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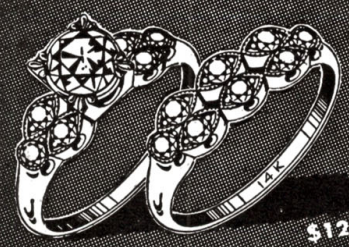

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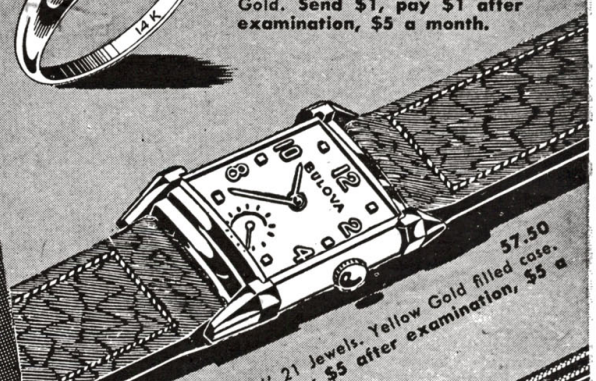

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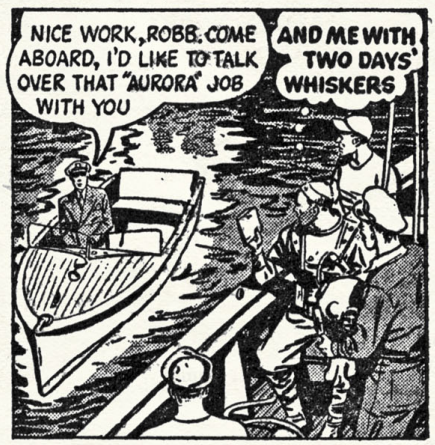

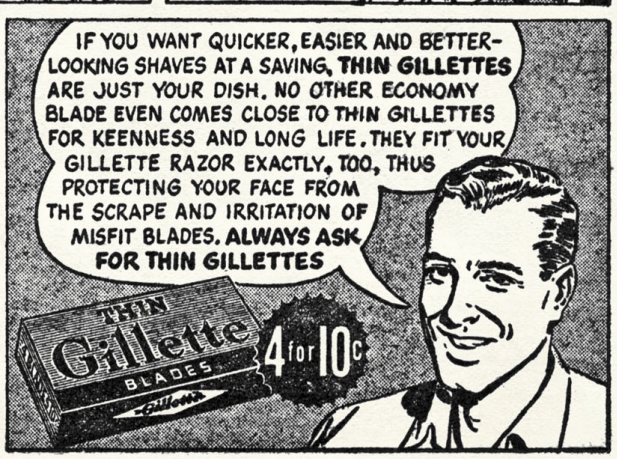

10 FICTION BULL'S EYES IN EVERY ISSUE

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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Western Features

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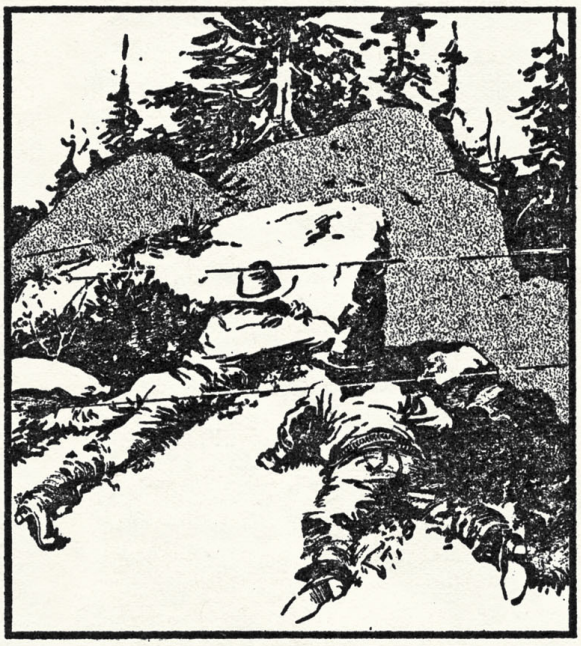

The Whistler Kid was not taken in by Mortimer Bodley's fine talk of building schools and churches and the general uplifting of the town of Silver. The Whistler voiced his opinion of Bodley; then, enlisting the aid of his ex-outlaw pal Bud Lott, did some investigating and got pinned down by rifle fire.

Whistler decided to visit Bodley's newly purchased mine, Apache Diggings—which had never brought pay dirt. It was just a no-good hole in the ground—yet Bodley's heavily armed men guarded it. . . . The guard aimed a rifle at Whistler saying: "No two-gun squirt is gonna snoop around here!"

When ore wagons began to roll out of the no-good Apache mine, Whistler figured he had to get into that mine, and look around. In the dead of night, he swung over a cliff and let himself down silently to a spot near the mysterious Apache Diggings, while Bud Lott waited up on top.

Before Whistler could accomplish his mission, the mine shack door flew open and the gunslick guards came pouring out, yelling and firing. . . . The complete story of Whistler and pious Mortimer Bodley will be told by William R. Cox in his novel—"Iron Bars for the Whistler"—in the April issue.

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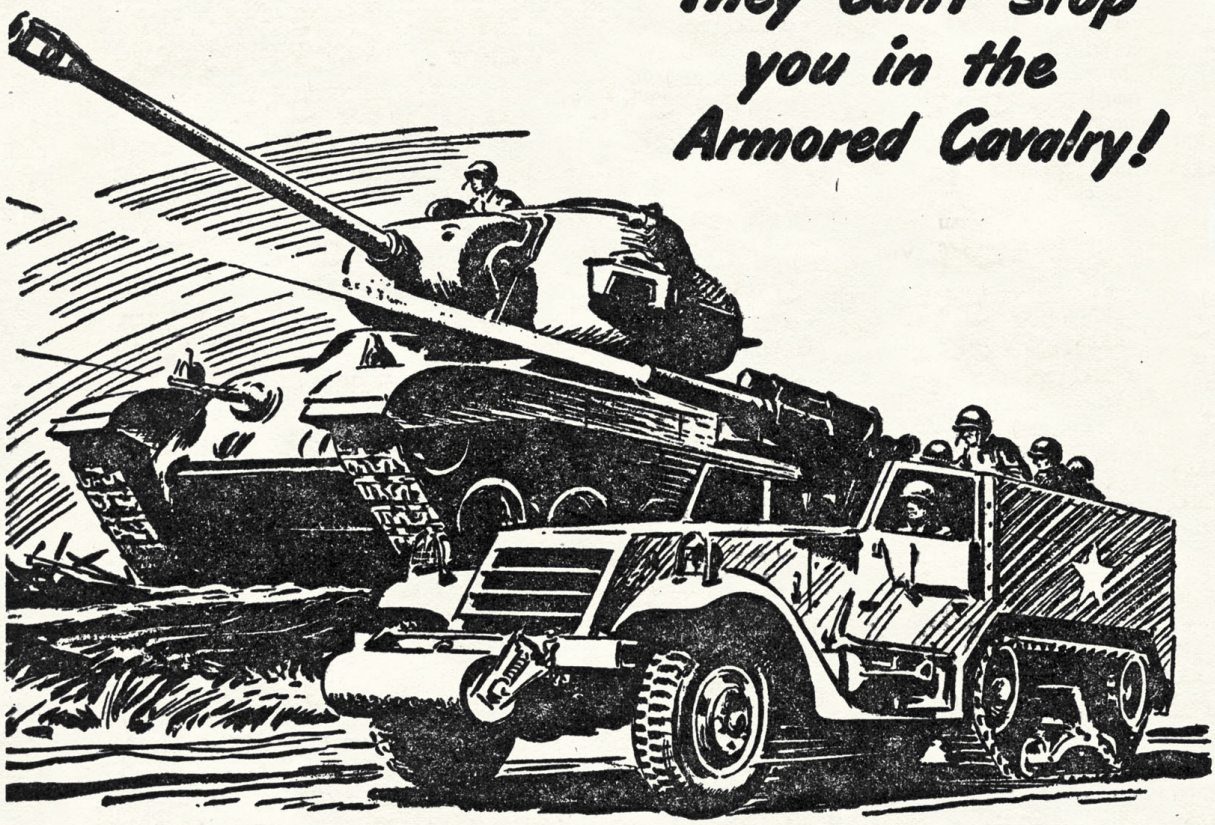

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RENEGADE KEEPER OF THE BORDER BASTION

He was stumbling like he was drunk. . . .

★ ★ ★

All hell was bustin' loose on the bloody Rio—and smack in the middle of that red roaring hell was Sheriff Johnny Madden . . . playing the game that sent his daddy to an unsung grave.

Dramatic Novel of Old Arizona

By WALT COBURN

CHAPTER 1 Black Andy's Badge

Johnny Madden didn't want the law-badge job in the first place and he balked, flat footed, when they tackled him about running him for sheriff.

"I've got a cow outfit to look after," said Johnny. "Not much of a spread but such as it is, it's mine. And to me it seems worth the hangin' onto. And misters, along this Mexican border a cowman better keep a tail-holt on what he's got. I'm obliged, boys, but I don't want no part of this sheriff's job."

A lot of folks agreed with Johnny Madden when they heard there was a move on to elect him sheriff. Old timers were inclined to think the job required a man with some gray in his hair and more gray matter inside the skull than young Johnny Madden had ever showed.

True, he was thirty years old and had cow savvy enough to build up his little border outfit into a sizeable spread. And he had the guts to take his own part and stand up for his rights. And while he had his town fun and raised his cowpuncher's share of hell with the others, still he knew when to pull up. But they just couldn't see Johnny Madden wearing a law badge.

Johnny Madden was just barely tall enough to miss being nicknamed Shorty. He stood about five feet eight in his high-heeled, shopmade boots. He had wiry black hair and heavy black eyebrows that shadowed a pair of blue-gray puckered eyes. He was blunt jawed and short nosed, and his wide mouth grinned easily. He was easy to get along with, and young enough to still believe in every man until a man proved himself not worth trusting.

Older men, hardened, a little embittered, said that a man as simple-minded as Johnny Madden didn't have the right warp in him to make a real sheriff. A law officer had to be more suspicious of other men, had to be more secretive. And Johnny Madden was as easy to read as the first-grade primer at the cow-country schoolhouse.

So when the talk first started about electing Johnny Madden for sheriff, the old timers grinned faintly and shook their heads. And it was only later on that they changed their minds, and when they did they were no longer grinning.

The men who were behind it didn't use the direct approach. They took their time about it, and they played it like they were sitting into a high stake poker game. Because when it came right down to cold facts, Johnny Madden was their ace in the hole. Because Johnny owned the little strip of rough cow country straddling the Mexican border that was called the Gap.

That is to say Johnny Madden owned the land on the Arizona side of the Gap. South of the Gap was Sonora, Mexico, owned by some Mexicans who raised a few off-colored Mexican cattle that Johnny bought from them at a fair price because they liked him and he them. They called him Juanito, a sort of pet name for Johnny; and they knew that as long as Johnny Madden owned the Gap, their cattle would not be stolen by raiding gringo border jumpers.

Nor were the Mexicans below the line the only ones who wanted Johnny Madden holding down the gap. The under-manned, over-worked Border Patrol had no need to worry about rustlers and smugglers using the Gap while it belonged to Johnny.

A ten-foot high barbed wire fence marked the border where it crossed the Gap, with a big pole gate that was kept padlocked. The Border Patrol had given Johnny a key to the padlock, and then after a few years passed they entrusted the Gap to him and no longer bothered to watch it. Because while Johnny Madden owned the Gap, he'd look after it, and he couldn't be bought off or scared into letting the Gap be used illegally.

Near Johnny Madden's old, rambling, adobe house, was a grave, marked by a weathered headboard and a blunt, grim epitaph:

JOHN MADDEN
of
The Border Patrol
Killed Here in Line of Duty

Johnny's father. Shot down in a pitched battle with a bunch of border-jumper renegades who had used the Gap for cattle rustling and gun running and smuggling.

The Border Patrol had paid off the debt of John Madden in their own way and nobody talked about it. The Border Patrol had been instrumental in locating Johnny Madden there at the Gap, and Johnny had built up a nice little spread. And now, ten years later, Johnny Madden had just about everything he wanted in life. . . .

It was everything that somebody else wanted. But not for the same purpose. And they were going after it in their own cautious, wolf-cunning way. . . . Elect Johnny Madden sheriff—that was the first move.

When Johnny turned it down, they were not discouraged. It was about what they had expected.

THE PRESENT sheriff was Andy Withers. Black Andy. Big and tough and crooked as the snake tracks along his back trail. Black Andy had been band-wagoned

into office on the old cow country notion that it took a tough renegade like Black Andy Withers to wipe out the cattle rustlers.

He had cleaned them out, too. He brought them in, one at a time, and collected the bounty on their dead hides. And all the while he was killing off his personal enemies that he had branded as cattle rustlers, he was helping himself to their little greasy-sack cow outfits. Until finally the big outfits that had pinned the sheriff's badge on Black Andy Withers got their eyes peeled open to the fact that Sheriff Withers owned those little two-bit spreads and that his hired cowhands were whittling on the big herds far more than the dead men had.

Now those big outfits were commencing to agree that Johnny Madden might just be the sheriff to undo the damage they had brought on themselves when they made Andy Withers sheriff.

So those grizzled cowmen no longer shook their heads. Their grins faded. And they rode over to the Gap and put it up to Johnny Madden. Cold turkey.

"We're goin' to pin that sheriff's badge onto your shirt pocket, Johnny. We'll furnish you with all the deputies you need. And you'll have the backin' of the Border Patrol, one hundred percent. In a way, Johnny, you owe it to your dead daddy. Them's the kind of curly wolves killed John Madden here at the Gap. . . . We're runnin' you fer sheriff. Regardless."

They made it sound like Johnny Madden owed it to them. And in the end they got his reluctant nod of consent. He saddled a horse and rode with them to town, to the little border cowtown of Mesquite.

Perhaps, deep inside his heart, Johnny Madden had the secret yearning to wear a law badge, like most kids raised in the cow country. Either a cow-country kid wants to be sheriff, or he yearns to take to the outlaw trail. It depends on his raising. And Johnny Madden's father had been one of the Border Patrol, killed off by lawless renegades. . . .

It so happened that the cowmen and Johnny Madden rode into Mesquite on the evening of the Fourth of July. The town was celebrating. There was a dance going on, and the town crammed packed with cowmen and their cowhands. So these grizzled cattlemen had timed it well.

Johnny Madden had been too busy at the Gap to watch the calendar. He didn't know it was the Fourth of July until they rode into town. And the cattlemen who had fetched him told him to get barbered and into his town duds and get over to the dance, while they circulated the news at the half dozen saloons and gambling houses. There would be a big rally at midnight there at the dance hall. They'd put over Johnny Madden For Sheriff with a real Fourth of July bang.

Johnny Madden caught the contagion of it, and once it got into his blood it made him as drunk as raw mescal. He was bathed and barbered, and dressed in a pair of new Levi overalls and shirt and his best boots when he hung his Stetson up in the coat room at the big dance hall. And it seemed like rare luck or a good omen when the first person he met was the one he most wanted to meet and tell the big news.

That person was Cleo Kramer. Cleo Kramer had hair the color of burnished gold and a pair of large violet eyes that had lashes as heavy as dark fringe. She was tall for a girl and well curved, and every man in the cow country wanted to marry her. She knew how to handle men and how to put them off with a smile and a slanted look so that they came back again and again, still hoping.

Cleo Kramer taught school at Mesquite. Whether or not her pupils learned all they should was beside the question. When Cleo made eyes at the men on the schoolboard, she got her schoolmarm job renewed the next term.

As if she had been waiting and watching for him, Cleo Kramer left her dancing partner standing alone in the middle of the dance floor and met Johnny Madden before he got inside the doorway.

Cleo Kramer had been dancing with Fay Wilkes. Fay Wilkes was the gambling man who owned the Keno and two or three smaller saloons. He owned the gambling at Mesquite. And he was the best dressed and handsomest man along the border.

Tall, lean, hawk beaked, with a pair of pale gray eyes and sleek black hair and trimmed moustache. His smile bared very white teeth. But the smile never reached his cold eyes. And while other men, coatless, sweated in the July heat, Fay Wilkes wore his tailored tropical white suit and no sign

of perspiration glistened on his handsome face. And under the tailored white coat, the pair of guns he wore in shoulder holsters barely bulged under his armpits.

Cleo Kramer had both Johnny Madden's hands in hers. Her eyes were soft and her red lips parted.

"Sheriff Johnny Madden!" Her voice was low toned, husky. "It's wonderful! Tell me about it while we dance this waltz. I want to be the first to actually hear it from you. And if it's still a secret, then you'll have to hold me close and whisper it in my ear. You're blushing, Johnny. I like you when you blush. Most men—" She let it hang. She was in his arms and waltzing with him.

"It's time that big tough Andy Withers got kicked out of office—run out of the country. I hate him. . . . You'll make a splendid sheriff, Johnny—clean and honest and brave. . . ."

SHE was almost as tall as Johnny. When her head turned, her thick burnished-gold hair was in his eyes and the perfume in his nostrils was heady as strong drink. She turned her head and her lips brushed his mouth with a softness that made him lose step. Her husky laughter was no louder than a whisper in his ear.

"*My* Sheriff Johnny Madden. . . ."

Fay Wilkes didn't seem to mind being deserted. He stood near the doorway smiling faintly as he watched the couple dance. And when the waltz ended they were near where he stood, and he shoved his well kept hand at Johnny.

"I heard a rumor I hope is true, Johnny. It's time we got an honest man in the sheriff's office. I've had a lot of trouble with Black Andy."

"Mebbeyso you ain't had no trouble at all yet, tinhorn."

Big tough Sheriff Andy Withers had shouldered through the doorway. A six-footer whose two hundred pounds was burly muscle and big bone, he stank of sweat and booze. A black Stetson was tilted back on his coarse black hair, and his eyes were as hard and glittering green as the eyes of a rattlesnake. His swarthy skin was pock-marked and he was coarse featured and his voice was harsh and grating. He had both thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt where a big bone-handled six-shooter flanked low on his thigh in a tied-down, Mexican carved holster.

Sheriff Andy Withers grinned flatly, baring big yellow teeth. He unhooked a thumb and ran the heel of a big hand across the sheriff's nickle-plated star pinned to his sweat-darkened red flannel shirt.

"Quickest way to git this badge, Madden," he grinned, "is to shoot me out from under it. It'll save your campaign expenses. And I'll guarantee they'll run you high if you make it that kind of a race. Because Black Andy will give you one hell of a run for this law badge, sonny."

"I'll give you a run for it, Andy." Johnny Madden had to look up a little to look into the bloodshot green eyes of Black Andy Withers.

"Any time you feel lucky," rasped the big sheriff, "we kin settle it almighty quick."

"I'll let you know," said Johnny Madden quietly, "if I want it thataway."

"How's about you, tinhorn?" Black Andy's right hand was on the white bone handle of his six-shooter.

"This is a decent dance hall, Sheriff. Ladies present. I'm looking forward to backing Johnny Madden. Any bets you want to make on yourself will be covered at the Keno."

Black Andy Withers grinned. He was looking at Cleo Kramer now, ignoring Johnny Madden and the gambler.

"How about the next dance, Cleo?"

"Not the next, or the one after the next, or any other dance. Go back to the honka-tonk where they appreciate you, Sheriff."

Her face had paled and her violet eyes were dark with contempt and anger. She wrinkled her nose as if sniffing some foul odor. Then the Mexican orchestra started playing, and she put herself in Johnny Madden's arms and waltzed away with him.

Fay Wilkes was left to cope with the big tough sheriff. The gambler's right hand slid inside his tailored white coat and his eyes narrowed to pale slits of shining steel.

"The lady is right. Take your big stink out of here, Andy."

"Or what, tinhorn?"

The men gathered around crowded back out of line.

"Or I'll kill you, Andy." The gambler's voice had the sound of ripping silk.

Big tough Sheriff Andy Withers grinned,

his hand still on his gun. His green eyes glittered.

"I'm a little drunk—but not slowed down enough to git killed before I pulled a gun trigger. But I'll let 'er slide this time. I got to teach young Johnny Madden a hard lesson. . . . Ain't he movin' in on your lady, tinhorn?"

"The lady makes her own choice. A big mongrel thing like you wouldn't understand. . . . Now get out. You're stinking up the place, *Sheriff.*"

Sheriff Andy Withers was backing out the door when a slim long-legged young cowpuncher moved up.

"Need any help, Andy?" His voice sounded an edge off-key, like he had been drinking more than he could handle.

Slim Kramer was Cleo Kramer's brother and a deputy sheriff under Andy Withers' appointment. He wanted to be tough. He wore his deputy sheriff badge pinned to his shirt and he used his legal authority to work out personal grudges and enmities even as Sheriff Andy Withers settled his old scores in a bigger way.

Slim Kramer was towheaded and his eyes were a pale blue color under sun-bleached brows. He was a little too pretty for a man, and some bigger, uglier, tougher cowhands had made the mistake of thinking he was too pretty to be dangerous. Because Slim Kramer was as vicious and treacherous as an inbred handsome hound.

Cleo Kramer, waltzing with Johnny Madden, saw her brother standing there at Sheriff Andy Withers' hulking back. Tall, slim, dressed like some range dude in a black sateen shirt with the legs of his tight-fitting pants shoved into his fancy boot tops, he stood there with his hand on the silver-mounted six-shooter he notched with every kill he made.

Cleo missed a step. Johnny Madden felt her hand grip his and it felt cold. And when Johnny swung her around, he saw Slim Kramer step around Black Andy's bulk and shove Fay Wilkes to one side with a swift straight-arm job. And Slim Kramer, his deputy badge shining, swaggered through the dancing couples and towards Johnny Madden and his sister Cleo.

"He's drunk, Johnny. Don't pay any attention to him. Let me do the talking. I'll handle the fool." Her voice lost its soft huskiness.

CHAPTER 2 Claws of a Tigress

Johnny Madden had tangled with Slim Kramer before. He knew that fancy spur jingler for just what he was. And he knew that there was no getting away from an ugly ruckus, or taking it outside. Slim Kramer liked to show off in front of a crowd, especially when there were good-looking girls in the crowd. It would happen here. And it was bound to be nasty.

Johnny's arm slacked around the waist of his dancing partner and he tried to free his left hand. But Cleo Kramer had a cold grip on it and she moved in closer to him. Her voice sounded in his ear:

"Keep dancing!"

She had her head close to his. She was leading, trying to manouver it so that she could watch that tall slim brother of hers. Slim swaggered through the other dancers, shoving aside any of the couples who were in his way.

But Johnny wasn't turning his back on Slim Kramer. He swung her around so abruptly Cleo almost stumbled. He felt her stiffen and heard her mutter something as Johnny shoved away from her and twisted his left hand free.

Slim Kramer halted close to where they stood and the Mexican orchestra got sadly out of tune as they watched what promised to be a fight starting. The other dancers had halted. Every person in the crowded dance hall was staring. They were backing away from where Johnny Madden and Cleo Kramer stood side by side and Slim Kramer stood facing them, yellow skinned, his pale eyes glazed, tiny flecks of white foam at the corners of his thin-lipped snarl.

"When Andy Withers wants to dance with you—" Slim Kramer was speaking to his sister but his pale eyes were fixed on Johnny Madden— "by the hell, you dance with him!"

"I choose my dancing partners, you drunken fool!"

The softness was gone from the large violet eyes of Cleo Kramer. Her upper lip curled back in a feline snarl. Her voice spat, hissing. She was like some beautiful golden cat about to claw.

There had been ugly rumors whispered concerning this beautiful tawny-haired schoolmarm. How she favored the older,

teen-aged pupils, some of them almost grown men; how she had vented her spite on some of the prettier teen-aged girls. . . .

Now Cleo Kramer and her brother Slim snarled at each other like animals. Animals of the same beautiful breed, the same litter, fighting since babyhood. Spitting, snarling, clawing. . . .

Johnny Madden cut a swift sidelong look at Cleo Kramer. He hadn't time to be shocked by the change in her, because he saw Slim Kramer's gun hand tighten on the ivory butt of his silver mounted six-shooter.

Johnny Madden moved in swiftly, before Slim could jerk his gun and club him across the head with its fancy scrolled barrel. He drove a short hard right into Slim Kramer's lean belly. It knocked the wind out of the tall deputy. And then Johnny Madden was boring in and his head was cushioned down against his left shoulder.

He fought crouched and rushed Slim backwards and off balance, and he doubled the tall deputy up with short punishing jabs in his belly and guts. When Slim Kramer went over backwards, rushed off his feet, Johnny was straddle of him.

Slim Kramer had the fancy gun in his hand. Johnny grabbed the barrel and yanked and twisted, and when it came loose he gripped the pear-handled butt and slapped Slim Kramer across the side of the head with it. Then he brought down alongside the lean jaw and criss-crossed a backhanded swing that chopped the gun barrel down across the high-bridged nose. The sound was a flat spatting noise. Blood spurted from Slim Kramer's broken nose.

Johnny Madden was straightening up, the silver-mounted gun in his hand, and about to get to his feet—when he felt his short-cropped wiry black hair grabbed and pulled so savagely it felt like his scalp was being torn away from his skull. Fingernails raked his face and clawed at his eyes. And in his ears dinned the sound of Cleo Kramer's voice. Nothing was left of its soft purring huskiness. She was panting hard and her voice was shrill and brittle as smashing glasses, and she was clawing at his face like she was trying to claw his eyes out.

Johnny Madden rolled over and onto his feet, and Cleo's grip on his hair was torn loose. She was thrown sideways and onto her knees. She was sobbing but there were no tears in her blazing eyes as she pillowed her brother's head in her lip.

The fight was gone out of Slim Kramer. He was whimpering like a whipped animal, and fear and pain were mirrored in his eyes. He writhed there on the dancehall floor and took the savage protection of his sister, who was dabbing at his bleeding nose with the hem of her new white dance frock.

Johnny Madden stood back, Slim Kramer's silver-mounted six-shooter gripped in his hand. His eyes smarted and stung, and blood trickled from the claw marks of Cleo Kramer's pointed fingernails. He heard Cleo Kramer's brittle voice calling him a lot of ugly names he'd never heard a lady use. He saw big tough Sheriff Andy Withers shoving through the crowd.

The gun in Johnny Madden's hand lifted no higher than the waistband of his Levi overalls. His voice sounded flat toned:

"I'm feelin' that lucky, Sheriff!"

The crowded men were tramping back on the feet of those behind in their panicky haste to get out of line of gunfire. Black Andy Withers bulked big as a silver-tip grizzly, and his green eyes were glittering. His coarse black hair hung dankly down across his forehead and his swarthy skin glistened with sweat. His big hand was on his holstered gun.

Then Fay Wilkes stepped in between Sheriff Andy Withers and Johnny Madden. The tall gambler in his immaculate white tropical suit, sleek, dry-skinned, cold-nerved, was the only calm man in the place. And his toneless voice cut like a whiplash, flaying everyone within earshot.

"There's a time and a place for this kind of drunken brawling. Get that drunken deputy out of here, Sheriff—he's messing up the dance floor. Come along with me, Johnny. You've gotten all the votes here."

Fay Wilkes took the fancy silver-mounted gun from Johnny Madden's hand. He held it by its scrolled barrel, its pearl butt towards Cleo Kramer.

"When your brother Vincent recovers," said the gambler, "give him his gun." He looked at her blood-spattered dress. "It takes Vincent to ruin things. Keep him out of circulation and I'll buy you a new dance frock, Cleo."

Cleo Kramer had gotten to her feet and was standing there, her fists clenched,

breathing fast in a visible effort to regain her self control. And Fay Wilkes' every flat-toned low-spoken word was whipping her back to normal. Only Johnny Madden, standing beside Fay Wilkes, could hear what the gambler was saying.

THEN Fay Wilkes took Johnny's arm and its grip was like a steel clamp. He led Johnny past where Sheriff Andy Withers hulked, glowering. And then they were out of the packed dance hall and out under the stars.

Johnny Madden pulled the fresh air deep into his lungs. He felt sort of sick inside.

Johnny had a temper that could flare up quickly like that. While its heat lasted it consumed him, and when the fire of it died it always left him limp and sort of nauseated. Only this time there was something else beside that hot-tempered anger dying out in him and he hadn't time yet to know what it was.

He felt it and half-way knew and he wanted to go off alone somewhere. But Fay Wilkes was holding onto his arm and was heading him away from the dance hall. The music had started in there and in a little while the dance would again be in full swing. And the only aftermath of the ruckus would be where the men grouped in little bunches outside and passed a bottle and talked it over.

The gambler was taking Johnny Madden to his adobe house at the edge of town. The finest house at Mesquite. It was an old adobe house built around a patio and furnished with hand-carved Mexican furniture. There was a small bar. Mexican cigars and cigarettes. Books and magazines to read. And when Fay Wilkes entertained the Mexican politicos or some influential Americanos, there would be a Mexican stringed orchestra and senoritas who sang and danced for the entertainment of the gambler's guests.

Johnny Madden had never been invited to the house of Fay Wilkes, but he had heard tales of the gambler's festive parties. And out of those rumored stories of lavish entertainment he now recalled but one.

The story had it that Cleo Kramer had been the guest of honor. That she had sung for them. And never had the assembled guests, Mexican politicos and some Arizona politicians, heard such a voice. Cleo Kramer, they had agreed then and later was wasted here teaching a cow-country school. She should be singing in public, earning big money.

And a few moments ago Johnny had heard that voice of Cleo Kramer snarling and spitting abuse at him—the same voice that had but a short time before that purred in his ear. The perfume of her hair heady as wine in his nostrils, her warm red lips brushing his mouth in a kiss. . . .

Johnny Madden halted. He shook his arm free. He felt cold and sick inside and he wanted to go off alone somewhere.

"I'll see you later at the Keno. I'm obliged, Wilkes, for your easin' me outa that tight. It was none of my makin' and I didn't like it, and I want to cool off somewhere's by myself."

"I understand. I'll see you later, Johnny. . . . Only one thing—Cleo. Don't hold it against her. Vincent Kramer is a no good swaggering drunken cheap imitation of what he thinks a cow-country peace officer should be—but he's her brother and she'd fight the world to protect him. Vincent and Cleo Kramer haven't had life too easy. . . .

"You'll be a lot happier if you forget it. Cleo will find you and she'll tell you she's sorry she tore into you like a wildcat. . . .

"See you at the Keno. But don't go prowling around alone. With Black Andy and Vince Kramer on the prod, you're not too safe. Take care of yourself. We're electing Johnny Madden sheriff."

He left Johnny and walked away and was gone in the night. Johnny went on to the feed and livery barn where he had stabled his horse. He had a notion to saddle his horse and pull out. It was like a strong hunch. Pull out while the going was good. While the trail back to his little cow outfit at the Gap was still open.

He washed the sweat and blood from his head and face at the pump, there at the feed yard. The cool water did more than cleanse his hide. It cleared his brain and he could think more clearly and he thought he could figure things out. He had pulled off his sweat-soaked shirt and it dried quickly in the dry desert breeze. He felt almost good except that the claw marks on his face were smarting. And the stinging pain kept reminding him of Cleo Kramer. . .

For a long time now Johnny Madden had

fancied himself more than half way in love with the tawny-haired schoolmarm. And tonight she had asked him to dance with her and her lips had brushed a kiss across him and he was still drunk from her nearness. His blood pulsed fast when he remembered that Fay Wilkes had said Cleo would find him and tell him she was sorry. He had a wild hope she might do that. It would be worth the risk.

He pulled on his almost dry shirt and walked up the main street of Mesquite. He didn't want to start drinking booze on an empty belly. What he needed most was strong black coffee and a bait of grub. To fill that cold emptiness inside his stomach.

He turned into the Mesquite Cafe and straddled a stool at the counter. He was reading the soiled hand-printed menu when a girl's voice spoke:

"You'll study that thing an hour, then order steak and fried spuds and a can of cold tomatoes. Cowpunchers always do. And coffee with whiskers on it. . . . You look like you'd tried to tame a wildcat, Johnny."

The voice belonged to Nora Mulligan. She was small and able to take her own part. There were reddish highlights in her black hair and she had eyes as gray as smoke and they looked straight at you from under almost heavy black eyebrows.

And when she was poking fun at you, there were tiny sparks of laughter in the gray of her eyes that sort of squinted almost shut when she smiled, and the smile crinkled a short nose that was sprinkled with tiny freckles. Her mouth was a bit too wide and generous and she had a stubborn chin. She was trimly built, slim, quick moving.

Nora had been orphaned when the Border Patrol took up the killing of John Madden at the Gap. Her father, Steve Mulligan, had taken to the bottle and gotten into bad company. When the shooting was over, Steve Mulligan was found among the dead border-jumper renegades.

The Border Patrol had taken up a collection for the sixteen-year-old Nora, and she had bought the Mesquite Cafe. And she was still running it and serving the best grub to be had at any price at Mesquite.

Johnny Madden looked up and his grin was forced. And the smile on Nora Mulligan's face was hardly a smile at all. Her eyes were as coldly gray as a cloudy sky.

She reached over and with her counter towel she rubbed the pocket of Johnny's shirt. Her voice was low toned, filled with a sort of contempt.

"Just shinin' up your beautiful new sheriff's badge, Johnny."

CHAPTER 3 For Two Dead Men

Nora Mulligan met a man on his own ground. It was a man's world, according to her belief, and she had to play a man's game. Straight or crooked, the bald truth or a clever lie. Check the bet to the man and let him open the jackpot—then out-poker him. And nine times out of ten the man never did know he'd lost the game to this small girl with the level gray eyes and a small-boy grin.

"That Nora Mulligan," they said of her. "Now there's a girl that's on the level. Lays her cards on the table. And you better lay yourn face up, mister. Or she'll just reach out and turn over the hole card you got buried. And if you bin markin' your cards, that's your sorrow. When your name is on Nora Mulligan's blacklist, it's there to stay. She'll go the route for a friend, no matter who he is or what he is. But if she gets down on you, you're all finished with that little Irish lady."

No man ever left her restaurant hungry for lack of the price of a meal. And if he needed a clean shirt she sent him to the mercantile store down the street.

"Tell Gonzales that Nora sent you."

Nora never had need to hire help. There was always some derelict there in her kitchen washing dishes. Getting straightened out. He might have the snakes but he'd be clean from the hide out, and the stink of the booze scrubbed off and its poison gone from his belly. Then he'd turn up missing and there would be another to take his place. Nameless derelicts. The Mexican border towns got more than their share of broken men. If they remembered any part of a mother's prayer they dug it up out of their memory and whispered it for Nora Mulligan.

Other men gave her their confidence. They would tell Nora their troubles, like a weeping drunk tells it to a deaf bartender, or a devout Catholic whispers his sins to a

priest inside the darkened confessional box, without fear of what he had spoken being repeated. And if Nora Mulligan knew everything that went on the surface and under the surface, there at Mesquite, she never let on.

Nora Mulligan held no grudge against the Border Patrol for the killing of her father. She was sixteen then and had kept house for him for a long time and there wasn't much she didn't know about the lawless border deals. And she'd taken her father's death with a splendid courage, without complaint or whimper. She had learned long before to take her tears off to herself. Nobody wants to see you deep. Men want you to smile. So you shed your tears on your pillow. And you smile at 'em.

But you didn't smile at men the way Cleo Kramer did. You didn't promise things with your smiles and your eyes and lie out of it and have some poor lonesome cowboy building up high hopes of getting married and then tossing him aside with a laugh. You didn't have good men killing each other from jealousy and counting it as some kind of a triumph. . . .

Cleo Kramer had come into the Mesquite Cafe with Fay Wilkes one night, when she had first come to teach school here at the little border cowtown. There had been a dance in honor of the new schoolmarm to introduce her, and it was about dawn when the dance broke up and Fay Wilkes had brought her into the Mesquite Cafe for breakfast. Cleo was dressed in her best dance frock and perfumed and the gambler dressed to the nines. The stools at the counter were empty, but they had sat down at one of the tables.

And right there at their corner table Nora Mulligan had let them wait, while she fed a couple of the old derelicts who had been washing dishes and told them Irish stories. While the dressed-up gambler and the new schoolmarm sat waiting for their coffee and flapjacks and scrambled eggs.

It got embarrassing. The beautiful blonde Cleo had voiced her impatience and Fay Wilkes should have known better than to get up from the table and walk towards the open door to the kitchen. Because Nora had been standing behind the counter when they came in and the gambler had introduced the new schoolmarm. And the level gray eyes of Nora Mulligan had looked straight into the violet eyes of Cleo Kramer and that was that.

Fay Wilkes never said a word. It was Nora who spoke. Quietly.

"The Chili Parlor gets the honkatonk trade."

Fay Wilkes took Cleo Kramer out. Neither of them had returned. Nora had given no reason for her instant dislike for the new schoolmarm, then or afterwards. She knew the effectiveness of silence as a weapon.

Now Nora Mulligan slid a cup of strong black coffee across the spotless counter towards Johnny Madden. Then she reached in under the counter and brought up a bottle of bonded whiskey and a shot glass and set them alongside the coffee.

JOHNNY'S clawed face was reddening under the level gray eyes. He looked at the bottle and shook his head. Nora poured the shot glass to its brim and dumped the raw whiskey into the black coffee.

Her eyelashes were not long but they were thick and black, and they blinked hard now and were wet. And her hands had doubled into fists and the two fists were drumming on the edge of the counter like she was fighting down something that surged inside her. And Johnny Madden was staring at her like he thought she was sick or going to throw a fit. And then her voice came from behind set teeth.

"I'd like to throw that hot coffee into that face of yours—coming in here—wearing her claw marks. You—you damned boneheaded fool. . . . Sheriff Johnny Madden. . . . When Gonzales' store opens here's a dollar to buy yourself a clean shirt. That one you're wearing stinks of gardenia perfume. She sheds it like a she-polecat."

Nora Mulligan took a silver dollar from the open cash drawer and she slammed it down on the counter beside the cup of spiked coffee. Her eyes were still wet-lashed but sparks of temper were there.

Twice now within an hour Johnny Madden had aroused the fury of two women. But by comparison this hot tempered anger of Nora's was so different that it purged something inside him. Johnny Madden straightened up on his stool and grinned and the grin widened.

That did it. Nora grabbed the cup of

coffee and threw it, cup and all. And Johnny had to duck fast. The heavy white cup smashed against the whitewashed adobe wall behind him. And Johnny quit his stool like he'd quit a pitching horse that was throwing him and he ducked down behind the counter. And there he was when the tall, rawboned Jeff Quentin, inspector of the Border Patrol, came in.

Jeff Quentin's hard blue eyes puckered and a grin spread slowly across his leathery face. He lifted both hands to the level of his shoulders.

Nora was breathing quickly and spots of color showed in her cheeks. Then she laughed. It was a gay, infectious laugh. And Johnny grinned at the Border Patrol Inspector and came up slowly from his crouch. Then he was looking across the counter at Nora Mulligan, and he stared at her like he was seeing her for the first time. And the grin on his face was sobering and when he spoke his voice was quiet.

"I'll give you another try," he said, "and I won't dodge it."

And Nora Mulligan was looking at him and her gray eyes were steady and unsmiling. Color flooded her face.

"That did the trick—I don't need a second shot. . . ."

Johnny reached over the counter and took her hand. He felt its quick hard grip in his and they grinned across the counter into each other's eyes. Then Nora Mulligan did what she had never before done in her life. She leaned over the counter and kissed a man. She gave Johnny Madden a hard, clumsy kiss, then pulled her hand away.

"Well I'll be damned." Big Jeff Quentin shook his grizzled head.

And the sound of his slow quiet voice brought Johnny Madden and Nora Mulligan suddenly awake to the fact that the Border Patrol Inspector was still on earth and here in the Mesquite Cafe.

"Anybody in the kitchen, Nora?" he asked quietly.

"Nobody."

"Let's the three of us have us some coffee, then, in the kitchen." And he took the bottle of whiskey along.

Johnny and Nora followed the grizzled Jeff back into the kitchen. Nora filled three cups half full of coffee, and the three of them sat down at the kitchen table and the two men spiked their coffee. Jeff Quentin, Border Patrol inspector, came to the point without wasting any of their time talking around it.

"If you don't want to die young, Johnny," he said flatly, "right now is the time to back outa this sheriff's job they're handin' you."

Nora nodded. But it wasn't her time to speak.

"It's a mighty well planned plot," said the Border Patrol inspector, "to re-open the Gap. Sheriff Johnny Madden, if he plays it smart, can clean up more during one term wearin' that law badge than Johnny Madden, cowman, would make in a lifetime. Only trouble is, you wouldn't live long to enjoy that quick, crooked money you'd bank while you was sheriff. Savvy, Johnny?"

Johnny Madden nodded.

"They figger on havin' some trouble handlin' Sheriff Johnny Madden," said the grizzled Jeff, smiling faintly. "So they'll use a hackamore instead of a spade bit. Till they git Sheriff Johnny Madden hackamore broke. Then they'll spade-bit him. And spur him. Till he's marked up like his face is claw marked now. And they'll spur him to death."

The Border Potrol inspector sipped his spiked coffee and let the silence ride. Johnny let his spiked coffee get cold. And Nora put canned cream and sugar in her coffee and drank it slowly.

"You want me to ride back to the Gap, Jeff? Tell these cowmen that fetched me to town that the deal is off? To get theirselves another man to take that law badge off Black Andy Withers?"

"That's what you'll do, Johnny, if you put any value on your young hide. And I'd be the last man on earth to brand you for a coward. And it'd make me feel almighty proud if you was to marry some clean wholesome girl of your own kind that would make you the proper kind of a cowman's wife there at the Gap. Us Border Patrol fellers would be certain of a good cup of coffee, mebbyso spiked with good likker, when we stopped at the Gap to rest our saddle. . . ." His grin took both Nora and Johnny in.

"But on the other hand, Jeff?" Johnny looked across the table into the puckered hard blue eyes of the Border Patrol inspector.

"ON THE other hand, Johnny, there's a mebbyso hundred to one chance you might play the cards like they'll deal 'em to Sheriff Johnny Madden. The Border Patrol will know all along what's a-goin' on and there'll be a gun trap laid and all hell will bust loose when the Border Patrol cuts loose.

"You'd stand just about that hundred to one chance of comin' out of that ruckus alive. And all the reward you'd git would be the thanks of the Uncle Sam who ramrods the Border Patrol. And all you'd have left would be what you start with now. The little two-bit outfit at the Gap."

"And a cup of coffee," Nora spoke quietly, "spiked, mebbyso sometimes, with a shot of likker. . . ."

Johnny Madden looked at Nora. And her eyes were steady and gray as smoke. Then he spoke to the Border Patrol inspector.

"Whatever you say, Jeff. I'm your huckleberry."

"I don't want you jumpin' into it, Johnny. But the hell of it is there ain't no time to waste. And it's a job that takes more than fightin' guts and common horse sense. It'll take the kind of double-crossin' cunnin' they got.

"I'm scared for you. Because you don't have that kind of double-crossin' cunnin' by nature. You're easy to read—open faced as a watch. And the minute they suspect you, they'll kill you. That's why I had to tell you what I just laid on the line. It would have bin slicker for me to keep my mouth shut and let the deal go through like they got it so carefully planned. But John Madden was my friend and you're his son Johnny. I can't let you git into this till you know what you're up against. John Madden got killed. He died under a cloud. . . ."

Johnny tensed in his chair. This was the first time any man of the Border Patrol had ever come right out with it, but the cow country had whispered it down through the years. That John Madden of the Border Patrol had been bought off by the border renegades, then killed because the Border Patrol Inspector Jeff Quentin had gotten onto the fact that John Madden had sold out to the cattle rustlers and gun runners and smugglers and was letting them use his key to the gate in the Gap.

"John Madden, your father, was murdered, Johnny, because he got caught playing the game like you'll play it if you string your bets with me and the Border Patrol. John wanted to risk it. I let him talk me into it. So far as Uncle Sam and the Border Patrol is concerned, there's no cloud. John Madden of the Border Patrol died brave and clean. I got there too damned late with help.

"But for reasons you'll understand, we let that cloud hang black over the grave of John Madden of the Border Patrol. And we killed those we found. And among the dead we buried was a black Irishman named Steve Mulligan.

It was Nora Mulligan now who stiffened. The color drained from her face and her gray eyes darkened.

"And there died a second man," said Inspector Jeff Quentin of the Border Patrol, "who died under a black cloud. And for the same reason John Madden was killed. Because somewhere along their back trail John Madden and Steve Mulligan had been pardners of a sort. Punching cows for the same outfits. Sharing the same roundup bed and warsack. When John Madden got killed Steve Mulligan took it up. He came to me with a proposition.

"We'd never learned the real identity of the man or men who were the real ramrods of a tough bunch of border jumpers who were using the Gap. John Madden was close to their identity when they killed him. Steve Mulligan said he was goin' after that information—with or without my sanction.

"Then Mulligan and I shook hands on it. Until now, I've never told it to any living human. But it's time I told Nora. Steve Mulligan died brave and clean. He took the identity of the men he'd found out to his grave.

"There is one man. There may be two. They're still alive. Those are the men who want to elect Johnny Madden for sheriff. They want to open the Gap. They'll get the key to the gate in the Gap from Sheriff Johnny Madden."

Inspector Jeff Quentin of the Border Patrol pushed back his chair. He muttered something about raiding the doughnut jar behind the lunch counter. And when he left the kitchen he swung the heavy door shut behind him.

Nora Mulligan had been sitting there dry eyed and white looking. Now her head was

pillowed on her arms on the kitchen table and terrible sobs racked her. And then Johnny was squatted on his bootheels beside her and his arm was around her shoulders. And then he took her in his arms and he held her like that while she sobbed out all the terrible aching grief inside her heart.

"Bawling—like a damn' baby. . . ." Her voice was muffled against Johnny's chest and shoulder. Then she sniffed loudly and twisted away from his arms and her short nose crinkled.

"If Gonzales ain't open, bust in the door! Get a clean shirt. Phew! Gardenias!"

Jeff Quentin was eating a big sugar-coated doughnut when Johnny Madden came through the swinging door like he'd been kicked in the pants.

"The Irish again, Jeff. I'll be back. . . ."

Johnny was back in a few minutes. He was wearing a new lightweight blue flannel shirt and was tucking in his shirt tail when he came back into the Mesquite Cafe. The grin on his face died a slow death. And his hand dropped to the butt of his holstered gun.

Inspector Jeff Quentin of the Border Patrol was nowhere in sight. But Sheriff Andy Withers was sitting on one of the stools and beside him on another stool sat his deputy Slim Kramer. Nora was standing behind the counter serving them coffee. She was laughing at something Black Andy was telling her. Her eyes cut Johnny a swift look of warning before she reached under the counter for the whiskey bottle.

Sheriff Andy Withers swung around on his stool. There was a forced grin on his swarthy face.

"Take 'er easy, Johnny. Me'n Slim has bin huntin' you. Slim here made a mistake. He wants to tell you."

"I was locoed drunk, Johnny." Slim Kramer forced out the words like he was reciting something he'd been told to say. "Let's forgit it. Cleo said to tell you to come back to the dance. She'll give you all the waltzes that greaser orchestra kin play."

Then Slim Kramer turned back to the counter and made a grab at Nora's hand. She laughed and handed him the whiskey bottle.

"Get back to the dance, Johnny." Nora's smile never reached her gray eyes. "No man keeps Cleo Kramer waitin'. Now trot along while I entertain the Law."

The look in her level gray eyes was shoving him back out the door. Back to the dance. Back to the gardenia perfume of Cleo Kramer—back to the dangerous game he had volunteered to play. For two dead men: John Madden and Steve Mulligan.

CHAPTER 4 Border Boothill

It was a dangerous game. And played fast. And without a hitch or delay or a single mistake. And no matter how Johnny Madden played the game he was never given a chance to stand flat footed. He was rushed off balance right from the start.

And once he was in the game there was no backing out or running away or showing any sign of weakening. Because there would be a man somewheres near with a gun. Or Cleo. . . . Until Johnny got to associating the sight of a six-shooter with the sweet cloying odor of gardenia perfume. And it was as nauseating after a while as the smell of death. Because death was always there in the shadows.

It started when Johnny Madden went back to the dance hall. Cleo Kramer in a fresh dress was standing outside. The man standing with her slipped away and Johnny got no more than a moving white shadow in the darkness, but he knew it was Fay Wilkes in his white tropical suit.

Then Cleo was standing close to him and the hands that had clawed his face now caressed the ugly scratches and her voice purred and her gardenia perfume was in his nostrils. And then Cleo Kramer's lips were kissing him. Telling him she was sorry.

There for a minute Johnny's legs were weak-kneed and his pulse pounded. A man just couldn't get Cleo Kramer out of his blood, even when he knew her for what she was and he was in love with Nora Mulligan. . . .

Then she led him back into the dance hall and she kept him there like a prisoner until they danced the Home Sweet Home waltz together.

"If you were to ask me now, Johnny," she whispered in his ear, "I couldn't say no. I want to be Mrs. Sheriff Johnny Madden."

Fay Wilkes took them to his house for breakfast. He played the part of a game loser without over-playing it.

He made an occasion of it. A champagne breakfast. And Johnny strung along as Jeff Quentin would be expecting him to play it. And it wasn't all pretense because the champagne made him tipsy and there was the gardenia perfume cloying his nostrils.

It became one of those typical border fiestas with a Mexican orchestra there in the patio and special guests showing up. And it went on and on. And at sundown there was a regular border banquet and speeches and Cleo in another dress. Black. With a fresh gardenia corsage. And she sang for them in her husky voice. And Fay Wilkes announced the forthcoming marriage.

And while the banquet was in full swing, Sheriff Black Andy Withers showed up. Big as a grizzly and half drunk. And with him came Slim Kramer. His broken nose taped, a little drunk. Black Andy's shadow —the sheriff's hired man. . . .

A hush fell. Then Black Andy made his big half-drunken gesture. He unpinned his nickle-plated sheriff's star and swaggered over to where Johnny Madden sat at the head of the banquet table with Cleo Kramer.

"Stand up on your hind laigs, Johnny Madden!" bellowed Sheriff Andy Withers.

And he pinned the sheriff's star on Johnny Madden. While the tipsy guests shouted and stomped their feet and champagne glasses were kept filled and Johnny Madden was sworn in as the new sheriff.

Black Andy Withers was drunk when he left. He took Slim Kramer along with him. And with Slim Vincent Kramer went the key to the padlocked gate at the Gap.

"You'll have to live in town now, Johnny," purred Cleo. She fingered the sheriff's badge pinned to his shirt. "Fay Wilkes has sent some Mexicans to clean up the sheriff's office for you. I'm not letting you leave town, darling. If I take a notion to marry you I want you within quick reach."

"I got my ranch to look after—the Gap. . . ."

"Do me one little favor, Johnny. It's a bigger favor than you realize. . . . Vincent —I know he's wild and reckless and has his faults. But when Andy Withers pinned his law badge on you, that left Vince without a job. He's a good cowman when you get him sobered up and away from town. And he'll do anything on earth for me.

"Let my brother Vince run your ranch for you, Johnny. Give him your key to the Gap.

Cleo was playfully searching his pockets for the key. She had it before he grinned his consent.

Black Andy was headed for his spread-out cow outfit along the border and Slim Vince Kramer rode out of town with him. But before they saddled their horses Slim had to stop at the Mesquite Cafe. For a last cup of spiked coffee. And to show the key to the Gap to Nora Mulligan.

"This is the key to a-plenty, Nora. I'll load you down with diamonds. Dress you in all the silk dresses you kin buy. We'll go anywheres you say on our honeymoon.

"The Border Patrol shot down your ol' man Steve Mulligan. I'll wipe out that debt, to show you I ain't foolin'—me, Slim Vincent Kramer. I could have my pick of all the purtiest girls along the border. And I go locoed over a hash-slinger. Ain't that a joke?"

"I'll laugh my self sick, Slim." Nora felt sick inside. Sick with a wild unreasoning

jealousy. Slim had fetched a bottle of champagne from the banquet along with the news it was a wild celebration. Sheriff Johnny Madden was going to marry Cleo Kramer.

"Come along, Slim," growled Black Andy. "Time's a-slippin'. We got a ride ahead of us. Do your braggin' when you git back. You'll have somethin' to brag about then."

"What?" Nora smiled into Slim Kramer's eyes.

Slim dangled the key to the Gap by its whang-leather string and he winked slyly, and then Black Andy got him out of there and on his horse. And when the pair had ridden away Nora went into the kitchen and through another door into her bedroom where Inspector Jeff Quentin of the Border Patrol was sitting in her rocking chair reading the Police Gazette.

A WHILE later the Border Patrol Inspector slipped out of town in the blackening dusk. And one by one he picked up the men of the Border Patrol who were waiting for him.

"It's a fast game this time, boys. We've got to beat 'em to the first shot. And that goes double for Sheriff Johnny Madden."

"Johnny Madden's in, Jeff?"

"He's in up to his neck. And over his head if he makes any kind of a mistake now. And the way the cards are stacked, Johnny Madden will be playin' it lone-handed at the showdown. Even a Border Patrol inspector can't be in two places at the same time. And it's a long jump between where I'll be at the Gap—and where Sheriff Johnny Madden will be playin' his hand out at Mesquite."

* * *

Fay Wilkes was sweating. This gambling man, who never perspired, could feel the cold clammy sweat that came now from every pore. It was the cold sweat of dread fear and it came from somewhere deep inside like a slow poison and it glistened on his skin. And in the cold gray dawn his handsome face took on a pallor, and his sleek black hair was thickly threaded with silver as if the man had aged over night. The silver had been there in the black hair for several years but he was a vain man and he had dyed his hair and moustache religiously.

But now that slow poison that glistened on his dry skin seemed to have some chemical effect on the sleek hair that showed silvery gray now in the dawn. There in his deserted Keno, where he had gone in the black hour before dawn. Taking Sheriff Johnny Madden with him. And Cleo had gone along.

Sheriff Johnny Madden knew where he stood now. When the banquet was ended and the guests gone and the three of them were alone there at Fay Wilkes adobe house, the gambler had taken Johnny into his smoking room and Cleo had gone with them. There in his lamplit smoking room with the door bolted and Cleo in her black evening gown leaning idly against the bolted door, Fay Wilkes had told Sheriff Johnny Madden to take a chair.

He indicated a chair that put Johnny's back towards the door. And in the old Spanish mirror over the modern steel safe where the gambler squatted Johnny could see Cleo Kramer's reflection. In her beautiful well kept right hand was a wicked looking little double barreled derringer pistol.

Her eyes met Johnny's in the mirror and they were no longer soft violet but black and glittering.

"Don't make the wrong move, *Sheriff*." Her voice didn't purr.

Fay Wilkes had opened the safe. From it he took a bank pass-book and a canceled check. The check was made out to Johnny Madden and his signature was forged on the endorsement on the back of the check. It was made out for the sum of ten-thousand dollars. The check had been signed by Andrew Withers.

"Produced in a court of law," Fay Wilkes said flatly, "this was a ten-thousand dollar bribe. Paid by Andy Withers, accepted by Johnny Madden. And that ten-thousand dollars bought the key to the Gap.

"Your forged name is the penmanship of an expert. There is ten-thousand dollars to your credit right now in the Border Bank. And it's yours. All you do to earn it is to sit tight. Like the proverbial three monkeys you say nothing, hear nothing, see nothing.

"That's what I gambled on when I had that sheriff's badge pinned on you. I'm gambling on a sure thing. The only loser

if you don't string along, will be Sheriff Johnny Madden. Because you'll never leave this room alive. The derringer will be pressed against your head so close your hair will be singed and the scalp powder burnt. It will be suicide."

The perfume of gardenias filled Johnny's nostrils. He felt the warmth of her where she stood now behind his chair, felt the gun muzzle against the back of his head. Johnny grinned at the gambler.

"You win, mister. I ain't ready to die. I'm bribed. Slim Vince Kramer has the key to the Gap. His sister Cleo—well, I've heard about shotgun weddin's. But a derringer pistol engagement—what kind of a josh is this?"

"Cleo is my wife. Vince is her brother. He'll ride through the Gap and come back through the Gap, using your key. He'll bring with him a cache we've had buried in Mexico for over ten years and didn't dare lift.

"You needn't know what's in it. Vince is bringing it up through the Gap to-night while that big tough drunken Black Andy and his renegades keep Inspector Jeff Quentin and his Border Patrol busy stopping a lot of two bit Mexican dogies from crossing the border along Black Andy's strip of range.

"When Vince shows up here, I'll take Cleo and she'll take her damned brother along and we'll be a long ways gone by the time the Border Patrol gets through chasing Black Andy Withers and his fool cattle rustlers. . . .

"You'll play the three monkeys. Sheriff Johnny Madden is welcome to what we leave behind here in this stinking flea-bitten border town of Mesquite. You know of any easier way to pick up ten-thousand dollars, Sheriff?"

"Nope. You want me to give you a long head start. That's all?"

"You might have to kill Black Andy when he shows up. That big tough hombre is going to feel cheated when he finds us gone. You can shut his big mouth with a bullet."

Johnny said that would be a pleasure, and that Cleo could put away her derringer. Cleo smiled and put away the derringer. But they kept him covered while they waited hopefully and impatiently for Slim Vance Kramer.

BUT Slim Kramer did not show up. And just before dawn Fay Wilkes took out what money there was in the safe and then took Johnny and Cleo to the Keno to get the house money from the Keno's safe.

The Keno closed after midnight. Fay Wilkes told the only man there, the bartender on the grave-yard shift, to go home. And with the first gray of dawn Fay Wilkes, high-stake gambler who never perspired, began sweating. And Cleo paced the floor in her tailored riding habit like a caged tigress.

Across the street Nora Mulligan moved back and forth between her lunch counter and the kitchen. Her cafe was empty of customers.

The border cowtown had gone to bed mostly drunk from the banquet and fiesta and was not yet awake. The street was deserted when a lone rider spurred a sweat-marked horse down the main street. It was Black Andy Withers.

He pulled up at the hitchrack in front of the Keno and swung from his saddle. There was blood on his shirt and his left arm was in a crude sling and his swarthy face was gray with pain. He came in through the swinging half-doors, weaving like he was drunk. He headed around the bar to get a bottle, unaware of the fact that he wasn't alone.

"Where's Vincent?"

Cleo moved out from behind the chairs and tables stacked against the far wall. The derringer was in her hand. "What's happened to Vincent?"

"Slim's dead. The Border Patrol got 'im. Somebody's crossed us up. I got the hell shot outa me. But I fetched the saddlebags with all of the stuff."

"Your job was to run cattle across on both sides of the Gap," Fay Wilkes said in a toneless voice. "I told you to keep those Border Potrol riders away from the Gap.

"While Slim Vince rode through and come back like he's on a pleasant little pasar—and the three of you would quit the country and leave Black Andy holdin' the empty sack an' takin' a prison rap! Mebby hang for the killin' of old John Madden if you squealed to his son Johnny like you threatened.

"I done all the dirty work since we throwed in together fifteen years ago, tinhorn. I killed John Madden and I killed

that stool pigeon Steve Mulligan while you kept your purty hands clean. And all the reward I got was you marry Cleo an' wish her damned white-livered brother on me to ride herd on. And all he's ever done was git underfoot when we got in a tight. Like he done to-night.

"Slim Vince ain't never goin' to be in my way no more. And from here on, tinhorn, me'n you fork the trail ahead. You kin take Cleo. But I'll take Vince's cut of the stuff we fetched up through the Gap."

Big tough Black Andy tilted a bottle of booze and drank it like water. He was standing behind the bar with the neck of the bottle between his teeth and his six-shooter gripped in his hand.

Cleo walked to the bar. The little derringer was in her hand. Her eyes were glittering, her teeth bared in a catlike snarl.

"You killed Vincent."

"You're wrong, Cleo. It looked like old Jeff Quentin, there in the moonlight. . . . And don't go shootin' off that pop gun. You an' the tinhorn still need Black Andy. We ain't outa here yet.

"Slim was stuck on Nora Mulligan. He showed her the key to the Gap. And when I rode up now I seen Nora go into the kitchen and I sighted a man standin' there in the kitchen with a gun in his hand. Mebbyso Sheriff Johnny Madden but I couldn't tell fer certain."

Johnny Madden had his back to the wall, his hand on his gun. And not ten feet away stood Fay Wilkes. The gambler's gun was in his hand. It was leveled at Johnny's belly.

"You double-crossed us, Johnny," the gambler said tonelessly. "You and Nora Mulligan."

"I double-crossed you, mister. Deal Nora out."

"You always wanted to even your score with Nora, Cleo. Take the little gun I gave you. And use it on that little—"

Johnny threw himself flat. Fay Wilkes' gun spat a jet of flame and the bullet meant for Johnny Madden's guts whined and thudded into the wall. Johnny had his six-shooter in his hand now, and the hammer thumbed back and the trigger pulled, and he felt the recoil of the gun kick in his tight grip.

He saw the gambler sway a little. Fay Wilke's gun spat fire and the bullet ripped a gash in Johnny's thigh, and Johnny was shooting as fast as he could thumb the gun hammer and squeeze the trigger. The gambler was stumbling like he was drunk. In the dim light his handsome face glistened with cold sweat and his pale eyes were slivers.

And then he coughed and blood spewed from his mouth and his mouth stayed open, slack jawed, and the blood kept spilling out and splattering his white shirt. The gun in the gambler's hand was still spitting fire and the bullets were ripping into the floor around Johnny and Johnny kept shooting. Then Fay Wilkes stumbled and went over headlong and lay there dead.

JOHNNY MADDEN didn't hear any other guns until he quit shooting. Then there was the crashing din of exploding guns, but his eardrums were pounding and he wasn't sure for a few seconds if it was shooting he heard or the reverberating echoes of his gun and the gambler's gun. And then the gunfire was over and there was only an awful silence.

Johnny knew his gun was empty. And there almost within arm's reach lay Fay Wilkes. His leg was throbbing with pain. He crawled over to where the dead gambler lay on his side and he slid the other .38 gun from its shoulder holster and he had it gripped in his hand when he sighted Black Andy's big bulk coming crouched around the end of the bar, a gun in his hand, his swarthy face twisted and ugly.

"Drop it, Andy!" barked Johnny.

"Who says so?" snarled the big tough renegade.

"Sheriff Johnny Madden!"

The gun in Black Andy's hand roared. The .45 slug tore splinters in the floor alongside Johnny's head. Then Johnny shot twice, as fast as he could work the double-action .38, and he couldn't miss that big hulk.

Then a .45 slug struck the gun in Johnny's hand and tore it from his grip with a force that numbed his hand and arm. Black Andy saw the gun go spinning across the floor, shot from Johnny's hand by sheer luck. And the big tough renegade laughed. He was drunk and wounded but still as ugly and dangerous as a wounded grizzly, and nothing this side of hell would stop him.

Then from near the front door a .45 six-shooter roared. The heavy slug hit Black Andy in the face and tore out the back of his black-thatched skull, and he went down with a heavy crash. And then the voice of Jeff Quentin cut through the gun echoes, saw edged:

"You still alive, Johnny?"

"Yeah. But Fay Wilkes ain't. Neither is Black Andy—now."

"Then it's all right fer you to come on in, Nora. . . ."

Later, Nora Mulligan told Johnny Madden that it wasn't the sight of Black Andy with his skull blown apart or Fay Wilkes with his belly shot full of holes that made her sick.

"It was Cleo Kramer. . . . She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, the morning she came into my place with Fay Wilkes—but Cleo was more beautiful dead than ever she had been alive, Johnny. She looked young and innocent and so beautiful with her golden hair tumbled.

"I felt all gone inside. I fainted like some silly thing. And you and Jeff both wounded—needing me. . . ."

Black Andy had shot her. Only Black Andy knew why, and he had taken his reason with him into death. . . . .

The saddle bags were crammed with jewels. Diamonds, sapphires, rubies and emeralds. Loot from the last revolution, where Fay Wilkes had played politics, he and his beautiful blonde wife Cleo and her no-good brother Vincent.

Big tough Black Andy Withers was leader of a bunch of gun-runners. And Fay Wilkes, gambler, had been the pay-off man for the rebels. When the revolutionists ran short of ready money, they handed over all that big haul of jewels looted when they took Guadalajara and Mexico City. But there was a heavy duty on jewels and now that the revolution was over and a couple of Presidentes had been assassinated or exiled there was a hunt on in Mexico for the hidden jewels and the U.S. Customs on the alert for them.

Twice Black Andy had tried and failed to get those hidden jewels lifted from their cache and through the Gap. And been stopped. Once by John Madden of the Border Patrol. The second time by Steve Mulligan. And the third time Inspector Jeff Quentin had tried it. Alone. While his Border Patrol men fought a running fight with Black Andy's renegades who were running a bunch of worthless Mexican dogies across the line in half a dozen places.

"Black Andy Withers killed young Slim Vince Kramer," said Jeff Quentin while he and Johnny Madden lay across from one another on hospital cots.

"I let the pair of 'em ride down through the gate in the Gap. In less than an hour that seemed like all night to me, they come back. Vince had the key. While he was unlockin' the padlock Black Andy shot him. Then when I hollered at him to surrender he made it a runnin' fight. I nicked his arm. Then let him get away. I had to be certain he'd take me to Fay Wilkes. I took a shortcut. Beat him to town, Hid in Nora's kitchen. She said she hadn't seen hide nor hair of you, Johnny. We figured Fay Wilkes had killed you.

"Then Black Andy showed up and the shootin' commenced inside the Keno. And that's all there is to it."

Johnny said: "I got ten thousand bucks in the bank, Jeff."

"Give it to Norah for a weddin' present. All Uncle Sam wants is them saddlebags full of Mexican jewels to return to the government of Mexico.

"I got a sheriff's badge I never did want."

"Throw it away. Or keep it for a souvenier. You'd make a sorry sheriff. . . . Doc says we'll be both up on our laigs about the same time. When you aimin' to git married?"

"Him?" Nora snorted. "Since when has he got a word to say about when he'll get married? Time you both learned—ask the lady of the house, mister. And it won't be till he's able to cut a pigeon wing at his own wedding. Him and his waltzes—gardenias—phew!" Her nose crinkled.

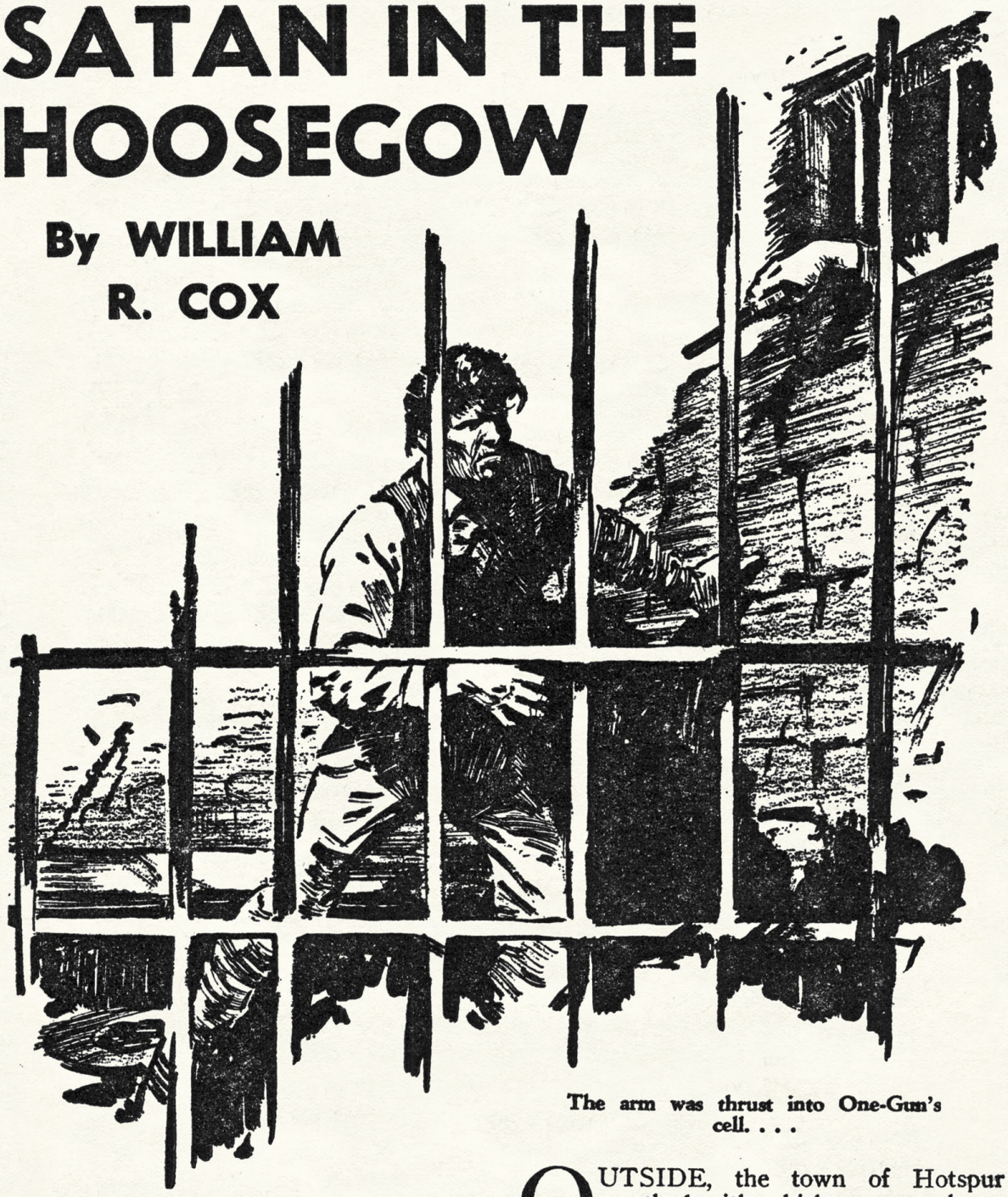
But it was Nora Mulligan who blanketed the coffin of Cleo with gardenias. And knelt and said a bit of a prayer there. But for Nora and Johnny the sweet perfume of gardenias would always be the smell of death. . . .

The key of the Gap was buried with Slim Steve Kramer. The unlocked gate in the Gap would remain unlocked.

THE END

SATAN IN THE HOOSEGOW

By WILLIAM R. COX



The arm was thrust into One-Gun's cell. . . .

His hoosegow cage couldn't spook Pete Packer from branding a hideout killer.

OUTSIDE, the town of Hotspur seethed with whiskey, song, dance and rumor. The early evening was cool and the year turned toward autumn, with the Ore Mountains lowering over the lowlands where the ranches spread green and rich along the Ore River, and not so green where the forked stream did not run. It had been a dry year.

Three quick shots punctured the clear air. There was a grunt from the front of the low, sturdy adobe building and a door slammed. That would be Marshal

Red Krutch going out to quell any disturbance. The crusty, big dummy would throw anyone into jail without compunction or fear, Pete Packer thought with disgust.

Pete Packer lay on the iron cot and stared at a whitewashed, flaked ceiling. The cell was square and barred with steel and strong as any fortress. One window split between it and its fellow. There were only two cells, and only one window. Pete had watched the sun go down and still he could not quite figure it out. He had never been in jail before.

He was a lean young man, very bronzed by the sun. His hands were toil-hardened, for it had been his first year on his little spread in the green part of the valley and there had been much arduous labor about the Lazy P. He had narrow gray eyes and his brow was high. He had been a waddy since he was fourteen and orphaned, and at twenty-five he owned, by virtue of a mortgage, his own small ranch.

Until this morning he had been secure, for he had long since chosen his land on Sweetwater Creek, and his small herd had waxed fat while the cattle belonging to bigger men had fared ill. Until this morning he had thought the winter would bring him cash enough to marry Janet Archer. . . .

The door to the cell block clanged open. Red Krutch shoved a man in ahead, blocked the entry with his bulk, opened the cell next to Pete and slammed the man within.

"Yer drunk, One-Gun, but thet won't git yuh off. Ye know dang well Lippy never carried no gun. It's murder to down a man that ain't heeled, dang yuh," the Marshal growled.

Pete Packer stirred on the cot. One-Gun Dunn was just the man to kill an unarmed citizen—not that Lippy Kile had been a citizen to cotton to. He stared at the tall, heavy prisoner. One-Gun was against the wall, sneering, defiant. He did not appear too drunk. His eyes blazed hatred at Krutch.

"Yuh think I'll stay in this rotten jail? My friends will have me outa here over your dead body, Krutch."

"That I gotta see," the marshal said. "Been a long time since I had two criminals in yere t'gether. You boys can swap lies about yer innocence. Huh!" He strode through the heavy door and the sound of its closing told of its impregnability.

One-Gun had been a mule-skinner. Pete listened admiringly to the string he put together. They were fine cuss words. They expressed exactly what Pete felt but had not the eloquence to deliver. He said as much when One-Gun paused for breath. He added:

"What for did you kill Lippy? Wasn't scarcely worth the trouble, was it, One-Gun? Lippy wasn't any account."

"He could talk," snapped the big killer. "He could put his forked tongue on a man." He glared through the bars. He said, "I don't want no truck with you, Packer. Yuh damn cow thief."

Pete lay back down on the cot. He said, "You don't believe I stole that yearlin', do you, One-Gun? A crook like you oughta know it wouldn't be worth the risk."

"Byswater's been missin' plenty yearlin's," said One-Gun virtuously. "It ain't the one Krutch found in yore barn. It's the hunderds of others."

Pete said, "Yeah. Been thinkin' o' that. Been thinkin' of your spread, too. You an' Pancake Gore. Even without grass, you two done had a fine year up at Runnin' G."

The big rancher eased himself down on the cot in the other cell. His voice rasped. "Packer, you're through. You tried to go it alone and it don't work. They'll send you to the pen—if the boys don't hang ye. Krutch found thet hide in yore barn. That's proof. Yuh shoulda burnt thet hide, Packer. Yuh just ain't smart."

Pete said lazily, "Never could stand the smell of burnin' hide. . . . I still don't understand how come you to burn down Lippy. He musta said somethin' awful."

"That's somethin' yuh can figger out. You're sich a smart, figgerin' fella," taunted One-Gun. "Couldn't figger yourself outa the hoosegow, though, could ye?"

"Couldn't even pick my company," murmured Pete, turning over with his face away from One-Gun.

He could figure out one thing. Running G lay beside the big Byswater Ranch. Neither had the water advantages of his shrewdly chosen little place. If he were sentenced to jail and had to sell, it would be a lucky rancher who got his key spot along the Ore River. He had figured that when Krutch had ridden in and found the hide. It was the first time Pete had seen the hide, but the brand of the Byswater, a

big BR, was plain on its flank, all right.

He knew Baskin Byswater, the Easterner who had come to the Hostpur country for his health, and had used his wealth to combine several ranches into one large spread—on the wrong side of the river. The soft-spoken, educated tenderfoot had learned a lot in the past five years.

AGAIN the door clanged and Krutch's heavy voice was lowered respectfully, saying, "Miss Janet, yuh wouldn't bring him in no saw, ner file, ner anything, would ye? It ain't reg'lar, lettin' yuh—"

Pete leaped to his feet.

Janet Archer said, "You don't feed him well enough, Marshal."

She was bright-haired, with blue eyes like the noonday sky, and she moved in grace. Janet swept down the cell corridor bearing a tray looking like a queen. She made her own clothing and that of the women of the town, and she was mistress of her trade. Her head was high and her eyes sought Pete's, clear and unafraid.

He said, "Hey, Janet, you shouldn't of come. People'll talk. They all got me pegged for a rustler."

"Open this door, Marshal," she said. She stepped inside and Krutch carefully locked the barred portal behind her. She shivered once, then, but she said bravely, "And isn't that why I had to come? Because stupid people believe lies?"

"The hide was in his barn," Krutch said. His heavy features were dogged, but slightly worried.

"As if he'd leave it there if he was guilty!" The girl faced the marshal. "Baskin Byswater himself doesn't believe it. He'll be here any moment to say so. You—you big oaf! Who informed? Who sent you out there? You don't dare tell!"

"It'll come out at the trial," muttered Kruch, but the worried look did not go away.

"Lippy Kile told you," she said. "And he's dead—thanks to this—this creature." She indicated One-Gun with a motion of her head.

Krutch said, "You got no call to snoop—"

The big marshal meekly turned and went. He was honest, Pete knew, but incredibly stupid. Now he was really worried and Pete's hopes leaped.

The girl said, "Eat." She cast a glance at One-Gun, moved close and whispered in Pete's ear as he sniffed the venison roast, the savory gravy. "Baskin is going to do something. I can't tell you any more now. Don't fret, Pete."

He murmured, "Don't know as I want him to. I hate to have you and him. . . ." He had known for years that Baskin Byswater was in love with Janet. Every man around Hotspur had proposed to her at one time or another, but Byswater had hung on even after she announced her engagement to Pete. Eastern ways, people had said, half admiringly. The sweet-talking man never gave up. Look at the way he had poured money into the BR.

"Who else has the brains—and the money—to help?" Her lips touched his ear and his spine turned to water. He kissed her in full sight of One-Gun.

She said, "Pete!"

"We're engaged—at least we were and if I live through this mebbe we still are," he grinned. His spirits were vastly improved by the meal, the girl's presence. He thought of something and said disgustedly, "Sure was a bad time for that hombre t' kill Lippy. It'd be interestin' to find how Lippy knew 'bout thet hide they planted on me."

"Who could have done such a thing?" she asked.

Pete said, "My place is watered, even in droughts. Y'see my sidekick over yonder, don't yuh? Yuh know his partner, Pancake Gore?"

She said, "Oh! I'll go back and ask more questions." She tossed her bright head. "This is one time it is good to be a woman, Pete. There are men who will talk to me."

"Be careful," he said anxiously. "Knowin' too much kin be plumb dangerous, Janet."

"Yes." She turned and looked squarely at One-Gun through the bars. "Lippy Kile evidently knew too much."

One-Gun said, "Ahhhh. When I get outa this dump I'll—" He did not finish, but his look seared the girl. Pete came to his feet and started in the direcion of One-Gun like a tiger, brought up against bars.

One-Gun said, "I'll be ridin' high when you're hangin' by the neck, Packer. Then

we'll see about this gossipin' piece of calico."

"Don't even listen to him," cried the girl. "Marshal! Come and let me out of here. I'll be back, Pete. I'll be back—with good news."

She was gone past the heavy door. Pete said quietly, "Yuh better get out before me, One-Gun. Because if we ever do meet, remember to come smokin'."

"I'll smoke you, waddy," chortled One-Gun. "Yuh dumb jasper. And I'll be outa here tonight, for sure. You and yer twist o' yard goods!"

Pete lay back on the cot and throttled his anger. He had to think. He had to weigh the things a man would do to gain an end, he had to apply the risk to the prize a man could win.

PETE PACKER was not a man to dream, but that night his sleep was haunted by shapes, ominous, snake-like. He twisted on the straw hassock. A serpent came through the window shared by the twin cells and there was the shattering of a vessel. He awoke and lay stark still, sweating but fully conscious in a split second, true to his plains training.

The jail was pitch dark since Krutch had frugally doused the light in the corridor. The window was a dusky square of gray in the black—but the square was distorted now.

Pete slid noiselessly to the floor, his instinct of self preservation rising to the fore. There was a serpent—no, it was a man's arm. He could see it slide over the sill, through the jagged hole in the glass of which Krutch had been so proud.

A whispering voice said, "One-Gun!"

The man in the other cell answered in like accents, "Gawd, I thought ye'd never come."

"Heah's somethin' fo' you'!" the voice said hoarsely. "Ketch."

One-Gun moved across the cell floor, his spurs tinkling faintly.

"No sense t' whisper," he muttered. "Thet dumb marshal's sound asleep an' this joker don't matter none now."

One-Gun was at the window. Pete came off the floor. He had crawled in the darkness, holding his breath. He could barely make out the arm extended within the cell. The window was at such a height that the man outside must be standing on something—a horse, Pete suspected. The arm was thrust into One-Gun's cell, and there was no doubt what the hand of the unseen man contained.

Pete came up, reaching. He had hands like steel traps. He had to reach through the bars into the other cell. He was hampered for a moment by the cold steel of the bars.

The reports were astoundingly loud within the confines of the cell block. The odor of smoke, the heat of the flashes were in Pete's very nostrils. He heard One-Gun curse, recognized astonishment, chagrin, fear in the accents.

He was clinging to the gun, then. Something scratched his hand. The barrel was hot. He heard Krutch's roar, heard him trying too hastily to fit the big key in the lock.

There was a moment of desperate struggle. Pete's hand bled from the scratch, but he was not aware of pain. He wrenched madly at the smoking weapon. The man outside, unseen, fought as hard to retain it.

Krutch's bellow was louder, the hinges of the door creaked.

The man outside suddenly let go. A horse galloped. Pete fell to the floor of the cell. The gun was in his hands.

He flopped over, moving swift as a panther. He concealed the revolver beneath the straw pallet. He came to his feet as Krutch, bearing a lamp, slammed up to the cages.

"They got him," he said. "You'd better chase out and look around. One-Gun won't know the difference."

There were two holes in One-Gun's chest. He was crumpled in a disorderly heap and the light of the lamp showed the astonishment of his features even in death.

Krutch turned and departed, raging. Pete sat down on the edge of the cot and rolled a cigarette. He moved the gun carefully, debating. Time passed. The dead man was a shadowy remainder that life was fleeting and the times desperate. Pete looked at the scratch on his hand.

The man had worn a ring. He knew that now. It was the stone, or the setting of the ring which had scratched him. He had been parly aware of it at the time of the fight for the gun, now it was etched sharply on his mind. He smoked pensively, waiting.

Lippy Kiley had turned him in—and been killed. Now the man who had downed Lippy, thereby shutting the mouth of the informer, was murdered. These events, Pete reasoned, could not but be connected. It needed no especial shrewdness to figure that.

He waited. Krutch came back with Morey, the undertaker. They stood around, not deigning to include Pete in their conversation. There were voices outside. People milled around the jail. Hotspur was excited.

A soft voice called Krutch. The marshal went reluctantly to the big door, his worriment obviously increasing with time. Baskin Byswater came into the corridor and walked directly to Pete's cell. He was smiling and his hand reached between the bars toward Pete. He said in his pleasant, cultured voice, "I was not able to leave the poker game, Pete. But I came as soon as they cleaned me out. I know you are not guilty, my friend."

He had a pink face which never quite tanned under the western sun. He was a tall man, thin, dressed carefully in rancher's clothing, not too well dressed, but always neat and in trouser and shirts which did not clash in color. His eyes were round and brown and intelligent and his mouth was full-lipped and sensitive.

Pete said, "Well, thanks, Baskin. Then why are they holdin' me? It was yore yearlin'."

"It's this marshal," said Byswater disgustedly. "He says he must uphold law and order. Really, I am not pressing charges. But what can we do? They found the herd on your land—"

Pete said, "What herd?"

"Why—the herd of my steers with the brand worked over. It was a botched job, believe me, Pete. Trying to make BR into Lazy P. Now, really— Stupid, indeed." His teeth were very white and even. He was, Pete conceded, a handsomer man than any waddy turned rancher.

Pete said, "I reckon that herd was in the hollow under Poker Bluff, wasn't it?"

"Shhh! Don't say things like that," cautioned Byswater, looking over his shoulder at Krutch and Morey. "How did you know where they were if you had nothing to do—" His straying glance fell upon the body of One-Gun in the adjoining cell. He started, his large eyes bulging. "What —who is that? Why—it's Dunn!"

"Yeah. Feller jest shot him," said Pete. "Reason I know that herd was in the hollow is that's where I'd be least likely to look. I don't run my stock in there. Loco weed grows thereabouts. You better get 'em outa there quick, Baskin."

"Well, they are evidence, you see." Byswater spread his hands. They were well kept hands and they were ringless.

THERE was another commotion at the door. Krutch lumbered over and opened it. Janet Archer rushed in past his arm. Behind her came Pancake Gore.

For a moment all attention was on the girl. Utilizing the precious seconds, Pete stepped back and reached down a hand. The gun was still warm. He shoved it into his belt, behind his right hip. He lounged against the wall, making another cigarette, his intelligent eyes going over the little gathering.

Pancake Gore was a squat, bow-legged,

hard-faced, hard-riding ex-outlaw who had settled down with the unruly One-Gun Dunn to running a slovenly ranch stocked with wet-backs and mavericks rounded up here and there in the wide loops of the partners. His face was surly, but his glance at his partner was cursory.

Krutch said, "Thought ye'd wanta see it. I ain't questioned t' other prisoner yet. Seein' as One-Gun was yer sidekick—"

"He was drunk," said Pancake. "I was in the poker game, off'n on, all night." He seemed to offer the alibi with great celerity. "Some friends of Lippy, I reckon."

"Lippy didn't have a friend," said Pete. Janet had come close to the bars, and Byswater managed to keep at her side, smiling with commiseration, but staying closer to her than Pete thought was necessary.

Krutch said, "You needn't make remarks, Pete. Jest tell us what happened?"

"Why should I?" Pete parried. "You got me in here charged with crime. Why should I help?"

Byswater said, "You would be perfectly within your rights, Pete, to keep silent. But I'd talk, if I were you."

Janet said, "Yes, dear. Tell what you know. This is murder."

Pete said, "Sure was. Might as well tell it, I reckon. Feller came up to the window, tapped it with a gun. Called to One-Gun, spoke right friendly. Said he had somethin' for him. Feller thought I was asleep."

"Then what?" demanded Krutch.

"Feller had somethin' fer One-Arm, all right. A couple .45 bullets," said Pete. "I heard a hoss runnin' away."

Krutch said, "I got to get a posse togeher. I got to start lookin' fer this dirty killer."

Pete said, "One thing I did notice." He kept his hands concealed at his side. The blood had dried, but the scratch would be visible in a certain light. "Feller had on a ring. Pretty big stone. Scratchy kind o' thing, I reckon."

There was a moment of silence. Then Pancake Gore started, raising his left hand. There was a ring on it. It was an onyx ring, mounted in a basket setting. One of the prongs was bent.

Byswater exclaimed, "Gore! You killed your own partner!"

"I be damned if I did. Why you—"

"He did it," cried Byswater sharply. "He was gone from the game. What time was this killing? Does anyone know?"

"I plumb forgot to look," said Krutch, crestfallen. "I was so excited, it happenin' in my jail—"

Pete said across the voices, "Pancake didn't do it."

"You know dam well I didn't kill Harry," snapped Gore. "And I got plenty good ideas—"

"Yeah," said Pete. "You and me, too. First place, the feller at the window didn't call him 'Harry.' You allus did. This feller called him 'One-Gun', which you, Pancake, never did."

Byswater said, "I still say—"

Pete took a puff of the cigarette, holding it in his left hand. He said, "Somethin' queer 'bout this whole thing, ain't there? Lippy tells on me, I stole a yearlin', gives further information I got a herd o' Byswater's steers in the Hollow. He gets killed. The man who kilt him talks plenty about crushin' outa jail, and expected this feller to come help him. But the feller kills him, too, so he can't talk about the shootin' of Lippy and why it happened. Looks like a mighty peculiar set of circumstances to a plain waddy like me. Wonder how it looks to a smart, educated fella, like Baskin?"

Byswater said slowly, "I see what you mean, Pete. If Gore and Dunn wanted your ranch, because of the water—"

Pancake Gore swung around, his hand reaching for his hip. Big Marshal Krutch moved and a log-like arm caught the stocky man and swung him around. The marshal plucked the gun from Gore's belt and swung him against the wall.

Pete said quietly, "I told you Pancake didn't do it. Why, he ain't tall nuff t' stand on a hoss and reach inside that window and kill Dunn. Think a minute and you kin see that plain as yer nose."

Janet was quick. She said, "Oh, Pete! Then—"

Pete said, "Sure. How long you been wearin' that ring, Pancake?"

"Since I won it it a poker game," spat Gore. "I been tryin' t' tell yuh thet. Since I won it from the jasper yuh all know owned it, if yuh stop an' think, as Pete sez. From Byswater!"

Pete said, "Marshal, take a look-see. If there is blood— Look out, Janet!"

The lean man from the East had moved with great speed. He had Janet before him like a shield. He said in a voice choked with passion, "I'm going out of here. I am taking the girl with me. One move and I'll kill her."

HE HAD a derringer against her back. He pulled her, reaching behind him each step to feel his way. Even in that moment Pete saw the scared face of Morey the undertaker, a timid man, and almost laughed. Krutch crouched like a lion, but did not speak nor move, fearing for the girl. Gore was disarmed, cursing, helpless. Byswater got to the door of the corridor. He put his backward-reaching hand upon the heavy knob, pulled. The door swung open. He was diligent about keeping Janet before him, twisting her wrist until she was forced to remain a shield fo him.

Pete said, "People like you allus make mistakes, Byswater. You made two in here. Now you're goin' to make another."

Krutch rumbled in his throat. Gore's cursing was like a litany. Morey's knees made a rattling sound, knocking together.

Byswater thrust the gun past he girl's body, beneath her arm. She writhed in agony, but he was strong, too strong for her. The gun pointed at the cell in which Pete stood against the wall. The three witnesses shouted warning.

Pete reached behind him. He plucked the Colt from his belt. He sidestepped until he could line up his target between the steel bars.

It was risky shooting, but Janet was clever and quick. Ceasing her struggling on the instant, she relaxed utterly. Her dead weight sank floorward.

The derringer barked. The heavy single bullet raked off the steel. It ricocheted and Gore screamed anger and pain as it struck him in the leg.

Then, for one instant, Byswater was exposed, just his torso and head as he bent, trying to raise the weight of the girl for his defense. Pete rested the revolver on his elbow, pressing he trigger almost lovingly, as though he was shooting targets for a prize.

In Byswaters head there appeared another eye. It was a bloody eye, almost exactly between the two with which he had been born. He shot over backwards, out of sight on the other side of the door. Janet, released, leaped aside, balancing herself against cell bars.

"Plumb betwist the eyes!" said Krutch. "Nicest shootin' I seen in years."

Gore, sitting on the cell floor, jerked out, "The skunk lemme bluff him outa thet ring on a pair of deuces. I shoulda knowed somethin' was up. It was him that left the game."

Pete said, "He was plenty smart, at that. He knew I had the hawg-leg I took off him. He figgered to get you riled, you wearin' the ring and all, and then I'd gun you. Me believin' it was you, an' that you would git me if I didn't shoot first. He knew you'd be in here, a-lookin' at Dunn."

Janet said: "He wanted your ranch. He wanted the water and had One-Gun plant the hide. He had Lippy tell Marshal Krutch. Then he had to get rid of them because they could always give away the show."

Marshal Krutch's face was a picture of bewilderment. He said, "Yuh mean this puny, Eastern dude thunk up all thet?"

"Why don't you let Pete out?" demanded the girl. "Can't you see it was all Byswater?"

Krutch wailed, "But I cain't let Pete out. What about thet there new evidence of the hide and them steers in the hollow?"

Pete said softly, "*You* wouldn't want to make a mistake, would yuh, Marshal? Well, then, open thet door and lemme out so I kin kiss my gal!"

The muzzle of the gun centered on the very substantial middle of the marshal. Morey giggled nervously, but Gore guffawed. Krutch turned pink, then white.

He opened the door of the cell. Pete circled Janet with one arm, managing the gun with the other. After he had soundly kissed the girl, he said, "That hombre wanted somethin' worse than he did my ranch and the water. He wanted Janet. Now, durn ye, Krutch, are ye satisfied?"

The marshal scratched his chin, staring at the blushing Janet. After a minute scrutiny, Krutch said, "Waal, Pete, whyn't yuh say thet afore? 'Course I kin see thet! Nach'ly you ain't guilty! Darn it, Morey, git some he'p an' clean up my jail. It's a plumb mess an' thet—thet criminal done bust my glass winder. If he was alive I'd sue daylights outa him!"

DRIFTERS MAKE GRAVE FODDER

By H. A. DeROSSO

I saw Ardis lurch forward, clawing at her Bisley.

Fiddlefoot Sam Lonigan wouldn't fog it—though caught in a squeeze-play between husky-voiced Ardis and a night-riding hardcase.

THE first bullet got me in the back. I couldn't move—couldn't see Ardis anymore. Ardis. . . . I'll go back and tell you about Ardis. I met her in Verde. . . .

There were seven silver dollars jingling in my pockets and my roll was tied behind the cantle of my saddle. These plus the bay, the clothes on my back and the black-handled .44 at my hip were all that I possessed in the world.

Looking back down the length of the lone street of Verde, I saw the rider moving

slowly past the buildings. The horse was an Arabian, all sleeked up and shining in the sun, and I guess I had eyes only for the animal. It wasn't until it was very close to me that I glanced up to realize the rider was a woman.

She reined in the Arabian beside me, sitting loosely in the saddle. She was wearing a blue flannel shirt and a black-and-red checkered jumper with a divided riding skirt. Despite the coldness of the wind, her browned legs were bare. A cedar-handled Bisley .38-40 rode in a holster at her side.

She was smiling at me. Her mouth was rather wide, her nose was too short and there were freckles over her face but still she was quite pretty. And she was smiling at me.

"Hello, cowboy," she said in a throaty, husky way, and I felt something start in me.

I said softly, "Hello," meeting the direct stare of those deep brown eyes that never wavered.

"You're new around Verde, aren't you, cowboy?" she said, the smile deepening until two faint dimples showed in her cheeks.

"I'm just drifting through," I said.

The smile narrowed. The brown eyes looked beyond me, at my bay and the roll on the back of my saddle. Then the glance came back to me, and the smile remained narrow.

"Don't you like Verde?"

I shrugged. "I haven't stopped long enough to find out."

There was a grave study deep in those brown eyes, belying that easy smile on her mouth. I didn't like the way they kept going over me. Frowning, I looked down at myself, at the gray woolen shirt, the checked Texas trousers and hand-stitched Cheyenne boots. My legs were bowed from twenty years in the saddle, there was a sharp hook in my nose, and my jaw was long and pointed. I couldn't understand what made her look at me like that.

She folded her hands over the horn of her saddle. "How'd you like to go to work with me, cowboy?" she asked.

The query caught me unawares. I couldn't think what to say. She laughed easily and said, "Haven't you ever heard of a woman owning a ranch, cowboy? I need a hand to keep strays out of the mountains and I'd like him to stay around long enough for spring roundup. What do you say, cowboy?"

Maybe it was because she was a woman, and pretty, and it had started there inside me already. Maybe it was because I was almost broke with too much pride to ride the grub line and so I'd have to go to work pretty soon anyhow. Maybe it was a little bit of everything.

"All right," I said, starting toward my bay. "Which way do we go?"

* * *

Her name was Ardis McKeever and she ran the Rafter M which her pa had left her. The spread lay up against the Calicos that thrust their barren, craggy peaks against the glaring sky. It didn't look like much. It was desert all the way, mostly mesquite with greasewood and cactus thrown in, but hardly any forage at all. Still, what few whitefaces I saw seemed fat enough.

She told me she wanted a man to stay at a line-camp she had deep up against the mountains. Cattle kept drifting up into the canyons and washes, making too much temptation to rustlers. She'd feel easier if there was a man up there at the camp all the time.

"I'll drop in every day or so to say hello," she said, giving me a long glance out of the corner of her eyes.

Ardis' headquarters weren't too impressive. There was a small house that was little more than a shack. Another building might have been a bunkshack in more prosperous days. The structures all lacked paint, were drab and sand-pitted. A man stood by an old pole corral watching us ride up.

He was bare-headed in the sun. His black, curly hair had a bright sheen to it, almost as if it were blued gun-steel. There was a reckless handsomeness in the cut of his jaw and in the dark, flashing eyes. He was wearing a black turtle-neck sweater and bright red galluses that stood out starkly against the blackness. At his right hip he wore a long-barreled Colt Frontier .45.

I could feel his eyes on me even while we were down the trail a ways. That stare kept getting colder and even somewhat hostile as I drew up near him. Ardis rode the Arabian up to him, dropping the reins down to him. He caught them without taking his eyes off me. I thought now I saw a glint of hard jealousy in them.

"Mike," said Ardis, sliding out of the saddle, "this is Sam Lonigan, who's going to work for me. Sam, this is Mike Rafferty, foreman, straw-boss, cowhand, jack-of-all-trades, and only other employee of the Rafter M."

His gaze was almost insolent as he weighed me. The tightness caught across my mind, starting a fit of anger, but I brushed it aside and gave him the eye right back. We were of a height, about six two, and of the same weight, maybe one eighty. His shoulders were a bit broader than mine and his hips a trifle thicker, but we were of a size.

He tugged a little on the reins, starting the Arabian, and began walking toward the corral. "Glad to have you, Lonigan," was all he said.

THE line-camp looked like it hadn't been used in a couple of years. That should have started me thinking—but my mind was too full of the picture of Ardis' face and the sound of her half-husky voice, and the memories were doing funny things to me inside.

I tried telling myself that I was just a drifter with little more than a penny to my name, that she was the owner of the Rafter M and I was just a hand. There was an easy familiarity about Ardis—but maybe that came just natural to her and I should let it go like that. I kept telling myself all this right along, but my heart didn't want to believe it.

A couple of days on the job started me wondering a little. It was all too good, too easy to be true. There were a few head of fat white-faces. Though I couldn't understand what they got fat on, I realized I'd never worked the desert before. They didn't seem to want to stray from these foothills where at least there was something to nibble on. I couldn't see much need for a rider out here.

I mentioned that to Ardis when she showed up the second day. She gave her low, throaty laugh that started a cloying ache in my throat.

"Tired already, cowboy? Or maybe worried about your wages? If I didn't need a man here I wouldn't put one here. Don't be impatient. You might have to earn your wages someday after all."

The next day I got to thinking that maybe she was going to be right. I spotted the tracks in the afternoon. There seemed to be three cows and a horse chousing them up into the Calicos. I started after them.

It was a tangled, twisted, at times baffling trail they laid. We kept rising all the time. The air got colder and there was no warmth in the lowering sun any more. Shadows came crawling down from the mountains. Soon the knowledge began to grow in me that whoever was driving those cows was going to get away with them.

A sound froze me in the saddle, my clenched fist reining the bay to an abrupt halt. I paused with my hand clasped on the butt of my .44, coldness lacing the back of my neck. The sound came again—the soft, dry lowing of a cow.

We were in a dark canyon, its high walls cutting off the sun. Slipping out of the saddle I proceeded on foot, .44 in my hand, cursing each jingle of my spurs.

The canyon curved sharply ahead and I went around it cautiously, poking my .44 out ahead of me. Peering through the thickening shadows, I saw them—three white-faces milling around a clump of mesquite. Just the three white-faces. Nothing else.

I brushed the sweat out of my eyes and holstered my .44. Whoever had been driving those cows must have got spooked and high-tailed it away from there. At least, I hoped he'd done that—instead of waiting for me instead behind some bush or boulder.

Mounting my bay, I rode up to the three white-faces and started hustling them back down the canyon. The shadows kept thickening. It was almost pitch black by now. I laid my lariat hard on the white-faces' rumps, working them into a lumbering trot.

It was cold, moonless night when I got back to the line-camp. The ground seemed hugged by a solid gray, almost tangible shadow. I picketed the bay down by the creek that wriggled down from the Calicos and, slinging the saddle over my shoulder, started for the shack.

When I pushed the door open, the rusted hinges gave their customary squeak. I dropped the saddle to the floor beside the door and was reaching for the hurricane lamp on the table when he came at me.

Maybe I hadn't been aware of him be-

cause I was so dog-tired or maybe the shadows were so thick I wouldn't have seen him anyway. But he rose up and loomed there suddenly before me like some giant thing. I had only time to grab the lamp and swing it.

He swerved, his shoulders hitting me a glancing blow. I missed with the lamp and went spinning back against the table. He slammed the door shut, coming at me again. I swung once more with the lamp. This time I got him alongside the head, tearing a hoarse cry out of him.

That seemed to double his fury. He came at me like a madman now. This time he blocked my swing with a brute shoulder. I sensed his knee coming up sharply, and then a sharp, tearing pain flashed through me.

The table smashed up against my back. Its legs splintered under our combined weight. As we went spilling to the floor, I tried to roll on my stomach, kicking up at him with my spurs. I felt cloth rip. Then his scream split my ears and he was momentarily off me.

The breath was tearing anguishedly out of my laboring lungs while I fumbled for my .44—but it had fallen out of my holster. Sitting there on the floor, trying to pierce that gloom, I saw the shadows shift and thicken and then he again drove at me. Throwing up my boots I blocked his rush, catching him in the chest and kicking him up against the wall. The shack trembled with the impact.

Either he was made of steel—or he hadn't sat a saddle for sixteen hours. He bounded off the wall as I leaped up into a crouch and we closed together. I had my head against his sweaty chest as I pounded at his ribs. Suddenly his spurs raked my calf and I shouted with pain, straightening with the agony. That was what he was waiting for.

His arm lifted swiftly into the air, the dull blot of the gun shifting in his hand. I cried out again, throwing up both arms to shield my self from the blow, but that hand was sweeping down fast. After the lightning burst hot and searing across my eyes, it was just blankness.

* * *

Ardis came the next afternoon. I was nursing my aching head, in front of the shack, when she rode up.

She looked cool and awfully desirable as she reined up, the soft wind curving her flannel shirt, half of her browned face hidden by the shadow of her Stetson. She dismounted, walking slowly toward me. That cool, detached look was in her brown eyes —then she saw the marks on my face. Her breath caught in a sharp gasp.

"Whatever happened to you?" she cried, taking the last three steps very fast, dropping to her knees beside me.

I told her everything, watching her face as I spoke. She'd pushed the Stetson to the back of her head, leaving her face clear for me to see, the sun shining brilliantly off the red sheen of her hair. There wasn't much I could make out in those deep brown eyes. They weren't warm and they weren't cold. They just kept watching me unblinkingly, almost skeptically.

I told her how I'd come to, my head hurting furiously, and fumbled around until I'd found and lit the lamp and then discovered that the intruder had run off with all my clothes and the seven dollars I'd cached in the coffee can.

She glanced away, studying the ground, when I was through. Her brows knitted in thought. "Some drifter," she said slowly. "Things like this happen, you know. Some drifter passed by and saw no one here at the shack and decided to do some rifling. You surprised him and after he knocked you out, he made off with what he wanted." Her eyes lifted to my face and they seemed strangely soft now. "Did he hurt you much, Sam?"

Taking off my Stetson, I ruefully showed her the lump on my skull.

Ardis whistled softly. "That sure is a beaut!" she said, and then she was reaching up and laying her cool fingers on my head.

I flinched a little at the first touch but right away it was her nearness, the warmth of her, working into my mind. I'd always felt it like this since the first time I'd laid eyes on her and now she was so close to me.

I grabbed her arms, a little roughly, and she tensed, her head going back. I pulled her toward me, but she braced her hands against my chest and through all my emotion I found time to marvel at her strength. "Sam!" she said sharply. "Aren't you forgetting yourself, Sam?"

That did it. It had always been in me anyhow and now, coming from her, it made the hopelessness of it all very real, distressingly real. It left a sadness in me that somehow sapped all the strength out of me and I released her arms and looked away.

The color had come to my face and a little shame and some hurt, too, I guess, and to cover all this confusion I said almost the first thing that came to my mind.

"Where's Rafferty? How come he never shows?"

I could feel her eyes on me but I couldn't face her. After a while her voice came, somewhat impersonal now. "Mike has his chores to take care of. The Rafter M is a big place. Maybe not in the number of cows —but here in the desert you need a lot of land to graze a handful of cows. This isn't the vega country of New Mexico or the Panhandle, cowboy."

I felt I could face her now and I lifted my eyes and she caught them with a rather sober look on her features. She didn't look away and she must have sensed how it stood with me for her voice, when it came, was only gently joshing.

"Now, Sam," she said, "if you won't try to wrassle with me again, I'll fix your head."

AFTER three-four days Ardis showed again, telling me to take the day off and go to Verde and get me some clothes so I'd have a change. She gave me an advance on my wages and said she'd ride the foothills for me that day. She wasn't forgetting those three white-faces that had been almost rustled.

That cold wind had stopped whistling down from the Calicos and there was some force in the shine of the sun so that I took off my denim jacket, tying it behind the cantle, letting the sun beat on my bared arms.

I made my purchases in the general store at Verde and when I came out with my bundles a man was standing beside my bay, a big, gray man with a badge on his vest. His face was wide and craggy, the lines of his mouth hidden by a long walrus mustache. His eyes were a cold cobalt with a hard, direct stare in them. They looked me up and down.

"You the new hand at the McKeever place, buster?"

I tied my bundles behind my saddle before answering. He bristled somewhat at my delay, his jaw muscles bulging, but I let him have a hard, straight glance right back. After all, there was no blot on my back trail, even though I was a drifter.

"I am," I said softly.

"Aiming to stay long?" he queried.

"As long as Miss McKeever thinks I'm earning my pay."

He had a big chew in one cheek and he rolled this around to the other side of his face and spat. "Mighty purty woman, Miss McKeever," he murmured, watching me unblinkingly.

I'd got my bundles tied and in place and I swung up into the seat. The sheriff put a hand on the bridle, seemingly casual, but his fingers were closed tightly around the leather. His cold eyes stared straight up at me.

"I hear tell you come in from the east, buster. You from Arizona, maybe?"

"I passed through there," I said, not liking all this talk very much. "Now if you'll

let go my bridle, sheriff, I'll start back to the Rafter M." I smiled a little coldly. "I won't make you any richer, sheriff. There's no bounty on me."

The next time Ardis showed I told her about the sheriff. Her eyes clouded and she frowned a little, her lips tightening as if in thought. Then swiftly her face was clear again and she laughed.

"That's just like Ed Niles, Sam. He's a suspicious cuss, and ambitious, too. Likes to think that every drifter passing through is a bad man on the dodge with a big reward on him. It's Ed's big dream to run into one of these bad boys someday and collect enough money to retire on."

This was down into malpais country, in the northwest corner of the Rafter M, and we were sitting on the ancient purple lava watching our horses browsing. Ardis had drawn her bared, brown legs up under her and she was sitting like that, leaning a little toward me. There was the scent of lilacs about her and the odor kept creeping up my nostrils, starting a cloying ache in my throat.

I couldn't look at her, it was that strong in me. I couldn't speak, either, just sitting there staring at my bay and her sleek, shining Arabian, all that I felt wrapped up in the cold, clogging lump in my chest.

We sat like that a long time, the silence lying between us like some intimate thing, and finally I heard her draw in her breath softly. She asked:

"What are you thinking of, Sam?"

I said, "Nothing," feeling the word choke somewhat in me. Fiercely I began to wish that she'd get up and mount her Arabian and get the hell away from here.

"Nothing?" she repeated softly. "Then why do you look like that?"

I turned on her angrily, seizing her arms in my hands, squeezing until she threw her head, gasping with pain. It was all there in me now, burning like an unquenchable fire, and the words came tumbling out in a raging shout.

"All right. So I'm forgetting myself again," I cried. "Isn't that what you want? You own the Rafter M. I'm just a saddle bum, drifting through. Here today, gone tomorrow, never to see you again. Is that why you keep coming around? Is that why you keep trying to make me forget myself? By heaven, Ardis, you've asked for it!"

She didn't try to move her head aside. She remained like she was, head dropped back, eyes half-closed to the pain. At first her lips were cool and she stood there limply, then she was up against me tightly, firmly, arms around me fiercely and she took her mouth away and put her flushed cheek hot against mine and I could feel her fingers clawing my back.

"Sam, oh, Sam," it came out of her swiftly, poignantly. "Why did you ever ride to Verde? Why did it have to be you? Why couldn't you have been old and harsh and ugly? Why did it have to be you, Sam?"

Then, just as suddenly, she broke my embrace, sliding away from me, face grave but still flushed. She caught my eyes, studied the look and longing on my face, and gave a short, embarrassed laugh.

I looked at her achingly. "Rafferty?" I asked, voice harsh.

"No, no, Sam. I'm fond of Mike. Maybe he's taken me to a few dances and stuff like that but not Mike. There's no one, Sam."

No one, Sam, I thought bitterly, feeling it all gather achingly inside me. No one but the difference in our stations. Me, a saddle bum, without a penny in the world. You, Ardis, owning a ranch and being so pretty and so appealing and yet so far out of my reach. Yes, Ardis, there's no one between us. Not a person in our way. Only what you are and what I am. . . .

I guess I'd known what my decision was going to be even before I'd thought of it. Now it came to the fore of my mind and though I wanted it different there was no other way.

"Ardis," I said, and the word came painfully out of me. "I'm quitting the Rafter M, Ardis."

Her breath sucked in with a loud, sibilant gasp. "Sam?" she asked queryingly. "What was that you said, Sam?"

I took a deep breath. I didn't face her. I kept my eyes straight ahead and down, studying the sand. "I've got itchy feet again, Ardis. I want to see what's on the other side of the Calicos. If you'll give me my time, I'll be riding on, Ardis."

"Oh, no, no," she cried swiftly, and she came back close to me, taking my hands in hers; and when I would not turn my face she caught my chin in her fingers and

twisted until I could look down into the depths of her brown eyes.

"No, Sam," she said slowly, firmly, lips whispering against my cheek. "I won't let it happen like that. You're going to stay a while longer, Sam. It isn't as hopeless as you might think. It isn't at all like you've imagined. Say you'll stay and then kiss me again, Sam. . . ."

IT WAS the following day that I sighted the cat tracks. They seemed to have come down out of the mountains and had cut across the range toward the low, jack-pine-covered hills to the east. The tracks appeared to be quite fresh.

I started after the tracks. I didn't have a rifle, only my .44, and I told myself I must ask Ardis if she had a spare Winchester around the place. Maybe I could flush the animal unawares and get a crack at him with my .44. Or maybe I could keep him right on moving until he was off Rafter M range and wasn't tempted to try the taste of white-face beef.

I guess I didn't have anything else on my mind. Besides, I hadn't expected anything like that to happen—so when I came to the ridge I followed the tracks right on up to the top. It was dumb, silhouetting myself like that, but I'd been on that trail two hours and my eyes and head were beginning to ache, and then, I hadn't expected to find anything but more cat tracks.

On top the ridge I pulled in my bay for he was blowing a little, and there, up ahead of me, his back to me, was a rider. The distance was too great for me to recognize him, but he was forking a bay like mine and I knew those clothes he was wearing. A fringed buckskin jacket, checked Texas trousers, dust-covered black Stetson. My clothes.

He must have sensed me for he turned suddenly in the saddle, his hand whipping out the carbine in his saddle boot. The long barrel flashed crazily in the sun as he slapped the stock to his shoulder. I was giving the spur hard to my startled bay as he squeezed the trigger.

The bay squealed, spinning on a dime, almost toppling over in its effort, and was already going back down the ridge when the bullet whined viciously past my ear. The bay's rapid, frantic crow hops almost unseated me. Grabbing the horn with one hand, I reined the bay around again, racing him along the side of the slope, keeping below the sky-line of the ridge.

I went perhaps a hundred yards like this, then I shot the bay up to the top of the ridge again. Off in the distance the rider was raking hell out of his mount, spewing a huge shower of dust behind him. The bay I spurred again, hard, and he went racing crazily down the slope, dodging boulders and clumps of greasewood with cat-like speed.

Up ahead, the rider turned once more in his saddle and, as he spied me, he sent his mount angling over toward the corner of a butte that lifted red and craggy toward the sky. I sensed his purpose as he hit the ground running, the carbine in his hand again. Frantically I whipped my glance around, spotting the ragged edge of a wash off to my right, and I spurred the bay toward that.

I made it just in time. The bay was going down the steep bank on its haunches when the carbine opened up. One of the slugs whipped the Stetson from my head. But then I was below the rim of the wash although he kept burning the air over me with his bullets.

Down in the wash I halted the blowing bay and considered. My .44 was no match for his carbine. And then things were beginning to fit together in my mind. I guess I should have known it was going to be like this—but I'd blinded my mind and my heart to the facts and now that I fitted the pattern together it left me cold and breathless and hurt inside.

Still, I had to be sure and there was one good way to find out. Gently I turned the bay's head down the wash and started for Verde.

* * *

When I got back I went first to the Rafter M headquarters, but they were deserted. I rode to the line-camp and that was empty, too. I spotted the tracks of two horses traveling side by side and I followed these to the malpais country where the tracks ended.

They ended because the horses had stopped and the riders were there on the ground, watching me ride up, Ardis and Mike Rafferty standing so close together

their hands touched, watching me come up slowly on my bay.

Rafferty was hatless. The sun struck a blue-steel sheen off his dark hair and his dark brows were drawn down flat over his black eyes. His thumbs were hooked in his bright red galluses.

Ardis took a step aside so that her hand no longer touched Rafferty's. That brought a sharp pain to me but it was to have been expected. The pain passed swiftly and now the dull anger began to beat behind my eyes.

I dropped to the ground and took three steps toward them. Ardis was watching me with a tight, strained look on her face and I guess I had eyes only for her for a second. Rafferty's hand dipped suddenly and the long-barreled .45 rose and leveled on my stomach. A hot grimace pulled the corners of his lips down.

I'd got my hand only as far as the handle of my .44. Now I took my fingers carefully away, watching Rafferty. Ardis sucked her breath in and it made a hollow, moaning sound.

"So the masquerade's over, hey, Rafferty?" I said.

His lips twitched slightly and there was a brief flare of triumph in his eyes. "Didn't I tell you, Ardis?" said Rafferty, his gaze never weaving from me. "Didn't I tell you he'd recognized me this morning? How much do you know, Lonigan?"

I sighed bitterly. "I took the trouble of going to Verde and asking around. I heard of the payroll holdup near Coyote Wells a week ago and last night the stopping of the S.P. Limited out of Mohave. Both jobs pulled by a lone bandit—wearing a fringed buckskin jacket, checked Texas trousers and a floppy black Stetson. A man about six two and weighing one eighty. About my size—or yours, Rafferty."

He gave a short, rasping laugh. "I think it will be yours, Lonigan," he said, and his tone sent a chill down my spine. "When Ed Niles finds you here with a bullet in you and those clothes cached in the line-camp and just enough of the swag on you, I don't think he'll look much farther for the bandit."

"Then it was you," I said heavily. "It was you who drove those cows into the mountains to get me away from the shack so you could steal my clothes. It was you who I startled there that night. You couldn't take a chance on it during the day for fear I'd stumble on you. It had to be at night."

I turned on Ardis. All the sureness seemed to have gone out of her. Her eyes wavered and looked away, then came back with a defiant effort to lock with mine, but the color drained from her face.

"YOU were in it all the time, too, Ardis," I said sadly, bitterness edging my words. "You were on the look-out for somebody Rafferty's size. Is that what you meant yesterday when you said you wished it hadn't been me? Is that why you kissed me and begged me to stay? Because Rafferty had this S.P. job to pull and you wanted to be sure I'd be around when it came time to put a bullet in me and tag me as the bandit. You've been in it from the start. Why don't you put a bullet in me, too, Ardis? Why don't you use that Bisley on me?"

She spread her hands helplessly and her face contorted. "Sam," she said, and then the words died, and she hung her head.

The anger was beating dully behind my eyes now. "Why don't you finish it, Ardis?" I cried. "It's what you want, isn't it? It's what you made love to me for, isn't it?"

I glanced at Rafferty. His eyes had grown hot and the hand holding the long-barreled .45 was white at the knuckles from the tightness of his grip. I remembered the jealous flaring in his eyes that day I'd first come to the Rafter M.

"Maybe you don't believe it, Rafferty," I said to him. "Maybe she'd got you fooled like she had me. Ask her, Rafferty. Why don't you ask her if I'm speaking the truth?"

"Sam," cried Ardis, edging over close to Rafferty. "Stop it, Sam. Don't listen to him, Mike. Don't—"

"Why protest, Ardis?" I interrupted. "If it isn't true, why not say so? Rafferty, how sure are you that she won't turn on you when it's all done? Can you really trust her, Rafferty? It was here that it happened, Rafferty. Right over there by the lava. We were sitting on the lava, Rafferty, right over there. You can see it from here, Rafferty."

His head turned, almost involuntarily,

that jealous flare strong in his eyes. His glance moved just slightly and that, I knew, was the only break I was going to get.

It all happened swiftly, in a matter of a second or so, yet each move is still etched with heart-aching clarity in my mind. As Rafferty's eyes wavered, I doubled and reached for my .44. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ardis lurch forward, clawing at her Bisley. Then Rafferty's .45 belched and Ardis, giving a choked little cry, broke stride abruptly, the Bisley dropping from her hand, and then she fell to the ground and lay huddled and still.

My .44 was out and I threw a snap shot off at Rafferty, but he'd leaped back into the ancient lava, ducking down into a depression. Throwing myself to the ground, I crawled frantically over the lava and down into a shallow hole, dropping out of sight as Rafferty popped out of his shelter and threw two shots at me. The bullets chipped bits off the lava, flinging them with enough force into my face to start the blood flowing.

I lay there, panting hoarsely, feeling the warmth of the blood on my face, the picture of Ardis lying there stark before my eyes.

Ardis, the cry went silently out from me. What were you trying to do, Ardis? Will I ever know? Were you helping him—or me? Were you trying to shield me when you stepped in front of Rafferty or were you trying to draw on me?

I never could make you out, Ardis. Yesterday when I held you in my arms you seemed sincere enough. Your kisses were sincere enough and all that you said. I can't forget how you cried out that you wished it hadn't been me. What did you mean by that, Ardis? I don't think I'll ever find out. You're dead and I think I'll never learn the truth. Ardis, Ardis. . . .

I reached up to wipe some of the blood off my cheeks but the wetness there wasn't all blood. Some of it was tears.

Suddenly I knew a vast, raging hate for Rafferty. Cocking the .44 I leaped to my feet, standing there on the lava bed, .44 pointing at Rafferty's hole. If he wanted a shot at me, he'd have to show himself and I'd be waiting. Yes, Rafferty, I'd be waiting.

"Rafferty?" I shouted. "When are you going to kill me, Rafferty? See, I'm here. I'm not hiding from you, Rafferty. I'm here if you want me. You've got to kill me, Rafferty, if you want your plan to work out. Who'll you pass off as the bandit if you don't kill me? Or can't you do it? After all, I'm not a woman, Rafferty. Is that your speed, Rafferty? Killing women? Is that your speed?"

I saw the long seven and a half inch barrel of his Colt poking out first, cautiously, as if feeling the way, then the black tip of his head. He tried to do it with desperate quickness, throwing his head up and snapping a shot off at me. But I'd been waiting and I pulled the trigger and the slug caught Rafferty in the middle of his face and he lifted convulsively halfway out of his hole, teetering there a moment. Then he fell sprawled out on the lava.

The shot came from the ridge behind me and I dove back into my hole. I lay there, pulses beating furiously. Ardis, I thought. I risked a look but she lay unmoving there where she'd fallen. She'd never move again.

The call was a hoarse bellow from the ridge top. "This is the sheriff, Lonigan. We've got you surrounded. Throw away your gun and come out with your hands up. Or you can stay there and make it tough for all of us. Either way, we'll get you, Lonigan. Come out or stay there and we'll come and get you. Which will it be, Lonigan?"

I lay there with my hot face against the rough surface of the lava bed. Ardis, I whispered through the pain in my heart. Why did it have to end like this, Ardis? Maybe I can explain it. Maybe they'll see it the way it really was and I can get out of it. But I'll never know the truth about you. All my life I'll be haunted by that. Why did it have to be like this, Ardis? Ardis. . . .

I raised my head so that I could cry out. "Go to hell, sheriff," I shouted and then put my face down on the lava again.

The first bullet got me in the back. I couldn't move—couldn't see Ardis anymore . . . couldn't raise my gun to shoot the sheriff.

He took me back to Verde, patched me up. He believed my story when the loot was found.

Then I quit Verde.

GUN-SLAMMER'S CHOICE

Mrs. Jackson Bradley would see a shooting soon. . . .

Jackson Bradley had his choice of a gift to his fragile Eastern bride—a killer for a husband . . .or his own bullet-riddled corpse.

By MARK LISH

JACKSON BRADLEY was married! The news rang across the mountains and the valleys, in the bunkhouses and through the towns. True, people do marry every day and not much thought given the matter. Some people, and in some localities. But this was Wyoming—*young* Wyoming, where the simple advent of an unattached female under fifty was news for a hundred miles around, and eager youth might ride that hundred miles, ahorseback and laboriously, for a look-see and a hoped-for smile.

A marriage, then, stood as a marker on

history's road. And when one of the parties thereto was Jackson Bradley . . .

Jackson Bradley was twenty-six, and he had shot five men. Of the five three had died, one of them instantly and in his boots. Two, recovering, put prompt distance between their persons and Jackson Bradley; and that had added more greatly to Jackson's prestige as a dangerous man than had the deaths of three. For the two were dangerous men themselves and nervy, and known as such, and one at least made no bones of the fact that he wanted nothing more of Jackson Bradley's game.

Jackson Bradley's bride was twenty, and she hailed from a town called Boston somewhere in Massachusetts, regarded by Wyoming as the essence of the effete. Pretty as a handmade saddle, riding men who saw her said, but pink-and-white and fragile, too.

Too fragile for life with a man like Jackson, opined Wyoming. Too fragile to bear the news, one day, that her man had met another whose reflexes or craft outdid his own. Even failing that, granting that her husband met no such man or that of his own volition Jackson Bradley hung away his gun and lowered his damn-you-mister chin, too fragile for the daily rigors of Wyoming living.

To cap it all, Jackson brought his bride first to Thermop. And it was Thermop, last year, that had seen the dying of Kenneth Honeywell. Nothing had been done about that, nothing at all. Kenneth Honeywell had pushed the trouble, or the liquor in him pushed it, and the first shot fired had splintered the floor between Jackson Bradley's boots.

Phil Honeywell had been away at the time, somewhere in Texas buying stock. Phil was back now, and he hadn't made any public talk about the killing of his brother—but then Phil Honeywell wasn't a talking man, and his very silence might well be taken as a warning signal.

Wyoming's speculation dealt with every phase. How would the fact of Jackson Bradley's marriage, the presence nearby of his brand-new bride, affect the decision of Phil Honeywell? And if Phil chose to look Jackson up and try conclusions, how might pink-and-white and Boston-raised react to her husband's shooting—perhaps killing—of a man while on their honeymoon?

Little time was wasted on the other possible outcome, for Wyoming knew its men by the record of their doings, and Wyoming said that if these two met, Jackson Bradley would walk away while someone buried Phil.

Jackson had experience, he had the eye to see those small details that in such affairs meant all the difference, the brain to grasp and correlate them; above all, he had the hardihood and cold decision to act instantly and without compunction. Phil Honeywell, said Wyoming, owned only raw headlong courage plus a likely desire to shoot this man who owed him a brother.

Speculation troubled Jackson Bradley, too, upstairs readying for supper in the hotel dining room. An old acquaintance had met his arrival with dry and casual mention of Phil Honeywell's presence in town; he had read in the eyes of others Wyoming's detached debate as to the situation.

True, he had met Phil later in the lobby of this hotel. They had exchanged the casual unhurried greetings of their kind, and Phil had extended friendly invitation to sit in a poker game this night. That Jackson Bradley had refused, reluctantly, on the ground that his bride might not like to sit alone while her husband gambled.

Phil had accepted the refusal as amiably as given, had walked away with no intention in his stride. But Phil had been drinking a little, and with Phil Honeywell as once with Kenneth, even a little drinking was apt to beget belligerence.

Back to his wife, Jackson Bradley thrust the cool barrel of his Colt into the waistband of his trousers, buttoned his vest over the arching handle, his coat loosely over the whole. Awkward to get at, there; but less a challenge to Boston training.

Gravely he escorted her down the narrow stairs, across the lobby, through the wide doors that led to the dining room. Hardly perceptible his pause at the stairfoot, again in the wide doorway for a glance across the broad room with its orderly spotting

of whiteclothed tables. Every table was taken, but Phil Honeywell was not here, nor any enemy.

But as they stood, two men reached for hats checked conveniently on the floor beside their chairs, rose, departed. These had been talking business of some intimate sort, sitting not opposite each other but with only the table's corner between. Their dishes remained, stains of their gravy fresh on white worn cloth.

Jackson Bradley drew a chair for his wife before one clean side, seated himself at the other, facing the door a half-dozen tables distant.

A beefy young woman arrived with her stereotyped, too-rapid statement of the evening's menu, tucked their orders beneath her pompadour and was gone, the dirty dishes somehow miraculously balanced in series along her muscular arms. She was back almost at once, new dishes balanced as precariously, by some legardemain transferring them to the table unspilled and unbroken.

Jackson Bradley began on the great slab of roasted beef, himself hardly conscious of alert attention given each new arrival at the wide doorway. He was half-through when Phil Honeywell appeared, hesitated, began threading his way between tables.

WITHOUT staring, without attracting notice by the young woman whose knee almost touched his own beneath the tablecloth, Jackson Bradley was aware of every small detail in the other man's approach. The slight sway to wide shoulders, giving to Phil Honeywell's walk a touch of swagger. The smile that was a mere lifting of straight lips, without flexibility. The stiff strides of long straight legs, betraying inner tension.

After six of those strides there could be no doubt of this man's destination, nor that he had some particular purpose at Jackson Bradley's table.

"He's made up his mind," thought Wyoming all across the room. "Might be this dining room—and Mrs. Jackson Bradley —will see a shooting in the next few minutes. Or a challenge, to be settled not much later."

Fingers went deftly to vest bottom, worked the weapon there into ready lap, returned to view above the tabletop. Eyes read further tension in the man approaching, brain translated:

He saw—knows my gun is ready. Knows I am ready. Puts it up to him; may sheer him off, may spur him. Have to watch close—he's tricky.

Then the man was by the table, swaying a little on his booted feet, saying: "Mind if I eat supper here, Jackson? Place seems kind of filled."

Jackson Bradley nodded, his wife nodded, smiled. She had met this man briefly in the lobby; thought him handsome, romantic.

Phil Honeywell slid out the chair facing Jackson Bradley, sat down, the movement brushing back the coat that, standing, had partially covered the long-barreled weapon in its holster on his upper thigh. The beefy young woman came, rattled off her rapid-fire menu, was gone, was back and gone.

Phil Honeywell was a good small-talker, able to couch his thought in terms a girl from Boston or a cowboy from the Platte might understand. But tonight he talked too fast, he smiled too much, his eyes while wide and direct-gazing had in them a hungry restlessness.

Might be he'd like to do it here and now, Jackson Bradley speculated, and kept the fingers of his right hand unoccupied and near the table's edge. *Like to shoot me before my bride, at the highest moment of my life. Point to the gun he knows is in my lap, claim self defense. And likely go scot free.*

There was tension in Jackson Bradley now, deep down. So deep that his bride, unschooled in the affairs of men like these, was aware of nothing at all. Unaware too, of the lull in roomwide clatter, the expectant hush that was Wyoming waiting, observing unobtrusively, minding its own business so far as actual mechanics of the situation went; yet vastly interested in every facet of the outcome.

Beside her, her husband kept up his share of the conversation in placid ordinary tones, smiled his normal untroubled smile, stirred cooling coffee with a spoon in the fingers of his left hand.

Not so Phil Honeywell. The tautness that was in him clashed silver against silver, cup against saucer. Until suspicion grew in Jackson Bradley that Phil was

putting on an act, that his nervousness was largely sham. So that when a raking coatsleeve sent Phil's fork clattering on the floor beside his chair and he bent sidewise nervously quick to retrieve it, Jackson Bradley's right hand too dipped promptly out of sight.

If he brings that fork up all the way, right up onto the table—fine, Jackson Bradley was thinking. *If his hand stops hip-high— Be hell if I shoot and he's got the fork in his fingers. They'd hang me, likely. And Marcia. . . .*

Phil Honeywell's blue gaze remained above the tabletop, the fingers of his right hand groped unguided on the floor. They started upward then, the body straightening, the arm bending at its elbow joint, the shoulder lifting. Halfway, a break in the rising motion, a flicker in blue gaze. . . . Muffled under the tabletop and hanging cloth, the gunshot was a coughing roar.

Strong legs strained Phil Honeywell's torso against the chairback, his breath a gasp. His weight pushed the chair and tipped it, and legs still half-bent staggered backward against it and tripped. The long body went crashing stiffly on its back, right hand succeeding too late in clearing long blue gunbarrel of leather. On the floor beside where he had sat, the fork bore mute witness.

Quick men there were in that room, men swift of body and of mind and heart. Three of them were beside Phil Honeywell almost as he fell, and their bodies shielded his from view of the frozen bride beside Jackson Bradley at the table. They lifted Phil from the floor and carried him away, and one graying head wagged slowly, gravely, from side to side.

From her chair the bride stared whitely. At the receding three with their burden, at the fork still on the floor, at her husband Jackson Bradley, who had shot a man before her eyes.

"Why, Jackson!" she cried then in too-shrill tones. "That man—he meant to shoot you! He didn't pick up the fork at all, though I saw his fingers find it—"

"Will you pass the butter, Marcia, please?" said Jackson Bradley, and there was nothing in his tone to tell of the revulsion he fought inside him—that he had fought down five times before.

Marcia stared again, briefly, understood from a deep intuition that the words were said to break a tension in herself. She smiled, a little shakily, put her hand to the butter dish and passed it.

Wyoming settled in its chairs and reached for knife and fork. A citizen had been lost, and that was a thing done. But one had been gained, too, her steel fit and ready for the building of Territory into Statehood.

JOHNNY HARDLUCK'S

Action-Packed
Cow-Country Novelette

By BRANCH CARTER

Back to his old stamping grounds came salty Johnny Hardluck—back to find his dinero lining Kingpin Bailey's pockets . . . and his old friends cringing in trigger-terror slavery.

HOT HOMECOMING

Johnny's bullet smashed his shoulder before the man's pistol could blast.

CHAPTER 1 *Woolly Welcome*

Johnny Hardluck eased the big bay gelding down the rock-strewn ridge trail; they cleared the shielding border of pinon and aspen and Johnny's eyes lighted. A silent whistle puckered his sun-cracked lips as he gazed over the broad valley at the scene of his birth and early boyhood.

It was not pleasant memories of the once familiar scene that brought Johnny's quickened expression; nostalgia had never attended his recollection of it. He had never known kith or kin save a sort of uncle who has cast perpetual gloom over Johnny's boyish years; a driving, heartless devil who had tormented him with constant work and cuffing and finally had literally kicked him off the place.

The pain of that kick lasted long, not so much at the point of contact but in his soul. It also performed a miracle of transformation; it made a boy into a man overnight, and a man Johnny Hardluck had been ever since.

However that might be, the sight of the town brought Johnny happiness. It marked the extent of his journey Eastward; the necessary means to an end. And that end was the bucket at the bottom of Johnny's rainbow.

It wasn't a dream; it was reality. Thousands of acres of richest grazing to carry his first brand; water that never ran dry; a ready-built home to be shared; a girl whose courage matched her beauty and

whose deep blue eyes held the promise of only waiting to be asked.

And to have all that?

Johnny had merely to pick up the accumulated money he'd been sending back through the years to old Eli Titus at the bank, turn the pile into carefully selected stock and chouse the dogies back to his new domain. Simple as that.

The pucker left Johnny's lips as suddenly as a fist becomes a hand; a frown gathered beneath his sombrero rim while he puzzled over an appearance that had no part in his memory. The first shacks were sun-bleached, patched and warped as theretofore, but only the fringe of the little town was unchanged. Everything else was strange.

There was a newness, a neatness in the white front of a general store and about the several saloons where Johnny had known only one. There was a square, adobe-walled building with iron bars at the windows proclaiming a bank. On that same site old Eli Titus had presided over a stout structure of wood with thick shutters at the windows and no iron bars.

Further on, Johnny saw a two-storied building with a broad sign of hotel and livery in careful lettering. He shook his head as the bay, at a walk now, stepped daintily in that direction, with Johnny's hand slack on the reins while an alert wariness grew in his mind. This was not at all what he had expected and, like a seasoned general, he wanted to survey the terrain before action.

So he passed the bank which was to have been his first and possibly only port of call. As the bay drew abreast of a saloon's batwing doors, they burst outward before a backward reeling form propelled by the smashing fists of a big man with a star flicking light on his flapping vest.

Johnny checked the bay as the beaten man slumped in the roadway, almost under its feet, and lay motionless while blood seeped from nose and mouth and stained the dust a reddish-brown.

Johnny sat saddle poker-faced, watching the big officer yank the half-unconscious man to limp, sagging legs, holding him up with his left hand while he again cocked the right.

"Won't do you no good," Johnny drawled mildly.

The big man, fist poised, turned his head and glared angrily at the cowboy.

"He wouldn't feel it," Johnny added.

Men had followed the two from the saloon and stood gaping before the doors. Others had run up from either side and still more were watching from across the roadway. A young boy crept up along the fringe of the little crowd and stood reaching uncertainly toward the man in the burly sheriff's grasp. Johnny's keen eyes swept the faces briefly, noting the lad and his gesture, seeing the angry scowl on a swarthy man's features as his black eyes were fixed on the officer.

The sheriff turned back to the crowd, nodded to a lanky man who wore a deputy's badge.

"Throw this lunk inter th' callaboose, Ridge," he ordered and passed the helpless man over.

The young lad moved closer and grasped the staggering man's arm, looking pleadingly up to the sheriff.

"Don't jug him, please, Mr. Rose," he begged. "It'd kill sis. Lemme take him home. I won't let him bother you."

The sheriff gave a back-handed swipe, hard knuckles slapping the boy's face, bringing blood to his nose and knocking him down.

"Get th' hell away from here," the big man snarled. "You'd oughter be ashamed to own a father like that no good bum."

Johnny thought he heard a low cry from somewhere down the road, but he was watching the scene through slitted lids, waiting for what he knew was to come. He saw again the swarthy man's expression, the blazing eyes, the slight, hesitant motion of his hand toward belt.

The other men looked sober; not one was grinning. It told Johnny that this burly sheriff was not popular, that at the same time he was in control of things. He wondered what had become of the old sheriff of Johnny's boyhood days; Dave Hansen, with his drooping, handlebar mustaches, his mild blue eyes that could turn to steel on occasion and scare hell out of a young kid.

The sheriff stepped meaningfully to the roadway, strode around the bay for a look at the brand on the night flank, then came back to stand spread-legged, hands on hips over the bullet-studded belt, and glared up at Johnny.

"Mebbe you don't like how I handle things, huh?" he demanded belligerently.

"You got no cause to take your mad out on me," Johnny told him.

"I asked you?"

Johnny shrugged slightly. "I ain't seen nothing yet to make me a good opinion," he drawled. "A drunk and a ten-year-old kid."

The sheriff's face seemed to explode.

"I'll give you something to make up your mind, you damn saddle-tramp," he roared.

He sprang forward, swift as a cat in spite of his bulk; his right hand reached upward to drag Johnny from the saddle. That was his mistake. Possibly he saw a blur of motion, but it was a cinch he knew it when the barrel of Johnny's Colt crashed down on the outstretched wrist. Then the pistol was in the holster again swiftly as it had appeared, and Johnny was calmly waiting to see what he might want to do next.

The sheriff leaped backward with a yelp of pain, holding his dangling right hand before him, slobbering curses. He let his arm sink slowly to his side, his brows all screwed up with the hurt of it. Beneath them his eyes, insane with anger, glared at Johnny. Then his left hand started to reach for the gun on his right thigh.

Johnny shook his head slightly.

"You got a badge," he said, "that 'titles you to pull in drunks and mebbe shoot at badmen. I ain't neither, and there ain' a man here but what knows you set out to pick a fight with me. So I'm advisin' you, friendly like, not to try it."

The big man growled something, turned abruptly and, holding his broken wrist with the other hand, shouldered his way heavily through the batwings.

No one followed him. The crowd to a man was watching the stranger-cowboy, some uncertainly, some with obvious approval.

JOHNNY turned to look down the roadway. He saw the deputy, Ridge, resume his way with his reeling prisoner. The young lad, dirty fist to bleeding nose, hastened after them. Across street and not far from the general store, a girl was leaning against a slender tree trunk, her head buried in her arms, bundles scattered at her feet.

From one side, movement before the bank caught Johnny's eye. Two men, who evidently had paused to watch the brief scuffle, were coming down the steps. One was short, stockily built, head held high with florid, genial face. A gold chain linked two pockets of his vest across his ample midriff. His clothes were obviously tailored and expensive; he looked prosperous and content.

Johnny gave him only a brief, appraising glance and fixed his gaze on the man's companion, and a sudden frown drew his brows together.

This second man was long in frame but stooped with the discouraged air of old age. His head was bent low, eyes fixed on the ground. His clothes, long unpressed, hung loosely upon him. Johnny nudged the bay into motion and let it walk slowly toward the two who had turned down the roadway. As he came alongside, his fixed look must have caught the attention of the old man. He looked up slowly and regarded Johnny with the vacuous look of complete lack of interest.

He was old Eli Titus, the banker, to whom Johnny had sent his hard-earned

wages saved the past half-dozen years.

Perhaps it was Johnny's reflex action that set the gelding into slightly faster motion. He passed the two, passed a two-seated buckboard, with a sidewise glance that showed a dark-haired girl holding the reins over a pair of well-groomed horses, restless at standing still. Then his attention was again taken by the girl beside the tree.

Two young fellows, of about Johnny's twenty odd years, had come up to her. They were well built, well clothed for range-country men. They were grinning at the girl who had swung around to face them angrily. One reached a hand toward her which she swung quickly away. Johnny saw that her face was strained and tear-stained but her eyes were straight-looking and alight with obvious resentment.

"Aw, don't be so coy, Kate," one of the young fellows said. "We only want to help you. Lemme pick up your packages and take 'em home for you."

"I don't want your help," she blazed back. "And don't put your filthy hands on anything of mine."

"Some wildcat, eh, Ed?" the other jeered. "Needs tamin'. Lemme show you."

He stooped, reaching for one of the fallen packages. The girl kicked it away.

Johnny had come up to them by that time. He swing down, trailing the reins over the gelding's head. He was mad clean through and wrought up over the spectacle of his old trusted friend, Eli Titus, and altogether reckless for anything.

"Happens," he said, "I'm right good of hearing. I dunno's this young lady wants any help outer me, but I'm right certain she don't want yours."

They swung simultaneously toward him, hands clenching, then hovering over belts where their guns were slung.

"Now is that so?" one sneered. "And what th' hell you aim to do about it?"

Johnny was standing easily, hands hanging loosely at his sides. "Make your move, damn you," he said so softly it was scarcely audible, but they heard it just the same.

These two apparently weren't too dumb so far as the safety of their hides were concerned. One's face paled; the other shifted uncomfortably. "Aw, don't get so het up. We was only foolin'," one said.

Johnny made no reply.

The second man glanced beyond Johnny, and Johnny saw sudden relief in his eyes.

"Come on, Ed," the young fellow said. "They're aw ready and waitin' for us."

Johnny watched them approach the standing buckboard, observing that the stout, well-dressed man had already taken his seat beside the girl. The two climbed in and the spirited horses sprang into motion. Johnny still watched as they swept away.

The young fellows, in the back seat, didn't look his way; the stout man was smiling at something, or nothing, straight before him, but the dark-haired girl, with capable hands on the reins, turned her head and smiled squarely at Johnny. He touched his sombrero rim, possibly to offset the smile which he didn't return. He faced the forlorn girl again.

She was looking at him, wide-eyed, lips a little parted.

"You've got yourself in awful trouble, Mister, account of me."

Johnny grinned at her. His good-nature was back again, but not his peace of mind. He'd been in his hometown scarcely fifteen minutes and already a lot of things were adding up too fast for him to grasp their significance.

"Don't let that worry you none, ma'am," he told her. "I've been next to trouble so long I'd feel funny if I was without it."

"But you're a stranger; you don't know who they are."

"I know the breed all right and I reckon that's enough for now. If you got no objections let's get these things where you want them to go."

"I don't know. Folks will see you helping me and that will get you into more trouble." She glanced along the street toward the saloon, scene of Johnny's little mixup with the law, and her face became drawn again.

"That was my father Sheriff Rose arrested. He'll kill you or have you killed for what you did to him. Oh, you were splendid. If there were more like you here, things would be—different." She clenched her hands and sighed, still looking up the street.

Johnny couldn't help seeing she was very pretty, in a strong, homey way; perhaps not so lovely as the girl in the buckboard, with her careful grooming and assured, sophisticated air, but somehow more satis-

fying to a man who'd seen all types. However, Johnny had no eye for even a bevy of pretty girls.

"Shucks, ma'am; let's get busy."

He picked up the parcels, one by one, wondering how the girl could have got so far with the lot. Instead of handing them to her, he fastened them to saddlehorn and cantle.

"Looks plum' like a Christmas tree," Johnny said lightly.

The girl smiled sadly.

"Now if you'll just show us the way," he suggested.

During all this time, in spite of his preoccupation, Johnny had kept half an eye on Eli Titus. The old man had pushed along with the shuffling step of the feeble-minded, head down, in no way concerned over whatever might be going on around him. He'd passed Johnny without the slightest sign of interest.

CHAPTER 2 Shoot-Out Sheriff

Leading the gelding, Johnny walked beside the girl until they came to what was little more than a shack set well back from the main street.

Johnny carried in the last of the packages, then paused, looking about him and thinking how a woman's care had made the interior far more prepossessing than the drab exterior. He was not waiting to be thanked. He felt that all this should lead to something of possible importance to him and was playing the hunch.

The girl was standing beside the little table on which the parcels were piled high. One well formed hand was resting on it; her plain gingham dress, appearing a trifle outgrown, was moulded on the curves of her lithe form. Her eyes were bright with gratitude through gathering moisture. Johnny looked hastily away.

"How can I ever repay you?" she said in a low, unsteady tone. "I'm Kate Wilson, although I'm afraid that's a name not to be proud of in this town."

"Seems to me you carry it right proudly," he told her with his friendly grin. "Folks call me Johnny Hardluck."

She looked at him quickly.

"Hardluck—Hardluck," she repeated. "I'm sure I have heard that. . . . Now I'll tell you quickly what you ought to know."

Johnny's curiosity was strong, over just one matter, but he waited.

"Those two—hoodlums you scared off are Ed and Tom Bailey, sons of Al Bailey, the town banker, big rancher and rich man." She flushed slightly. "That was their sister, Alice Bailey, who smiled at you from the buckboard."

Johnny let that pass without a flicker.

"Mr. Bailey came here only two or three years ago and took over the bank and about everything else in town and around it. He brought Rose and some other men with him. I guess he had some money to begin with, but right off he grew richer and everyone else got poorer—including ourselves."

She paused momentarily and bit her lip against its trembling.

"I won't bother you with our troubles which led to what you saw—my father today. What you should know is that the Baileys control everything, including the law and all its gunmen. Sheriff Rose, of course, is their man. There have been killings—I suppose I should be glad that my father at least is still alive."

She looked at Johnny then and her eyes were blazing.

"We had a small ranch, and a little money. The bank has it now. Some of those men who were killed, all accused of starting a fight or of some crime, had something or other which the bank holds now. Everyone here toadies to the Baileys or keeps out of their way, if they can. No man dares oppose them. You saw a little while ago—" She broke off, then added: "Now do you understand what you have got into? Or perhaps you aren't stopping here."

"I reckon I'll stick around a mite," Johnny said tightly. "You say Bailey took over the bank?"

"How he did it," Kate said, "is still a mystery. When Eli Titus—"

She stopped abruptly, with a quick look at Johnny.

"That's where I heard it. Eli spoke it. But it wasn't exactly Hardluck."

"Hadlock?" Johnny suggested.

"Yes, that was it. Johnny Hadlock."

"What'd he say?"

She frowned in thought.

"It was sometime ago. Let me think.

Yes, right after he lost the bank. He had his bad turn then. Some say it was a stroke. He has never been the same since. Doesn't even speak coherently now. It was something he mumbled. I can't quite—"

"He lost his mind?" Johnny felt as if he had suddenly stepped into an abyss.

"I don't know really. Mr. Bailey has had a man looking after him ever since and no one ever gets to speak to Eli alone. Mr. Bailey calls the man a nurse but—" her voice lowered—"I think he is a guard."

"Well, now," Johnny began.

There was the sound of light, running steps. A boy burst through the doorway. Caked blood showed on his nostrils and chin.

"Sis—" he started, then stopped at sight of the stranger. He stared at Johnny, then his eyes brightened.

"Say, Mister, you're th' feller broke th' sheriff's arm. By golly—"

"S'pose you tell your sister what's on your mind," Johnny interrupted him.

The lad's gaze turned to Kate and sobered instantly.

"Ridge says Dad can't come outer there till he rots less'n we pay ten dollars. I'm goin' to burn that danged jail."

Kate's look swept the packages on the table, terribly troubled.

"I don't see how we can do it, Pete," she said. "Perhaps Mr. Smith will take these back and we will make out somehow. But that won't—"

Johnny interposed, grinning at the youngster.

"Now, Pete, I wouldn't go to burnin' no jail, 'f I was you." He separated a bill from the roll he carried in a pocket inside his shirt. "You run down there an' turn your dad loose."

KATE stepped close and grasped his arm with both her hands. Johnny was disturbed, because he saw she was really prettier than he'd noticed and her eyes were telling him what he didn't want to see.

"You can't do that, Johnny, after all you've already done."

"Look, Kate," he said soberly. "Mebbe it's worth more 'n that to me to hear what your father might tell me."

She still hesitated.

"I mean it," he told her. "I didn't come to this here town just for fun."

She took the bill reluctantly.

"I'll have to go down myself. Will you wait here, Johnny?"

"Reckon I'll get along to th' hotel. Mebbe tonight or tomorrer?" He made it a question.

"Either time—if his mind is clear." She flushed. "Oh, he wasn't always that way—only these past few years."

Johnny patted her shoulder.

"Be seein' you, Kate." He turned to the wide-eyed youngster. "'Case your sister needs me, Pete, you come arunnin'. She'll tell you where and how."

"There's something I want to tell you about Eli," Kate said, already at the doorway. "But—perhaps you'll come back—after dark."

Johnny stabled the bay with extra fodder and settled for a room for himself. It was getting late and he was hungry, but with so many unanswered problems chasing themselves around in his mind, he felt that his first need was for something more stimulating than mere food. Then, too, he noticed that the dining room of the hotel was well filled, and for what he proposed to do, the less familiar people were with his appearance the better it might be for him.

The nearest saloon was the one from which the Sheriff had emerged and in which he had sought refuge when he was hurt. So it was not difficult to deduce that it was Sheriff Rose's hangout. However, that thought didn't deter Johnny from quietly pushing the batwings apart and stepping inside.

Without turning his head, his eyes swivelled around. Two men were sitting in the semi-obscurity of the wall directly to Johnny's right. Further along, two more were at a table on which were a bottle and a couple of glasses. The right arm of one of the drinkers was swathed in splints and bandages.

Sheriff Rose was facing toward Johnny, and there could be no doubt of the nature of his feeling about the newcomer. Without pausing in his slow stride, Johnny returned the glare steadily, noting that the big man's gun was now belted over his left thigh, seeing also Rose's glance shift quickly to the first two men by the wall. Except for the bartender, there was no one else in the place, and for all the sound of conversation the men made, it might have been empty.

The bar was along the wall at Johnny's left. He went there and ordered whiskey. By shifting his glance in the back-bar mirror, he could make out Rose and his companion. However, almost directly behind him sat the two men by the wall.

The barman set a glass before Johnny, poured so generously that bottleneck clinked against it and a little liquor slopped over. It seemed to Johnny he was a bit over hasty in starting for the far end of the bar.

Johnny moved his glass in little circles on the bar, as if apparently deep in his own thoughts. His head was bent but under the lowered brim his eyes were intent on the mirror.

He saw one of the men behind him move slightly, then come silently to his feet. He saw the dull glint of metal coming from the holster, rising swiftly.

Johnny's fingers released the glass. He dropped, plummet-like, to the floor, landing in a half-crouch. A gun crashed and, mixed with the blast, was the tinkling of broken glass as the bullet smashed the whiskey glass that had been directly before Johnny's chest.

Johnny's Colt roared twice, drowning the thud of the falling body and the brittle tinkling as the glass in front of Sheriff Rose disintegrated.

Johnny came erect. His gun swivelled across his left arm although he held the others in his vision.

"Get out in front of the bar," he ordered, and the drink-jockey, with a glance toward Rose, hastily obeyed.

There was the sound of an excited voice outside and Johnny smashed a bullet through the batwings. Then the Colt swung back to the room. Sheriff Rose's face looked as if he was on the verge of apoplexy. He made no move, although apparently he couldn't forget that he was supposed to be kingpin in his own bailiwick. He began to bluster.

"What th' hell you think you doin'?" he shouted. "Tryin' to shoot up th' whole town?"

"You got any more bushwhackers handy," Johnny told him, "an I'll sure get busy."

The Colt's long barrel indicated the dead man on the floor.

"That feller," Johnny said, "never knew me before, so he couldn't have anything against me. I don't like shootin' a man on suspicion, but if I was sure you'd set him to it, Rose, I'd put a hole in each of them poppin' eyes of yours."

"I don't have to call on nobody to do my gunnin' for me," Rose yelled. "An' if I didn't have this—" he raised the bandaged right arm—"I'd show you."

Johnny grinned. "I ain't so good with my left hand, but if you're honin' to try—" He slipped the Colt's barrel back into his holster.

"I'm the Law here an' I don't go in for gunfights."

"Not right now, Rose. In my book you're a party to an attempt at murder." He tapped the holster significantly. "This is the judge sitting on this here case. What you got to say 'bout it?"

"He shot first, sure, but that don't put me in it. An' you had no right to bust my drink. That was an attack on me."

"Makes us even," Johnny said. "Your man bust mine. Which-all reminds me I want a drink."

HE WAS standing easily, hands at sides, the right not touching the holstered weapon. He nodded toward the dead man's companion who had neither moved or spoken.

"Shuck your iron," Johnny commanded, and the invitation was an obvious dare. Although a slight grin twisted his lips, hell was riding on Johnny's anger. If any more wanted a shoot-out, he was ready and willing.

The fellow, Johnny saw, was a hard-bitten, sharp-eyed man of around thirty. Because he had been so quiet, Johnny reasoned that he was either a rank coward or had coolly been weighing his chance. The man leaned back a little from his table and both hands went slowly to his belt.

"Reckon you could drop her easier," Johnny drawled, "if you was to stand up."

The man's lips curled in a snarl as he came to his feet. His hand toyed an instant with the tongue of the buckle. Then suddenly he burst into spasmodic action. He sank to a crouch; his right hand streaked to the nearby butt.

Johnny's bullet smashed his shoulder before the man's pistol could blast. Then the Colt swung swiftly to the man at Rose's table, who had half risen and who instantly let the weapon slide back and raised both arms above his head. Johnny looked back to the wounded gunman and the pistol lying at his feet.

"Kick her out here," he ordered, "and set down. Tend to you in a minnit." And when he complied: "You next, Rose, an' fast."

The sheriff's gun and belt clattered to the floor. The other man followed suit. Johnny ejected the spent cartridges from his gun, slipped in fresh bullets and holstered the weapon. He leaned back against the bar, with both elbows on the wood.

"Rose," he said, "I dunno what part o' hell you come from, but if you want to get out all in one piece 'fore this shindig is cleaned up, you better get movin'."

He leaned away from the bar in his seriousness.

"I was born an' growed as a younker here. It was a good place. An' I'm sorter wonderin' what-all's become o' those old-timers who kept th' law and didn't tolerate no backshooters whatsomever. Mebbe you an' your bully-killers scared 'em, Rose, they not bein' used to your ways." His tone was filled with contempt. "But I'm tellin' you this, Rose: You can set 'em up before me all you want, like this feller with th' busted arm here, but one more try to backshoot me an' I'm comin' for you, Rose, with lead."

It was a long speech for Johnny Hardluck and it made him irritated. He snapped orders at the barkeep, got his drink, then had the man write out just how things had happened, filling in the names of the two unlucky gunmen. And after one look at Johnny's eyes, not one of the three hesitated to sign it.

Johnny thrust the paper into a pocket, tossed a coin on the bar and turning his back contemptuously on the room, strode to the batwings. Without pausing, he shoved open the doors and stepped swiftly to the shadows at one side.

Johnny knew well enough he had no time to lose. In fact, he figured that nothing short of a miracle would save him from assassination that night if he stuck around anywhere he might be found.

So he slipped along, keeping to the shadows and making all haste to the stable. Fortunately it was the dinner hour and no one was around. In a matter of moments he was astride of the bay and heading off into the darkness.

CHAPTER 3 Lion's Den

Coming into town, Johnny had needed only a sweeping glance to recall the immediate countryside. Every foot of it was so familiar to him that dark was no handicap to him now.

He sent the bay straight away from the lights, circled a little and struck a trail running off from the main, through roadway and leading into the rolling hills. A run of about three miles brought him over a low ridge to the lip of a broad meadow. Across it was the dark blur of woods. Johnny grinned in the darkness, recalling the trout brook that ran along its edge and the times he had been chased from there by the owner of the modest spread, whose ranchhouse was now close before him. Lights shone dimly from one or two windows, and Johnny slowed the bay to a walk.

Of course, after the years, he couldn't be sure the same owner held the place; but

if it was, he had things to talk over and, he reckoned, a chance to assuage his gnawing hunger. If a new man had come in, Johnny could make some excuse and ride on, probably minus the supper. So he pulled up at the porch, looped the reins over the railing and knocked at the door.

A hard voice called out: "Who th' hell's thar?" and Johnny grinned again.

"A lone an' starvin' cowpoke," he gave back.

A latch clicked, the door swung open but no form appeared in the oblong of light.

"Come on in an' show yerself," the same gruff voice invited, and Johnny obeyed with alacrity.

A big-framed man swung the door closed, without showing himself to the outside. Steely gray eyes surveyed Johnny, a little baffled by his steady smile. The handlebars were still in prominent evidence, but they were more white now than gray.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Johnny said.

" 'Pears I don't place you, stranger."

Johnny waved a hand in the direction of the distant woods.

"'Member the kid you used to scare hell out of when he'd come fishin'?"

Dave Hansen's eyes squinted, ran up and down Johnny's lean frame, and a sudden light grew in them.

"Ma Hansen," he called. "Come on in. Here's Johnny growed up to a man."

A gray-haired woman came from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. Instantly a warm smile spread over her face.

"I declare if it ain't. I never would forget that grin of his even when he was gettin' licked." She drew the back of one hand across her eyes. "Did I hear you say you was hungry, Johnny? Or was you only foolin'?"

"I been tryin' to fool my stomach all day long, Ma."

You just set. I was just puttin' away half th' steak Dave left, drat him. Coffee's still hot. And apple pie. You remember the' apple pie I used to slip to you when Dave weren't around?"

That swept away the years for Johnny.

While he ate, former Sheriff Hansen sat by to talk.

"One o' th' boys," he said, "stopped by while ago. Says town is all het up over some stranger pistol-whuppin' Rose an' breakin' his arm, an' arter that, standin' up th' two Bailey boys."

Johnny, without replying, took from his pocket the barkeep's report of the later happenings and handed it over. Dave Hansen read it laboriously, then fixed Johnny with a long, hard stare.

"Jee-rusalem. You sure got th' devil by th' tail an' both horns."

Johnny plied the former sheriff with questions, but Dave couldn't or wouldn't give him more information than Kate Wilson had already supplied. Yes, there was new law in the town; that fellow, Bailey, had grown rich and seemed to be running things, and his two boys were kind of wild and doing about anything they pleased. He reckoned there still might be some men around who didn't cotton to it, like Ed Snow, the blacksmith; Doc Peters; Leff Wells, who'd had to quit his general store and was trying to keep his little shop going; but they couldn't do anything.

"Right off," he said, "when they come up with more votes 'n I could raise, I figgered 'bout time I retired anyway, so I come back to my place an' been mindin' my own bus'ness stric'ly ever since. What set you ararin', Johnny?"

"Rose didn't like way I looked at him an' set out to lick me." He was thoughtful for a moment, then told Dave about the wages he had been sending back to the bank, never knowing that it had changed ownership.

Dave shook his head.

"I weren't consarned with that. Al'ays kept my money some'ers else."

"What happened to Eli Titus?"

"Eli musta had a shock or something, when Bailey took over. Never been a sorter man since that day, so folks say."

JOHNNY felt frustrated. He swallowed his second cup of coffee, then glanced around the room until his eyes rested on the double belt hanging from a convenient peg, with its twelve-inch barrelled Peacemakers sagging in the worn holster. He grinned.

"Reckon you've forgotten how to use that altogether, Dave."

"You think so, huh?" Pride at last had pierced the old man's armor where all of Johnny's direct questions had been evaded. "Wal, now, son, I got me a coyote today,

an' it was first shot on th' dead run."

"Ever get to town these days, Dave?" Johnny drawled.

The gray eyes squinted.

"What you gettin' at, Johnny?"

"I got business at th' bank tomorrer. Reckon I'd kinder feel easier if a feller who knew me was 'round there some place, case some ranny wanted to backshoot me."

That was all. Dave made no comment, and Johnny expected none. He stood up and pointed at the paper still lying on the table.

"Wish you'd hold on to that, Dave. Might come in handy, case things don't work out right."

He shook hands with both, thanked Mrs. Hansen and was gone into the night.

He threw down his blanket roll and hobbled his bay in a little gully near the Wilson's house, then clumped over to the little shack. At first he thought it was unlighted, then, as he came close, he made out a faint glow where a shade had not been fully drawn.

The last he had seen of Kate's father, the man was beaten almost to insensibility and sodden with liquor. Johnny hoped that the intervening hours had cleared the man's mind, for the information he sought was of great importance to him.

As he warily approached the back door, a low moaning reached his ears and affected him strangely. Putting his mouth close to the warped door's edge, he rapped lightly.

"Kate. It's Johnny."

The moaning sound lessened but didn't entirely subside. Footsteps came swiftly to the door and it was opened. Kate stood there, swaying a little. Even by the faint starshine and the meager glow from the candle in the room behind her, Johnny could see there was something odd about her.

Suddenly her hands went to his shoulders, her head bent low until it sank on Johnny's chest. Sobs shook her as she leaned against him.

"Oh, Johnny," she murmured between breath-catching sobs. "They killed him!"

Automatically his arms tightened around her, and she seemed to press closer still, as if she found him a refuge. After a few moments, her sobs lessened; she straightened and pulled herself erect.

"I—I didn't mean to give way," she whispered. "But it was just too much."

He pressed her shoulders and let his arms fall away. He then became aware that the boy, Pete, was close beside his sister and that it had been the lad's moaning he'd first heard. He urged both inside and softly closed the door. Kate sank to a chair, and Johnny found a box close by.

"Tell me about it," he said, and his teeth had gritted on his words.

"It was just after dark," Kate said, in a tone that was just above a whisper. "We'd had supper and he seemed more like himself. I told him about you and that you were coming to ask him questions. When someone knocked, I said, 'That's Johnny now.' We had the lamp lighted. He was nearest the door and he opened it quickly. A pistol crashed terribly. I think I heard someone runing away, I don't know. He fell and was dead when I got to him."

She paused, drawing long breaths. Johnny said nothing.

"Some people came, after a while. That deputy, Ridge. Then Doctor Peters. They took him away."

Still Johnny was silent. He was thinking of this fine girl left alone with her young brother, helpless before such men as the two Bailey boys who could do what they wished and no one to object to it.

Kate went on: "They said you had shot two men and—"

"Ridge said it was prob'bly Johnny shot Dad, and it ain't so."

Johnny drew the lad to him, and Pete leaned against him and rested an arm on his shoulder.

"Kate, you had something you were going to tell me about Eli Titus."

She sighed, then seemed to get control of herself.

YES. I don't believe he is as bad off as they make out. I used to bring him, from time to time, something I had cooked. Always that guard was there and hung around and Eli acted as if he didn't know I was there. Then once, when the man's back was turned, he looked at me as sanely as you or I, and his lips moved and I know he wanted to tell me something. I have often thought of it, but I had so many things to worry about."

Johnny sat more erect.

"Now that makes right good sense. Kate, think you could take something to him early tomorrer?"

"That guard is sure to be there."

"Mebbe I can entertain him long enough for Eli to say his piece, if he's got anything to say."

"But they're hunting for you, Johnny. I heard Ridge say that."

"They won't do no huntin' in plain daylight, less'n things sorter get out of hand. Pete, want to do something for me?"

"You bet."

"Wish you would quiet-like go to Doc Peters, Ed Snow an' Leff Wells an' tell 'em you heard th' feller that broke Rose's arm say that he's expectin' some things to be happenin' right sudden tomorrer."

He made his arrangements with Kate, told them how near them he would be spending the night and got up to leave. Kate stood up with him.

"I'm sorry I was so weak. I am not really a coward, Johnny."

"Wish I had half your courage, Kate. You an' I an' Pete are going to see if a little shenangin won't make things a mite better hereabouts. Pete, you look out for your sister, an' come a runnin' if anyone bothers you tonight."

"I will, Johnny—honest."

Early morning, before banking hours, found Johnny casually approaching the little house where Eli Titus was living with his guard. As he remembered it, Eli had occupied another house on the other end of town, but he supposed this was Bailey's doing, to have him kept close at hand. Johnny knew that he was taking a gamble; that if the guard knew who he was, fireworks would be apt to start before Johnny wanted them to. But it was a chance he had to take.

Just before turning in from the roadway, Johnny saw Kate coming toward the rear with a small, covered package in her hands. He strode at once to the door and rapped sharply. After a moment's delay, a coarse voice called from behind it.

"Who're you an' what d'you want?"

"I want to see Mr. Titus."

"Can't. He's sick."

"Sick, huh? Open up an' tell me 'bout it 'fore I bust in."

The lock clicked; the door opened swiftly and a man appeared, half concealed by the jamb but showing his right hand on the butt of his pistol.

"Who' the' hell're you?"

Johnny grinned disarmingly. He'd been watching for the slightest sign of recognition and it hadn't come.

"Just come back to town an' heard about Eli. How bad is he?"

The guard tapped his head.

"Sho, now; you don't say." He stepped back a pace and, with a glance toward the door, lowered his voice. "Come out a mite an' tell me 'bout it so's I can tell th' folks back home."

The guard came to the step, left hand holding the doorknob; his right still on the gun.

"Been that way longer 'n I been—er—nursin' him. Wouldn't do no good for you to see him. 'Gainst doctor's orders anyway." He grinned slightly. "He wouldn't know you if you was his own son, which-all I cal'late you aint. Never seems to know when anybody's around him."

Johnny showed distress. He asked more questions until he thought he had delayed the man long enough without arousing his suspicion. He shook his head sadly.

"Well, thanks. I gotta be pushin'. Reckon's nothing I can do."

The man was sure there wasn't and backed through the door. Johnny, head bowed as if in deep thought, waited until it was closed, then walked slowly away.

He loitered a little, listening for voices inside the house to indicate if Kate had been discovered, and heard nothing. He was most anxious to see her, but that would have to wait as he didn't want anyone to observe him near her place. He watched, but didn't see her reappear.

Fnding a little restaurant, he ordered a bigger breakfast than he wanted and lingered over it until he saw Eli Titus, trailed by his guard, walk toward the bank. A few moments later, Bailey's buckboard drew up with a flourish before the squat building and the dapper man sprang down lightly and went inside. The team, driven by one of the sons, with the other in the back seat, started up the roadway.

Johnny's seeming lethargy left him. This was the opportunity he wanted; to meet Al Bailey alone with Eli inside that bank. Johnny had seen Eli's guard leave him at the bank steps and go on elsewhere. He'd

also observed another man with belted pistol, meet the two and enter with Eli; without question another guard for inside duty. Johnny hurriedly paid his bill and strode over.

As he was about to mount the steps, the buckboard was turned about and there could be no doubt in Johnny's mind that he was instantly recognized. The young fellow driving let out a yell and lashed his horses into swift motion.

IT COULD mean but one thing; the two were hurrying for reinforcements. In at few moments only, Ridge and his gang would come piling down, guns ready for the kill, for Johnny would be holed up with their boss who would certainly raise no objection.

In fact, Johnny already suspected that, in some way unknown to him, that boss had ordered Wilson's murder and set the pack scouring through the night for him.

It was too late for Johnny to slip away undiscovered; too late for him to get to the bay gelding and make his run. As a matter of fact, he didn't give that meager chance even a thought. He grinned a little as he went up the steps; he wanted inside and he had a hope that he might find there a joker to add to the ace at his right thigh.

He seemed not in the least hurried or perturbed as, walking forward, he glanced over the interior. Eli Titus was seated at a desk, at Johnny's left, head bowed low, his hands lying motionless. Directly behind Eli, the guard occupied a chair in the corner. Over to the right Bailey was behind a polished flat-topped desk, with a single chair set before it. Johnny thought he couldn't have arranged it better himself.

After the first swift glance, he didn't look toward Bailey. He stopped by the white-haired man with the drooping head.

"Howdy, Eli," he said. "Remember me?"

Titus didn't look up. He gave no sign whatever that he had heard him.

"Young man," Bailey called from where he sat, "if you will be kind enough to come over here, I think I can take care of you."

"Now that's right obligin' of you, Mister," Johnny responded as he walked that way.

Bailey indicated the chair before the desk. Johnny took it up and set it beside the banker, putting the solid wall at his back, with Bailey close at his right. Johnny had the idea that Bailey wanted to study him, but the banker was as bland of expression as Johnny himself.

Johnny swept off his sombrero with his left hand, holding it in his lap with half of the brim up. Bailey nodded his head toward the opposite side of the square room.

"It's a very pitiful case," he said, in lowered tone. "He wants to come to the bank each day and I humor him. The poor fellow is harmless and he's not in my way." He smiled at his own good-heartedness. "Now," he added more briskly, "please tell me what I can do for you."

"I hope you won't take it bad, but I figger on drawin' my account with you."

Bailey laughed.

"That's quite all right. Happens every day. But you say you have an account with us?" A puzzled expression appeared on the banker's face.

"I sure enough have. Been sendin' you deposits pretty regular for nigh 'bout six years."

There was the sound of voices outside, unintelligible but with the note of excitement, and the scuffing of hurrying footsteps. Johnny saw Bailey give a quick glance toward the entrance. In that instant, without movement of body, Johnny drew the Colt and let it lie along his thigh. The sombrero would conceal it from anyone coming in, but it wasn't hidden from Bailey as he turned his glance back to his visitor.

"Don't mean you no harm, Bailey," Johnny said quietly, "lessen some feller tries to get too hasty. 'Sides, you an' I have got somethin to augur over, an' we can't do it right well with some fellers buttin' in."

That was Johnny's joker, and he waited to see how it would work. And Bailey, for whatever else he was, surprised Johnny a little.

"I see your point," he said coldly, and without a quiver of lip or eyelid. "It is well taken." He placed both hands on the desk before him and raised his head to stare toward the entrance.

Wihout losing Bailey from his vision, Johnny flicked a glance that way. The lanky deputy, Ridge, was in the lead, hand on pistol butt, flanked by two men. Behind

them and keeping themselves well covered, were the banker's sons. Ridge's face lighted on seeing Johnny, and he appeared about to draw his gun.

"I see you got him here, Mr. Bailey. We'll take him over now."

"Just a moment, Ridge," Bailey said calmly. "What is it you want to see this man for?"

"For murder," Ridge lashed out. "He shot two men in th' Palace las' night. A little later he knifed an' killed John Rose."

"What's that?" Johnny cried out involuntarily.

"That's what I said," Ridge declared stoutly. "Rose was killed less'n an hour after you shot them other two fellers in th' Palace."

"Ridge," Johnny said," at that time I was miles from here with witnesses that will stand up in any court. You prob'bly also know that I have a paper signed by Rose himself, coverin' that backshootin' in th' Palace. That, too, is in good hands. If you're just plain bent on murderin' me, you'll never have a better chance than right now."

Ridge hesitated.

"What should we do 'bout this, Mr. Bailey?" he asked.

The banker shrugged.

"Those are matters for the law," he said. "Just now, however, I have a little private business to discuss with this gentleman. Later, if you feel it necessary to arrest him, no doubt you will find him somewhere in town after he has finished here."

That, it was plain to Johnny, was the order for his execution.

Ridge grinned. There was no question about his understanding. He turned to harry his men out.

CHAPTER 4 Hardluck Hell!

As the entrance was cleared, Bailey turned to Johnny, and there was a little wicked gleam of triumph in his eyes. Johnny grinned right back at him. Both had raised but the final call hadn't been made yet.

Johnny slipped the Colt's back into its holster. In a way, it was a touch of bravado, but it also bespoke confidence, and that had its part in this game.

"Now to our little business," the banker said. "How much did you figure you had here?"

"Round about five thousand dollars."

"Hmm. That's quite a sizeable sum. It's strange. I thought I knew every account we have." He smiled. "What did you say your name is?"

"Hadlock—John Hadlock." Johnny spoke clearly and let his glance flicker across the room, but there was not the slightest change in Eli Titus' expression.

"Hadlock," Bailey repeated. "I am sure it is not on our books."

"Five thousand dollars," Johnny said deliberately, 'just don't get up an' run off by itself."

The banker made himself appear thoughtful.

"There must be some mistake. Naturally you don't want to lose it—any more than we want a man who thinks he is our client to be disappointed. I would like to think of a way this could be straightened out." Suddenly he smiled, blandly and genially. "How would you like to be the sheriff of this town, now that we have lost Rose?"

"I wouldn't be worth a nickle to you, Bailey, much less five thousand dollars. I just don't go to shoot a man in the back."

Just for an instant Johnny caught a gleam of the steel hardness, the stark cruelty beneath the smiling geniality in the banker's eyes. Then the mask was on again and with it, all of the man's assurance.

"No," he said heartily. "I size you up for one who would give any man an even chance."

Anger was beginning to rise in Johnny. This calm dismissal of his claim for his money was equivalent to stealing if from him. But this was no time for recklessness. Not with that bunch of killers waiting outside for him to appear.

"Would you, Bailey," he asked, "*ever* give a man an even chance, once you got the drop on him?"

Bailey waved that aside disdainfully.

"I don't go in for gunplay. I know nothing about guns."

"That's not true, Bailey," Johnny said harshly. "If you don't carry 'em on you, your guns are hidden. Your man Rose carried one; th' feller that tried to bushwhack me, another. Ridge, now, and whoever murdered Wilson last night. All those

guns are drawn on me now, Bailey. Do you know any reason why I shouldn't start shootin' the man who had 'em drawn?"

Bailey looked at Johnny once, then quickly averted his eyes.

"This is foolish talk."

"Mebbe, an' mebbe not. I stand bein' pushed just so far, Bailey."

He stood up and looked down at the stout banker with fearless eyes. He said softly: "I'm warning you—if any of those hidden guns of yours open up on me, I'll come right back to settle with you personal."

He walked slowly toward the door, ostentatiously watching Eli Titus, but in reality keeping in his vision the guard who sat stonily in the corner of the room. Gaining the wideopen door, he went through swiftly.

As he reached the first step, he caught a slight movement above the batwings of the Palace saloon. It was merely a flicker of motion, but Johnny instantly let himself drop to the ground. There was a blast of rifle flame.

Johnny thought he heard some sound behind him, but he lay motionless, eyes slitted, the colt in his right hand behind his back. A moment passed, then a rifle barrel poked the batwings open. A man stepped out, looked over and started to raise the weapon for another shot. It never came.

From Johnny's side of the street, there came the crashing report that only a long-barrelled six-gun could give. The killer's rifle dropped; the man's head jerked back, then he slumped on top of his weapon.

THINGS happened fast then. A second, hasty shot spurted from above the batwings. It was not aimed at Johnny, but Johnny was half erect, sending his first bullet into the dark opening above the swinging doors, and he was relieved when he heard the big revolver blast again.

He heard someone shout behind him, in the bank, and the sound of running feet. Then a gun crashed in there, followed by the thud of a falling body, and his thought was that poor old Eli Titus had got his at last. He ripped another shot where he knew Ridge and his men were hidden, then turned with the rage of vengeance.

A cracked voice called from behind him, from the room he'd just left;

"Johnny, git in here!"

Johnny froze. That wasn't Bailey's voice. It was an old man's voice. Eli Titus's!

Up the street, Old Dave Hansen, handlebars quivering, was steadily pouring shots at the batwings. But he was plainly in the open. One carefully aimed shot . . . Johnny yelled at him.

"Come arunnin', Dave. We'll hole up here." Then he paced his remaining bullets until the old sheriff slipped past him, and with a parting shot, Johnny followed him in.

A totally unexpected sight met his eyes. The guard's body lay motionless on the floor. Old Eli Titus was hopping toward him, a big gun dangling from one fist.

"You plum' damn fools," the old fellow was yelling, "Git that door shet."

Johnny left it to Eli to attend to that precaution. His gaze was drawn across the room where Bailey was slumped sidewise in his chair behind his elegant desk. His head was drooped down to one shoulder. Crimson spotted his fine vest. He was dead.

"Did you shoot him, Eli?" he demanded.

Eli Titus was erect, head high, his eyes blazing. Insane? Helpless from a stroke? He was the liveliest appearing of the three.

"Hell, no," he spat out. "That first bullet for you, Johnny, got him plum' center. I seen it out th' corner of one eye. Then that feller," he pointed pistol barrel at the prone figure, "let out a yell and went bustin' past me. Been waitin' for that nigh on to three years. Damit, that's the first man I ever shot in th' back, but he was right on top of you, Johnny, and I couldn't do nothing else."

"I kinder reckon," Dave Hansen broke in quietly, "that this air soc'able ain't all over yit." And as if to confirm it, a bullet thudded into the stout door; another sent glass from a window tinkling to the floor.

The former sheriff hustled into a corner, smashed glass from a window and turned loose a couple of shots from the Peacemaker.

Johnny sought another corner but his brain was working faster than his Colt. "Hey, Eli," he called, "you been foolin' them all this time?"

"Lissen, Johnny," old Dave said querulously, "when we git through with this

fracas, you'n Eli can swap stories all you damn want, pervided—" he paused while the Peacemaker said its word—"you both can hear an' speak then!"

A bullet came in at a new angle, cutting the old fellow's sleeve and driving him closer into his corner. At the same time Johnny saw a man crossing the roadway further down at a run. A carefully aimed shot dropped the man to lie motionless in the dust. That seemed to call for a fresh fusillade from the attackers.

"Eli," Dave Hansen yelled above the crashing reports. "You know 'bout any rifle in here?"

"Ain't ary one."

"Safer to use your six-gun, Dave," Johnny told him.

"They's a son," Dave fumed, "has clumb up on top th' hotel with a rifle an' th' dirty skunk's keepin' me cornered."

Besides the single front window, where Dave had posted himself, there was one on either side with the fourth wall blank. The adjoining wooden shacks were about twenty feet distant and that worried the former sheriff. He gestured with his long-barrelled revolver.

"You fellers got to keep them varmints on the other side th' street. If they shoot from th' shacks, we'll be boogered."

Johnny glanced over where Eli Titus crouched at the opposite window, and a sudden thought struck him.

"Eli, did Kate Wilson get to you this morning?"

"Sure did. An' while you'n that guard was palaverin', I told her were she'd find my record book in that old house o'mine. Shows what you an' ever'body else had in th' bank, what Bailey plum' stole."

Johnny looked wildly about him. "Is there a back door here?" he called.

"Hell, no."

"Son," Dave Hansen warned, "Kate 'll have to shift for herself. Now shet up an' lemme see—" The roar of the Peacemaker finished the sentence for him. Dave peered above the high-angled weapon. "Wal, by gum; reckon I druv him off th' roof anyway."

The outside shots lessened, abruptly, then ceased altogether, while the beseiged could hear men shouting and answering yells from down the street. Stooping low, Johnny scuttled to the other side of his window, near Dave, for a better view. The buckboard had returned. Man after man was leaping from it, rifles in hand, yelling joyously to join the fray.

"Looks like Bailey's whole damn ranch crew," he muttered.

It was a long shot, but Johnny aimed carefully at the group of cowboys. As he fired he saw one stagger, dropping his rifle, then, clutching his shoulder, lean weakly against the vehicle. Johnny hustled back to his former position, with the window at his right.

SHOOTING recommenced from the Palace saloon and the two low buildings on either side of it, concentrating on the front window, the reports punctuated by exultant yells.

Then abruptly, guns crashed from the little building on Eli's side. But the bullets weren't aimed at his window. They were smashing at targets across the street.

"Got somebuddy on our side," Eli yelped.

"Likely Ed Snow an' Leff Wells," Dave answered, "an' them fellers with rifles 'll sure burn 'em down. Load up, boys, an' git ready for all hell."

Dave's prophesy was quick and terrible in its fulfillment. Shots crashed from half a dozen rifles as rapidly as hand could lever and pull trigger. Sixguns and another rifle added their clamor and lead where Ridge and his men were firing. Bullets smashed the remnants of glass left in windows, zinged off the iron bars, tore gaping holes in floor and walls and wrecked furniture.

Seeking cover as best they could, unable to reply to the leaden storm, the three men were not escaping unscathed. They were cut from head to foot by flying glass, nicked by bullets glancing from the bars. But all three were ready for the finish, grasping their fully reloaded weapons for the moment when they could again bring them into play.

"Watch fer a let-up an' heads showin'," the former sheriff yelled.

And suddenly, like the end of a passing shower, the downpour lessened in volume.

"Here she comes," old Dave called cheerfully, and from their prone positions all three rose to a crouch, desperately eager for their turn.

But someone was shouting outside; a

hoarse voice calling something in strained, excited tone. And then it registered.

"Hold yer shootin'! Gal comin'!"

Kate Wilson was Johnny's instant thought, and he sprang fully erect before his window. But it wasn't Kate. Another girl was spurring her mount at full run, leaning forward in her urgency, hair flying in the wind. Alice Bailey, daughter of the man who now lay slain by one of his own gunmen.

Her presence seemed magical, for the battle stopped and men looked openly from their shelters. Alice rode straight up the road to the bank, swung down and pounded her quirt on the door. With another motion, she waved back the cowboys and the deputy and his men who would have accompanied her, and pounded again.

"Let me in to my father," she called.

Johnny, knowing there was dynamite in that room, in the body of the banker, and that a breath would touch off the inferno, was peering through Eli's window at three men coming from the nearby shack. He called Dave.

"Is one of them Doc Peters?" And when Dave confirmed it, Johnny signalled the physician to come to the door. Johnny opened it, confronting the girl and screening her view of the interior.

"Oh, it's you," she said, and the ghost of a smile hovered on her lips. "What has happened here?"

He told her, and saw shock appear in her eyes, then blazing anger take its place. Her lips parted to voice it but Johnny forestalled that.

"Just a moment. You know Doctor Peters. There is no rifle in this place. Let him tell whether a pistol bullet or one from a rifle killed your father."

As Peters brushed past them, she looked at Johnny, a little bewildered and still angry, but with scarcely a sign of grief. Peters was back almost instantly.

"Nothing but a rifle could adone that," he said. "It went clean—"

"That's enough," Johnny said sharply.

"Damn them!" Alice Bailey burst out. She faced the group of cowboys. "Two you boys throw away those rifles, kick Tom and Ed off the seat and bring the buckboard here. The rest of you get back to the ranch pronto."

She faced the other way, and called the lanky deputy to her. "Ridge, you're through. You and one of your men with a rifle have done your last killing." She nodded toward the room. "If you stay around here I reckon these men will hang you and I hope to hell they will."

She waited and Johnny went over to her. She looked at him squarely with eyes that were deep and dark.

"I know what has been going on," she said. "I liked what I first saw of you, the way you stood up to those two bullies, my brothers. You're square. If you don't find all the money that should be here, come on out to the ranch. It will take me a little to clear up things and get out of this cursed country. I hope you will come."

She caught up the trailing reins, swung lightly into the saddle and followed the buckboard with its grim load.

Johnny went inside where were Dave Hansen and Eli Titus, with Snow, Doc Peters and Leff Wells. Ridge and his men had quickly disappeared, but others were slowly drifting toward the scene of the recent battle and the lodestone of their abandoned hopes. Kate Wilson, with little Pete, burst through the crowd and hurried inside directly to Johnny. She scanned his bloody appearance anxiously. On his smiling assurance that he had nothing but scratches, she handed him a ledger.

"It's all here," she said. "Your five thousand and a little more—ours and other people's. Eli made it all out, then had to play possum or be killed. Every moment, day and night, they watched him, fearing to kill him, unless they had to, or it would have given their thievery all away."

"'Pears to me," Dave Hansen drawled, "we got quite some clearin' up to do, an' I don't mean jest this room or jest them bankin' 'ccounts. I knowed all along I was rightfully sher'ff. I appoint you, Johnny, to take over, an' you can 'ppoint th' rest of us to help you git this air town clean. You've got a job, son."

Johnny saw Kate Wilson's eyes on him, hopefully. He thought of that strange girl, Alice Bailey, and he thought of another girl on the distant San Padre range. He shook his head, thoroughly puzzled.

"I dunno," he said slowly. "But maybe I'll have to hang around a mite anyway."

THE END

POWDERSMOKE RHYTHM

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

He grasped Haines' right wrist . . . and reached for his Colt.

Ivory-pounder Charlie Haines salvaged a shattered dream—with Frog Fisher's bushwhacking trigger prod.

★ ★

THE piano was badly out of tune with some of the keys sticking so that it was necessary to play around them, weaving in the harmony in the minor key, remembering which keys were off, which ones didn't play at all.

Charlie Haines, pianist at the big Pioneer Saloon and Gambling House, picked up the glass of beer the waiter set on the piano top, sipped it with his left hand, while he kept the melody going with the right. He wore a brown derby hat, set on the back of his head. He had his coat off because it was stifling hot inside the Pioneer, revealing lavender-colored suspenders and a striped shirt.

The beer was warm and of poor quality. Charlie Haines scowled as he put the half-empty glass back on top of the battered piano, and went at it again with both hands, hammering out the stuff he despised.

Behind him he could hear the hum of talk along the bar, the chink of silver and chips at the gaming tables. A gray pall of tobacco smoke hung over the big rectangular room on the lower floor although the evening was still young, and Eva Crandall had not made her appearance.

Old Jed Withers was up on the tiny stage lighting the kerosene lamps which served as footlights, which meant that she would be out in about ten minutes. At forty-two, with the marks of one disastrous love affair still showing in his gray eyes after eighteen years, Charlie Haines felt his heart beating faster.

A cigarette dangled loosely from his lips as his long, supple fingers flashed over the keys. Charlie Haines watched those fingers as he'd watched them for a thousand nights in half a hundred different places like the Pioneer, wondering idly how so much could be taken from a man's heart and still have so little effect on his fingers.

One month after his brilliant debut in Boston's Cromwell Hall, he had become engaged to a society girl. Three months later, when she broke off the engagement to elope with another man, he realized that hers had only been a passing infatuation brought about by his skill at the piano. He shocked the blue bloods of Boston by appearing at a recital crazy drunk.

Then he went on a month-long spree, and when it was over he left town, drifting west. He had drifted for eighteen years, playing in the honkatonks, picking up enough money to keep him in liquor, playing the cheap, popular music the saloon crowd wanted, hating it, hating himself.

Recently young and pretty Eva Crandall had come to the Pioneer. During the month and a half Charlie Haines had accompanied her nightly on the piano, he'd learned her story, respecting her all the more for it. Eva's father, a mining engineer, had been killed in a mine accident, and she'd been left alone. She'd always been able to sing, and she had an appealing voice. She sang home songs for the toughened miners and cowboy crowd in the Pioneer, bringing tears to their eyes.

She loved music, and many mornings while the swampers were cleaning out Frog Fisher's Pioneer Saloon and Gambling House, Charlie Haines played classical music for her—Chopin, Mendelssohn, Debussy. He thought he saw something in her eyes as she listened, and it carried him back eighteen years—back to hope again. But he couldn't forget that a waiter passed the hat for him halfway through each evening's work.

Old Jed Withers came over after he'd lighted all the lamps on the stage. Withers was a senile old man who did the swamping for Frog Fisher each morning. He had a mop of gray hair which stood up in tufts on the top of his head; he smelled of the stable as he leaped down over Charlie Haines' shoulder and said slyly,

"She wants you to play, 'Will you be my darlin', fer the last one, Charlie."

Charlie Haines slurred a measure of the popular number he was playing. He stared straight ahead of him at the batch of fly-specked music sheets on the rack, which he never looked at when playing.

"That right, Jed?" he murmured, and his fingers kept going, turning out the stipulated volume of sound for Frog Fisher's patrons.

Jed Withers poked him in the ribs with a bony finger. The old man cackled, then winked.

"What do you think o' that, Charlie? Who is she singin' that to, Charlie?"

Charlie Haines shook his head but didn't say anything.

And yet the hope was present, and it would not go away. At night it kept him awake, and in the day time he was having visions. Spurred on by Eva Crandall, he could still come back and astound the music lovers of America and Europe with his amazing skill on the ivories. He was not too old for his profession; the hard years he'd spent in the west would enable him to give a more mature interpretation to the works he played.

He said slowly, "You're an old fool, Jed."

"You'll find out," Withers chuckled. "You'll find out, Charlie."

Charlie Haines looked at the half-filled glass of beer on top of the piano. That afternoon he'd gone over the half-dozen songs Eva Crandall was to sing that night. 'Will you be my darling?' had not been one of the six. He decided for himself why the girl wanted the change made on the last number. This afternoon he had noticed that she had been unusually lively. She had listened, enthralled, as he played some exquisite pieces from Chopin.

Even big, brutal-faced Frog Fisher, sitting at a corner table, engaged in his usual solitaire, pricked up his thick ears as Charlie Haines poured out his soul in music, inspired by Eva.

NOW it was time for the nightly collection for the pianist, and big George Dickson, the floorman, came up behind Charlie Haines, slipping the derby hat from his head. Dickson, an ex-pugilist, also had listened to some of the concerts Charlie Haines gave behind the closed doors of the Pioneer while it was being cleaned. Something in Dickinson had been touched. He was a towering, red-faced man with wide, flapping ears, scarred eyes, a battered, twisted nose.

He'd offered to take up the collection because he thought he could get more than one of the Pioneer waiters, and to thank Charlie.

"All right, gents," Dickson was saying as Charlie continued to play, "Let's fill her up tonight. Charlie's the best damned pianner player this place ever had. Dig down."

It was the one small shred of pride left in Charlie Haines that he would never take up his own collection, stipulating to each saloonkeeper for whom he worked that a man would have to be provided for that.

Dickson came back in five minutes with a heavy hat which he placed on top of the piano, giving Charlie a nudge and a wink as he went away. Charlie said quietly,

"Thanks, George."

Frog Fisher waddled over during a pause in the music. Fisher was bow-legged, heavy-bodied, chunky in the shoulders, with a thick, hairy neck, and a round head like a cannonball, sparsely covered with scrubby brown hair. Frog Fisher had green, veiled eyes. He spoke around a stub of black cigar, saying,

"Another beer, Haines?"

"No, thanks," Charlie said. He didn't like Frog Fisher's beer; he didn't like Fisher's gambling games which were crooked; he didn't like Frog Fisher himself; he didn't like the way Fisher looked at Eva Crandall when she was singing up on the stage. It was the way a heavy-bodied bass, lolling at the bottom of a water hole, looked up at a butterfly fluttering on the surface, ready to strike.

Fisher was making a fortune with Eva Crandall singing in his establishment. Nightly, the crowds poured into the Pioneer, big spenders, men with money to lose at Frog Fisher's tables, attracted by the singing of the beautiful, dark-haired girl with the appealing voice; the girl who reminded them of the homes and women they'd left.

Frog Fisher was going to hate to see Eva Crandall go because with her went much of his profits, and Fisher hated to lose money.

"We'll get that damned pianner fixed one o' these days," Fisher said. "Ain't been no pianner tuner out this way fer over two years."

"I see," Charlie Haines said, wanting Fisher to go away.

Men were moving down from the other end of the long room as the announcement was shouted that the boys would now be 'entertained by the best damned little singer in French Flats.'

Young, red-headed Larry Simmons, a drifting assayer in French Flats, pulled up a chair alongside the piano and sat down. "Nice crowd tonight," Simmons said. He was smoking a cigar, leaning back in the chair, blowing the smoke toward the ceiling.

Charlie Haines glanced at the younger man out of the corner of his eyes. Nightly, young Simmons drifted into the Pioneer at about the time Eva Crandall was due to sing. He applauded loudly, and he dropped his money into the hat which was passed. He was another of the hundred-and-one young men in French Flats who had become infatuated with the girl, and who was doomed to disappointment.

Simmons said softly, "You're a lucky hombre, Charlie, sitting here every night, accompanying her."

"Am I?" Charlie Haines countered. He liked young Simmons. The assayer was a pretty steady young fellow, respected in French Flats. He didn't throw his money away at the gambling tables; he was a capable assayer according to reports; and he didn't drink too much.

Immediately before the curtain went up, old Jed Withers came over to the piano again. He bent down low so that no one else could hear. He whispered.

"Says she wants to see you backstage, Charlie, right after the last number." Then the old man winked slyly and ambled away.

Charlie Haines played a few fanfares just as the curtain started to waver. He watched the curtain through a mist which had come into his eyes. Feeling the kind of happiness he had not felt in eighteen years, he was

positive now that the girl really liked him, and that he had been a fool remaining distant, thinking that the difference in their ages was a barrier.

He had won her with his playing. She had recognized something in him which she had not found in other men. The last song on her program she had changed deliberately for him. It was her way of saying the things she could not say face to face.

Charlie Haines had his moment of pity for young Larry Simmons sitting by the piano smoking his cigar so calmly. He said charitably,

"Larry, how's the assay business these days? Making yourself a good stake?"

"I get by," Larry Simmons told him. "Pulling out of French Flats tomorrow. Have a job lined up with the big Montana Gold Mining Company up in Custer City. The thing I've been looking for for years."

"Good for you," Charlie Haines said heartily. "I like to see a young man get ahead."

Simmons looked at him curiously. He had stopped playing because the curtain still wasn't going up, and he was waiting for his cue from Jed Withers at one end of the little stage.

"What about you, Charlie?" Larry Simmons asked. "A man with your talent should be back east playing high-class music for people who appreciate it."

Charlie Haines shrugged. "It might come to that, Larry," he admitted softly. He was wondering how Eva would look in ermine, accompanying him to one of his recitals. He would have a carriage and stables, a beautiful home, champagne served at his table instead of Frog Fisher's warm beer.

The curtain was lifting now, and Eva Crandall stepped out, dressed in quiet blue. The miners started to howl and applaud, and silver dollars clattered to the boards of the stage. Jed Withers, expecting them, rushed out, scooping them into his hat.

She nodded to Charlie Haines at the piano, giving him a warm smile. Charlie played the first notes of the opening song. He was watching her as his fingers drifted over the keys gently. Her voice was rich and deep, and at the first note the miners quieted down. Charlie Haines could hear them breathing deeply as he kept the melody moving on the piano.

When she finished there was no sound in the saloon. Men sat on the edge of the chairs, hands clasped, sweaty, bearded faces slack. Then the roar of applause came. Looking up at her proudly, Charlie thought that even if he didn't make good as a concert pianist, together they could make out.

Glancing across the room, Charlie saw Frog Fisher leaning against his bar, heavy body shoved up against the wood, a glass of beer between his ponderous, hairy hands, green eyes half-closed.

SEVERAL times as Eva sang Charlie Haines caught her glancing in his direction. He felt his heart pounding beneath the striped shirt, and he poured his soul into the music, playing with a feeling he'd never known before.

And then she was through, smiling as she stepped back through the curtains, coming out several times as the miners continued to roar and gold coins clinked on the boards.

Charlie Haines turned to see how young Simmons was taking it, but the red-headed assayer was gone. With the curtain down, men drifted back to their gambling games and the bar. Charlie Haines went through several fast numbers and then pushed the stool back.

He stepped around the piano and pushed through the maroon curtain which led to the dressing room in the rear. There was a little corridor here, dimly lighted by a single kerosene lamp suspended from a bracket on the wall.

He didn't see them at first because they were standing in the shadows near Eva Crandall's dressing room door. They were standing very close. They were kissing.

Charlie Haines stopped abruptly, but they'd heard his step. Eva Crandall broke out of Larry Simmons' embrace and ran toward him. She was smiling, the happiness welling up in her brown eyes. She cried,

"Charlie—you've been so good. I wanted to tell you about it first."

She caught his hands and she stood there, looking into his eyes. Charlie Haines felt the ice congealing inside him. It was becoming difficult to breathe.

Larry Simmons was walking toward them, grinning, shoving his hands in his pockets, taking them out again.

"Larry and I are getting married," Eva

Crandall was saying breathlessly. "We decided last night, and I wanted you to be the first one to know. You've been such a good friend, Charlie."

"We're taking the morning stage out of French Flats," Larry Simmons said. "We're living in Custer City, if you want to stop in and see us some time, Charlie."

It was time to say something; it was time to smile. Charlie Haines wished them happiness, but his smile was a waxen one, and he was glad that the light was poor here in the corridor so that they could not see the hell in his eyes.

"Come to see us some time, Charlie," Eva Crandall begged. "We love to hear you play."

"I shall make an effort to go through Custer City one of these days," Charlie Haines nodded. He got away then, hardly seeing where he was going, but as he passed another curtained entrance way he caught a brief glimpse of a man's face, peering through the few inches of opening. It was a wide, brutal face, a round head like a cannonball. The face of Frog Fisher.

Charlie Haines kept going, pushing through the curtain out into the saloon again. He found his stool and he sat down. His fingers started to move over the keys, playing. He played softly, looking at the panel in front of him, at the faded, torn sheets of music, unaware of a drunk singing in one corner; two men at a card table near at hand arguing, cursing at each other; the clink of glasses at the bar.

Then big George Dickson, the floorman, came over, crackling his knuckles, grinning. The ex-pugilist leaned on the piano top, nodding his head in satisfaction. He said,

"That's it, Charlie. That's it."

"Is it, George?" Charlie Haines asked bitterly.

He got up from the piano then and reached for his hat. He looked down at the coins there and then walked over to the stage, signalling for Jed Withers to come over. Dumping the money on the stage he said,

"All yours, Jed."

He walked over to the bar, leaving the old man scooping up the coins, faded eyes lighting up. He stood at the elbow of the big bar, alone, leaning on the wood, rubbing the lower portions of his face with his hands.

Joe Smith, one of Fisher's four bartenders, slid a glass of beer in front of him, grinned, and said,

"Compliments of the house, Charlie."

Charlie Haines downed the drink. He saw Frog Fisher coming in through the little door behind the bar. Fisher had the black stub of cigar in his mouth, and he was chewing on it thoughtfully as he ducked under the bar and came up beside Charlie.

Charlie Haines didn't look at him. He stood at the bar, the empty beer glass gripped in his hands. Frog Fisher said softly,

"So they're figurin' on pullin' out!"

Charlie gave no sign that he had heard. He knew now that when young Simmons sat by his piano each night, Eva had been singing to the assayer.

Frog Fisher said, "An' why so sad, Charlie?"

Charlie Haines looked at him and then away.

"Kind o' like her yourself?" Fisher murmured.

"Shut up," Charlie Haines said.

Frog Fisher shrugged his immense shoulders. "If it was me," he observed, "I'd think o' somethin' to stop it. She's marryin' a boy; she's only a kid herself. What do they know?"

They know they're in love, Charlie Haines thought bitterly, *and it only comes once in a life time.*

"Me," Frog Fisher was saying, "I don't like to see her go either. Bad fer business."

"Try and stop them," Charlie scowled.

"You got a reason," Fisher grinned. "Maybe a better one than I have." He paused significantly, and then he added, "How kin a man get married when he's dead?"

CHARLIE HAINES turned to stare at the hard-faced saloonkeeper. Fisher's plan was so simple in a town like French Flats where men died nightly for so small an offense as a careless word.

"There's five hundred dollars out o' my till," Frog Fisher said slowly, "fer the man who sees to it that young Simmons don't ride that stage in the mornin'."

Charlie Haines squeezed the empty glass between his hands, and he had his picture

(Please continue on page 95)

HELLION'S TRAIL-END

CHET MORGAN put two more sticks of wood on the fire, then leaned back against the brown wall of the canyon, the firelight playing over his darkly handsome features. He could hear the murmur of the little stream that twisted down through the canyon and he could hear the lonesome whisper of the pines. He did not like that sound and he shivered a little.

He could think of a lot of places he would rather be set afoot. He was a Texan and he did not like this bleak, wind-whipped high country. He did not like it a little bit.

But Morgan didn't think that he would be sticking around here much longer. He knew that a man was trailing him, had been ever since he'd fogged out of that little mountain town of Pinecliff. At first there was a posse, but when the going got rough, they turned back. Only one rider had stuck to his trail, gaining slowly.

Heading for the pass that would take him across the mountains, Morgan had tried every trick he knew to shake the man on his back-trail. But he hadn't been able to. And Morgan had pushed his mount too hard. He hadn't realized he was doing it, but he had ridden the sorrel to death.

He didn't believe there was a house within a hundred miles of here, so he figured the only thing to do was wait until the rider who was following him came along. Then Morgan planned to put a bullet into that gent, grab his horse and be long gone. That was why he kept the fire burning brightly. He wanted to make it easy for that horsebacker to find him.

Chet Morgan grinned sardonically and rolled a smoke. He could see the round white moon above the rim of the canyon but its light did not reach here between the rocky walls. The darkness was thick beyond the circle of firelight and the pine trees continued to whisper eerily.

Morgan scowled, then suddenly he stiffened a little, his head twisting sideways. He heard the faint mutter of hoofbeats down the canyon and his breath began to come a little faster. He reckoned that was the gent he was expecting. It looked like the waiting was over.

He thought of the money he had hidden back in the brush—two saddlebags full of dinero—enough to set him up for life. It had been a cinch, he reflected, going into that gambling joint and sticking the place up. He figured he would have gotten away without any trouble at all if it hadn't been for that old girl in the spangled dress. He had been backing out of the place when she stepped from a side room with a gun in her hand. She had him right in her sights and so he let her have it.

It hadn't bothered him much, but he guessed it had put the law on his tail that much sooner. And now someone was riding down the canyon. Unless Morgan missed his guess, it was the gent who had kept coming after the rest of the posse had turned back.

Morgan tossed his cigarette into the fire and stepped back into the brush. He checked the loads in his gun and listened to the hoofbeats grow louder. He saw the rider come into sight and he lifted the gun, but he did not pull the trigger. There was something vaguely familiar about the rider; something that caused Morgan to frown and stare intently.

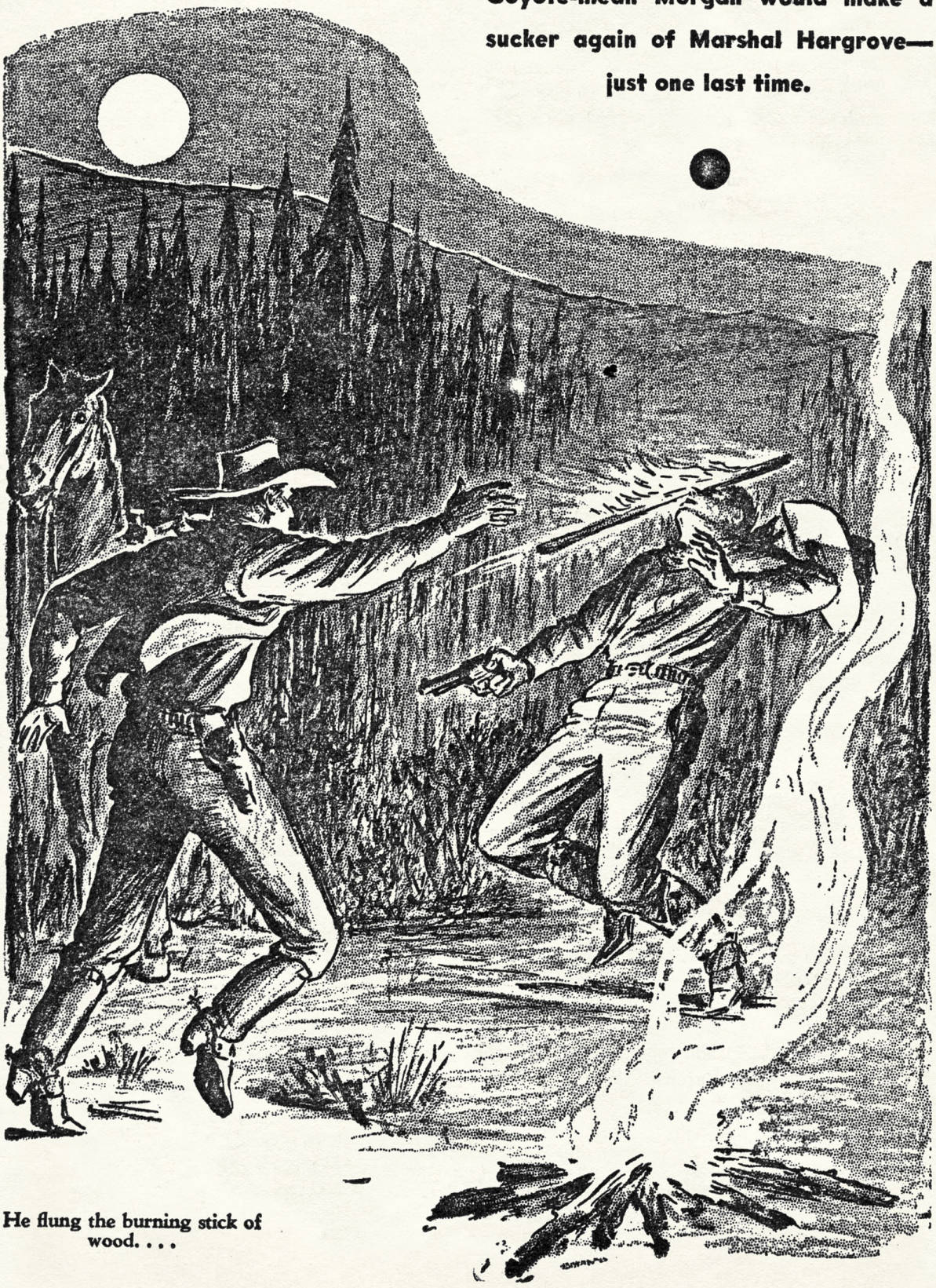
The horsebacker drew close, and though he wore a gun, he kept his hands on the horn of the saddle. "Might as well come on out, Chet. I know you're around somewhere."

Morgan stepped out of the brush, back into the circle of firelight. He had the gun gripped in his hand and his lips were thin and twisted. "I knew somebody was following me," he said. "But I didn't have any idea that it was you, fella."

The man on the long-legged black showed weariness in every line. His eyes were red-rimmed and his clothes were dusty. He looked like a scarecrow, Morgan thought; he looked skinny and pale. Mor-

By RAY GAULDEN

Coyote-mean Morgan would make a sucker again of Marshal Hargrove—just one last time.



He flung the burning stick of wood. . . .

gan's lips slanted with contempt. The same old Jim Hargrove.

"Climb down, Jim," Morgan said quietly, "and keep your hand away from your gun."

Hargrove nodded slowly and dismounted. He shuffled over to the fire and Morgan thought: *He looks worse than I ever saw him. But he's still wearing a badge.*

Hargrove held his hands out to the fire, shivering a little. "I was getting kind of cold," he muttered. "The fire feels good."

Morgan stepped forward and lifted his gun and tossed it beyond reach. He felt Hargrove's eyes upon him and he smiled crookedly. "It's been a long time, Jim. But I heard about you after I left home—heard how the fair-haired boy made good. First a sheriff, then a United States marshal."

Hargrove sat down on a boulder close to the fire. He said, "You put a lot of miles between you and Texas, Chet."

There was a mocking shine to Morgan's frosty eyes. "Yeah, I've been around some," he said, "since I ran away with your girl."

IF THERE was emotion in Hargrove, it did not show on his face. He bent over and turned a stick in the fire. He was not an old man, but there was gray in his hair and his eyes were those of a man who has suffered a lot. He said, "Mary loved you, Chet, and I thought you loved her. That's why I stepped out of the picture."

Morgan said, "You're breaking my heart."

There was a distant look in Hargrove's eyes. He continued, as though he hadn't heard what Morgan said, "I hoped she would be able to straighten you out, Chet. You'd run around with a lot of girls, but I thought maybe it was different with Mary. It wasn't, though. You grew tired of her."

Morgan shrugged carelessly. "I couldn't stick with any one woman—I'm just not built that way. Mary was a lot of fun at first, but then she got to nagging and preaching. I couldn't stand that."

Hargrove picked up a piece of the wood Morgan had gathered and put in on the fire. "No," he said dully. "You couldn't stand that. So you ran off and left her—without a dime and nobody to turn to."

Morgan uttered an ugly little laugh. "Well, she could have gone back to you. You'd have been glad to take her back, wouldn't you, Jim?"

The lawman nodded, his eyes somber. "Yes, I would have taken her back, Chet, but she didn't even let me hear from her. She was too proud."

Morgan scowled. "Well, don't make it sound so bad. I guess she didn't go hungry. She used to be pretty good at singing. She could always get a job at that."

Morgan had hunkered down beside the fire. Now he arose suddenly, impatience working on him. He said roughly, "All this talk's not getting us anywhere. I want to sit down to a good square meal again and I can't do that around here. I've got to get across the mountains."

Hargrove stared at him fixedly and there was something in the man's eyes that caused Morgan to shiver a little. He cursed himself silently, and he decided there was no use in fooling around any longer.

Hargrove said, "You figure on killing me and taking my horse. Is that it?"

"That's what I had in mind. You see, I never did like you, Jim. I remember how folks used to say, 'There goes Jim Hargrove. A fine fellow. Too bad old Chet Morgan couldn't of had a son like him.' And the way you always tried to treat me like a big brother. . . . I used to lay awake nights and hate you, Jim. That's why I took Mary away from you. I never loved her—I just did it to hurt you. And now, I need your horse, and this is a good spot to do what I always wanted to."

There was no fear in the lawman, and this angered Morgan. He wanted him to beg, to crawl. But he realized the man would never do it. He would die though, and Morgan could watch him kick out his life. Then he would leave him for the wolves and ride away.

Hargrove looked too tired to care about anything. He bent over and turned a piece of wood in the fire, and watching him, Morgan's eyes glowed wickedly. He lifted his gun and the hate was strong within him.

Then Jim Hargrove came to life. He moved suddenly, flinging the burning stick of wood into Morgan's face. Taken by surprise, Morgan leaped back, and then the

stick struck him and the flame seared his flesh and brought a cry of pain from his lips. He brought his left hand up and pawed at his eyes, cursing savagely. The gun had sagged and he tried to get it back in line, but Hargrove was on him, had slapped the gun from his hand.

Morgan leaned back against the canyon wall, breathing heavily. He put his fingers gingerly to his face and stared wild-eyed at the lawman.

Hargrove had picked up the gun. His lips were thin and rimmed with white. "I ought to kill you, Chet. I ought to put a bullet through your rotten heart. It wouldn't take much to get me to do it. But I guess I'll save you for the gallows."

Morgan forgot about his injured face now. There was a little band of sweat across his forehead and there was desperation in his eyes. He said hoarsely, "You wouldn't want to see me hanged—not you, Jim. Why, you always stuck up for me. You—you always—"

Hargrove's face was stony. "I always thought you was just a little wild, Chet—that one of these days you'd wake up. But tonight you killed a woman—"

Morgan took a step away from the wall, his mouth jerking, his eyes pleading. "Hell, Jim, it was just a dance hall floozie—just a cheap little—"

The lawman's eyes were boring into him and the rest of it stuck in Morgan's throat.

Hargrove said tonelessly, "Why do you think I followed you up here, Chet? Didn't you know that this wasn't a job for a U.S. marshal?"

Morgan looked puzzled. "I—I never stopped to think about it."

"No, you never stopped to think about anything, Chet, and you didn't stop to get a good look at that woman you killed, did you?"

Morgan shook his head, a nameless fear gnawing at his insides. "What—what are you getting at, Jim?"

The lawman's eyes did not leave his face and Morgan wanted to scream, but he held it back. Hargrove said, "That girl you killed, Chet, was Mary."

Morgan's mouth came open and his eyes widened. "You're crazy," he whispered. "It couldn't have been."

Hargrove nodded slowly. "But it was, Chet. I found out where she was a couple of weeks ago. That's why I came to be in Pinecliff. She had changed—she looked older. But it was Mary."

Morgan leaned weakly back against the canyon wall, his head spinning crazily. The deep silence of the high country closed in around him and there was only the wind through the pines, crooning softly. And those trees, he thought, were singing to him. He didn't like that song and he didn't like the words, but he couldn't keep from listening.

One day soon they're going to hang Chet Morgan.

Comin' Round The Mountain

The trail over Black Canyon Hill, Arizona, was so narrow that stagecoach drivers carried long tin horns like those used on Down East fishing boats. One long blast signaled an approach to a one-way passage, two toots an acknowledgment that the other driver would wait. If the signals were not heard and the stages met at impassable spots, the up-going team was unhitched and driver and passengers grabbed the tongue of the vehicle and rolled it down grade until a passable place was found. Because of the narrowness of the passage, Black Canyon Hill Trail was the scene of many stage holdups.

—L. H.

COLD-STEEL CURE

By JOHN MacDOUGALL MURRAY

"Come on, you damn fool!" Doc bellowed. . .

• •

IF A MAN could kill quickly, without questions or challenge—without fear of the noose—Bill Harkens knew in that moment he would have killed the big, florid, dudish-looking man closing the door of Bill's General Hardware and moving slowly down the length of it toward him.

His massiveness was of one piece from his hips to his shoulders, to the thick, bull neck, the heavy jowls, ending in folds of chin. His fat hands hung limply, glittering with rings, from the ends of the black

Hellwater trembled in fear of the pudgy Doc's kill-hungry gunmen—but Bill Harkens knew the Doc's knife was just as sure . . . and much, much slower.

sleeves of his coat. They were white, pasty-looking hands, without a callous or a hair. They were, Bill knew, one of Doc Bart's proudest possessions. He cared for them as a young mother does her first born.

He took the cigar out of his mouth and nodded to Bill affably, as though his visit were purely one of peace and happiness. "Howdy, Bill." He looked around him at the half-bare shelves. "Nice little place you've got yourself. What's it worth?"

"Five thousand if I was selling—which I'm not."

One fat hand lifted the cigar to his mouth again and Doc Bart nodded, squinting through the smoke drifting over the domes of his face, swirling lazily over the puffy bags beneath his eyes.

"I've been looking for you, Bill. This is just an accident I found you—sort of a lucky accident. It's right smack at a time when I can use you."

"I'm not interested, Doc, not a bit." Bill shut his mouth tight to keep from saying more.

"I wouldn't say that if I was you. You got a hot head—I'm taking that into account. But when it's not hot it's one of the clearest thinking things on this earh—and I don't give a damn about anything else." He waved one hand to indicate the store. "Don't tell me, like other fools before you, you've gone honest?"

"I'm not interested, Doc. What are you doing in Hellwater anyway?"

"Come down because—well, I heard Banker Clowd passed on—and by his own hand, poor old soul." He made a clucking sound with his lips, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"Clowd died this morning. News doesn't travel that fast, nor do horses!"

"Right!" Doc Bart snapped his fingers, smiling. "You see—that mind! Quick! Two and two make four, never six or seven! And I have to be surrounded by oafs that are lucky to have someone show them what end of a gun not to stand in front of. I need you, Billy."

"You're going to keep right on needing me then. I've got a beautiful little wife, a home in the hills—and a chance to sleep without a gun under my pillow and one ear cocked for the drumming of a posse."

Bill turned deliberately to straighten a shelf. "Don't slam the door as you go, Doc. Remember I've got a hot head, and if there's anything makes me mad, it's someone slamming a door."

Doc didn't go. He just grinned and moved closer to the counter to lift one hip onto its edge. "You remember, Billy," he said quietly, "what we used to—we used to call it plan A—when someone wouldn't move? Burn them out in the middle of the night—that was it, wasn't it?"

Bill turned swiftly, set the heels of his hands against the counter and leaned forward. "Did you come looking for a fight, Doc? You just happened to find me, and you've got a deal on—do you want a fight? Is that it?"

Doc made the same pitying sound with his lips. "That hot head, my, my. Now you're not thinking worth a damn. You know Doc would never travel alone. I've got the boys here. Pancho and Harry, Curly and Frisco Joe. You couldn't fight them all."

"There with you?"

"Sure they are. Over in the hotel. Why don't you go over and meet them? They'll be glad to see you." He got off the counter. "I'll tell them you're coming back and you come over tonight and see them."

He walked slowly to the door, stopped and looked back, then wagged a finger at Bill. "This is a big thing, Billy—biggest yet. It's going to put us all on velvet, and we're never going to have to worry about a posse again. Pancho or Frisco Joe will be sheriff. I'll be waiting for you."

Bill heard the door click shut without watching it. He dug out the makings of a smoke, pulled a drawer out behind him and sat on the edge of it.

Two things he knew—if Doc was here with all the boys it was something big. Small jobs Doc had always handled himself. Banks or stages or paymaster's trains he always took everyone on. Number two—Banker Clowd hadn't killed himself. It had looked like that, even to the powder burn on his temple, but it was a set-up.

TO TELL Doc he wasn't interested was all right. It sounded good, and it helped the pride—but you didn't just tell Doc something like that. Bill knew that from five years of close association—just as he knew that, regardless of Doc, he was going on living as he had, working each day and

going home at night to Charity and her little pink curtains and flowers on the dinner table.

One thing—he didn't know how—but Charity must never know about Doc. The renegade had mentioned Plan A. It had been said casually, but he knew Doc well enough to know that he'd do it. It wouldn't matter who it was, or how close they were to Doc—if they said no, and stuck by it, it was more than Doc was ever known to bear. "No" was something he said to others, but no one was to be fool enough to say it to him.

Well, it was "no," nothing else. Bill got up off the drawer and moved along behind the counter to a case of guns. For a long minute he stood looking at them, then picked one up, thumbed the cylinder, pulled the hammer back and let it snap down.

He stood there balancing it carefully, questioningly, then nodded to himself and broke it open to press shells into the cylinder. Finished, he thrust it into his belt and walked around the counter to go down the store.

Outside, he stood a moment on the board sidewalk, looking down the street at the sheriff's office and the Hellwater jail. Across from it stood Clowd's bank, closed now. Further up the wagon-rutted street was the long, false front facade of the hotel, with its usual shadowy loungers. He wondered momentarily if Doc was amongst them, or any of the boys; then thought the hell with it and went unhurriedly along the board sidewalk toward the sheriff's.

Conger was in there, his white head bending over a ledger, his gnarled hand pushing a pen laboriously. He looked up when Bill entered, nodded and went on with his work, his lower lip tucked between his teeth, as if the job were as painful as paring an ingrowing nail.

Bill leaned against the desk. "Completing the records on Banker Clowd?"

"Yup."

"How are you saying he died, Conger?"

He looked up at Bill quickly, puzzledly. "The way he did, of course, by his own hand."

"He didn't." Bill didn't say more. He waited for that to sink in deep, waited for the open-mouthed disbelief to fade from the old man's face.

"You're talking riddles, Bill. I don't like riddles. Clowd was sprawled forward across his desk, the gun in his hand, his temple hair scorched with the powder flash. That's no confounded riddle!"

"Just the same, Conger, he didn't kill himself."

Conger threw his pen down, splashing the ink on the ledger. He pushed his chair back and stood up, his fists clenched at his sides, his chin thrust out. "Stop standing there, man, talking things like that! If you know something I should know—tell it, damn it!"

Bill waved him down into the chair, moved over to the long table running down the center of the room and sat on the edge of it.

"I don't give a hoot in hell for your old heart, but Mrs. Conger does. Simmer down a mite and I'll talk. First off, promise me what I say is between us only. You know what you know but where you got it you forgot."

"For Charity?"

"For Charity, Conger. I'm taking my life in my hands, but she's worth more than that."

Bill said it with an intensity that reached into Conger. He nodded slowly, dry scrubbed his chin a moment and sat down. "Go ahead, Bill."

"Doc Bart's in town with a big deal on. Clowd was part of that deal—the first step."

"You know that because you used to be part of Doc Bart's gang?" Conger wasn't looking at him. He lifted a hand and looked at it, front and then back.

"For three years, until I got sick of running from the law."

"You've got facts, Bill?"

Bill shook his head. "Not that kind. I know Doc and he talked with me. He admitted nothing about Clowd, but I know. He wants to make me go back with him."

"And what did you say?"

"No." Bill straightened and patted the butt of the gun pressing into his belly. "That says I mean it."

Conger bent forward and opened a lower drawer in the desk, took out his own gun.

"Give me an hour before you move in on him, Conger. I've got a little business to do with Frisco Joe. He handles the money bags." Bill got down from the table. "In an hour you can open up—and you'd better take help."

"Never needed any for his kind."

Bill hesitated a moment in the doorway, and decided further warnings would be wasted. Old Conger had been taking care of Hellwater's few badmen for so long he was set in his convictions about his personal ability. He went out quietly and crossed the street to the front of Clowd's bank, then walked slowly up to the hotel.

YOUNG JENNINGS was back of the desk, his freckled face beaming, his red hair looking as though he'd run his stubby fingers back and forth through it to scratch his scalp and it bothered to smooth it down afterwards. Bill nodded to him.

"I'm looking for Frisco Joe Miller."

"Room One at the top of the stairs."

"Is he in there?"

Young Jennings nodded violently. "Just went up not five minutes ago."

"Thanks." Bill turned and climbed the stairs. Outside the door he paused, then knocked softly.

It opened swiftly and Frisco Joe Miller stood there in his long underwear, fingers of one hand thrust between the top two buttons, scratching his chest. Bill said nothing, simply smiling and waiting for Frisco to recognize him.

The man hadn't changed any, from the constant stubble of black beard on his jaws to the slits of eyes sunken deep in dark pits beneath bristling brows.

"Bill!" Frisco Joe shouted it loud enough for young Jennings to hear it down at the desk. "Well, come in, damn you! Doc said he saw you and you were coming back!"

Bill walked through the door held wide, closed it behind himself. Frisco Joe was at the commode, rattling bottles and glasses.

"We've got to have a drink on this, Bill. Some of Doc's own stuff too." He poured a couple of big ones and turned with them, holding one out. "Here's to the brains! Drink up!"

He poured half of his own down and banged the glass on the table top. "He said you were coming up to see us all and just talk. What have you been doing?"

Bill smiled. "First things first, Frisco. I've got some things to do before dark. After I get them done I'll be seeing you."

"Like what, Bill?"

"Like five thousand dollars for my place. Doc wants it. He's got other things for me to do, but he wants this done now."

"He said he'd give you five thousand?" Frisco Joe was incredulous. "He didn't say anything to me at all."

"He probably didn't want the others to know. Give me five thousand, Frisco."

"I can't, Bill. If Doc—"

"Let me worry about Doc. He said to tell you to give me five thousand—now."

Frisco Joe shook his head puzzledly, snatched up his drink and downed the rest of it. "We've got that much with us, sure, but—"

"You've got more than that. Doc told me everything. Give me five thousand or I won't be able to be back by dark—and Doc wants me here then."

For a long moment the owlhoot stood there, his lips compressed, then shrugged. "If you say so, Bill, but I wish I could see Doc right now."

"You worry too damn much. That's why Doc always lets you take care of the money."

"I've got to worry. If I made one single mistake I wouldn't be able to crawl, let alone walk or ride. You know that." Joe went back to the commode, opened the cabinet under it and fished in the darkness.

Bill spilled the roll of paper money on the table, scooped them into his leather change bag. "Tell Doc I'll be seeing him, but as long as he didn't mention this in front of the others, don't you do it. Wait until you get him alone."

Doc was crossing the lobby with Curly and Pancho when Bill went down. He walked with him out onto the veranda, leaving Curly and Pancho to go up alone. Outside he took Bill's arm and turned him.

"You changed your mind, Bill?"

"No."

"That's not right." Doc shook his head sadly. "You know that, Bill."

"I know a lot of things I didn't know before. One thing is how nice it is to sleep peaceful all night and know where you're going to be the next day." Bill shook off his arm. "You can't hurt me, Doc."

"That's plain talking big. You said your store was worth five thousand. Can you stand to lose five thousand?"

"As good as you can."

"You're going to, Bill." Doc blinked quickly, his lips tightening. "I'm not standing out here pleading with you any longer.

You come in or you stay out, take your choice."

"Out, Doc—I like it that way."

DOC considered him silently then nodded. "If you change your mind by morning come and see me. I'm done talking. You seem to have some fool idea I've gone soft!"

"You always did call me, 'the brains', remember."

"Go to hell!" Doc spun on his heel and lumbered across the veranda into the lobby.

Bill looked after him, then stepped down into the street and walked toward his General Hardware. Frisco Joe would be tongue tied with the other two in the room at the same time Doc walked in. He lived almost in terror of Doc, so Bill could count on that. But Frisco Joe might manage to get Doc aside and talk to him. That would take minutes—enough time, Bill hoped, to get a few things out of the store he was going to need, such as shells, a shotgun and his saddle out of the storeroom.

He woked as swiftly as possible without attracting attention, transferring everything he thought he would need to an abandoned woodshed behind the barber shop. Finished, he walked back to Sheriff Conger's office. The star-packer was sitting, his back to the desk, his feet on the table. When Bill walked in he stood up.

"You had five more minutes to go before the hour was up."

"I'm done." Bill dropped the leather bag on the desk. "I want you to keep that for me until I go out to the house."

"Money?" Conger lifted it, weighed it in his hand, his eyes narrowed.

"Five thousand in Federal Government paper."

Conger whistled softly.

"I want you to make me a deputy, Conger."

"To go after Doc? I don't need no deputy, Bill. I've handled that bad before."

"Go ahead then—get your damn fool head blown open! I'll watch from here."

Conger made a grunting sound of disgust in his throat and slammed out. Bill watched the lawman pause on the board sidewalk, looking across at Clowd's bank, and next to it the hotel. Then Conger stepped into the road, walking slowly, deliberately. Those who saw him would think his old legs were acting up again—all but Bill.

Alone out there, Conger was walking into a lion's cage and knew it. For all his bristling impatience and pride, he had a big lump of fear down inside and it was making him just a little sick, just a little doubtful of his ability.

He went up onto the veranda of the hotel glanced back briefly and went in. After that it was only minutes and he came out, Pancho and Curly behind him, holding him up off the boarding. They heaved him clumsily through the air and watched him fall into the dirt.

He lay there, holding his side, then pushed himself up, climbed to his feet. Bill could see he was hurt. He stood sort of stooped over, still rubbing that side, then straightened a little and looked at the hotel. Men were gathering along both sides of the street, watching. Conger took a limping step forward, then another.

Pancho and Curly made a threatening gesture, then stopped as Doc came out to stand between them.

Bill Harkens quietly lifted the window and leaned out.

"I'm warning you, Sheriff," Doc bawled, "come a step closer and it'll be your last! It's a shame a decent man can't come into town without being accused of everything that ever happened! Now get the hell back to watching your chickens where you belong!"

Conger took his gun out lamely and lifted it. It was the wrong thing to do. Doc whipped one from somewhere on his person. There were two shots, both Doc's, and Conger went down so hard he sent up a puff of dust. He didn't try to get up again but just lay there, his legs bent under him, one arm stretched out straight and unnaturally stiff.

Bill eased down below the window sill and brought out the gun he had lifted from the store case. Curly caught his first slug and spun, slamming against the pillar beside him before falling backwards into the street.

Pancho went for the gun on his thigh and doubled in the middle, holding himself. Bill laid the next one in the center of the bald spot on the top of his head and shifted the sights to Doc backing through the doorway. The lead chopped splinters out of the woodwork, nothing else. Bill put the window down and stood up.

THERE were still Harry and Frisco Joe, but at least he had made a beginning. Doc knew the shots came from the sheriff's office. The thought would follow naturally that it was some deputy—so it would be a good place to stay out of.

Not only that, when those Hellwater citizens got over their amazement they'd be in, and he didn't want that. He went to the back window, tapped it with the gun-barrel and stepped through the frame.

He walked around to the street and mixed with the crowd about the bodies. The men around him without exception were muttering and spitting and cursing—leaderless sheep, milling endlessly, making a thousand wrong guesses about who was in the hotel and why they shot Conger. Bill stood there, amongst them, listening without really hearing.

With an abruptness that was intended to surprise he squatted beside Conger, rolling his body over. It had its desired effect. They gathered swiftly, peering down to see what he had discovered.

Bill got up slowly, looking into their sweating faces, first one and then another and another. They all knew him—he was Bill Harkens who ran the General Hardware. When he spoke he kept his voice deliberately low, tense.

"What are we going to do about this?"

"Yeah, what?" someone muttered. "We goin' to take it?"

"That's Doc Bart in there," Bill said. "Doc and two more of his boys. They've come to take over Hellwater. They started by killing Clowd—making it look like he did it himself."

Their voices were a meaningless babble of sound. Bill let them go at it among themself, waiting. He had applied the match, now let the fire burn a little itself. And even while he was waiting he knew he was taking a chance only a fool would take. If Doc had time to denounce him, expose him for what he had been, everything was off. He cut into them at last:

"I'm for going in there and bringing Doc out!"

"You're crazy enough to draw against Doc or any of his boys," a bearded man muttered, "you just go and do it! I've been plenty of places and I've never seen the man yet who lived after making that mistake." He turned and pushed away.

"Any more of you feel like he does?" Bill challenged. "It'll be safe about a hundred miles from here."

"You lead and we'll follow, Bill Harkens!"

Bill couldn't see the speaker, but he nodded, lifted the gun out of his belt and laid a thumb on the hammer. "Those that don't want to come in, get around this place to make sure Doc doesn't go through a window or the back door!"

He walked slowly through them, up onto the veranda, giving them time to choose behind him, to form up. Like Conger, they were big with talk about Doc, but underneath they were in terror of the pudgy renegade.

Bill waited at the door and three men came up onto the veranda to go in with him. Bill pushed the door open, stepped into the lobby.

Young Jennings was behind the desk, looking scared. He came around it to cross to the stairs, blocking them.

"Pa don't want the place shot up, gents! He'll wallop the tar out of me!"

Bill pushed past him and started up the stairs. Doc would know now they were coming. He wouldn't run. He hadn't earned his reputation that way.

At the top of the stairs Bill paused, motioning the three following him into positions on both sides of the corridor. He lifted a fist to bang on the door and spun.

DOWN the corridor two doors had opened quickly. Out of them stepped Harry and Frisco Joe. They uttered no sound whatsoever. Frisco Joe's mouth was twisted to one side, his eyes slitted, peering down the raised barrel of the gun he held. Harry was grinning toothily, his hat shoved far back on his balding head, his gun held in tight against his hip.

The corridor rocked and rolled and jumped in the crossfire. Bill felt the gun in his hand ripped from his fingers, leaving them stinging. He saw one of his three men go over backwards down the stairs, saw another crumple against the far wall, clawing at it, and the third throw his empty gun and run for the stairs. Frisco Joe caught the poor beggar with a slug between the shoulders that pitched him head-first into the lobby.

Now the door beside Bill opened and

Doc stood to one side, smiling. "Come in, Bill, come in."

Frisco Joe and Harry came toward him. Harry had his gun open, was pushing shells in, his face glistening with sweat. Frisco Joe motioned Bill into the room and started to follow. Doc blocked him with a motion of one fat hand.

"I'll handle this, Frisco—alone. You and Harry sit out there to make sure I'm not interrupted." He closed the door in their faces. "Well, Bill—so you came back."

Bill looked around the room. It was unchanged since he had first been in it to see Frisco Joe about the five thousand. He walked to the windows and looked out on the street.

The crowd had drawn back to the far board sidewalk to peer up at the windows fearfully. They had heard the shooting, had seen the two who crashed down the stairs. It was enough. Anyone who tangled with Doc Bart was crazy.

Bill licked a tongue over dry lips. How well he knew those thoughts—and how easy they had always made jobs for Doc.

Doc was still standing by the door, watching him, a half smile on his lips.

Bill glanced at him and all the bitterness in him welled up chokingly. Out there were men who could change this whole thing—men who wouldn't act, who wouldn't move, because a reputation held them in terror. He thought of Charity, sitting, waiting supper by now, wondering what was keeping him. He walked across to the bed and sat on the edge of it.

"You've got me, Doc." He forced a grin. "What do we do now?"

Doc nodded, lifting his brows just a little. "There's no hurry, Bill. You know what we do with your kind. I won't go into that."

"You don't want me back?"

"You don't want to come back. And even if you did I wouldn't have you." Doc crossed to the commode and poured himself a drink. He glanced out the windows and turned. "They could do a lot for you—but they won't."

"Why talk about it?" Bill got up. "I could use a drink."

"There's water in the slop pail. Harry shaved in it."

Bill shrugged. "Those string ties never did suit you, Doc. I think I told you that before."

"You didn't like the black suits, either, but folks know me by them." Doc swallowed his drink and threw the glass into a corner. "I never carried a gun. You know that, too."

"Sure, I sharpened your knife often enough. But whose gun did you use on Sheriff Conger—and why?"

"You saw that, did you? I was ashamed of it. They call me Doc because I use a knife so—so, well, delicately. I'm proud of that."

"You would be." Bill looked into the chipped jug of clear water on the commode and raised it to his lips.

"I told Curly and Pancho to break that damn fool's back when they threw him out. Instead of throwing him so he'd fall across the tie rail, they tossed him into the wagon ruts—and then folks began gathering. What could I do? Hell, I took Frisco Joe's gun; shoved it under my shirt and finished the job."

Bill lifted the jug to his lips again and swallowed. When he took it down it was to see Doc watching him, his eyes filled with speculation; the slender, gleaming steel of his knife held gently between the fingers of both hands, balancing it.

Bill knew from experience that look and what it meant. There was only a brief space of a few breaths between that moment and the next, when the knife would leave those fingers—not to kill outright, but to cripple. The killing would come later, slowly, deliberately, when Doc ripped away the shirt and began carving—delicately.

"You said there was no hurry, Doc."

"There isn't. This is just the beginning." The fingers of one hand took possession of the tip of the blade. It sloped downward briefly, then the arm lifted, shot back and out.

Bill dodged, timing himself to the split second. The knife bit deep into his thigh, instead of the belly as it had been aimed.

Bill lifted the jug and threw it. Doc hurled himself to one side and it crashed through the window into the street. Bill gritted his teeth and drew the knife out. It made his stomach turn over, rise up. He fought the feeling, walking limpingly toward Doc.

"Come on, you damn fool!" Doc bellowed, and a second knife seemed to slide into his hand. "Did you forget the second

knife that I always carry along with me?"

Bill laughed down in his throat, wiped the bloody blade of the knife on his shirt sleeve and took the tip of it between his fingers. "You better throw quick, Doc—or you won't be able to!"

"Wait!" Doc licked his lips.

"Wait, hell!"

Doc went white and threw in desperation. It was the wrong thing to do, and he obviously knew it the moment the blade left his fingers. His mouth dropped open when it thudded heavily, hilt first, into the commode and fell to the floor.

"Let me try!" Bill threw the knife he held, threw it purposely high.

Doc dropped in a shuddering crouch, then stared up at it, quivering high in the wooden partition. With a cry of joy he threw himself upward toward it.

It was what Bill wanted. He hurled himself forward and dragged him down from it, throwing him over by sheer force of drive. Doc flailed up at him with his fists, but they were soft pillows of fat. Bill sat astride him, lifted himself halfway up and thumped down on his belly with all his weight, making the breath grunt out of him.

His face crimson, Doc continued to lash upwards. Bill closed his hands on both trailing ends of the string tie, pulled hard, wrinkling the collar, making it bite in.

"Always said they didn't suit you, Doc —always said it!" His eyes were grim.

Doc's face changed from crimson to purple. His mouth opened, his nostrils dilating, his eyes rising up in their pits of fat, and the fists opened to rip frantically at the hands pulling the string tie. Then they fell away slowly, leadenly, to lie on the floor at each side. Bill waited another minute, then got up, feeling the sudden cold wetness of his trouser leg, and weak and dizzy with the effort of rising.

Outside, those faces were still peering up at the windows. Bill looked down on them through the broken window, then spat and turned back to drag Doc's body closer. He grunted and groaned and sweated it up to the sill, then lifted the legs and gave it a shove. They could have that to look at, to wonder at.

He walked almost drunkenly to the door, opened it. Harry and Frisco Joe were sitting on the top step. They turned, expectantly; then their mouths fell open. Bill walked toward them, passed between them and stopped, one step down.

"Get out of town, both of you! Hide somewhere until dark, you two, then ride like hell!"

He left them, in the act of rising, and went down into the lobby to find one of the Jennings. He had to get out to Charity quick and get someone to look at his leg—the hell with everything else.

GUN-SPEED SAVVY

By FRANCIS P. VERZANI

SAMUEL COLT invented the first practical cylinder gun in 1835. The frontiersmen of Texas were quick to see the advantages of the revolving firearm. Two techniques of gunmanship developed immediately.

Some of the early day gunmen put their bets on hitting the target with the first shot, reserving their remaining loads for emergency. Others depended on fire power, and threw as much lead as possible.

These exponents of fire power were handicapped by the mechanism of the revolver. It was a single action gun—the hammer had to be brought to full cock, and then the trigger had to be pulled before the gun would fire. All this took time. But the bang-bang boys got around this difficulty by developing a method of rapid fire that they called "Fanning."

This particular feat is accomplished by drawing and pointing the gun with one hand while operating the hammer with the other. The palm edge or heel of the second hand is brought against the hammer spur with a chopping motion. A glancing blow snaps the hammer to full cock. The trigger is held back, and the instant pressure on the hammer is released, the gun is discharged.

The striking hand brushes the hammer spur only long enough to accomplish its purpose, then passes on out of way of the accompanying recoil. This action is repeated for each succeeding shot, and the peculiar fluttering motion that develops is termed fanning.

The gun handler who depended primarily on the accuracy of his first shot was at a disadvantage. So he speeded up his performance by thumbing his hammer back, and then releasing it. This method of operation is known as slip-shooting.

Slip-shooting is similar to fanning, but instead of the palm edge of the second hand doing the work, the thumb of the drawing hand flips the hammer back. The trigger is held or dismantled, and pressure on the hammer is released as the gun muzzle lines on its target.

Another less well-known means of gun operation is the "Roll." This is a particularly showy but not too effective method of handling a revolver. The gun is spun forward on the trigger finger, and the thumb engages the hammer as the gun butt slaps into the palm of the hand. The spinning weight of the gun cocks the hammer, and the shot is "slipped" or triggered. Similar operation of two guns in known as the "Double Roll."

So much for firing the gun. Getting that gun into action is something else.

There are three general classifications of the quick gun draw: The hip draw—where the gun is carried at the side and drawn by the nearest hand. The cross draw —where the gun is pulled across the body by the hand opposite the holster. And the shoulder draw—a variation of the cross draw in which the gun is taken from a gun rig or harness that holds it under the arm. Each method has its champions, but actual speed is governed by two things—distance of travel, and ease of movement—as the gun comes into an effective position.

That effective position depends on the distance of the target. At short range, the gun may be discharged as soon as it levels clear of the holster. Greater distances require closer gun control, and a long shot may require a deliberate aim. The amount or drawing time is the sum total of the time required for each movement.

For this reason, advocates of the hip draw proclaim its advantage since movement is at a minimum. But the cross draw artist can get his shot away with equal speed by lining his body with the target, and firing as his gun clears leather. The shoulder draw is just as fast when done by an expert. All three draws have been done in one half second, and clean hits were scored on the target. That's fast!

When the range stretches out to twenty or more yards, the time for a draw and *hit* climbs up to two seconds. Anyone who can hit a man-sized target and do so consistantly in that time and at that distance is a top-notch gun artist.

(Next month: "Two-Gun Tricks.")

THE FATAL FIDDLER

Gunmen fled in horror and women wept in terror when mild Jake Bardee . . . played his violin.

"The devil's in that violin!" she screamed.

By JIMMY NICHOLS

JAKE BARDEE was what you might call a natural-born musician. He not only played entirely by ear, but he was 42 years old before he ever held a musical instrument in his hands.

Jake could never explain it, either. He grew up in the dying goldfields along the Sacramento, doing odd jobs, a little gambling, a little unsuccessful prospecting—and not much of anything. His father was killed in a barroom brawl in 1835 and his mother, fleeing back East with her penniless brood of twelve children, somehow overlooked Jake in the rush and left him behind.

It worked no great hardship on the boy, however. Money came easily to him and departed with only scarcely more effort. If he had never wandered across the dried bed of Feather Creek on that hot afternoon in August of 1867 and stumbled across an ordinary country-style auction sale, things might have been different. He might have lived out the rest of his life in peace and died with dignity.

As it was, Jake Bardee's name, from that day on, became one with the skull-and-crossboned image of sudden and violent death, a man from whom even the strongest gunman and the stoutest miner fled.

The moment that Jake saw the violin lying open in its worn leather case on the auctioneer's bench, he knew he had to have it. He didn't even know what it was—he thought it was some kind of banjo—but he knew that when he went away, the strange-looking stringed instrument would be tucked under his arm.

There was only one other bidder, and he dropped out as Jake bid swiftly up to three dollars. With trembling hands, the violin's new owner stroked the rose-satin wood—and then the crowd roared at the ignorance of this bumpkin as he placed it across his stomach and prepared to strum it with his fingers like a guitar. Grinning hugely, the auctioneer showed him how to tuck it under his chin and, handing him the rosined bow, explained how it worked.

Jake nodded impatiently. Of course! How stupid he was! He remembered now! Then he caught himself. What did he remember? It was gone—a fragment of thought, drifting across his brain. He lifted the bow and drew it boldly across the strings. To everyone's astonishment, a torrent of merry, golden notes rippled out, whole perfect, and professional—playing a wild, tuneful, irresistible melody that no one had ever heard before.

In no time at all, the entire crowd had joined hands and was skipping gayly in a circle round about the spare, shabby figure of Jake Bardee, who played on as though possessed. Tirelessly, the crowd danced on, and as they danced, a change came over the bright summer afternoon.

Clouds gathered swiftly, a purple thunderstorm rolled out of the mountains and suddenly a crack of lightning broke the dancers' spell and sent them scurrying for shelter. Jake stood alone as the first big drops of rain beat down. Then he put the violin in its case and walked slowly down the road.

Fifty miles later, he came to the outskirts of John Town, a raw, new mining settlement, half above the earth and half under it. Gold had been discovered just six months before and in the vicious scramble of each man to get his pile, the land was torn up and tossed about as though by a giant claw and the earth was riddled with tunnels, shafts and sliding mounds of slag.

An unlovely spot, but Jake was wet and hungry and he could see the cheerful sign of a hotel at the edge of the settlement.

He smiled a winning smile and approached the innkeeper. "I haven't any money," he admitted cheerfully, "but I could stand in the lobby or in the dining room and play for your guests."

"Play? Play cards?" asked the hotel man interestedly.

"No, music." Then, seeing the man's gathering scowl, he added hastily, "Like this." Opening the case there on the porch he began to play, the same wild, nameless tune that had mesmerized the dancers at the auction. In a few minutes a large and silent crowd had gathered. Jake began a strategic retreat to the dining hall. The crowd followed and sat dumbly down at the tables.

"You win," the owner told him. "Keep playing!" And he began to dish out supper to the crowd before they could change their minds.

At ten o'clock that night, Jake was still sawing away on his violin. He was tired now, and uncomfortable—sweat was pouring down his face and his arms and neck muscles ached. More than that, he was finding it difficult to breathe. An icy clamp seemed to have fastened itself across the small of his back and a great weight seemed to be pressing down on his skull. He was oppressed by a sense of gathering doom. Time after time, he tried to lay down his bow, but the throng refused to hear of it.

"Play 'til eleven o'clock!" they begged him. "The last shift will be out of the mines by then and they'll want to hear you! Go on! Please go on!"

At ten-thirty, a string snapped on the violin's bridge. Recoiling, it whipped him across the cheeks, leaving a fine, red welt. The music broke off, discordant, and silence rolled through the room. Then, an instant later, they all heard it.

It was a dull, muffled roar, at first. Then the underground explosions swelled to a mighty crescendo. The hotel shook under the feet of the paralyzed musician and the men and women who turned, stumbling desperately, to escape into the street. As they ran, the ground opened before them and they piled, screaming, into a blazing mine shaft.

No one who was there ever forgot the Big Lick mine disaster at John Town.

Seventeen men and three women were killed above the ground and dozens were injured. The eleven o'clock shift never got out of the mines. Help began to arrive the next day. As news of the tragedy swept the coast, men and pack mules poured into John Town to bring food and medical supplies while heroic settlers' wives traveled miles over the mountains to volunteer as nurses.

IT WAS not Jake Bardee's idea that he should play at a benefit concert to raise money for the widows and orphans of the men entombed in the mine. In fact, he resisted it bitterly without quite knowing why. He had not touched his violin since the night of the accident. But he could not very well refuse.

The concert hall was crowded for the musician's second John Town debut. Everyone who was not too numbed by grief to care was anxious to hear this musician who played so wonderfully well. And Jake did not disappoint them. He played generously for three hours. At the end of that time, the familiar feeling of fatigue, coupled with a vague uneasiness, settled down on him and he attempted to leave the stage.

"Encore! Encore!" the audience begged.

Someone seized him by the arm. "You can't leave now—we ain't took up the collection yet!"

Reluctantly, Bardee returned to the platform and struck just two notes. A sharp crack reverberated through the house. Everyone jumped, mistaking it for a pistol shot. But it was not. The main rafter, a solid log all of three feet thick, had suddenly split like a piece of dry kindling. As Jake watched, the roof sagged slowly in the center, then collapsed with a rush on the shrieking audience. Three miners were killed.

As the crushed bodies were uncovered and the ridgepole lifted by a dozen men off others still living, a muttering roar swept through the crowd. One hysterical woman was the first to voice the cry that haunted Jake Bardee for the rest of his life.

"The devil's in that violin!" she screamed. "It's bewitched, I tell you! Get that man away from me!" and she pointed accusingly at the stooped, agonized figure of Jake Bardee.

"Hang him!" A man grabbed Jake's shoulder. "Ride him out on a rail! Who is he, anyhow?"

Somehow, Jake recovered himself enough to take to his heels. Sobbing under his breath, wondering desperately to himself if it were really possible that he had the power to destroy, he stumbled outside, down the pock-marked road, past the fresh cemetery where the other victims had been buried, and on into the night.

* * *

How far he walked, he never knew, nor how many days he was on the trail. He could never remember if he ate or slept or even stopped to rest. All he knew was that one day he found himself walking wearily across a wide prairie toward the sparse buildings of a little cattle town.

"What place is this?" he asked as he limped down the main street.

"Why, it's Lincoln, Nevada, stranger," a man answered him. "You going ter play that thing at the opery house?"

With a start, Jake looked down, following the man's gaze. The violin, secure in its stained leather case, was still clinging to his hand.

For hours, pacing back and forth in his hotel bedroom, Jake argued with himself. It was silly, superstitious, ridiculous, he scolded. Music was music. How could mere notes floating out on the air blow up a mine and cave in a roof? He siezed the violin and examined it carefully. There was no mark, no mysterious inscription, nothing to hint that it was anything but an ordinary violin. A very ordinary violin, he amended, for the best instruments, he had learned, were signed by their makers like fine paintings.

Deciding to place the decision in hands other than his own, he went to the owner of the Opera House, grizzled Abe Benton, and told him the whole story. Abe laughed until he wept.

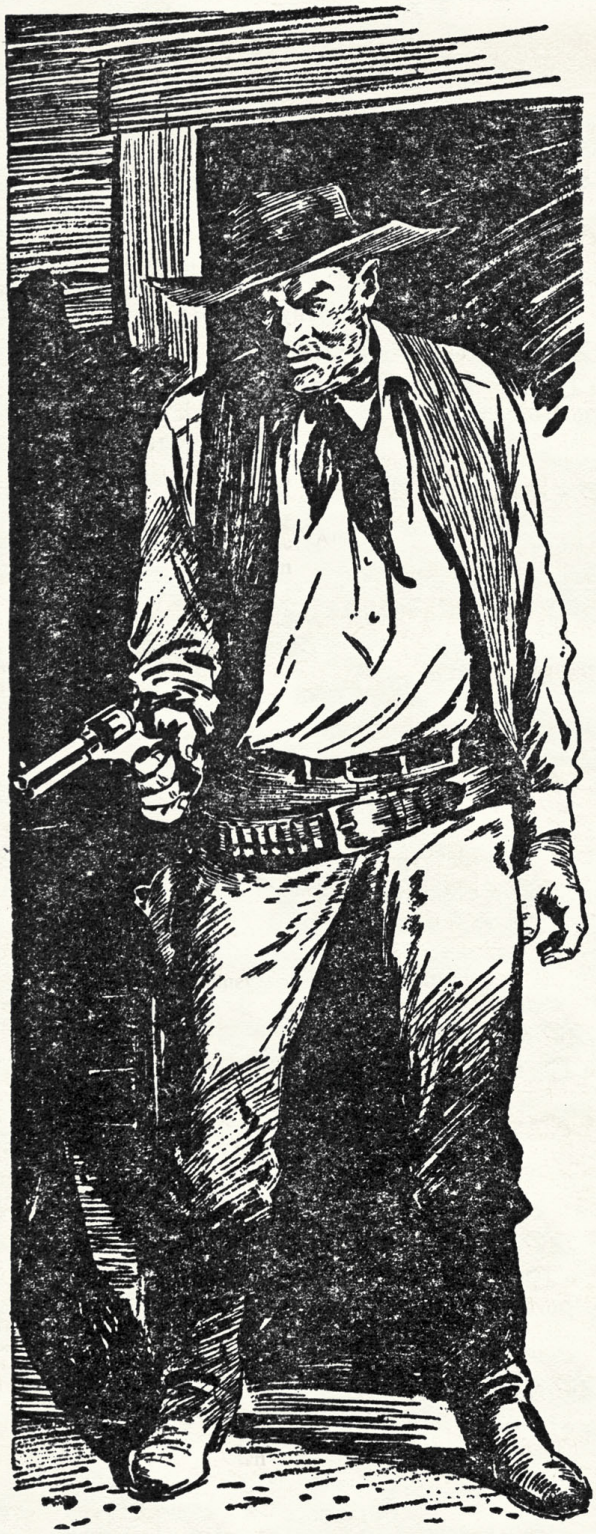
"Them silly, ignorant fellers out on the coast," he said, shaking his head sadly. "They just hadda blame someone fer what happened. 'Stead o' blamin' their own dumb heads for not shorin' up the mines and watchin' how they play with dynamite, they'd ruther blame the Devil. As fer thet roof a-fallin', of course 'twas weakened by th' explosion."

(Please continued on page 98)

BLACK FIRE at DEATH MOUNTAIN

All his life wilderness-bred Joel Dirrick had listened to the brooding mountain—but it remained for gold-greedy Erlin to learn its dread curse.

Very slowly Joel Dirrick turned. . . .



Startling Saga of the Sierra Nevadas

By STEWART TOLAND

CHAPTER 1 A Killer Is Born

It was the mountain that had the most to do with it—this pile of granite and tumbled débris, of snow and ice, of bottomless gorges, of wind and sun like devil's playthings in its frozen hair. It squatted above the earth, a brooding monster as yet unnamed and almost unknown on the edge of the Sierra Nevada in this year of our Lord 1864.

It was the mountain that had brought Joel Dirrick here. It had called to him from miles and miles away. He had stood on the bed of a Conestoga wagon and leaned through the dawn and watched this mountain come out of the haze.

It wasn't a tall, thin spire like a beckoning finger; it was broad and squat and capped with white, like the head of an old, old man with a high forehead, and there was a black gash where his mouth might be, screaming at him through the silence:

Come! Come here to me.

And Joel Dirrick went.

He might even have gone alone, a boy of fourteen running through a wilderness, running to this bit of stone like an island riding in the sky. Only his father heard the mountain calling, too. He listened to it, and he listened to an old Indian chief.

"Go to the mountain, white man. You have a son and it is in the mountains he will learn to be a man. For the mountains are men, too. My people have known that since the first day crept out of the earth. The mountains are wise old men. From them your son will learn caution; he will learn to know all the gods of the moon and the sun and the wind. He will learn wisdom and bravery.

"And he will learn evil. What evil brings. There is no cheating, no lying, no stealing from a mountain."

The Indian lowered his eyes, and the crown of eagle feathers above them whispered with the first stirrings of the morning breeze. "That is the best of what he will learn. How a man cannot cheat—not the gods, nor himself nor his brother without paying a penalty. And the penalty the mountains ask is death."

So there it was on that first day six years before—that word *death*. . . .

Yet still Joel Dirrick and his father went on. They built a cabin at the foot of the mountain, and in time they came to know what the Indian had meant. They learned all the things he said they would and one thing more. Love. The Indian had forgotten to tell them how much they would grow to love their mountain and their home.

They had everything any man could wish for. But in these six years death had called twice.

The first time it took Dirrick's father. That was in '63. Joel Dirrick's father had been cheating, himself: he had worked in the spring round-up too long and too hard and too fast, and he hadn't thought of himself at all. And he had died.

And death came the second time. . . .

Joel Dirrick leaned through the night staring at where the fire had been. It was a black night. There was no moon, no star, no wind. That was it. That was how he knew death had come. There was no wind to blow the fire out and yet it was gone. No wind, so it must have been the breath of death that had swallowed the flames. That was what the Indians said—there was only one breath stronger than the wind, stronger and colder, the one that belonged to death.

One moment there had been that small red blaze like a bloodshot, angry eye watching him from the ground, and then the eye had winked and there was nothing left. Not an ember, not a spark. Joel struck one of his precious matches and lighted a candle and held it low over the ash, and he could read death in it. He had learned that from a Kaw Indian once, how the Indian read the ashes of his campfire. He could see life in them and death; he could tell a man's future by the way the ashes lay.

Dirrick took a curved green stick and stirred them, and the ashes settled in small, rounding mounds, grave mounds they looked to be. Grave mounds in his campfire.

Young, proud lips pursed and blew the candle out. The flame made a picture of his face for a fleeting moment: bronze skin, wide blue eyes, red hair. He was handsome and he was cautious. That was in the slitting of his eyes, in the cock of his head as he listened. He heard nothing.

All night he sat there in the dark with a gun in his lap, and in the morning he searched his valley and found nothing. He could not see where the death waited.

He slept for a while that afternoon and once again at dusk he made his fire beside his cabin door. He roasted beef and boiled tea, and the ashes of his fire spelt death.

Next morning Joel Dirrick mounted his pony and rode west. For thirteen hours he never left saddle. And then he made a campfire, and this night's ashes told a different tale. He slept well and awoke early and watched his mountain come out of the dawn. And he listened to it calling.

You'll never get away, you know. You'll always wonder what the ashes meant. And if you run you'll be a coward; you will be cheating yourself. Remember what the old Chief said about cheating? About the penalty? Come back, Joel, and meet whatever is waiting here. Meet and conquer it. If you start running now, you'll never be able to stop.

Perhaps it was the mountain talking. Perhaps Joel Dirrick had lived alone too long, or perhaps he loved the mountain too much. Men who love mountains do mad, strange things. In this year of '64 the California Geological Survey had many such men climbing and scrambling and all but killing themselves as they explored this unknown Sierra Nevada. So he was not alone in his madness.

And he was not alone on the trail striking toward his cabin and his mountain. Farther to the east, angling in from the north were two men and four mules.

The men were quarreling.

"You wouldn't always have to be getting off and repacking those mules, Erlin, if you did it right in the first place."

"If I did right I'd ditch the whole thing and go east to God's country!" Erlin's broad, florid face was very red. "Why in hell's name I ever came out here!"

"Why did you?"

"For gold, of course!" He laughed bitterly. "And by the time I got here California was picked clean."

"The Chinese still make a living out of panning the streams."

"Who wants a living?" The words might have been oaths. "I want money."

The younger man stopped his mule and studied his companion as he might look at a new, strange bug. "Why did you join the survey? You don't love mountains, and you're not a scientist. And as my packer you scarcely earn more than pork and beans. Why did you join the survey?"

Erlin shrugged. "Because the survey is going where few white men have before. Because in climbing around these damn mountains maybe I'll find gold. A new strike richer than heaven and hell."

Dick Chesbie's lips curled. "And I had to be the one to draw you!"

"What's wrong with me?"

"Greed." He spat it contemptuously, and then he stared at the mountain towering above them. "With a map to make, with a new world to measure and name and conquer for all eternity, still you think only of gold!"

THEY rounded a bend in the trail, and there at the end of a meadow was a small log cabin. The door was closed and in front of it were the gray ashes of a fire.

"Hello!" Chesbie called once and then a second time. "I guess no one's home. We'll make our base camp here." He studied the mountain. "I'm going to do a little exploring before dark. Want to come?"

"Is it orders?"

"No. It isn't orders."

"Then I'll stay."

Chesbie watched Erlin squat against the cabin door and take out a plug of tobacco. "You don't have to come with me, but you're supposed to be packer and cook for this outfit. Unload the mules and turn them out to graze. I'll be back for dinner."

He slung a pair of field glasses over his shoulder and started up the mountain.

Frank Erlin bit off a chew. He waited until it was swirling over his gums with just the right slickness and then he unpacked the mules. He saw Chesbie like a small ant crawling in the distance, and he heard a mule train coming. He heard the creaking of wood, and the slapping of leather and the swearing of the driver. He heard the cracking of a bull whip, and then out of the forest of fir to the south came a wagon train pulled by twelve sweating mules.

The driver braked by the cabin and took a big envelope out of his pocket. A long slim envelope with two red seals on back.

"Howdy, stranger. Where's Joel Dirrick?"

Erlin stared at the letter. With the printing on the front and those seals, it looked to be an important letter.

Erlin shrugged and pointed at the black dot on the mountain that might be or might not be Joel Dirrick. "Want to wait till he comes back?"

"Hell, no, I've got traveling to do before sundown." The driver gave the letter to Erlin. "Give him this for me. I wouldn't give mail to just anyone, but I can see from your truck you're with the Survey." He shook his head. "Fine men Mr. Whitney's gathered, though I must say queer. All that work just to write a map!"

The mule train headed west and Erlin stood there with the letter. He didn't move until every last sound had melted in the distance, and then he ripped the envelope in half.

Joel Dirrick, Esquire:

Your uncle, Nathanial Dirrick, has just died. You, as his late brother's son, are his only heir. If you will present yourself in New York with this letter, and all the family history you can furnish for our verification, and a certain family heirloom you will know about without our naming it, we shall be glad to turn over to you your uncle's estate of $200,000.

Knowing the mails are somewhat uncertain due to storm and savages and thieves, we are dispatching six letters, two around the Horn, two across the Isthmus and two overland, hoping that one may reach you safely.

Respectfully yours,
Duncan, Rappalye and Bendriff,
Attorneys at law,
4 Wall Street,
New York City.

Two hundred thousand dollars. Gold! More gold than there was in all of California.

Frank Erlin began to shake. He trembled as though he'd taken a tropic fever. He read the spidery scrawl of the letter again and again, then finally folded it long and slim in his money belt, and he went inside the cabin.

He searched every inch of the one-room shack for something old or fine that might be classed as a family heirloom. There wasn't a thing—a few provisions, some blankets, a cook pot or two—nothing but junk.

A band of Digger Indians had set up camp on the other side of the clearing. The survey was frequently followed by the poor, beggaring Diggers, watching silently by every camp fire, waiting and ready to snatch any food that fell in the ashes and wolf it down. They couldn't be driven away, not with curses or sticks, only guns would do that and he couldn't show guns. He couldn't show any kind of anger until he had learned all about Joel Dirrick and his heirloom. Then would be time enough to start shooting.

Joel Dirrick rode up about eight o'clock that night.

He saw the flickering campfire through the firs with the two men hunkered above it, and he saw the Indians. He whispered to himself: "It this it? Is this what I must meet and conquer?"

There was only one way to learn the answer. He jumped off his pony and walked into the firelight.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Welcome to my home."

Dick Chesbie scrambled to his feet and put out his hand.

"I hope you don't mind our camping here. We belong to the survey and we wish to take some measurements from the top of the mountain. We shall be here a week, perhaps two—just long enough to get to know and map the mountain and surrounding country."

"Know my mountain in two weeks?" Joel Dirrick laughed, warm, soft laughter, like a woman cooing over her child. "I have lived here six years and I do not yet know all of my mountain. I never shall. Haven't you learned that mountains are jealous of their secrets?"

Dick Chesbie began to smile. "You're crazy as the rest of us!"

For an hour they talked of crags and débris and glaciers. Chesbie had come from the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale; he had climbed the Swiss Alps. He talked of the glaciers there and of the characteristics of the glaciers here; he talked storms and avalanches—and Joel Dirrick was like a man drinking cool water after a long, long thirst.

And Frank Erlin listened to the words in his heart. *Kill. How shall I kill him with those damn watching Diggers? How shall I find out about the heirloom, all the Dirrick family history I must know?*

CHAPTER 2 One Barking Dog

It was really easy to find out all Erlin needed to know, quite absurdly easy. He only had to ask that first question. "Does your father climb mountains, too?"

It had been almost a year since his father died and Joel wanted to talk about him. He wanted to make him live again. And he did. A kind man smiling at them from the flames. Joel told all his family history and Frank Erlin listened as though his life depended on it—or two hundred thousand dollars.

Erlin unfastened a stickpin from his tie and held it out. "That's all I have left of my father and of his father before him." He was very casual, almost shy. "I guess you'd call it a sort of family heirloom. Do you have one? Something left of your father and his people?"

Yes, Joel Dirrick had one. Joel took it out of his pocket; the top of a cane, one lump of gold fashioned into the shape of a barking dog.

Or death. That was what it really was. The sealing of his fate.

Erlin rolled the dog in the palm of his hand, and those words were back in his ears. *How can I kill him, with twenty watching Indians and one watching white man? How can I kill him?*

But there was the mountain. They could go up on the mountain alone, where there were no watching eyes to see, where there were deep, bottomless crevices. A man could fall and die there and no questions would be asked. Not ever.

And Joel Dirrick must die. The law firm had mailed six letters. There were five yet that could be delivered. It might take a month or a year or two years, but when they came, Joel Dirrick mustn't read them. One man's life was a small price to pay for two hundred thousand dollars.

Only it wasn't to be just one man. He would have to kill two. But Erlin didn't know that until the next morning when Dick Chesbie remembered about the muleteer and the letter.

It was Joel Dirrick who brought the subject up. Joel who had barred his door after the others had crept into their blankets, and

made a fire on his small stone hearth. And he read death in the ashes again. He sat for a long time above the gray mounds, so like miniature graves; and he remembered every word and every motion since he had returned to his home and its warning fires. He saw again that strange gleam of joy in Erlin's eyes as he had fondled the gold dog.

It was queer. Because the dog couldn't be worth more than a hundred dollars and Erlin had treated it as though he held a fortune in his hand.

That was why Dirrick, instead of putting it back in his buttoned pocket, buried it in the earth of his cabin floor. He buried it deep, more than two feet deep, and he covered the spot with ashes and crumbs and pounded with his feet until it was hard-packed as all the rest of the room.

And as soon as dawn came he went outside and looked around. He found the tracks of a wagon train; he found where it skidded to a halt. There were boot marks in the soft earth beside it.

"Hey, you fellows!" He called to the men packing up a day's provision and with theodolite and barometer already slung on their shoulders. "Did a wagon train stop by here yesterday?"

He might have struck them, they stood so still. It was Chesbie who answered.

"I forgot all about it. What was that he waved at me, Frank? I was watching through my glasses and it looked like a letter."

That was when Erlin knew he would have to kill Chesbie, too. Because no one must know about the letter. He would like to kill them both right now and be done with it. Only there were those twenty watching Diggers, men, women, and children, forty staring eyes. . . .

He couldn't take a chance. The world was getting too small. There was a railroad as far west as Missouri now; there were ships that could make New York in less than three months. No, he couldn't take any chances.

He shrugged. "It was a letter for a man named Stanley. He lives somewhere in these parts and the driver asked if I knew where. I didn't."

Chesbie and Erlin walked up the mountain without Dirrick. They were both disappointed. Chesbie couldn't understand why a man who loved climbing would pass up an opportunity. He and Dirrick had seemed to make such a quick, fast friendship the night before in their love for the same things—it was incredible that Dirrick would stay behind in the dawn alone. Out here in this lonely land where men were hungry for companionship, it was queer.

Only Joel Dirrick didn't stay alone. He dashed off on his pony and followed the wagon ruts until he heard swearing. It was mid morning by then, and the mule train had been bogged down in a mud hollow for more than two hours. Joel and his pony helped sweat and heave until the mules were free. Then there was time to talk.

"Did you stop at my cabin yesterday, Luke?"

"Sure. You waved at me from the mountains. That was the only reason I left the letter—because you saw me give it to that stranger."

"I wasn't on the mountain."

"Like hell you say!"

"What kind of a letter was it?"

"Important, it looked to be. It came from New York, a law firm—had two fancy sealing wax things in back. I'm sorry about this, Joel. Is that fellow still around? Want me to go back and take it up with him?"

"No. I could go and throttle it out of him, only Erlin mightn't throttle easy. I could search him but maybe the letter has been destroyed. Perhaps I'll do these things later, but first I'll try the stage station. If it was an important letter, there may be a duplicate there."

And there was. One of the letters that had come through the Isthmus to San Francisco, then overland into Joel Dirrick's hand.

Two hundred thousand dollars in his hands. Or almost. For the gold barking dog was buried in the cabin floor. He would have to go back. He would have to take one more chance with his fate.

And it was the last chance. For as he knelt on the floor of his cabin, just as he lifted the barking dog out of its hiding place, a shadow fell across his hands.

The shadow of a gun.

Very slowly Joel Dirrick turned. Frank Erlin stood in the doorway, sullen, watching. The death that had been in the ashes now burned in a man's eyes.

Dirrick pretended not to notice. He

yawned as he stood and he brushed the moist earth off the gold dog. He started to take a step toward Erlin—just one step when he needed ten to be close enough to throttle the fat, greasy neck. But there wasn't time for ten steps. With that first movement Erlin's finger had begun to pull on the trigger of his .44.

A gun on his heart, with the hammer already falling, and Joel Dirrick wasn't armed. He threw the dog, quick as thought. It flashed across the room to hit Erlin in the temple simultaneously with the roaring of the gun.

But Erlin had ducked, that last fraction of a second, and lost his aim. The bullet ploughed into the raftered ceiling as Dirrick closed in to finish what the gold dog had started. Not that it really needed finishing. A purple welt was growing on the freckled temple and Frank Erlin lay in a crumpled, stupid heap.

DIRRICK gagged and tied Erlin. Then he went outside where the first gray fingers of night were reaching down to touch the earth and make it cold. It was almost November, and there was winter riding in the sky; this winter that lived all year round on top of the mountains and for this little while spread its skirts wider. There was a storm brewing in the hurrying clouds, and in the clearing there was no sign of Dick Chesbie. Not even his bootprints coming down off the mountain. There were two sets going up and one coming down.

Joel Dirrick raised his eyes to the gray granite with the black-slashed crevices like wrinkles in an old man's face, and Dirrick heard words again. These words that sometimes he thought the mountain spoke and sometimes he thought his heart, when it really didn't matter which said it. That a young man had died, or would die, because of him. Because of a letter and two hundred thousand dollars.

Because Joel Dirrick had been a coward and run from an omen. If he had stayed he would have been there to receive the letter, and this thread of death might not have been spun.

He went up the mountain, Joel. That was what the words said, the words and the bootprints in the earth. *This young man who loved to climb so has gone up the mountain and he hasn't come back. He carried only provisions for a day and no blankets. Maybe he's at the bottom of a crevice, dead and broken, because he remembered a letter.*

Or maybe he was only killed to make a trap, a way to get you on the mountain to meet your fate that was written in the fire.

Those were part of the words. And there were others answering like a mocking echo. *Go away! Take your letter and your dog's head and your life, and run away.*

And that wasn't the mountain speaking. It wasn't his heart. It was the coward in him.

Joel Dirrick held the gold dog's head in his hand but he didn't see it. He saw a young man laughing as he had the night before when he talked of mountains. Laughing and loving and living.

The blue eyes looked up again at the mountain. Chesbie might be alive now, waiting up there hurt and alone, and by morning he would be dead. That was certainty. No matter what he was now, in the morning he would be dead. There would be no way to escape the cold, not for a man alone without a blanket or fire.

There was still sun up there on the frosted top, sunshine that made the gold dog seem pale by comparison. Everything the gold dog stood for was suddenly pale and cheap, because two hundred thousand dollars was so much less than a man's life. Because with all the money in the world in his pockets, he would never be able to forget this last thing the mountain said:

If you don't find out about Dick Chesbie, I'll haunt you for the rest of your life. Come! Come here to me.

And Joel Dirrick went.

He gathered up a couple of blankets and a rope and a piece of beef, and with two great pine knots under his arms he disappeared in the storm-hurried dusk. He followed the bootprints, two sets going up and one coming down. When it got too dark to see, he set a match to one of the pine knots and with it a blazing torch above his head, he walked on calling Chesbie's name.

He stopped to listen. The name echoed on the mountain, from ledge to ledge and from one mouth of a canyon to the next. "Chesbie. Chesbie. Chesbie." It was like a hundred men calling through the night.

And Frank Erlin in the cabin way below heard it, soft and low and lonely like the crying of the dead. No, it was as if the mountain were calling to him. "Chesbie's up here and Derrick. If you come you can finish this business. Finish it now forever."

Erlin worked at his gag. He slobbered and chewed over it until it was a thin, soggy line he could call through. And he brought the Indians to him, crowding silently in the doorway. Some of their eyes were on him and some on the flour barrel and some on the slabs of bacon hanging from the rafters.

"If you set me free it's yours. Everything in this house is yours, and the mules out there and the blankets. Everything but my long gun."

They set him free and he went out and watched that high, climbing light like a guiding star. He carried a rifle, and that was all he needed. He wouldn't have to come any closer than the reach of a bullet. Because now he knew what the heirloom was he could have one made, a barking dog of solid gold.

Joel Dirrick climbed higher and higher. He left the last of the lonely, stunted trees; he slipped over shifting débris and up ice shelves so steep he had to cut toe-holds with his knife. He climbed crevices by finger-holds alone, throwing his torch ahead of him, and for a minutes on end he waited breathlessly on ledges as the first frost-loosened avalanches of the night thundered past.

That was one of the deaths on the mountain, one of the things the mountain had taught him first. That after the sun had gone, and the frost settled in, the leverage it exerted could lift a block that weighed tons. It was madness to climb at night.

And yet he went on.

He came to a bank of bold buttresses just out through fields of ice. There was a frightful drop in front of them, a stream and a waterfall at the foot of a glacier to his left, and here beside him he found boot-prints. They were clear and plain in the snow—they and the story they told. There was the print of a clutching hand dragging down over the edge, and the tumbled blur where a body had fallen.

Dirrick held the torch high and listened to the stillness. For just a moment there wasn't a sound. The whole mountain had stopped breathing. There was no pop and crack of frost, there was no thunder of avalanche, there was no whine of the wind that had been growing and growing this last hour until it snatched the breath from his nose and all but ribboned his clothes.

There was no sound at all. Even the cascade could not be heard, its fall was so deep, so far away. The mountain was hushed and asleep in this frozen night. For this once, when it was so important, it didn't call to him.

Turn around, Joel, and see the man behind you. See, he's putting a rifle to his shoulder. And standing there in the torch light you make such a good target.

The mountain should have said that. But it didn't.

"Chesbie!" Dirrick called it only once, and faintly, through the echoes, he heard an answer.

"Here! I'm down here!"

Dirrick threw his torch then in a wide arc like a comet come to earth. It made a blaze of glory down a hundred feet, two hundred, half a thousand feet. And it showed a vast, tilted field of ice snagged here and there with boulders like broken, blackened teeth. And at the very bottom an infinitesimal speck that moved and might be a man.

CHAPTER 3 Hunter and Hunted

This moment was the gauge on which the balance of Joel's life was hung. Because there was a bullet nosing into a gun, and there was so little time left. It was perhaps for this one moment that all his father's teaching and the mountain's teaching had prepared him. If he took the brave way, risked his life to save another, he would escape the bullet. If he took the coward's way and hesitated, he would meet the bullet.

So little time. Just time enough to live. Or die.

Joel Dirrick snubbed his rope on a rock and slid over the edge of the snow field. As he worked down it, he heard a sound like a rifle—but then so many times frost snapped loud and sharp as a gun. And there was no second shot as he reached the flat platform at the foot of the snow field.

Then he heard the sharp crack of a rifle again, and this time he knew what it was. Because Erlin had got his range, and the bullet had ploughed into Joel's arm.

Joel Dirrick got up and ran, a blind, staggering run with only his ears to guide him. And at last he fell in the dark beside Dick Chesbie.

"My Lord, Dirrick, he was shooting at you! I saw the flashes of his gun. Has he gone mad?"

"Yes," Dirrick said. "Over two hundred thousand dollars."

Dirrick told of the letter, and they huddled close together and listened to the avalanche roar.

"You shouldn't have come, Dirrick." It was hard for Chesbie to speak. "I'm going to die and now you will, too. Because there's no escape from this ridge. Before dark I crawled all around it, and it's a thousand foot straight drop. On all sides except two—the snow field you came down and a wide waterfall." The words caught in his throat. "You can't climb the snow field, because Erlin will hold that with his rifle until we freeze to death. And you can't swim the lips of a waterfall."

Dirrick listened to the howling of the wind. It was wilder even than before. There was snow in it now, like small white nails driving into their cheeks. Coffin nails.

Dirrick lifted Chesbie's head where it had fallen on the ground. "Are you hurt?"

"Both my ankles—broken. And I'm about frozen. Before I die, Joel—"

Dirrick slapped Chesbie in the face, half a dozen times, hard, quick slaps. "Don't talk that way—you're not dead yet! Tell me—when you crawled did you find any wood? Are there any dead trees on the ridge?"

"Yes, I found one." Chesbie pointed weakly. "But I couldn't fire it—lost my matches and my flint. . . ."

Joel Dirrick dragged Chesbie across the ridge to the half-buried log. The wood was full of resin; it only took one match from his buttoned pocket to fire it.

It lay close against the granite wall, and the two men squeezed in the recess behind it. They warmed themselves by the blaze and began to live again.

Outside the recess the storm howled, and the massive ice and snow on the mountain creaked and shifted, and crashed down in mighty avalanches. Rocks tumbled down, and ton upon ton of ice and snow bounced on the ledge above their heads. Each time they waited to see if it would break, not daring to breathe; and when it didn't break, it was like being born again. Rocks smashed into their fire and showered them with sparks but little by little the cold thawed out of their bones, and they roasted the frozen beef Dirrick had tied to his back and made it a fine banquet.

Chesbie said: "This is good, Joel; this is the best of all my life. To have a friend by me, and a full stomach. It is better than dying on an empty stomach." There were lights twinkling in his eyes, almost like laughter. "Because you know this is only intermission, don't you?" He stared at the reflection on the high cavern wall opposite, separated from them by the gorge beyond their ledge and yet joined with this rainbow of dancing light from their own fire, and from another blaze higher up.

"We're close against the curve of the snow field where his bullets can't reach us now, and he is too much of a coward to come down the way you did. But there is no need. This fire won't last long, and there is no more meat. With that gun of his, Erlin can hold us trapped here till we freeze to death. It won't take too long."

Joel Dirrick listened to the wind. It was like an angry monster, hissing and seething and screeching. He studied the heavens and saw dawn not more than half an hour away.

"You're from a scientific school aren't you, Dick? And you've climbed mountains in Switzerland. But do you know the wind? Has a mountain ever taught you about its winds?"

Dick Chesbie didn't answer right away. There was something in Dirrick's voice, a strange triumph that sent little chills racing over his scalp.

"What do you mean, Joel?"

"I mean that the storm will reach its height just at dawn. And it will probably not last much longer. The sun will come out, hot and red and beautiful. That's the way the storms are here sometimes. I've prayed this will be no different."

"Why? What difference will the sun make to us? We can't eat it."

"Peter, will you trust me? Will you take a chance on dying horribly in one terrible

moment, or maybe living forever? As much forever as any man ever has?"

Chesbie said simply: "What do you want me to do?"

"Give me your climbing shoes with their sharp cleats. And pray that the storm will grow! That it will match the fiercest storm that has ever been on this mountain, like the ones I've heard of playing around the great Yosemite Falls."

They sat in golden firelight and watched the first dawn creep over the top of the Sierra Nevada. Watching, waiting. And the storm grew and grew, trying to tear the mountains apart, until Chesbie admitted he had never seen its equal, not even in the Alps.

The storm shrieked and tore at the mountain, and finally Joel Dirrick got up and tied his tight woven Mexican rope around Chesbie's chest, just under his arm pits.

"Hug your knees, Dick, and keep your broken feet off the ground. I don't want you dying of pain."

And then, leaning on his rope like a hunter coming from the forest with his kill, Dirrick dragged Chesbie in the safety of the long ledge of rock that bounded the tilted snow field, over to the edge of the falls.

THE falls were perhaps twenty feet wide with a six hundred foot drop down below. On the other side of the waterfall there was a sloping rock débris instead of the sheer wall on this side. A man could climb down to earth on that side of the falls. But they were on the wrong side.

Chesbie stared at the stream, tons and tons of water falling. He shouted above the howling wind:

"There's no way of crossing it, Joel. Your rope isn't long enough to throw and reach the first crag. Even if it were, it would do us no good, not with that water. We would be dashed to death."

"Hush! And listen to the wind."

They listened—they could not help it. The wind battered against their eardrums, screeching, whining, blasting—like some unleashed demon.

And it happened then. The wind rose to new fury—and suddenly there was a horrible boiling sound. The sound of an angry river churing and fighting, of white frothed waves pushed back against other waves and forming a wall as tall as a man. That was what the wind had done.

It had stopped the running of a river.

The water curled back on that lip of stone, and Joel Dirrick ran before it, dragging that dead weight behind him. One minute. Sixty seconds. Twenty feet to go. The stones were slick with slime, the wind pushed the men against that water wall. It held them prisoners, too. Joel Dirrick fought it and Chesbie fought it. He clawed and pulled at the rocks with his hands. He screamed at Joel.

"Drop the rope! Go on, save yourself! Without me you can live."

Only Joel didn't drop the rope. He was pushed into that wall of water, and strangely it was respite. In the water he couldn't feel the wind; it was so cold, he couldn't even breathe or think. He couldn't hear the bullets screaming down from the monster who had watched their madness from the edge of the glacier high above. And in the churning water the rope didn't drag so.

Joel crawled over the rocks, his hands came out into the immovable blast of wind. And his knees touched dry rock and the cleats on his shoes dug in. He was across.

He was across and the wind was lessening. Joel was so tired he didn't think he could move. But he did. He felt the wind and he saw that figure with the gun spitting useless bullets at them, and he jerked the rope and brought Dick Chesbie over the lip just as the river won.

The wall of water eight feet tall broke and thundered. It catapulted straight out for hundreds of feet, and then it fell with the sound of a thousand crying women. And two men.

They couldn't help it. Nerves, exhaustion, relief, they cried until all the tears were gone. The tears and the storm. And the sun came out red and hot and beautiful just like Joel Dirrick said it would.

And they were no better off than before. They were still prisoners of a gun. Because there was only one rock tall enough to hide them from the fury of Frank Erlin sitting on the glacier across from them and above them.

He had plenty of ammunition. Twice he drove Dirrick back with bullets, and now that the wind had gone the bullets were not whipped away into nothing. One got Dir-

rick in the neck and one in the shoulder, and each time Erlin moved a little closer, edging along the glacier shining faintly blue in the sun.

"It's no use, Joel," Chesbie said. "There's no sense in fighting any more. Let's end it now, Joel. Let's jump over the side and do it quickly."

Joel Dirrick smiled. "But there's the sun, Dick. Don't you know about the sun? Haven't the mountains ever told you about the sun?"

"What do you mean, Joel? What is there about the sun?"

"It is as powerful to a mountain in the day as the frost is to the night. It is the reason why I dared cross the falls. It is the reason why I drew his fire so he would come down on the glacier to me. See where's he's sitting, how it's faintly blue? Watch, Dick. Watch and wait and don't think of death yet. Not our death. His."

They watched. For three hours they peeked through a cleft in their rock and watched the man above with his gun. He was just beyond the waterfall and perhaps two hundred feet above it. He was stretched there very comfortably.

Another hour passed, and another. He laid his rifle beside him and rolled a cigarette. That was the last thing he did, too to raise that smoke to his lips. Then the glacier opened up beneath him and he plummeted from sight.

That was what the sun and his body warmth had done. That was what the faint blue had meant. That was the trouble with these Sierra Nevada glaciers—they weren't like the Swiss ones; they couldn't be trusted. They were shells pitted with bottomless icy caverns.

That was where Frank Erlin had gone, without any warning, without any sound, without any escape, plummeting down into a frozen hell. He left his gun behind, and his scream, lost and lonely as the crying of the dead.

Joel Dirrick stood and he put his arms around Chesbie's shoulders. "With the rope and your help, as much as you can give, I think we can make my cabin by night."

Dick Chesbie couldn't believe it. He crouched there staring at that useless gun. "Joel, how did you do it! How could you know!"

Joel Dirrick smiled. "The mountain taught me. It taught me about the sun." He looked to the hole melted in the thin crust of ice. "It taught me about the wind." He looked at the cascade with its tons of water boiling over the lip in a seething fury. "And it gave me life."

"But it took Frank Erlin's."

"Yes. That is the most important thing the mountain has to teach: that a man can't cheat. The penalty the mountain asks is death."

Historical Note On "Black Fire at Death Mountain"

"Black Fire at Death Mountain" is wholly fiction but all the geographical data is authentic. The incident at the falls is based on a historical happening witnessed in November of 1864 by members of the Whitney Survey party.

A storm they encountered then nearly cost the lives of two of the scientists. The snow and driving sleet tore and bruised their faces; their mules had to be beaten with clubs and dragged to make them move; avalanches, lightning and falling trees added to the men's danger and misery.

They lived to reach their camp near the Yosemite Falls, however. For a month the falls had been dry, but now they were a torrent of seething water. The whole lip of the Yosemite was filled to the brim and for hours the water tumbled.

Then the men saw an unforgettable sight—the wind, in a sudden fury, literally held back the falls, piling up a wall of water two hundred feet wide. For a whole minute not a drop poured, and there was utter silence. Then the water crashed through with thunderous violence.

It is on this dramatic incident that the above story is based.

—S. T.

(Continued from page 67)

of the red-headed, likeable Larry Simmons lying in a dark alley with his life's blood flowing from him, or sprawled on a bar room floor, victim of a deliberately concocted brawl, if not with himself then with some tough Frog Fisher hired for the work. Fisher's five hundred would not go begging long. Besides, Simmons was a young drifter with not too many people to worry about him when he went.

"Let me know in an hour," Fisher said carelessly. "An' you open your mouth about it an' you'll find your damned throat cut before mornin', and Simmons dead in the bargain."

Charlie Haines was still standing at the bar when Fisher moved off.

Joe Smith slapped at the bar in front of him with a rag. He said, "Another one, Charlie?"

"No, thanks," Charlie Haines said. He walked toward the door and stepped outside. The street was crowded with men, moving from salon to saloon, standing in groups on the corners, talking loudly.

The Wells-Fargo station was directly across the way, a small cubbyhole of a building where the agent sold tickets, and where passengers waited for the stage.

Larry Simmons emerged from the office, looked up and down the street, and then headed for the Belmont Hotel where he lived. He didn't notice Charlie Haines standing on the porch, leaning against one of the wooden pillars.

Charlie felt inside his shirt for the small five-shot Remington-Elliott derringer he always carried with him. His fingers closed around the cold butt of the little gun. The sweat broke out on his face. He had carried that gun for several years, but he never shot at a man in his life.

He watched Larry Simmons moving through the crowd with a spring in his step, a young man with all of life ahead of him and a beautiful, girl to live it with—the girl Charlie Haines knew could give *him* something to live for.

Turning around, Charlie Haines walked back inside the Pioneer. He found Jed Withers drinking a glass of beer by himself over near the stage. He said quietly,

"Jed, tell Fisher I want to see him out in the stables."

He went out the back door which led onto a courtyard, and he saw the yellow light from the Pioneer Stables at the other end of the yard. Back here it was quiet, the wall of the building muffling the sounds inside the saloon. He glanced down the alley which led to the street. He could see men passing across the mouth of the alley, but no one was coming in.

He walked across the courtyard and through the big open space into the barn. About half the stalls were filled. The hostler, Ed Raynor, came through the door, lifted a hand to Charlie, and kept going.

Charlie Haines sat down on a bale of hay. He looked down at his slender hands. He took the little derringer from the concealed holster and slipped it inside his left coat pocket.

He was still sitting on the bale of hay, staring at the floor when Frog Fisher came in, making the loose boards on the floor creak with his weight. Fisher was grinning.

"You want to see me, Charlie?"

Charlie Haines looked at him steadily. He said, "Your price is five hundred to have Larry Simmons murdered."

Frog Fisher's veiled green eyes widened in mock surprise. "I never said that, Charlie," he protested. "I just wouldn't like to see that hombre walk off with my singer."

"You're paying five hundred so he won't step on the stage tomorrow morning," Charlie Haines repeated. "Is that right?"

Frog Fisher shrugged. "It's five hundred," he admitted. "I'll give you two hundred now, an'—"

"They're a nice couple," Charlie Haines said, "a very nice couple. You never met a finer girl in all your dirty existence, Frog, and he's a nice boy."

"You after that money, Charlie?" Frog Fisher snapped, eyes very narrow.

"No," Charlie Haines said.

"Then why in hell—"

"I don't want to see anybody else get it," Charlie Haines said slowly.

Frog Fisher was standing about five feet away from him, both boots planted firmly on the floor of the stable. He carried a gun inside his coat, a pearl-handled Colt six-gun. Charlie had seen it many times; he could see the bulge of it now.

"So," the saloonkeeper said softly. His

green eyes dropped to Charlie Haines' right hand inside his coat pocket. He measured the small man carefully, and then he started to grin. "You ain't got the nerve to use that," he chuckled. "Forget about it, Charlie."

"Don't try to leave this barn," Charlie Haines said. "I don't want to shoot a man in the back, but I will."

"You damned little fool," Frog Fisher snarled, but there was reluctant admiration in his greenish eyes as he swiftly leaped forward. His left hand shot forward, grasping Charlie Haines' right wrist inside the coat pocket, and at the same time he reached for his Colt.

The Colt was out of the holster, coming up toward Charlie's waist, and Charlie saw the murder in the saloonkeeper's eyes as he calmly slipped the derringer from his left pocket and fired twice, sending both bullets into Fisher's capacious stomach.

Fisher's knees buckled and he fell forward, trying to catch Charlie around the waist. The Colt was still in his hand and it roared, the slug tearing through Charlie Haines' coat, thudding into an upright nearby.

Charlie stepped away to let the big man fall. Then he heard Ed Raynor coming in, and Raynor's startled gasp.

"He pulled a gun on me," Charlie said quietly. "You can see that, Ed. You'll tell the sheriff that."

"Sure," Ed Raynor whispered. "Sure, Charlie." There was awe in his voice as he looked down at the lifeless bulk of Frog Fisher.

Men were piling through the back door of the Pioneer, attracted by the shots. Charlie stepped aside to let them pass, and then entered the door himself. He walked across the room to the piano stool and sat down. He started to play—softly, gently, improvising around the dead keys a sad yet optimistic melody.

George Dickson came over, leaning on the piano, a fresh cigar in his mouth tilted toward the ceiling, big hands in his pockets.

"That's sweet," the floorman said. "A man can play like that should own the world."

"George," Charlie Haines said softly, "I almost did."

(Continued from page 83)

From Abe's sensible mouth, the whole thing seemed silly. Jake felt better immediately, and stepped out on the Opera House stage that night with gaiety and confidence.

It was during the intermission, when the wild applause had finally died away, that someone at the back of the hall said loudly, "I smell smoke!"

With a rush, the audience left, pouring outside to the racks where their plunging horses were tied. It was not the Opera House that was on fire, but the whole prairie, a long, mile-wide sheet of flame rolling down from the North and threatening to engulf the whole town. In a panic, the entire population of Lincoln, including Jake Bardee, fled across a narrow river and up into the stony hills behind the town. From there, they watched to see Lincoln burn to the ground.

A miracle saved the settlement. At the last minute, the wind died, a rare, quick shower came up, and the fire was put out.

"It was lucky," everyone agreed. "Only one building burned to the ground—the Opera House!"

Jake Bardee did not touch his violin again for six years. During that time, he wandered the Southwest, miserable, the burden of tragic deaths in his conscience. But he could not force himself to discard the delicate instrument he loved despite the evil song it sang. And on the Fourth of July in 1873, a holiday crowd in Silver City, New Mexico, begged him so heartily for music that he could not refuse. As a precaution, he played outside, mounting a wooden box to be seen above the crowd.

Coins showered generously at his feet. But among them was a sizzling firecracker, thrown at him by two mischievous boys. It landed on the wooden box where he stood and Jake, laughing, toed the explosive through a hole and dropped it inside the box. Then he realized, in a flash, that the box was labeled dynamite!

Bardee flung his body, with the bewitched violin beneath him, across the box of smouldering explosives. An instant later, with a red roar, the deadly jinx claimed its miserable messenger. Only a few shattered fragments of the evil-voiced violin were ever found.

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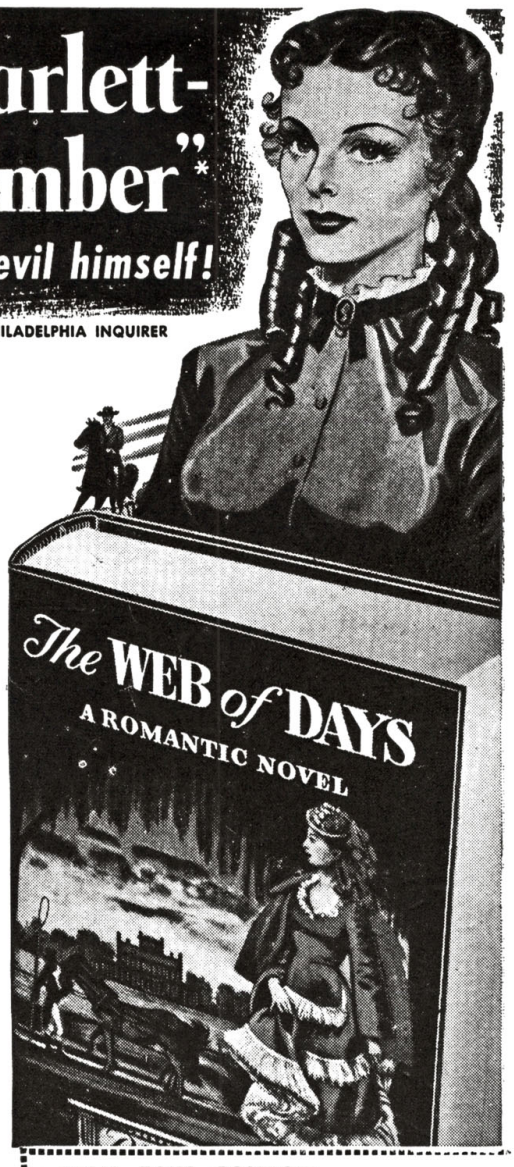

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