came for you. I figured Faro would let out that he'd killed Magruder, once you were here. Then the marshal could arrest him and the Kid. But Tobey didn't show up, and I couldn't keep them from beating you. I'm sure sorry, Doc."

"This doesn't clear you," Doc said.

"I know it," Saunders muttered, in his hangdog way. "Faro came to town yesterday morning and told me to get a horse and ride up-creek with him and the Kid. He said we'd get hold of some paydirt, easy. I went along, but when Faro showed his hand I tried to back out. The Kid, though, threw down on me. Even so, I tried to keep Faro from shooting Magruder. I swear it!"

"All right, Len. I'll take your word."

Outside, someone shouted. It was Marshal Ed Tobey calling, "Doc, you there?" Then, as Doc showed himself at the door, the lawman added, "I was away from town during the day, but somebody left word—Len Saunders, it was—that I should trail you if anybody took you away from town

tonight. You were already gone when I got Saunders' message, so I didn't know where you were."

Doc said, "Then how'd you find me?"

"That singer at the Bonanza told me you'd be here," Ed Tobey replied. "Soon as I got back to town, around midnight, she came running up and saying you'd been brought here by Kid Bowers—a gunslick tough."

* * *

Doc Wyler was more done in than he had realized. He was so near collapse by the time he rode back to town, Len Saunders had to carry him into his house. The man said, "Somebody'll have to look out for you, Doc. My wife'd be willing, but she's not able. I'll find somebody else. Maybe that girl at the Bonanza, Sally."

"Not her," Doc protested. "I don't want to see her, Len."

"Why not, Doc?" Saunders said. "She couldn't help what she did. The Kid knew you were sweet on Sally, and he figured she could make you tell where Magruder's dust was cached. He told her that if she didn't get it out of you, he and some others would lay for you—and handle you mighty rough."

"What could she do, Doc?" Ed Tobey was away. She could have had some of the men around town grab the Kid, but she figured the Kid's *compadres* would get you."

Doc Wyler sprawled out on his bed and closed his eyes. He was full of pain, but he realized that he had hurt Sally far more. He could see it now. After Sally had tried to get him to tell about the cache, she had wanted to warn him. But he had flung his ugly accusation at her, and fled.

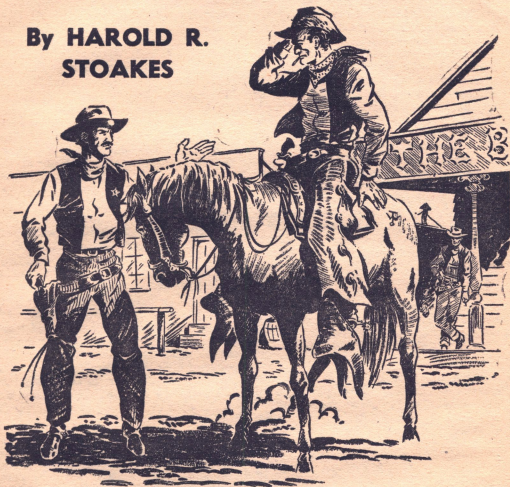
Later, as he had ridden from town with the Kid, she had tried to call him back. Then she, not Len Saunders, had gotten Marshal Ed Tobey to Magruder's place.

"Kid Bowers is Sally's step-brother," Saunders was saying. "Sally's mother was a widow, and married the Kid's old man. The girl knew the Kid would do what he threatened. She's all right, Doc—honest."

"I know, Len," Doc muttered. "I know now. Look, Len, Magruder cached his dust behind a loose stone in his fireplace. You go get it; then take your family away from here. You may as well have it. Magruder had no heirs. . . . And Len, send Sally here." He closed his eyes and tried to think how he could begin to beg her forgiveness."

TRAIL BOSS, YOU'RE DONE!

By HAROLD R.
STOAKES



"I'll have to trouble you for your guns," the marshal said.

Driven to reckless desperation by the memory of 500 dead longhorns, trail-man Han Weber swaggered into Abilene—to give that wide-open helltown a rip-snortin' Texican farewell.

HANNIBAL WEBER slapped his silver dollar down loud and hard on the church lady's table, to show that his money was as good as the next person's. Then he stood, high-humored and half-belligerent, in the doorway.

The sagging cloth sign outside said: *Church Dinner—\$1 a Plate—Welcome All.* Inside, the long livery stable had been scrubbed down until the splinters of the floor showed white and slender.

Han glanced down the long aisle between

the linen-covered tables where the Abilene dudes sat with their wives—men in black string ties and broadcloth coats; women in Paris muslin and starched calico. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Marshal Tom Smith chinning with the Reverend Mister Sorenson.

A few heads turned at the loud slapping of the dollar. Han grinned. There was a law in Abilene—deadline law that said a Texas trail man didn't come across the tracks. But the sign said *Welcome All*.

Han was momentarily conscious of the difference between them, and of the dried trail mud that clung to the cracked crevices of his chaps. Of this, and the flapping mockery of the empty gun holster at his side. He was a big man, Han, with legs as long and slender as pitchfork handles, a rawhide hardness to the skin of his face and hands, and the devil himself straddle-legged in his eyes.

Behind him, standing in noonday sunlight, he knew that Shorty and Ted were waiting for the thing he had promised to do. Han grinned again. It wasn't exactly like being in church, though there were plenty of church folks chomping at their vittles.

He rolled back his head and parted his lips. The sound that leaped out was high-flung, piercing.

"E-E-E-e-e-Y-Y-O-O-W-w-w-w-w-Y-i-p-P-E-E!"

Down the aisle he saw a broadcloth-coated dude half rise, scared plumb out of his chair. A bowl of gravy crashed, breaking in half and spattering across the scrubbed whiteness of the floor. A girl stood, white faced, with gravy stains slopped along the hem of her calico skirt.

Han lowered his head. Marshal Smith moved toward the door fast, with the Reverend Mister Sorenson behind him. Han waited. He had promised the boys he would bust his lungs across the tracks. Now it would be right interesting to see what the fancy-new Abilene marshal planned to do about it.

The marshal had almost reached the door when Han saw the minister's fingers close over his arm.

"Leave him alone," the minister said. "I never seen a noisy man yet that wasn't a lonely one, and perhaps a mite empty-headed."

The words hadn't been meant for his ears, but Han colored. The marshal hesitated, shook his head and turned aside. Han looked into the steady blue of the Reverend Sorenson's eyes.

"You boys just come along," the minister said. "There's room aplenty, and the food's tolerably good."

Han heard the soft sluff of the dollars that Shorty Lathrop and Tex Miller pushed across the church lady's table. Seated at one of the linen-covered dining tables, Han felt the warmth of color about his face increase.

The silence around them seemed throb- bingly alive. It hadn't come off the way he had planned it. He had aimed to have a showdown with Marshal Smith. Instead, the minister's words rankled in his thoughts. . . .

Han had smashed up his herd on the banks of the Republican. The river flowed wide and deep, with an ugly, silty tug to its current. Han should have waited, but there was the urgency of a man long on the trail to be done with his chore. And there was Shorty's word for it that the crossing could be made.

Han didn't know at the time that Shorty wanted him to fail. Less than half way across, the herd milled in panic and found quicksand. Five hundred of them died, sucked under water until only the razor points of their horns caught driftwood that swirled overhead. The balance—less than half the herd—straggled shivering and wet up the far bank, on the last leg of the long trip to Abilene.

Along the Chisholm Trail men were saying that Han had made his last trip to Abilene. Word had a way of getting around. There wasn't another Texas rancher who would trust him to drive a herd up from the Panhandle.

Han reached Abilene with the need to prove himself a man a rowelled spur against his thoughts. He still didn't suspect Shorty, nor that Shorty was needling him on.

NOW, seated at the church dinner table, Han writhed under the disapproving eyes of the townsfolk. Across from him, an Abilene couple kept their eyes on their plates and pushed their food around with

their forks. Han didn't dare look around the room. He knew the rest of the people were watching.

The minutes dragged squirmingly past. From all appearances, the church ladies just aimed to let the cowboys sit there, without serving them, until they got up—the three of them—and walked stiff-legged back out the door and across the tracks to the side of town where a Texas trail man belonged.

Han could picture that retreat when he heard a soft rustling at his side. The girl who had dropped the gravy pushed plates in front of them and brought steaming hot dishes from the kitchen.

Han saw the slender whiteness of her wrists and risked a glance at her face. There were gold ringlets tied back against the nape of her neck, and there was something in her eyes that stopped a man up as short as a rampaging Andalusian longhorn suddenly braking itself against a taut lasso.

Confused, Han looked back down at the floor. The gravy stains were still evident, despite the quick rinsing with a moistened rag. He looked at her face, obliquely.

"I sure am sorry about them stains, Ma'am," Han said.

She tossed her head indifferently.

"Gravy stains wash out quick." She smiled. "I reckon the Lord likes to hear a good shout now and then, if it means a man's happy inside."

She turned away. Han heard a hissing voice behind him.

"Chrissie Matthews, you can wait on those men without talking to them."

Chrissie! Han relished the sound of the name, but the food was lumpish for him.

It was because that rebel shout hadn't meant that he was happy inside that Chrissie Matthews' words had a barb to them—without her even meaning them that way. It was like the thing the minister had said. Added together they meant much the same—and there was truth in them. Han could never remember meeting a really noisy man who wasn't a little lonesome inside.

He ate swiftly, forcing the food across his tongue, and cleaning his plate down to the last morsel—more to show folks that he wouldn't be run off without getting his dollar's worth than because there was a taste to the vittles.

He had pushed back his chair and was ready to leave when Reverend Sorenson came back down the aisle.

"There's going to be a social and a bit of a program tonight. You're welcome to come," the minister said. "Sunday morning church meeting is at nine."

Han felt Shorty's elbow brush his sleeve. "You mean we're welcome personally, or any cowpoke in Abilene kin come?" Shorty questioned.

"Any Texas trail man is welcome where the church is concerned," Reverend Sorenson said. "The program tonight won't amount to much, but there's no deadline in front of the door."

Han saw that Shorty's face was cocked sideways. Just behind him Chrissie Matthews cleared the table.

"Maybe you need some Texas panhandle talent for yore program," Shorty said. "Han here is a mighty nice singer. You should hear him sing 'The Crossing of the Republican.' Han wrote it himself. Got a purty tune, and purty words, too."

Han felt a flashing blaze of anger, stronger than the burning of a brand across a longhorn's hide.

"I couldn't—" he began sharply, but Chrissie Matthews had turned.

"I'd surely love to hear it," she said.

Han colored again, and the minister smiled.

"I'll announce it myself," he said. "We'll count on you to be here."

"He'll be here, Reverend," Shorty said, "if we have to get Marshall Smith to bring him."

OUTSIDE the sun blazed down on the swirling dust of the street as Han looked toward the railroad tracks. The white lines of the Drover's Cottage Hotel were etched hard against the sky. Piano music—with a tinkling loneliness to it—drifted across the town.

"Don't figure things come off right like you planned," Shorty said, grinning.

"Well enough to satisfy you, I reckon," Han said. He could see it all now, the needling and the pretense. "It was you who said the Republican was safe for a crossing," he went on angrily.

"You wouldn't blame another man for yore mistakes, would you?" Shorty said.

Han looked down. He could fight with Shorty, breaking him in two with the bigness of his hands, but fighting wouldn't prove much. A big man was always at the mercy of bantam-legged midgets.

"I was trail boss for the Bar-X before you came along," Shorty said. "I figure I'll be trail boss again after yore gone. Tonight I aim to hear you sing."

Shorty and Ted swung away. Han walked on in silence, swinging his still legs and grinding the heels of his cowboy boots into the ground. Shorty had set a trap, and he had fallen into it. It was Shorty, even, who had warned him about Marshal Tom Smith, until Han had vowed blusteringly that he would lasso, bulldog, and hogtie Abilene—and fancy-new Marshal Smith along with it. Things had gone astray quicker than it takes year-old heifers to bolt for timberland.

It had started early that morning when Han rode into Abilene, even before they went across town to the church ladies' dinner. Marshal Smith met them in front of the Drover's Cottage.

"I'll have to trouble you for your guns," the marshal said.

Flanked by Shorty and Ted, Han looked Tom Smith over carefully. He had heard something of the man's reputation from talk that sifted down the Chisholm Trail. The marshal had auburn hair, with a plains-burned lightness to his mustache, and a glacial mixture of gray and blue to the color of his eyes.

Han grinned, forcing a joke.

"I'll allow it's less trouble to let us keep them," he said. "I don't aim to check in my gun and get another man's back."

"You'll get your own gun," the Marshal said. "We check them by numbers and give a receipt."

There was a quiet decisiveness to the words—no bite, but a brittleness that left no doubt of the determination behind them. Han rocked slowly in the saddle, conscious that passers on the board walk had halted and were watching—waiting.

Finally, shrugging, he unlimbered the revolver from its holster and handed it across. Shorty and Ted did the same.

It was something new that the Abilene marshal had put into effect. Checking the guns of Texas trail hands was like clipping the razor horns off a rampaging steer. . . .

Now, walking in the sunlight with the empty holster flapping mockingly at his side, Han moved closer to the tracks. He had come into Abilene to prove himself a man, and he had done everything wrong. What was it the minister had said? *I never seen a noisy man yet that wasn't a lonely one—and a mite empty-headed.*

Han's lips were dry. There was a truth to it. It was like that tune he had written. "The Crossing of the Republican" was something he had thought up years ago. A cowboy's lament, good for bedding down restless steers on a lonely night watch. Good for a chuckle around a chuck-wagon camp-fire.

*My name is Hannibal Weber, and I'm Texas
born and bred.*

*I know the color of a steer, and that blood
is murky red.*

*I've been a lonesome cowpoke, and I've known
men weak and strong.*

*I've herded longhorns on the trail, and this
then is my song:*

*'Twas coming up the Chisholm Trail—the
dust would make you weep—*

*Until we got to Kansas where the mud was
nine feet deep.*

*It rained all day for forty days, and forty
nights to boot.*

*The Republican ran deep and wide and didn't
give a hoot*

*For men and cattle milling 'round and sinking
in the mud.*

*The river just went snarling past. It shorely
was a flood.*

*The herd was bound for Abilene. They boys
looked glum and slack.*

*"You might as well just turn round and head
them critters back.*

*You'll never get them steers across such water
—wide and deep.*

*They didn't even lay them down. There ain't
a place to sleep."*

*Now me I had my dander up. It was foolish
what they said.*

*Afore we sighted Texas soil, them steers
would all be dead.*

*I said: "Now, boys, be patient, and jest keep
your saddles dry.*

*I aim to get that herd across—at least I aim
to try."*

*The cowpokes they just doubled up, and
laughed 'til they was sick.*

*"The dust and rain's shore got him. He's as
crazy as a tick."*

*They kicked their heels and laughed some
more and had a rarin' fling.*

*"That trail-boss man must think a steer comes
fitted out with wings."*

*The boys, they did my thinking, and my song
is nearly done.
A man that's bound for Abilene can't stop
for mud nor sun.
I looked things over closely, and I showed
them who was boss.
I planted wings on all them steers and flew
them plumb across!*

ONLY the steers hadn't flown across the Republican. The bones of Bar-X cattle would bleach white along the sandbars of the river. And men were saying that it was Hannibal Weber's last trip to Abilene.

Han grimaced, remembering the words of the song. It was the kind of foolishness that only a lonesome cowpoke would think of—the kind of thing that came to a noisy man's lips to hide what was inside of him. Tonight they would expect him to sing it up there at the church social. Even now Shorty Miller would be spreading the word among the grinning cowpokes so they would attend.

Han's back stiffened as he walked. There wasn't a law in Abilene that said he had to go through with it. There wasn't a law, nor a man, that could make him do it. . . .

At the door of Frank Sweazy's office, Han paused and looked back across the town. Up past the church, Abilene townsmen's folk drifted homeward again.

Angrily Han twisted the doorknob. Inside the office, Frank Sweazy sat behind a paper-littered desk. Frank's checkered vest fit too tightly so that his shirt front ballooned up toward his throat.

Han sat down. There was warmth in the room—the kind of warmth that brought relaxation, not the burning hotness of a trail campfire that toasted a man's boots while his back froze to the wind.

"You wanted to see me?" Han asked.

"I still want you to go to work for me," Frank said. "I need an extra cattle buyer. I figure you're the man."

Han rose, restless, and moved to the window.

"It's no good, Frank. I'm not the man you need."

"Why not? You know cattle better than most men know their own faces. I've seen you guess within ten pounds of a steer's weight from the heft of its horns and a knowledge of how far it's been driven."

Far across the town Han saw sunlight flicker against the squareness of a window pane.

"I'll be going back down the trail again," he said.

"You can't go back," Frank said. "A trail boss only sluices one herd."

"I'll go up the trail then." There were other places. Ogalalla, the sand hills of Nebraska, Montana. Places where a man's name had never been heard.

"It's a lonely life, Han."

Han remained at the window. Yes, it was a lonely life, with the blackness of the sky for the roof of a man's home, and the wind-whipped embers of a campfire for his hearth—and the sudden breaking of a twig enough to send the longhorns lurching drunkenly to their feet and stampeding across the rain-slogged earth.

Across town a schoolbell tolled. For just a moment up there he had seen something else. In an Abilene couple, perhaps, who pushed their food around with their forks, and avoided his gaze. In the eyes of a golden-haired girl, who laughed at gray stains down her dress.

Yet it wasn't for him. He had done everything wrong. There was nothing left now but to go away; to follow the trail north.

"A man can't stay where he's lost the right to other folks' respect," Han said harshly.

"Nor find it by running away," Frank Sweazy answered.

* * *

All day and long after darkness came, Han sat by the window of a cubicle room in the Drover's Cottage, looking across Abilene. He had vowed to stay there, going out only as much as was needed, until the herd was delivered. Then he would be free to leave.

Along the street Shorty would be rounding the boys up for the church social, savoring the taste of another man's misery. Han stood up angrily. He could change that last verse. He could show men whose advice he had followed. Still it was no good. A man was responsible for his own mistakes.

The realization that he was trapped and helpless settled deeper. Shorty would have his laughter if the song were sung. But Shorty would laugh deeper at a trail boss who smashed his herd and then hid away, afraid to show his face.

Han turned finally, tiredly, to the door,

knowing that he had to go up there. At least he could show them that a man could keep his self-respect even though he went away.

They shoved an old guitar into his hands even before the minister left the platform. Han stumbled up, scarcely seeing the blankness of the faces before him. There was the tumbled blur of Chrissie Matthews' golden hair plumb ahead, and to the back the strangely empty holsters of grinning trail hands.

Han twanged the guitar stubbornly.

*My name is Hannibal Weber, and I'm Texas
born and bred.
I know the color of a steer, and that blood
is murky red.*

A man could hate himself for the things he had to do. Han's eyes cleared a little and he could see Shorty Miller's slyly grinning face.

*The herd was bound for Abilene. The boys
looked glum and slack.
"You might as well jest turn around and
head them critters back."*

Han tried to stand a little straighter, and remembered a gape-mouthed Texas cowboy who stood in a doorway busting his lungs. The song moved on.

*"That trail boss man must think a steer comes
fitted out with wings."*

Shorty leaned forward, expectantly, nudging those beside him, waiting now for that last verse. The Bar-X cattle hadn't had wings when they'd milled and died in the river.

Han strummed the strings stiffly and sang on, but they were other words that came from his tongue. Quickly unprovoked and unplanned, lonely words—improvised words, the way a cowpoke sang to a night herd, under the stars.

*I'd like to say that all went well. My song
is nearly done.
A man that's bound for Abilene can't stop
for mud nor sun.
We started in to make the drive. I never
should have tried.
The critters milled in panic and five hundred
of them died.
Oh, a bird would fly his way across, a
laughing as he goes—*

*Most any bird that knows the sky, and even
bats and crows.
A bird flies north in springtime and tries to
make a home,
'Til winter winds come blowing in, and send
him on the roam.*

*Oh, a cowpoke ain't much different, for he
knows the empty sky,
And summer heat, and wintery winds, until
the day he dies.
He knows the bite of trail dust a stinging
'gainst his mouth.
And like the birds, when summer's done,
you'll find him heading south.
Oh, God made all His critters, and it surely
makes Him frown,
'Cause God left wings off man's slim back,
so man would settle down.*

The weight of the guitar was heavy in his hands. In the front rows Abilene townsfolk clapped politely—folks who could never know a trail man's feeling. In the back rows there was silence.

Han stood rigid, wanting to run. Then it came, high and strident, like the screaming of a fiddle string.

*"E-E-E-e-e-e-Y-Y-O-O-W-w-w-w-w
Y-i-p-P-E-E!"*

It wasn't just another Texas cowboy busting his lungs. It was a salute to something they wanted to remember—a recognition of things that only a trail man could know and feel and understand. They milled forward, brushing even the Reverend Mister Sorenson aside in their rush to reach him.

Han saw them and the rigid tenseness was gone, even before they pulled him down from the platform. Chrissie Matthews' face was smiling under the glow of the kerosene lights.

Men had said it was his last trip, not knowing the truth of their words. Frank Sweazy would be waiting, wanting to see him again.

He had made a heap of mistakes, but it wasn't the mistakes a man made that mattered at all. It was the way he faced up to them afterwards that really counted for a man.

The Reverend Mister Sorenson had said sharp words, but the Reverend had said other things.

*Sunday church meeting is at nine. You're
welcome to come.*

Han grinned and vowed to remember it. Chrissie Matthews, folks said, never missed a service.

Next

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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Johnny Hardluck got plumb riled when he saw two hombres tie dynamite to a third—and light the fuse. With more guts than sense, he clamped sweating fingers on the blazing fuse. . . . Then he dragged the gun-whipped victim to safety, set off the charge—and ran like hell.



Johnny had bought chips in a mighty unhealthy game, for Rancher Kane's gunslick crew was going all out to break Homesteader Howe and his tempestuous red-headed daughter. . . . Johnny caught two riders leaving firebug calling cards—and had to let them escape. They could wait—the fire wouldn't.



That night, the Howes beat off a Kane-incited Injun attack—and awaited Kane's next play. It came in the fat form of Sheriff Hodges and his hired gunny—who made the mistake of drawing on Johnny. Redheaded Elsa calmly took on the sheriff—who blubbered for mercy.



The bloody game reached a showdown in the Howes' ranchyard. . . . There was a warning scream, a flash of metal—and Kane's gun came up . . . with a bullet tagged for meddlesome Johnny Hardluck. . . . The complete story will be told by Branch Carter in his novel—"Johnny Hardluck's Dynamite Killer."



*Action-Packed
Cowtown Novelette*



**By FRANCIS P.
VERZANI**

CHAPTER

1

Hot Lead Jury

Everything seemed quiet as Don Clayton rode his big bay horse into town. But it was a very deceptive calm. There was gun-trouble in the air, and the gun-shy citizens of the little rangeland community were wisely staying behind the shelter of closed doors. The rickety plank walks that bordered the dusty main street were deserted. Not a single one of the town's usual loafers was anywhere in view,

★ GUN FEVER HERITAGE ★

The trigger-proud young Association leadslinger was dogging his daddy's footsteps—straight into gunhawk's oblivion.

The bulky gunman started to sag . . .



but Clayton knew that sharp eyes were marking every step of his progress. Keen ears were waiting the quick, harsh thunder of gunfire.

The young rider sat his saddle with a swaggering unconcern, but his hawklike scrutiny of the road ahead gave the lie to his seeming indifference. His swift glance probed every doorway, searched every shadowed corner, and a tight grin pulled at his thin lips as he noted the drawn blinds of the Marshal's office. Evidently the local law was discreetly interested in other and distant affairs. A white face showed momentarily behind a window of the Bon Ton Restaurant, and he tossed a lazy wave of his left hand in that direction. Some distance away, a creaking weather-beaten sign identified the Pioneer Bar and Gambling House.

The big bay seemed to feel the alert tension of his rider, and pranced nervously as they approached the saloon. Clayton pulled up, and his lean, hard body was out of the saddle with a swift, smooth flow of fluid movement. A moment later, he looped the bridle reins of his mount over the splintered hitch rail, and stood facing the Pioneer's front entrance. His hands poised momentarily over the low-swung butts of the big sixguns that angled out of open-topped holsters thong-tied to each leg. His slitted eyes caught no least sign of movement.

A half dozen quick steps took him swiftly around the corner of the building. Stabbing fingers found the knobbed handle of a door latch, and a lithe twist of his body swept him through the saloon's side entrance. Back to the wall, hands within inches of his ready guns, Clayton balanced lightly on the balls of his feet. Nothing happened.

Behind the long mahogany bar an aproned drink-dispenser busied himself with a damp towel. A half dozen men were grouped around a green-covered table stacked with poker chips, but their covert alertness was due to more than the excitement of the game. Two apparently apathetic cowboys were drinking beer at a smaller table, and in a far corner of the room, "Pop" Smith, the Pioneer's janitor and handyman, was engaged in his habitual deal of poker solitaire.

Some of the tension went out of the

poised gunman. For long minutes, now, he had been keyed to face the sudden blast of gunfire. He had issued a challenge, and he knew that challenge had been received. Don Clayton was top gunhand for the Cattlemen's Association. Rustlers and their kind knew him for an implacable enemy. When he served notice on a suspected man, that man was apt to decide that his health would be better in some other district. But Curly Jones was not the kind to run. He, too, was confident of his gun skill.

Clayton smiled grimly. No, Curly wouldn't backwater. All the rangeland knew that Curly wouldn't bluff, and rancher and townsman alike awaited the inevitable showdown. It was coming fast. Don Clayton adjusted his gun belts, and crossed over to the bar with all the arrogance of the professional gun-fighter.

Bottle and glass slid down the polished mahogany, and spun to a stop in front of the cold-eyed gunman. Clayton poured his drink with steady fingers, but the amber liquid sparkled untouched in its glass as he faced about, leaning lazily against the bar. Thumbs hooked lightly over his crossed gun belts, he again surveyed the room.

Pop Smith was still busy with his solitaire. The five-card square was almost complete now, and a few more cards would finish the sequence. Clayton watched idly. Pop was a queer old duck. His hair needed cutting, and a graying thatch of ragged beard made a whiskery blank of his face. A shabby old coat draped his rounding shoulders with a wrinkled shapelessness. To all appearances, he was just another old timer on the downhill road. But he was no barroom bum. In the several years that he had been around the Pioneer, no one had seen him under the influence of liquor.

The card players maintained their pretended absorption in their game. Tobacco smoke thickened the air, and a low murmur of voices added its rumbling accompaniment to the slap of cards. The two cowboys called for another beer. Time dragged. Clayton turned slowly back to the bar. Then, suddenly, the batwing doors of the front entrance slammed open under the thrust of a burly body.

"Clayton," a harsh voice knife-edged through the big room, "I'm lookin' for you!"

The Association gunman faced about un-

hurriedly. There was no hint of strain in his bearing, but the swift hard drive of his pulse sent a hot flood swelling through his veins. This was the big moment.

Time seemed to stop, and every quivering nerve was alive to the exhilarating lift of the coming gamble. He fought to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Reckon I'm easy tuh find," he said coolly.

Framed in the doorway, Curly Jones stood spraddle-legged, slightly crouched, eyes blazing murder from under black brows. The fingers of his right hand were tightly wrapped about the butt of a half-unholstered sixgun.

"Yuh will be from here out!" Jones rasped. His gun lifted.

In the same instant Clayton's hands dropped, and his lithe body dodged lightly sideward as his irons tipped clear of leather. Gun thunder filled the room in a flaming blast.

A tinkle of shattering glass sounded behind Clayton as hot lead slapped at Jones' shirt front. The burly gunman stiffened convulsively, then started to sag, bending in the middle like a partly filled sack of grain. His heavy revolver, loosed from suddenly limp fingers, fell to the floor, and slid almost to the feet of the stunned card players. Clayton, gracefully poised on the balls of his feet, watched the other collapse, then holstered his still smoking guns.

"The drinks are on the house," he announced.

THE bartender, ruefully surveying the wreck a forty-five slug had made of the back bar, managed a weak grin. "You're callin' the tune, Gunner," he agreed. "Belly up, Boys!"

Don Clayton stared at his distorted image reflected by the bullet-smashed mirror. His blood still raced with the livening fire of conflict, but reaction would set in fast. And yet the saloonman's words filled him with stubborn pride. "Gunner!" That was a name to work magic. Let the rangeland plodders bust saddle for forty a month and found. His guns would pay his way! He drew fighting wages for a fighting job. Curly Jones had been foolish to ignore a plain warning. So Jones had died a fool's death!

The card players swiftly lined the bar,

ignoring the dead gunman. The two cowboys joined them. None of these men were reckless enough to risk offending a victorious gunfighter. The law could handle things from here on out. It had been an even break. Good whiskey would soon steady jumpy nerves, and wash the acrid bite of gunsmoke from raw throats. Gunfighting was common, and a fast gunman was to be congratulated. Clayton was a gunner from away back, and they were not at all reluctant to accept his drinks. Jones had only got what he asked for.

Pop Smith alone failed to join the rush for the bar. His eyes were fixed on the dead gunman, and his ragged beard only intensified the whitening bloodlessness of his face. He sat unmoving, hands palm flat on the table, as though the blast of gunfire had brought a sudden paralysis.

"What's th' matter, Pop? Yuh never see a dead man before?" Don Clayton queried truculently.

"Yeah, I've seen dead men," the older man answered tonelessly. "Many times Too many times."

"Well, he come lookin' for it, an' he got it." The Association gunner shrugged his shoulders with a deliberate show of callousness. "Forget him, and drink up."

"Sorry, Son, I—well, I just don't feel like drinkin'." Pop's shoulders straightened a little, and his eyes met Clayton's hard stare without faltering.

A swift uneasiness swept through the men at the bar. Under the circumstances, a refusal to drink was practically an insult. Certainly it reacted on Clayton's nerve-strung temper like a slap in the face. His lips tightened.

"So yuh don't feel like drinkin'," he grated at the older man, the words evenly spaced in cold harsh tones. "Maybe yuh don't figure I gave Curly an even break?"

"Yuh gave him as much of a break as any gunfighter gives th' other felluh. Which ain't much." Pop Smith's voice was tight, emotionless. "Sure, he came lookin' for yuh. But yuh badgered him intuh it. He carried th' fight to yuh, hopin' tuh get th' edge. Only he didn't have any edge. And you were bettin' he wouldn't."

"I figure he was rustlin' Association beef," Clayton told him grimly. "Maybe I couldn't brand him with it legal, but I spoke my piece. He should uh cleared out."

"Yuh knowed he wouldn't," the other countered. "He was gun proud, too. He had tuh see yuh through smoke. That's th' way gunfighters are built. They got tuh keep goin' tuh prove their guts. So killin' follows killin', until they meet up with a better man, or git backshot. An' you'll follow th' same trail less'n yuh change your ways. A few years back, when you were just a button, yuh showed promise. You might uh made a hand then. But now you're settin' up for a gunslick. And I'm not drinkin' with gunslicks."

"Go dry, then!" Don Clayton turned back to the bar, and tossed his drink down with an angry gesture. Somehow the triumph of his successful gunfight had gone unaccountably sour, and his temper soured with it. His eyes went ugly, sweeping the mahogany counter with eager belligerence. "Any uh you felluhs feel inclined tuh agree with Pop?" he demanded.

There was no answer. But somehow the gunman sensed that more than one of these men secretly approved the bearded old-timer's attitude.

The others were fair-weather friends. They were drinking with him now, but if he had been a split second slower, if his unexpected movement had not been just enough to spoil Curly's aim, these men would be bending elbows with Jones.

Clayton poured another drink with a hand that was not quite steady, gulped it down, and swaggered toward the door. "If I'm wanted, I'll be over to the eatin' house," he called back over his shoulder. "Spite uh all this preachin' an' gunfire, I still got my appetite!"

Pop Smith watched the gunman's departure, and shook his head. A wet thumb slipped the top card from a dwindling deck, and that card completed his spread. For a long moment he studied the five-card square, reckoning its values, then swept the pasteboards into the deck and shuffled them thoroughly. Slowly he took the first card from the reshuffled deck, and placed it in the center of the table. It was the Ace of Spades.

CHAPTER

2

Born to Kill

The Bon Ton Restaurant was just another cow-country eating place. A pine

counter, fronted by a row of battered stools, sided the front half of a narrow room. Bentwood chairs separated the three small tables that lined the other side, and a slivery partition blanked off the kitchen. The usual smell of cooked food permeated the place, but the oil-cloth tops of the tables were spotlessly clean, and the rough flooring was scrubbed to a bleached whiteness.

Behind the counter, Nance Emmet dabbed at a suspected smudge with a cleaning rag. Her ribbon-bound hair was gathered high on her head, and a single blonde curl momentarily threatened to escape from its silken wrapping. Blue eyes that were meant to smile sparked brightly under arched brows, but at the moment those eyes were worried, and the full rich mouth below showed a hint of strain.

Don Clayton opened the door quietly, but the soft click of the latch snapped the girl into instant alertness. She whirled to face him, one hand on the counter, the other tight pressed against her patterned apron front.

"I heard the guns." Her voice caught for an instant in her throat. "You—you're all right?"

"Of course I'm all right!" Clayton's words sounded louder in his own ears than he had intended, and he attempted to cover his embarrassment with bravado. "No two-bit gunman is goin' tuh account for yours truly!" His face tightened. "Curly—" He swallowed quickly. "Curly Jones is dead."

"Oh, Don!" Nance Emmet paled. "I—" She made a desperate effort to hide her emotion. "I suppose it couldn't be helped."

Clayton straddled a stool, and leaned his elbows on the counter. "I guess it just had tuh happen," he told her slowly. "Yuh see, a man in my position," his voice lifted a little, "he can't afford tuh let folks ride over him rough shod. I've got my reputation tuh consider."

"Your reputation!" The girl's blue eyes began to glow with a growing spark of anger. "Do men have to die to maintain your reputation? What does it get you? You used to be like the other boys, but you've changed. You're getting hard, and mean, and quarrelsome."

"Hold up, Nance," Clayton protested. "Like I said before, it ain't just me, it's th' whole setup. If I went soft now, every kid with a gun would be jumping down my

throat. It would mean killin' an' more killin'. But if I'm tough, all I got tuh do is serve notice on a man."

"You served notice on Curly Jones," Nance Emmet pointed out.

"Curly went gun-hot on me," Clayton declared. "He—Aw, Nance, don't let's scrap about it. I've already took enough rawhidin' for one day. Your friend, Pop Smith, threw th' hooks intuh me plenty."

"Pop talked to you?" Nance Emmet looked surprised. "What did he have to say?"

"He spoke right up in meetin'," Don Clayton admitted grimly. "And he said a lot more'n I rightly wanted tuh hear. Warned me tuh change my ways. Claimed I was catchin' gun fever. Oh, he handed it to me all right. Called me a gunslick. Well, maybe he was right, but it's too late for me tuh change now. I've rode too far along th' trail, and there ain't no turnin' back."

"But there is," the girl insisted. "You'd work up in no time. Why, you could grab a job as wagonboss tomorrow!"

"Could be. Only—" Clayton's supple fingers knotted into fists. "Well, I've used my guns too often. I've made enemies. They'd figure I turned yellow. And th' worst part is that I'd always wonder if maybe they weren't right."

"Nope, I can't hack 'er. Things might uh been different once, but I took th' wrong road when th' trail forked. I got tuh follow that trail now. I wouldn't mind so much, only Pop set me tuh thinkin'. It's a lonely trail, and I ain't got th' right tuh ask anyone tuh side me on it."

"No?" Nance Emmet looked at him for a long moment. "If—if somebody really cared, they'd know how you felt. It might mean a rough ride, but they'd throw in with you anyway."

"Yuh mean that, Nance?" Don Clayton demanded eagerly. "I—"

The click of the latch interrupted his words, and he came swiftly to his feet. As he whirled to face the door, one hand automatically slapped to a holster with the unplanned speed of a reflex motion. Pop Smith stood in the doorway. There was no expression in his bearded face.

"Sheriff's deputy want tuh see yuh at th' Poiner," he told Clayton.

"So th' Law showed up after th' shootin' was over, huh?" Clayton growled. "Maybe

if our good sheriff would crack down on some uh th' long-loop artists aforehand, things wouldn't shape up to a shoot-out!"

"Maybe," Pop Smith agreed. "Trouble is, th' Law needs proof, but a gun cure can be applied on suspicion. Better trot on over, an' let th' badge-toter brand your last kill legal. The sheriff's got tuh please th' big owners, yuh know."

DON CLAYTON flinched under the sharp barb of the other's words, but choked back his anger. A tight, mirthless smile pulled at the older man's lips as the young gunman pushed past him. The door clicked shut, and Pop stepped forward and seated himself at the counter.

"Might be I could relish a piece of your pie," he said quietly. "And some coffee."

Nance Emmet looked at him thoughtfully as she drew coffee from a battered urn. "You've got something on your mind, Pop," she declared, placing the cup in front of him. "It isn't like you to rawhide somebody without reason. But you've thrown the spurs into Don Clayton pretty heavy."

The old-timer reached for the sugar bowl. "Told yuh about it, did he?" he inquired. "Maybe he ain't as case hardened as I figured."

"He's not really hard," the girl exclaimed. "He's just putting on. Down underneath, he's just a big overgrown kid."

"You're foolin' yourself, Girl," Pop told her harshly. "He's shapin' up tuh be a cold killer unless he changes right soon. And I told him as much!"

"I know," Nance Emmet agreed. "We were talking about it before you came. Only Don thinks it's too late to change. He's afraid that folks would think him a coward."

"What folks might think don't count," Pop Smith said. "It's th' way he thinks that matters. Long as he knows he ain't spooked, okay. But if he's doubtful on his own account, that's another horse."

"It isn't that he's afraid," the girl protested. "It's just—well, he always had to be the best at everything he did. And now it's guns."

Pop Smith's shoulders sagged, and he shook his head slowly. "I might uh knowed it," he declared. "Gun fever's got him! And it ain't tuh be wondered at. It's in his blood. His pa was a gunman before him."

"You knew his father?" Nance's eyes widened. "Tell me about him."

"Why?" Pop looked at her sharply.

The girl blushed. "I—I've got a right to know. I've the same as told Don that I'd marry him."

"Yuh can't do that," the old-timer exclaimed. "Yuh can't, I tell yuh! You don't know what you're lettin' yourself in for!"

"I'll learn," the girl answered quietly.

"Like Don's mother did!" Pop Smith's eyes flashed. "She was a little bit of a thing. Soft and pretty—" His eyes filmed for an instant, then grew hard and bright.

"But Don's paw—he was a gunfightin' fool. Killin' followed killin', and he never knew a minute's rest. Every clump uh brush might hide an ambush. Any stranger might be gunnin' for him. He got plumb proddy; then he took tuh drink. And all th' time his wife was settin' home on their little spread, awaitin' and aworryin'. Th' strain was too much. She up an' died, leavin' little Don tuh th' care uh kind neighbors."

"You mean his father deserted him?" Nance Emmet's whitening face showed horror.

"Not quite. Th' kid was taken in by an old friend. Don's pa kept in touch, but he swore that friend tuh secrecy. Didn't want th' boy tuh grow up an' tromp in his footsteps. A lot uh good it did."

"What became of him, of Don's father?" the girl demanded.

Pop's bearded face was hard and grim. "Prob'ly come tuh th' gun trail same as all other gun-slicks do. Gunfighters never quit less'n they're killed or gun busted. And Don's headin' down th' same trail."

"We've got to stop him," Nance insisted. "We've got to! There must be some way."

"Looks like nothin' short of a miracle could do th' trick," Pop objected. "But," his face was suddenly thoughtful, "miracles do happen. I got an idea that might work. So keep your chin up. Keep hopin'. Maybe there is a way."

Nance Emmet could make little of Pop Smith's cryptic words. But she took his advice. There was something about the bearded oldster that inspired her with confidence. The town might accept him as just another worn-out old timer who was content to do menial chores in return for a few odd coins, but she sensed that the

man had greater depths to his make-up.

NOBODY knew much about Pop Smith. Some years back, he had drifted into town and moved into a rickety old shack that was deserted by its original occupants. No one knew where Pop got the money for the repairs that made that rundown place habitable, but he seemed to have enough ready cash for lumber and nails. He sawed and hammered and patched until the ramshackle old structure was as sound and weather-proof as any of the better houses in the settlement. Folks said that the little cabin was as neat as an old maid's bedroom, but nobody knew for sure, because none of the town's inhabitants had been inside since Pop took over.

Later, Pop had added a lean-to to stable a pair of fine horses. That was odd, but in a country where most people owned some kind of riding stock, this eccentricity was readily accepted. If the old codger could afford to feed a pair of idle saddlers, that was his business. Few people paid enough attention to note that the bearded old-timer rode with an easy grace that was natural to a much younger man. Good riders were a dime a dozen in that country.

Pop's two big animals grew fat with lack of exercise, unworked except for the oldster's daily ride, and an occasional hunting trip back into the hills. Those hunting trips usually lasted for a number of days, but where Pop went no one knew. And Pop didn't talk much. Apparently he was just an aging bachelor with a few simple amusements, and enough laid by to keep him in grub if he augmented his savings with the income from janitor work at the Pioneer.

Following the shooting of Curly Jones, the situation changed. As was to be expected, that shooting was speedily white-washed. The customary verdict of self defense was brought in by a hastily assembled jury. The sheriff's office was too well versed in political expediency to buck the big cattle interests, and the underlying causes of the shoots-out were skipped over lightly. But they were not forgotten. Nor was Pop Smith's refusal to drink with the victor.

"I reckon the old coot might have good reason for his stand," a rancher suggested significantly.

"Yuh could be right," another agreed.

"Seems tuh me like we've maybe over-looked something. Rustlers and such need tuh keep posted on what's happenin', and from where I set, it looks tuh me like Pop was in a right smart place tuh tip 'em off."

"And if he was friends with Curly and his gang, he might not care tuh bend elbow with th' lad who's puttin' a gun crimp on such activities. That it?"

The other nodded. "Could be he let his feelin's get th' better uh good judgment. He'll stand watchin'."

But the common consensus was that the bearded old timer was loco.

"Plumb off his nut," the bartender at the Pioneer declared. "Look at the haywire things he does. Shucks, he bummed the remains uh that busted bar mirror off'n the boss. An' he ain't so blame handsome that he has tuh have somethin' tuh admire himself in!"

"Maybe he's figurin' tuh set up for a gunslinger," one of the saloon's customers suggested with a grin. "I've heard tell that some gunslicks practice their draw in front of a lookin' glass."

This sally brought a quick laugh from the lined bar. "I got me a picture uh that old fossil throwin' iron in front of a shiner," a runty cowpoke put in derisively. "More'n likely he aims tuh watch himself playin' solitaire. That way he can ketch himself cheatin'."

"You felluhs go right ahead and laugh," a second cowboy said grimly. "Pop could be runnin' a whizzer on all of us. There's no tellin' much from his face, and whiskers have hid a wanted man afore this!"

"Maybe we'll soon know," a rancher told him. "I just come from Jed's store, an' Pop was buyin' a mess uh stuff includin' a razor."

"Huh?" The bartender whistled. "Boys, if that whiskery old cabin rat ever shaves, there's only one answer. I'll bet yuh th' old codger's been slippin' one over. He's been shoppin' for one uh them mail-order wives. One uh these days, he'll be movin' a new cook into that shack uh his. You watch."

The people of the town did watch Pop Smith. They observed his every movement with interest. But the bearded old-timer went his customary way. Tlien, one day, he failed to show up at the Pioneer. The bartender at the big saloon thought that was

queer, and mentioned the fact to the marshal when that individual dropped by for his early morning eye-opener. When the marshal went to Pop's shack, the place was locked, and Pop's horses were gone.

The officer promptly forced the door of the cabin. He found an oblong chunk of mirror from the Pioneer fastened to one of the cabin walls. Several pieces of homemade furniture were in the little shack, but all of the old-timer's personal belongings were missing. The little cabin was just as neat as rumored. There wasn't so much as a scrap of paper to indicate who Pop was, or where he had gone.

CHAPTER

3

Gunslick's Slicker

As the days passed, the topic of Pop's disappearance lost interest. New talk of rustler activity on the range began to be heard. Several men were being watched, and once again Don Clayton issued a gun warning. This time he served notice on Tom Doyle, a roustabout gunhand who was suspected of brand blotting. Clayton announced that he would be waiting at the Pioneer Saloon if Doyle cared to argue the matter.

The Association gunman was running true to form. He issued a challenge. As challenger, he was able to fix the time and place of combat. The challenged man was in a cleft stick. He could meet that challenge, or he could ignore it. But if he ignored it, he was done in that district. The men of the rangeland were quick in their condemnation of any individual who showed yellow.

Memories of the shoot-out with Curly Jones were fresh in Clayton's mind as he walked his horse down the street toward the Pioneer. The same sharp tension stilled the town. Gunmen had anticipated the scene of conflict before this, and the townsfolk were taking no chance of stopping wild lead. They were staying close to shelter just in case that the challenged gunman should decide to cut down on Clayton before the Association gunner reached the saloon.

But nothing happened. Clayton eased into the Pioneer with alert caution, only to find it deserted except for a hardy few who were on hand to witness the expected

shoot-out. Those few made an unconvincing pretense of being occupied with their own affairs, but Clayton knew why they were there. They were his audience, his public. Their story would swell his reputation—if he won. He tossed them a quick greeting as he took his stand at one end of the bar.

Time dragged slowly by. Each minute increased expectancy. Then came a gradual easing of the heightened tension. In spite of himself, Don Clayton felt a sense of disappointment. Nerves set for combat, his whole being was keyed for the fierce, wild thrill of gunplay. And now it looked as though that gunplay would not materialize. Apparently Doyle had heeded his warning. Well, that was what Clayton wanted. Or was it? Gun fever was running hot in his veins, and he felt like a gambler with a big hand and no callers. A spatter of rain drops against the shingled roof added to his growing depression.

Long minutes ticked by, and the drizzle of rain turned into a beating downpour. The Association gunman felt his nerves go slack. There was little likelihood of trouble now. The other men in the room began to feel the same way. The poker game they were using for an excuse to be present began to assume its own interest. Chips began to click with definite purpose, and stakes grew higher. The eyes that had been covertly watching Clayton were now fixed on cards. Then in a twinkling, the situation changed. A sudden pound of hoofs came to an abrupt stop in the puddled dust outside the saloon.

Quick silence gripped the room as the swinging doors of the saloon entrance pushed open. Clayton balanced forward on the balls of his feet, hands ready. His alertness was wasted. The slicker-wrapped man in the doorway was not Tom Doyle.

The newcomer slapped his high-crowned Stetson free of rain drops, and a sprinkle of gray showed in the short cropped hair of his momentarily uncovered head. Clayton's eyes narrowed. Something about the stranger's quick smooth movements marked him as more than the usual casual rider of the range country.

Ignoring the Association gunman's sharp scrutiny, the stranger stepped over to the bar. "Rye," he said shortly, and shrugged out of his slicker.

Clayton felt a quick premonition of trouble as the man tossed the discarded slicker across the bar so that its dripping wetness splashed the floor between them. Twin guns rested at the stranger's hips, but those guns were not supported by the usual crossed belts. Their deep lipped holsters were supported by a single shaped and tailored band of carved leather tight-buckled about the man's waist. The left gun was drop-swung in position for a quick hip draw. The right gun was reversed for a cross draw, but to Clayton's critical eye, it seemed too far back on the hip to be effective.

"Ridin' through, Stranger?" the bartender inquired conversationally.

"No. I'm looking for a man."

The sharp terse statement carried clearly to the men at the card table. The babble of talk there eased into an exchange of quick undertones. Everything considered, there was only one way to take those words. Spoken in that tone, they meant just one thing. Clayton's even pulse gained a beat. He had been right when he smelled gun trouble.

The two-gun stranger ignored the Association man's studying eyes. "I'm lookin' for a man," he repeated. He regarded the bartender steadily. "Might be you could tell me where tuh find him."

The drink dispenser refused to meet the other's cold stare. "I ain't mixin' in nothin'," he muttered uneasily.

"This felluh's named Clayton," the other continued evenly. "As I get it, he's kind uh top gun-dog in these parts."

The murmur at the card table was completely silenced now. A quick tension held the card players.

"What might you be wantin' with this Clayton?" he inquired softly.

The gun-hung stranger apparently did not hear the question. He continued to watch the bartender, his left hand toying with his glass of whiskey.

"I asked yuh what yuh wanted with Clayton," the Association gunner repeated, his soft tone thinning to a veiled velvet threat.

"I heard yuh," was the even reply. "And if yuh're interested, maybe I'll tell yuh."

"I reckon I'm right interested," Clayton retorted grimly.

"It's kind of an old story." Light struck

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an amber gleam from the raised glass in the other's fingers. "Seems this Clayton has contracted a mean case uh gun fever. Throws fast iron, and figures nobody can beat him to th' draw."

"And is that any uh your business?"

"I aim tuh cure this Clayton's gun fever. Permanent!"

AN UGLY twist pulled at the corner of Don Clayton's mouth. He was standing to the port side of the stranger, and his eyes were glued to the other's left hand. That was the hand to watch. Maybe the man didn't know him, but Clayton was taking no chances. The Association gunner was ready to make his play the instant that left hand moved holsterwise.

"Yuh must figure you're carryin' powerful medicine," he grated.

"Plenty powerful," the other agreed. "Colonel Colt made it."

The men at the card table held their breaths. The bartender gasped. Then Clayton flashed into action as his eye caught the telltale flicker of that left hand.

His guns were just clearing leather when a heavy lead slug slammed him back against the bar. The explosion that drove that slug was echoed by a second shot before the stunned watchers realized that the first one had been fired. Both of Clayton's guns bounced out of his hands, and his arms dropped lifelessly to his sides.

The two-gun stranger whipped back from the bar in a spinning leap, and struck the floor with his back to the saloon trance. Then the door closed behind him.

"Absent-minded cuss, ain't he?" Don Clayton spoke through pain-tightened lips as the sound of departing hoofbeats faded in the distance. He was leaning against the bar. Blood soaked both sleeves, and streaked across paralyzed fingers to splash great crimson drops against his high-heeled boots. But he managed a game grin. "Plumb forgot his slicker. Seems right careless for a bird that had things pegged as neat as he did!"

"What duh you mean?" The bartender stared at him, wide eyed.

"That slicker was across the bar between us," Clayton explained grimly. "It was just enough to cover the move he made with his right hand. He had it all figured. And any man that smart ain't overlookin' "

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nothin' without reason. Take a good look at that raincoat!”

“Ain't nothin' unusual about it I can see,” the bartender muttered. “It's just—Hey, wait a minute, here's somethin' in th' pocket. By grab, it's a key with a tag tied ontuh it! And Nance Emmet's name is on th' tag!”

“I knew there was something,” Don Clayton declared, and started to fold at the knees.

The bartender dropped the wet slicker, and vaulted over the bar in time to catch Clayton's sagging body before it struck the floor. “Give me a hand, here,” he snapped. “We got tuh get this boy tuh th' doctor. We can do our talkin' later!”

“I tell yuh, I saw gun flame lick out across his back,” one observer insisted later, when the story was told and retold.

“That ain't no-wise reasonable,” a second witness objected. “That gunner was movin' so fast, yuh couldn't tell much. And no man can throw a gun around his back and still shoot straight!”

“Oh, I don't know about that,” a sun blackened old-timer protested. “I've heard tell of a felluh down south could do th' trick. Solitaire Jim, they called him, count uh his habit uh playin' cards that way. Yes, Sir, they claim he could line a gun acrost th' small uh his back, and darn near bust a walnut at five paces!”

Nance saw Don as soon as he could get around. He was pale, carried himself stiffly, but his face no longer seemed to be hard or strained. The sharp cold challenge was gone from his eyes.

“Don,” she said softly, “you've changed. You're going to be all right?”

“Doc claims there's no permanent injury,” Clayton answered. “But I won't throw iron any more. Reckon that's one way uh gettin' shut uh that gun fever Pop Smith talked about. And I'm glad. Only there's a lot I don't understand.”

Nance met his gaze without lowering her eyes. “I don't know much more than you do,” she declared. “Pop Smith left a little cash box with me, and this looks like it might be the key to the lock. I've been waiting until we could open the box together.” She took a small metal box from under the counter.

The key clicked in the lock, and the top

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of the box tipped open. An envelope with her name scrawled on it topped a number of papers. Inside of that envelope was a short letter. That letter read:

Dear Nance,

I won't be around when you read this, but I'm hoping that things will have worked out. If they have, Don's ready to ride the right kind of trail. It's up to you to judge. If you think he's headed right, give him this box. Maybe it will help explain things.

There's a deed to the little spread that his ma and I had when he was born. It's made out to him, and if he works at it, he can turn that spread into a good thing. If he's got the right stuff in him, he'll do it.

Pop

The deed to the ranch was in the box. And there were some old letters that told a story. There was a yellowed marriage certificate. And the faded picture of a girl.

"I'll do my best tuh make it up tuh him. Only you got tuh help me, Nance."

"I'll help," Nance told him.

"Then we'll do it," Clayton declared. "We'll make that old spread intuh a real ranch, and intuh a home where sometime Pop can ride in tuh stay." A broad grin spread his lips. "Yes, sir, I'm bettin' it won't be long until Pop's on deck. It's a cinch that if he couldn't keep clear of a no-good, gun-struck son like me, he ain't goin' tuh be far away if maybe there's a grandson around!"

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A search of the most pertinent prior U. S. Patents should be made and a report obtained relative to its patentability. Write for further particulars as to patent protection and procedure and "Invention Record" form at once. No obligation.

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(Continued from page 37)

body slowly to a poised position facing Stafford. Fleck's coat was back, his gun butt handy for a draw.

John Stafford stopped ten feet in front of Fleck, and Stafford knew that, from this distance, he could shoot the pips out cleanly from a playing card. He'd done it many times.

Fleck must have sensed it, too. He must have read the fact belatedly in Stafford's eyes, because, when Fleck went for his gun his move was jerky. His one shot missed.

John Stafford also fired but once. He saw Fleck's body spin about and crumple in a twisted heap. He waited to be sure Fleck didn't move, then whirled and made two quick strides to the faro table.

He examined Dave's hand carefully and slowly, and told Dave: "It's not bad, Kid. A lot of blood and one small bone. In a month it'll be as good as new. How'd it happen?"

"My pony stepped in a hole and threw my. My hand hit a sharp stone. And Uncle John—I knew you'd get here. I knew you wouldn't let that—that man take off my hand." His eyes turned toward Fleck's body on the floor. "Is—is he—?"

The words trailed off, and John Stafford felt the color draining slowly from his own face. Horror scraped its jagged edges through his mind, as his thoughts turned back upon himself. He had wanted to kill Fleck—and he had. Or maybe—just maybe—a chance in a thousand. . . .

He went swiftly to Fleck's body, turned it over, and saw the growing patch of blood. It was flowing from Fleck's shoulder. From his shoulder! Fleck had fainted from the shock.

Stafford eased back upon his haunches, too weak to move until his brain had cleared. Then gradually his thoughts took shape, and a great peace settled over him.

He could have put that bullet anywhere he'd wanted to. He'd fired through instinct, not through reason, and his instinct had been sound. He had fired to cripple, not to kill.

He turned to the men about him. "You'll need a new doctor here in Conestoga. Do you think I'll do?"

They made it evident from their expressions that he'd fill the bill. Then Stafford went to work on Fleck.

"I don't wear the pants,
but I buy 'em, and..."

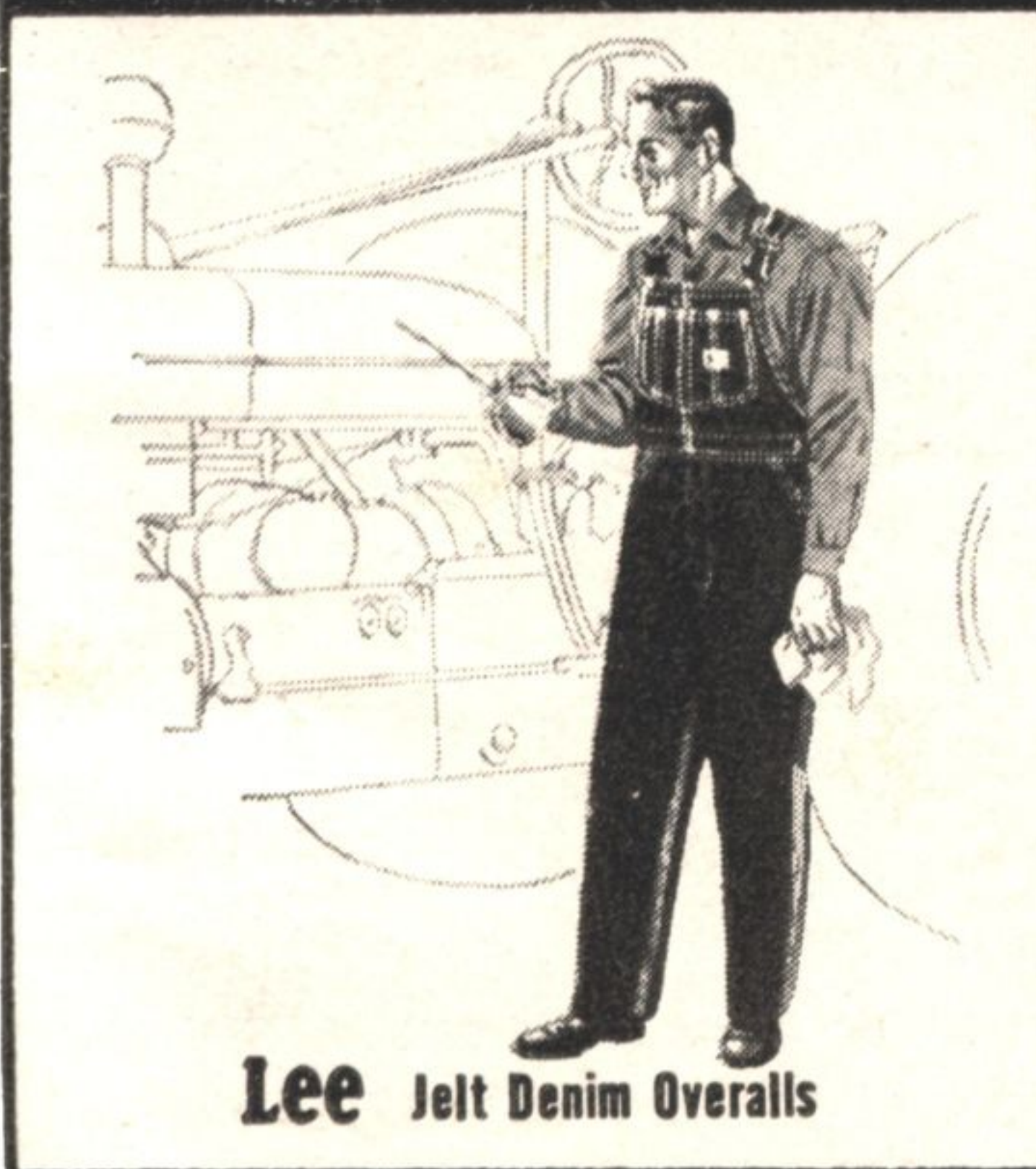
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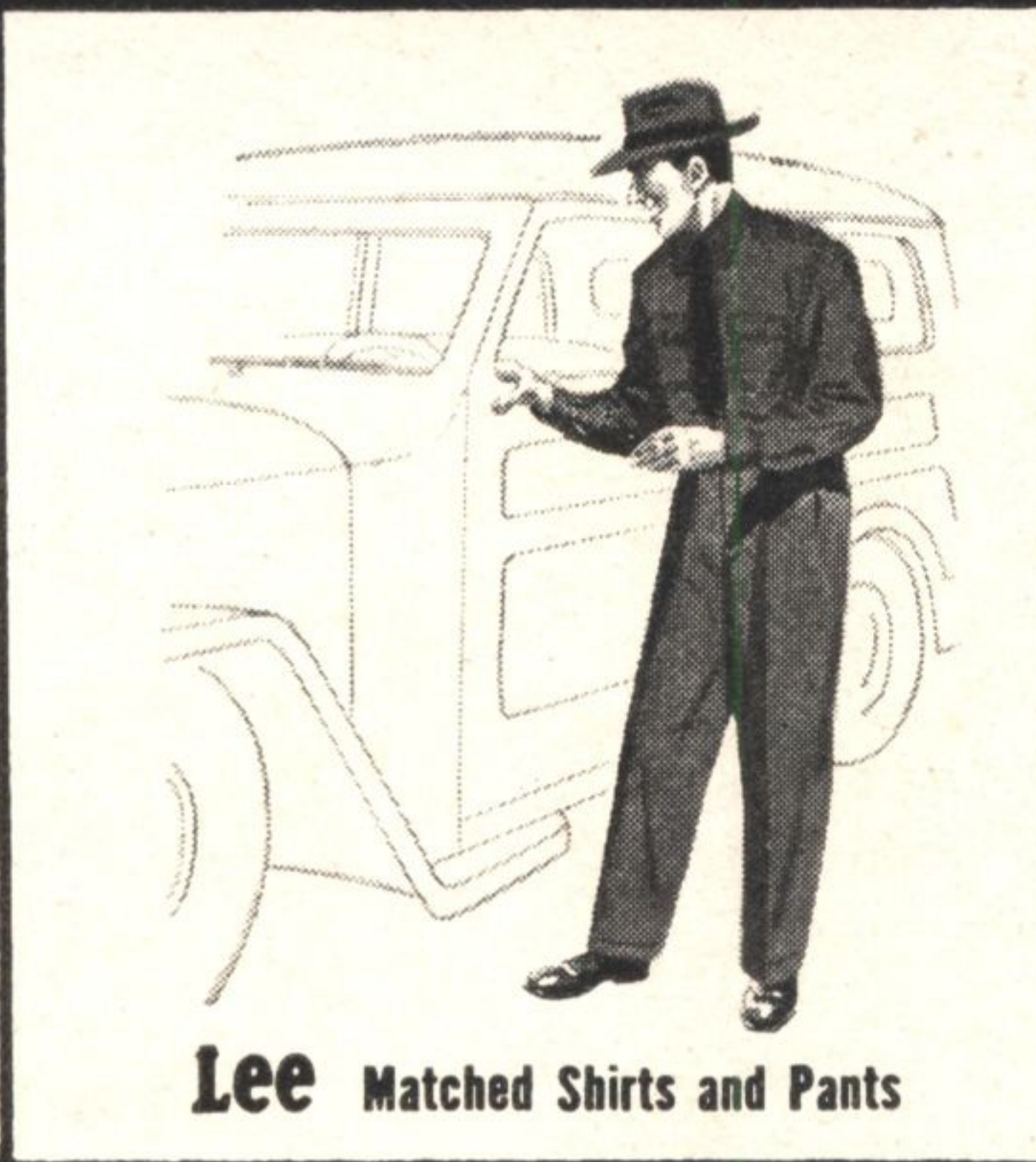
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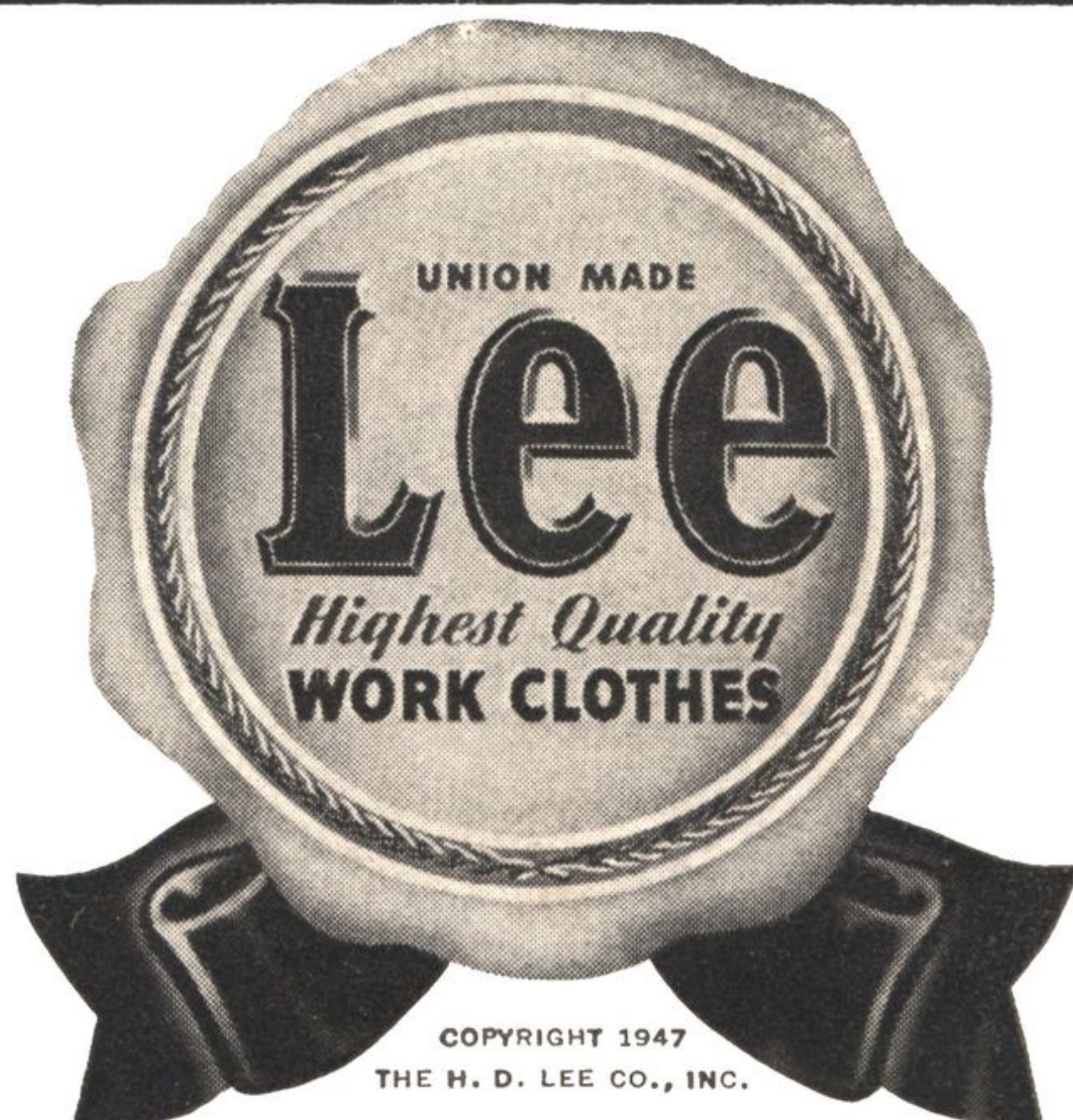
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