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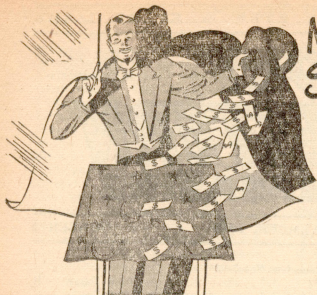
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED
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NOVEMBER, 1948

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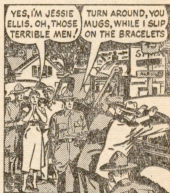
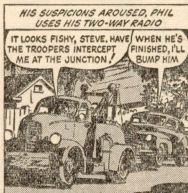
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GUN-RIG ROUNDUP

By FRANCIS

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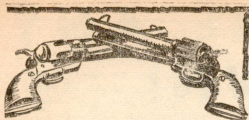
THERE is nothing mysterious about the most complicated gun rig. It is nothing more than a means for carrying one or more guns with *safety* and *convenience*. These two factors are the essential points to be considered in designing a gun harness. A third factor, that of *comfort*, must also be taken into account, but is a minor matter to the man whose life may depend on the quickness with which he can get a gun into action.

A gun rig is made up of two or more component parts. The simplest arrangement consists of a holster attached to a belt. The holster is only a carrying case for the gun, but it must be correctly designed and properly fitted. It must hold the gun securely without making it difficult to draw; it should protect the gun against damage; and it must be sturdy enough to stand up under hard use. Skirting leather is the best material for a first-class holster, and is readily adapted to that purpose.

The leather is cut and shaped to fit the particular gun for which the holster is being made. The actual gun or a duplicate in hard material is used to make a pattern around which the leather is moulded and stitched. The result is a "box fit."

The design of the holster is up to the individual who is going to use it. It may have an overlapping flap that covers the grip of the gun, or it may be equipped with a retaining strap secured by a snap fastener. Where instant access to the gun is necessary, the top of the holster is cut away, and so shaped that the drawing hand can grasp the gun without interference. The finished holster is then ready to attach to the gun belt.

This attachment is usually effected by means of a belt loop incorporated in the design of the holster, and the belt is then



P. VERZANI

adjusted to bring the holster into its proper position. A tie strap is often added so that the end of the holster may be fastened down to facilitate a quick draw.

The position of the holster is governed by the type of draw contemplated. Each gun carrier must work out the details for himself. Slant, tip, elevation, and angle must be carefully considered. Physical characteristics are taken into account, and the gunman comes to his final decision through a process of trial and error.

When the carrying of a second gun is planned, the situation is somewhat more complex. Crossed gun belts are the simplest answer to this problem; and many an old-time gunslinger let it go at that. But crossed belts are not too comfortable, nor do they add to ease of movement. A single belt so designed that it can hold each holster in a proper position offers a better solution. The "Buscadero" belt is such a gun rig.

This belt is cut with side tabs to which a holster can be fastened. The holster, itself, is custom tailored to fit the belt. Extension loops are made to use with the side tabs, and the carefully planned arrangement gives increased flexibility and convenience. Craftsmen who specialize in such work spend much time in designing this kind of equipment, and the result is a well balanced and efficient gun rig.

For various reasons, the belt rig is not always as convenient as a shoulder holster. This type of gun harness is particularly adaptable for the use of the individual who does not care to advertise the fact that he is armed. A gun carried in this way is easily carried beneath the clothing, and is still readily available.

The simplest form of this type of gun harness consists of a holster carried under

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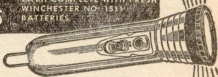
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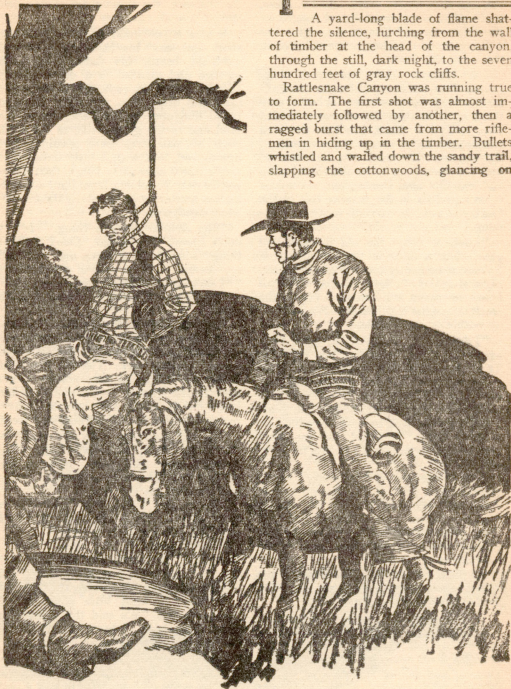
• By TOM ROAN •



Turbulent Novel of Thundering Triggers

A yard-long blade of flame shattered the silence, lurching from the wall of timber at the head of the canyon, through the still, dark night, to the seven hundred feet of gray rock cliffs.

Rattlesnake Canyon was running true to form. The first shot was almost immediately followed by another, then a ragged burst that came from more riflemen in hiding up in the timber. Bullets whistled and wailed down the sandy trail, slapping the cottonwoods, glancing on



Schilbell was dragged way out of the saddle, weaving and rocking in the air.

the rocks—sudden hell opening up along the east side of the creek. In the noise, a tall dark horse snorted and lunged as his rider whipped him to the right, like a flying shadow taking hurried shelter in the rocks and trees.

Phil Morgan—Hell Morgan to many people from eastern Colorado to California—had been warned of this very thing no later than the afternoon behind him, in Grizzly Bend, the little cowtown twenty-odd miles away in the mouth of the canyon. The man who had warned him had been none other than long, grim and lean Old Sam Peevey, one of the best town marshals in the eastern rim of the Outlaw Trail Country of western Wyoming.

"Look at this," the old lawman had growled at a table in the Grizzly Bend Saloon as he gently touched his bandaged right shoulder. "High-powered rifle ball from the rocks and bushes west of the creek that splits Rattlesnake. No warnin', no nothin'—just a bullet!

"I'd gone up Rattlesnake, eight days ago, after a filly what had run off from Towhead Fowler, the bakkeep here. Two miles up, and the shot comes, knockin' me cockeyed for a time. I came to myself lyin' on the ground and my hoss gone. I had to walk back to town, bleedin' like a stuck hawg. Towhead, like me, ain't seen his rifle again—and I reckon he never will."

Now it looked as if Rattlesnake Canyon gunmen even fired at shadows on a trail. For a few moments, Morgan was certain that the bullets were intended for him. Then he heard the muffled pound of hoofs coming around a snake-like bend in the winding trail.

As the horse shot past, the figure in the saddle rolled drunkenly, fell off. He landed noiselessly in the sand.

A withering burst of shots sounded up the canyon, as if everything counted on a last-minute kill. Morgan heard the bay stumble, hoofs sounding as it went into a running and falling sprawl. He righted himself with another snort, and went on, until he was around another bend and gone in the night.

Already having swung out of his saddle, Morgan moved forward swiftly toward the quick dust around the man,

while the gunfire staggered to silence in the distance, the canyon again lone and still.

It was an old man lying in the dust, short and lean, his face bristly with a week-old beard, his faded blue garb patched and mended in a dozen places. Blood smeared the right side of the white head and dripped in the sand. Morgan rolled him over on his back, out of the sand and to the grassy side of the trail. Now his pale eyes were opening. His lips moved, first with a little flutter that was a dazed attempt to laugh, then a few words were stumbling from him, a meaningless muttering at the start, then somewhat steady.

"She didn't. Nary a thing. Me? I don't know. Never did. Don't look at things what don't concern me. Learned my lesson." There was a pause, then: "'Tain't right. 'Twon't be. Never. Government's gonna ketch up. Wish I had a chaw."

Hearing hoofs in the distance, Morgan picked him up, hastily kicked sand over the small smear of blood in the trail, and started moving back. The old man was light, and it was an easy matter to get back to the waiting horse, and grab the long reins to quickly fade into the sheltering darkness of the taller rocks and trees.

The old man was fully conscious by this time. He spoke whisperingly when Morgan eased him down, using a big, sloping rock at his back as a brace. A thin smile moved his lips now.

"Looks like I didn't go far. Who're you? If you're tryin' to help me, they'll only kill you for your trouble."

"Keep quiet for the time," warned Morgan. "Horsemen are coming down the trail. Let them pass if they will."

"But—if they stop to fight?"

"Then," a hard little smile curled Morgan's lips, "it's said that's the only good thing I do. I have two forty-fives and a rifle. Now—quiet."

CLOSE to midnight, the late moon was beginning its slow rise to cast a dull, silvery glow on the fog-like pall against the sky. Holding his horse by the nose to squeeze out any sign of a snort or a nicker, Morgan grimly waited. In the growing glow, he saw three men go

swinging down the trail, a tall, thin figure and two shorter, stouter ones, butts of six-shooters and cartridges in broad belts catching some of the light, rifles ready for instant use across the crooks of their arms, the hoofs of their horses a furious swishing in the sand of the trail.

When they were gone, the old man spoke again. "They'll soon come back, I think."

"Who are they?"

"You wouldn't know, I reckon." The old eyes seemed intent on him. "I'm Jeff Longlace. Used to run the Longlace spread in these parts. Just plain, pore white trash these days. Everything's fallin' apart, no stock left, no nothin' but debts.

"Head hurts to beat the band right now." He lifted a near-limp hand and touched the side of it. "'Twarn't a bullet. Don't remember stoppin' one. Think I

a shotgun and make him go. He said he was the last man I'd ever draw a gun on, and—"

"Hold it!" Squatting beside Longlace, Morgan put a quick hand on his shoulder when he heard the sounds of hoofs on the trail again. "I think your friends are coming back."

He could soon see that there were only two of them, the tall, grim rider and one of the shorter, stouter ones. They were traveling easily now, each mounted on a splendid horse. As they passed, Morgan leaned forward in the limbs of a pine to catch what they were saying.

"Windy Schibell ain't gonna find Longlace," the shorter man was growling.

"Damn little difference!" The tall man seemed to bite out his words. "He knows by now that Pistol meant what he said. Only for Pistol, him and that purty little blonde gal woulda been gone from the

Hell bent on raking Rattlesnake Rock clean of its owlhoot horde, Phil Morgan vowed that kill-hungry Gun DeMoanie and his grim pistol-whips would pave a passageway to boothill with their own poison-mean skins.

got raked by a mean limb of a tree. Don't remember much else. Hard on an old man—not that ten men would be enough for Gun DeMoanie and his Whooraw Crowd. They run this Rattlesnake country."

"And," said Morgan when there was a pause, "Gun DeMoanie and his Whooraws were after you tonight, old-timer?"

"Not Gun." There was a ghost of a smile on the old face. "Maybe Big Pistol, his brother, was along to see the fun. Gun ain't the kind to go gallivantin' round on common little jobs. Takes somethin' big for Gun to stick his fine whip-cord pants in a saddle. Big Pistol's the fool."

"Why were they trying to kill you?"

"'Cause I run Big Pistol off from what's left of the Longlace last Sunday afternoon!" There was a scowl of bitterness now. "He come pesterin' around Rocky, my granddaughter—and she wouldn't wipe her feet on him to come in outa the mud and the rain! I had to take

old Longlace months and months before now."

"Windy's playin' close to Pistol!" The shorter man laughed. "Gun don't like a man when he finds him hopin' to curry favors."

"Gun DeMoanie sometimes kills men for that!" The tall man's voice was harder, flatter. "He don't like it when he thinks a fella's playing him or Big Pistol for a sucker. We'll be buryin' Windy yet."

They were gone then, the taller man spurring into a faster pace, his horse snorting and lunging from the quick play of the sharp rowels. Morgan waited for a minute. Knowing that his own horse would stand quietly from now on, he was about to step back to old Jeff Longlace, when he heard the third man in the distance, coming back up the trail.

Always a man to make up his mind quickly and execute an idea in the same fashion, Morgan swung into his saddle,

taking down his long rope. Still hidden by the trees and tall rocks, he moved closer to the trail, knowing that the two men who had passed were now far enough away to hear nothing except the ringing report of a shot behind them.

Windy Schibell was the man of the moment. In a few moments, Morgan could see him coming, bobbing along in his saddle, leading Jeff Longlace's tall, clean-cut bay behind him, the bayumping slightly in his slow gallop. Just as the rider was passing, Morgan's long rope shot forward, a noiselessly uncoiling snake in the air, the small loop flying straight to its target.

The snake-like loop from the coil of dark lightning settled around Windy Schibell's neck and shoulder, too quick for him to cry out. Morgan's horse had set himself. The rope seemed to snap taut. Before a man could open his mouth to yell, Schibell was out of the saddle, in the air, and swishing down. Landing heavily at the edge of the trail on the side of the head and shoulder, he made a wild kick, and was still. His horse came to a halt a few yards beyond him, while the bay stopped beside him.

Sometimes the devil seemed to direct Hell Morgan. He went forward swiftly to where Schibell was sprawled, all light suddenly buffeted out of him. Morgan took off his rope. He wheeled the man over, whipping Schibell's thick wrists behind his back. With a short strap he had snatched from his own saddle, he lashed and tied the thick wrists together, then took a sweat-wet red bandanna from around Schibell's neck and turned it into a blindfold.

When his consciousness started returning, Windy Schibell must have thought that a posse had caught up with him somewhere. He was back in the saddle of his own horse. His own saddle rope had been brought into play. A double winding of it was around his chest, the rope going back under his arms and knotted between his shoulder blades. The end of it had been brought back and roughly knotted around his neck. A man he could not see was standing in the saddle of a tall dark horse and tying the rest of the rope to a stout limb of a cottonwood overhead.

"Wait a minute, fella, wait a minute!"

he sputtered. "What'n hell are you doin' to me!"

"Hanging you." The answer was straight to the point. "The people of this country have grown damned tired of your kind, Windy."

"But—but I—I ain't done nothin'!" Schibell was so scared by this time, his voice was only a hoarse whisper. "Take the blindfold off and lemme talk to you fellas! I—I'll tell you everything!"

"There are only twenty of us tonight." Morgan had changed his voice entirely. "There'll be more as we go along. The rest of the Gun DeMoanie crowd are going like this. Lead the horse from under, boys."

"Don't!" Schibell's voice leaped into a bawl of terror. "Don't hang me and let the others go! Don't—Uh!"

"Give our regards to hell, Windy!" Morgan had dropped back in his saddle, giving the horse beside him a kick, making him surge quickly forward. Schibell was dragged out of the saddle, weaving and rocking in the air. "Tell the devil we'll be sending down more and more from now on!"

"I don't wanta die! I don't wanta die!"

Morgan ignored him. He caught up the reins of Jeff Longlace's bay, then swung on to Schibell's horse, whipping off his bridle and giving him a lash across the rump with it, sending the horse snorting and wildly running up the trail toward Rattlesnake Rock.

Now Morgan swung back to Jeff Longlace, helping him into the saddle of his bay. "Lead the way," he ordered. "This'll maybe give Gun DeMoanie and Big Pistol something to think about it."

"But—but," half-gasped the old man as they swung out of the rocks and trees, "he's hung, all right, but he can still yell!"

"Let him yell his head off! We want him to remember this night."

"And damned if he won't!" nodded the old man. "Let's go see my Rocky."

THE bay had been nicked across the shoulder. Jeff Longlace wanted to give him plenty of time, knowing that he could doctor up that small bullet rake once he got the horse home. Schibell was still yelling in the distance behind them,

when they swung abruptly into the mouth of a weed and brush-grown trail, that led them to a break in the high canyon wall.

The old man grunted, "I've brung a lot of cattle and hosses down this trail. But I haven't shipped a head in three year—and reckon I never will again." He straightened suddenly in his saddle. "I gotta tell Rocky somethin'. What am I gonna call you?"

"Morgan—Phil Morgan."

"Phil Morgan!" The old man's eyes widened. "Say, now, you wouldn't be—er—Hell Morgan, wouldja?"

A thin smile moved Morgan's lips. "Certain people saddled that name on me, but I've never let it trouble me."

Jeff Longlace slumped back in his saddle, staring at him with big, round eyes. "Hell Morgan in person! I thought you would have horns and a tail. Guess that's the kinda fella Gun DeMoanie an' his Whooraw Crowd'll be lookin' to see ridin' into Rattlesnake Rock one of these days soon. Some got the idea that you ain't comin', that it's too tough for even Hell Morgan to monkey with. Sheriff Two-Gun Pete Farloe hinted that this afternoon just before sundown."

"Then the whole town knows I'm comin'?"

"What Pete Farloe knows, the rest knows." Longlace seemed to slump lower in his big saddle. "Pete's one of the best sheriffs in Wyoming—but he can't help it. A letter, even, can't go through the post office in Rattlesnake Rock without Gun DeMoanie and his Whooraw Crowd knowin' what's in it. They as good as own the telegraph line, end to end."

"They're waitin' for you." The old man had swung to one side in his saddle. "They're so powerful nothing shakes or jars them. Pete's shot up so bad he can hardly get out of a chair; just looks down on the town like an owl with his tail-feathers pulled and can't fly no more."

"Who shot him—and why?"

"Double-barrel shotgun loaded with buck." Jeff Longlace grimaced. "And why? 'Cause somebody pulled both triggers out in the barn behind the jail one night. That's all Pete can tell you, and if Pete can't tell you—how can I? May-

be he's afraid to tell—though nobody ever called him scared before they hauled him from Hossthief Creek to be sheriff."

Longlace was not telling all he might have told. Morgan could soon see that. To try to question the frightened Longlace beyond what he wanted to tell would be useless. Even Old Sam Peevey had avoided a lot of things in Grizzly Bend as if wanting to shield certain ones up here. The thing to do was to wait and listen, letting a little come at a time.

Knowing that they were on the lookout for him in Rattlesnake Rock, and probably expecting him to arrive by one of the evening stages, Morgan had simply made up his mind to wait until daylight, then drift in. Professional killers were usually sleepy early in the morning, their nerves shaking from drinks the night before and a little too uncertain with their hands and feet to want to start a gunfight.

He rode on with the old man, toward Longlace's spread. They passed through the deep break in the canyon wall and were now in a great basin. Log houses and corrals could be seen on a flat rise of a mile-wide lake of water, turned silvery in the growing moonlight.

"This," said the old man, "is the Longlace—what's left of it. Finest water and grass to ever lie outdoors. Basin's got everything a ranchin' man could ask for. Except," he added, with a deep frown, "cows an' hosses—these days. I'm one of the last to be run out, but they've got me by the tail and—er—moon's comin' up, ain't it!"

He had been on the verge of saying more, but had stopped himself just in time. Appearing gloomier than ever, they rode on to the hitchrack in front of the main house. Longlace eased down to have a close look at the bullet tear in his bay's shoulder, while Morgan made no move to dismount until the front door was thrown open. A girl of twenty stood there, a fat Cheyenne squaw looming like a wagon behind her.

"It's me, Rocky," called out Longlace. "Think we'll have company for the night. My hoss got a little scratch on a bush."

Morgan swung down when the girl came forward. With lamplight behind her, he had seen that she was tall and

rather slender. The lamplight had showed also that her hair was pale, almost the color of honey. When the rising glow of the moon fell fully upon her face, he saw that she was startlingly pretty.

Longlace said: "Rocky, this is Mr. Morgan."

"Morgan!" The girl stopped, appeared to stiffen for a second. "Oh, I see." She was suddenly forcing herself to relax. "I'm glad to know you, Mr. Morgan. Come in! There's coffee on the stove. It's the first thing Grandpa asks for, regardless of the time of night he gets in."

"Go on in!" ordered the old man, gruffly. "I'll put up the hosses and take care of the bay's shoulder."

"But I'll push on, I guess," Morgan was trying to protest. "You said it was only six or seven miles back there into Rattlesnake—"

"And the hour is late," cut in the girl. "Please come in."

It seemed the only thing to do, but he was cursing himself inwardly for it a few moments later, and wishing he had never seen old Jeff Longlace. Women were out of the question as far as he had always been concerned. He could not call himself anything other than a professional fighting man, doomed to go at almost any time. A woman would only distract him from the tough job cut out for him.

He thought of Pistol DeMoanie and couldn't blame Big Pistol for making a fool of himself over this girl. Here was a girl to knock any man off his feet and pin his ears back!

CHAPTER

Snowball in Hell

2

"Go on, spit it out!" There was fury in Gun DeMoanie's eyes, as he glared at the cowering hulk that sat low in a chair.

The thing in the chair was Windy Schibell. Seven fast riders had gone back down the canyon to look for him, when his horse came galloping in after midnight. Brought back to town and hurried through a rear door to gun DeMoanie, he looked as unhappy and scared now as he had looked swinging on his own saddle rope from the cottonwood limb.

"It's all I know, I swear, Gun!" he

cried. "I'd found the old man's bay, and was tryin' to catch up with the other boys. First thing I know, something's hit me. When I come to, there's a whole gang around me, aimin' to hang me. Blindfold on me made everything black, but I still had my old fightin' sand left in my craw. I scared them into leavin' me hung like that and not lettin' me choke to death."

"If you were blindfolded—" DeMoanie leaned forward, black, lizard-tail mustache curled upward, lips warped in the handsome dark face—"how did you know there was a gang around you?" There were two or three moments of silence while he waited for the answer, then: "Speak up, or I'll have you nailed to the wall by the lying tongue in your mouth!"

"Only one man spoke," winced Schibell, "but he said there was about twenty of them. That's the way I knew it was a crowd."

"Hell!" Gun DeMoanie sat back in his chair in disgust. That's the way you know a lot of things, Windy. Get out of here before I lose my temper and blast hell out of you."

Schibell had come in slowly, wondering what was in store for him, fearing the worst. He went out quickly now, upsetting his chair in an almost backward leap. Stumblingly, like a man three sheets in the wind drunk, he righted the chair, and scooted on out the rear door.

"Send me Bull Killay. The rest get out."

The words seemed to come from Gun without effort. Four men in the room, leaning back in its corners as motionless as statues and as silent as shadows. They stirred as one now, guns rocking at their hips as they filed outside, not a word spoken from any of them.

Gun DeMoanie sat there waiting and scowling, an untouched bottle of whiskey and a few glasses in front of him.

Now and then, he had had a sneaky feeling that it was getting close to the time when he would have to be moving on. No man in his right mind stayed in one place too long. He had almost done that in the Southwest. Seven years ago had seen him coming out of Texas on the run, Americans north of the border hot on his trail, Mexicans south of the border dragging their ropes for him and his

crowd, known down there as the Nightingale Gang.

Big Pistol DeMoanie had been the cause of trouble on the border as well as up here. Gun DeMoanie had kept completely away from him for nearly four years, knowing the danger of having that high-headed half-fool around. Big Pistol was younger, leaner and taller, standing better than six feet in his bare feet. Three inches of spiked boot heels made him tower over most men.

At thirty-five, he still had a lot of ideas that belonged only to some smart fool of eighteen, always garbing his lean frame in shining black, gold and silver-mounted six-shooters buckled around him. Hatchet-faced and bucktoothed, Pistol never was able to make himself handsome, regardless of how much money he spent on himself, his horses and his grand saddles.

A faint knock sounded on the door behind the thoughtful, scowling Gun. Then the door opened and Bull Killay stepped noiselessly into the room. Bull-necked and bull-chested, he was a six-foot whale of a man with a whispering voice.

"Sit here." DeMoanie pushed back a chair at his left. "Take yourself a drink."

"I never drink when there's an iron in the fire." Killay seated himself quietly. "Something tells me a lot of metal's getting hot now. I've talked to Windy. Questioned him all the way in after we found him hanging on that rope down the canyon. It wasn't old man Longlace who swung him up like that. The same kind of a stunt was pulled in western Utah about three years ago, just before I came here. The man who did that trick left his brand behind. Phil Morgan's hit the Rattlesnake Country, Gun. I'd lay my last dollar on it."

"Hell Morgan, eh?" A smile crossed DeMoanie's face, brightening his eyes. "I'm hoping that there's no mistake about it. We can't always trust the telegraph line of late."

"Then—you've heard something before?"

"Two wires." DeMoanie nodded and looked up at the ceiling. "One from Steamboat Buttes day before yesterday morning, another yesterday afternoon from Grizzly Bend. Neither sure, but both suspicious."

"You don't tell everything of late, Gun." Bull Killay sat back and looked at him with a scowl. "Big Pistol, I suppose?"

They looked at each other.

"Big Pistol, yes," nodded Gun DeMoanie with a frown. "One of these days I may have to kill him myself to keep him from wrapping a rope around his neck and all our necks at the same time. It's that damned Longlace girl who has taken him by storm. He was always a fool for women!"

"All men get that way—" Killay twisted in his chair—"when they look at that dame, Gun. She's rank poison to men. Don't blame Big Pistol this time. You've seen her. So have the rest of the boys. She could make most of them double-cross us by a wink of one of her damned beautiful eyes!"

"No matter now." DeMoanie was suddenly leaning forward, right hand knotting into a fist on the table, eyes glass-hard. "If that *was* Morgan, then we want to take him fast. He must have headed into old man Longlace during the shooting down the canyon. If he did, then Longlace took him on to the ranch with him. That means he'd stay there until sunrise or after. Your job is to take some of the men and go see."

"If he's there—don't come back here and say that he got away. Blast him down. Ernest Hardy swears that he'd know him in hell. Jerk Smith, Rance Tobin and Mule Knight swear the same thing. He ran them out of Arizona a couple of years ago, after breaking up the old Midnight Gang down there. Take Ernest and Mule with you. Leave Jerk and Rance here. I'll use them in the guard I'm throwing up. We're going to do this job up fast, Bull."

He hit the table with his fist. "This Hell Morgan is a snowball in hell. If you're not a damned fool—you won't give him half a chance. Not half a chance. Understand?"

"Snowball in hell!" Killay came to his feet with a smile, hitching up his heavy belts. "I was afraid you wouldn't say that, Gun. Taking Hell Morgan from behind or the bushes is the only way you'll ever down Hell Morgan. Anybody can tell you that. . . ."

"YOU can't shoot this one out, Phil Morgan. Get out before it's too late. It's only a matter of time before we're going to pull out—maybe some dark night without a moon to see my grandfather pocketing his pride."

It was late before he could get started. The sun was high in the air, a gentle breeze fanning the basin. Even now he was inwardly reluctant to go, having had only three hours sleep. Rocky Longlace and her grandfather had kept him awake until almost dawn. Now he stood on the west end of the porch. Jeff Longlace and an old Indian buck had quietly taken themselves out of the way, with the pretense of getting his horse from the corrals and sheds.

Rocky Longlace was all seriousness about it. But even the girl had been hiding something. He had sensed it from the beginning. They were holding back something that would not let old man Longlace put up a real fight by borrowing more money from the bank in Steamboat Buttes and hiring a string of pistol-shooting cowboys to see him through. Morgan had not yet been able to get to the bottom of it.

But he liked these people, including the old Indian and his fat squaw. People like these didn't show the white feather, didn't leave their homes even when their last drops of blood were spilling on the ground. Something here was making them afraid to fight back—and it was not the mere thought of dying.

"You're our kind of people," she was telling him now. "I know. I've heard things about Phil Morgan in the past. Nothing has ever stopped you. Nothing stopped my grandfather—until he came to this—where—where they strike at you from behind with something more than guns."

"But that's not for now!" She shook back her shoulders as if throwing off something about to cloud down on her. "It's you. Hang up your guns. Go somewhere—where there's a woman waiting who'll make you happy. She'll make you forget, and then you'll live like other men."

"I've never seen but," he paused, growing red-faced, then cold and white, "one woman who could pin me down—"

"Then go back to her," she hastily cut in. "Now, while there's time!"

"I don't have to go anywhere!" He was as hard now as a man just entering a gun-fight. "She's standing right here, looking at me. And that means," he suddenly turned away, "I've got to get out of here! Where the hell's my horse?"

He felt like a king of fools, but he kept going, off the end of the porch with a quick, hard pace, then on toward the corrals, brutally determined to never look at her face again. He saw Jeff Longlace and the old Indian just coming out of the corral with his saddle horse. Morgan caught the reins quickly.

"This is it, I guess!" He swung into the saddle. "Thanks for everything. Hope I'll soon be seeing you."

"Then," Longlace caught the cheek-strap of his bridle, "she couldn't hold on! We never slept, Rocky and me. We talked it all over. She was to do what she could."

"You can't go back on your word, I—er—guess." He had glanced back at the end of the porch, saw the girl standing there looking at him, as she clasped and reclasped her hands nervously. Looking quickly in another direction, he swung the horse northward. "Good-by."

It was like running away from something. But before he had gone two hundred yards—a furious burst of shots sounded, coming from a jackpined rise to his left. Less than three hundred yards away, the bullets were a sudden hail in the air all around him.

In the noise, he heard the girl scream behind him, heard Jeff Longlace crying out something, while the bullets and his fallen horse kicked up a cloud of dust all around him.

Now he was suddenly back to something he knew a lot more about than women. With the horse falling to the right, it had given him a chance to snatch his rifle up from under the left sweat-leather. Wheeling behind the horse for some protection, he snake-twisted himself backwards into a weed-rimmed little dry wash. The crying lead was still all around him as he dropped out of sight.

Hell Morgan was back in business again in a very few seconds. He scurried along the wash on his hands and knees,

coming up behind a clump of bushes and rocks. The fire was still heavy from the knoll, and now he heard a rifle start churning in the direction of the house. A glance in that direction showed spurts of smoke jerking from a north window, then he saw no more of it for a while.

He was opening up now on the rim of the rise, one bullet after another whipping out from the rapid flashes of the rifle. A yell floated down to him. Then he moved on, popping up here, popping up there, the basin ringing with the reports of the firing.

It was a long run afoot, but the wash had deepened, letting him move faster. Shots still poured from the house, bullet after bullet hitting the rim of the rise, glancing on trees up there, making men yell. In a few minutes he had made a wide half-circle and was on the north side of it, able to see horses hidden in the trees behind it now.

When he opened up again, it was all fury once more. Caught now by a withering fire from the house and from the north, men on the rise were suddenly falling back, seven of them rushing wildly for their horses.

Before they could reach their mounts, he had dropped two more. Then the remaining would-be killers were gone, leaving three of their horses behind them as they fell out of sight in a deep ravine. A streak of dust rose along the brushy rims, indicating that they were heading for Rattlesnake Canyon as fast as hoofs would carry them.

CHAPTER

3

Rattlesnake's Fangs

Feeling more crowded here than any other place he had ever been, Morgan moved on to the knoll, rifled slammed full of cartridges, slate-blue eyes alert to the stir of every moving leaf in the morning breeze. Old Jeff Longlace had not been firing that rifle from the window of the house. Neither had the old Indian nor his squaw. That left only Rocky Longlace, and the rapidity and the accuracy of her shots had made it easier for him.

This meant that he had suddenly found himself with a gun-pardner. He had had them before in his wild ramblings. But

they had always been men—never a woman taking it upon herself to fight for him.

Rocky Longlace had ceased shooting now. Everything was still until he came to the abrupt upper rim of the rise. He heard a groan a few yards ahead of him, coming from beyond the ground-sweeping limbs of one of the low pines. He advanced cautiously, stopping when he heard a half-muttering voice break into a fit of sobbing:

"Left behind just like a dog! Shot to hell. They thought of only their own hides, damn 'em!"

"That's generally the way of it." Morgan spoke, still shielded from sight by low limbs and rocks. "They lead you in to it. You go like a fool—and die like a fool, for all your troubles. Watch your six-shooters there at your hips! If you try for a draw, you're a dead man before you make it."

"I—I know when I'm down." The answer was a broken sob. "This time she's for good. Who'n hell are you?"

"The man you were trying to kill."

"Morgan!" The wounded man gasped the word. "Mule Knight said it'd be like this, and I saw Ern Hardy agree. But Bull Killay laughed at him."

"You should have listened to Mule." Morgan stepped forward, easing his hand away from the butt of a long black Colt, the rifle now on the crook of his left arm. "Where'd you get hit?"

"Go—to blazes!"

It was a fool's move, a pain-maddened man's sudden jump into almost instant suicide. He was lying there in tall weeds, a rifle alongside. In a desperate sweep, he brought the rifle up, thumbing the hammer, the shot a splintering report.

Morgan went down, the bullet a foot wide of his head. A six-shooter flew into his hand. Even having gone that far he might have let the man live, but there was no way of stopping one who seemed hell-bent on dying. The big hand had dropped the rifle, flashing now to the butt of a Colt. Before the DeMoanie man could slip the weapon from its holster, roaring gashes of fire were lurching forward, pumping the life-blood out of him.

Morgan took a better look at the bad-man a few moments later. To his surprise, he saw that the bullet that had

taken him out of the fight had come from Rocky Longlace's rifle.

It meant also that he had hit one or two more men up here during the first wild outburst of the fighting and right after his horse had been killed from under him. He had heard the yells up here, but the men he had struck had evidently not been put out of the fight for very long, and had been able to make a getaway with the others.

Now he turned down the side of the rise, walking with that same noiseless tread. He found one of the men he had dropped in the rush that cleared the rise, but the second one was gone. Then he saw another streak of dust rising from the deep ravine—and knew that the second man had managed to get to his waiting horse and make a slip-away while Morgan was on the top of the rise. As he stared at the streak of rising dust, a twig cracked to his left. He stiffened, then swore under his breath when he saw Rocky Longlace, rifle ready in her hands.

"So it's you again," he half-snapped. "You should have kept out of this, Rocky Longlace. Now you're really in it."

"Without," she nodded soberly, "any more half-way moves. The Longlaces used to fight like this. Did I do any good?"

"You caught one through the hip, and I had to finish him off up there just a minute or two ago. They'll probably accuse you of murder now—if it gets out. We'll have to keep it hidden."

"I'm not hiding anything any more, Phil." She lowered the rifle's hammer and eased it down beside her. "I'm not even trying to hide anything. No matter what my grandfather says about it, I am no longer protecting anybody—not even my own father's name. He died in southern Utah by a sheriff's bullet one night while taking my two half-brothers out of jail. He did it for my mother's sake, before she died. It was the only violent act he had ever done in his life."

"My half-brothers made good their escape." She tried to smile as she held back her tears, lips trembling. "They were always bad. Their father before them was killed in a bank robbery three years before my father met my mother in Oregon. Those two—Waine and Crock-

er Cole—are in the penitentiary now in New Mexico.

"They tried to head for South America after escaping from Utah. Down on the Mexican border they fell in with the wrong crowd again. They planned the New Mexico robbery, and were captured. Gun DeMoanie knows all about them. He claims to know of another job they did, one that will put ropes around their necks. I—I guess that's all of it."

"And enough," nodded Morgan. "But I'm glad you came clean with it. Now I can go on to Rattlesnake Rock, knowing that you trust me. I'll keep it from Sheriff Pete Farloe."

"Two-Gun Pete Farloe probably knows all about it." She smiled grimly now. "Granpa came to this country in a covered wagon with him years and years ago. Old-timers stick together. You know how they are."

"Yes, Rocky, I know!" He caught her by the shoulders quite suddenly. Looking straight into her eyes and feeling as if he had known her for many years, he made a long shot at something that had come into his thoughts. "Maybe you're telling all. Maybe you're still hiding a little thing or two. Tell me, Rocky," he gave her a gentle shake, "just where was your grandfather that time when your father went to Utah?"

"Why—why—" her face had suddenly gone white—"I—I don't know!"

"Rocky," he gave her another gentle little shake, "you don't lie very well. Something tells me the old man was with your father that night, and two deputies were killed during the fighting."

"But I—I didn't say that!" she gasped, even her lips bloodless now. "I—I didn't!"

"And didn't need to." He laughed almost softly at her. "Some things become so apparent you don't have to tell them. Does Two-Gun Pete and Gun DeMoanie know it, too?"

"No! Of—course not! Granpa was never in Utah in his life!"

"Rocky." His hands tightened, a great urge sweeping over him to take her in his arms. "You are a most beautiful little liar. But don't let it worry you. I'd go to hell before I'd hurt a single hair on your head or cause you one tear."

IT HAD taken Morgan an hour before he had been ready to make another try at leaving the basin. First loading the bodies of the two men on the bay and tying them in place, he had taken the black that had been left behind with the bay, and was now riding him.

"Gun DeMoanie's men will kill you for this!" Jeff Longlace had warned, when he came up at last to see what was going on behind the knoll. "And don't think that they ain't watchin' your every move right now from some safe place in the distance. They'll cut trail on you before you go half the way!"

"I'll come back later and get my saddle." Morgan had ignored the warning as if it had never been uttered. "I'll appreciate it if you and your Indian can get it off my horse. And you could bury him there with only just a little bit of trouble—"

"Trouble!" had snorted the old man. "We'll take care of the hoss and the saddle business. All of us are gonna stick close to the house until we hear what happened to you. If you get back here after ridin' into that rattlesnake hell ahead—well, you'll be welcome to anything that we can do."

"You've done too much for your own good now." Morgan had swung up in the saddle, trying to keep his thoughts and eyes away from the girl standing there watching him silently, desperation in her face. "Maybe they'll soon be trying to make you pay for it—in blood. But stick close to the house. Don't open your door until you are sure who's outside.

"But remember this." He had looked straight into the old man's eyes. "I have a strong hunch that the bluff they've been

holding over you has run out. If they know that for some reason they can't keep on bluffing, then the only thing they can do is kill you—get you out of the way. Just don't give them the chance. . . ."

The girl's eyes seemed to follow him even now. He could see her standing down there in the edge of the trees, looking at him steadily. His last glance at close range had told him that there were tears in those big blue eyes. She was afraid, he knew. He should have stayed with them. Yet he knew that that would not end Gun DeMoanie's game. One did not sit on the tail of a snake to kill it. A man went after the head—which was Rattlesnake Rock.

Longlace had pointed out a couple of rough trails in this direction. In traveling by daylight, he had explained, a man could follow them well enough, but most men shunned them at night. Either one would take him through the tall hills and bring him to a broad cattle and wagon trail above Rattlesnake Rock.

The gunmen could cut this trail even easier than the one in the canyon, but he wanted to get into Rattlesnake Rock as quickly as possible. The quicker the fight was done, the quicker it would be over.

Soon he was merely keeping close enough to the trail to know that it was there as a guide. He dodged the bends, keeping to the rocks and trees, pulling up several times to sit and listen.

After two hours of slowly moving through the trees, he came to the broad cattle and wagon trail. He avoided it, pushing on until he was more than a mile northeast of Rattlesnake Rock.

At the bottom of the slope, he wrapped the bay's reins around the saddle horn,

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and gave him a light kick. The horse with his cargo of death would head for the public stables or the hitchrack in front of the big saloon. His coming with two dead men would throw the town in an uproar, but Phil Morgan hoped to get to the jail and see old Two-Gun Pete Farloe before hell broke loose upon him.

CHAPTER

4

Powdersmoke Visit

As wary as an old killer wolf, he pulled up sixty or seventy yards north-east of the jail, sheltered from sight by a fringe of pines. Swinging down, rifle on his arm, he gave the black's reins a loose wrap around the saddle horn. A light slap sent the horse cantering back on the trail.

Morgan moved on to the corner of the jail, then forward to the short porch. The bay with the double load of death had turned in at the hitchrack in front of the Yellowstone Saloon. A crowd had already poured through the swinging doors to stare. Meanwhile the black with the empty saddle was galloping down the street, heading straight for the public stables.

Phil Morgan moved on to the porch and up the short flight of steps. The door in front of him was open. He walked on inside, and stopped, facing a lean, gray-bearded man behind a varnish-peeled old desk literally covered with six-shooters of every variety. Behind him, a dozen rifles and shotguns leaned against the wall.

"Howdy!" grunted the old man. "Who are you?"

"Morgan."

With a wince, the sheriff sat back in his chair. "A long time you was agettin' here. Still," he grinned, "you will live longer for it. Rattlesnake Rock's aboiling this morning."

"I heard you were banged up." Morgan kicked the door closed with his heel and came on, thrusting his hand out, as he stood his rifle against the front of the desk. "You look it, too!"

"And am," nodded old Two-Gun Pete Farloe. "Buckshot in both arms." He glanced downward, right and left. "In both legs, too. One in the hip. Why they didn't kill me is more'n I know. Sit

down!" He nodded to his left at a big chair at the end of the desk. "Rattlesnake Rock's glad to see you."

A bitter scowl wrinkled the hundred wrinkles on the old sheriff's face. "I reckon I sent wires and letters over half the country tryin' to find you. Lots of them didn't get outa town, I know. Yep," he nodded, "it's that tight-fisted here, now Gun DeMoanie's got it."

"Where'll I find Gun?"

"Find him?" The old man stared unbelievably. "Why, you won't have to find Gun 'cause he'll find you! Everybody saw that hoss come in with the dead on it. That'll soon bring Gun—or that Big Pistol brother of his. Nope, it's Gun—coming now."

"Ever tried locking him up?" Morgan had not even glanced at the window. "They say you once had a decent or half-decent judge here."

"Ben Dowling's a good man," frowned the old man. "He just ain't big enough for the Whooraw Crowd. Better get on your toes. Gun and that gang behind him make a mean outfit. Don't get killed the first ten minutes in town!" He looked toward the window again. "An' don't ask if I've tried lockin' up Gun. You can't lock up the whole damn Rattlesnake Country—and Gun's that."

There was little time for anything else. Gun DeMoanie was getting close. A dozen feet behind him strode the six-foot whale that was Bull Killay. Six-shooters rocking, Gun DeMoanie came on up the steps. He rammed the door wide open, and walked inside. Killay stopped in the doorway, with the crowd behind him silently waiting. DeMoanie halted, eyes swiftly appearing to rake the room, voice curt:

"Looks like you got here, Morgan! Now you can get out!"

"Listen, gun-lawyer—" Morgan was on his feet—"I didn't come here to run. If I leave, I'll take you with me." He was moving closer, a thin smile on his face.

In all his bullying and gun-farming, Gun DeMoanie had never met such prompt action without a waste of words. His hands made a flash-like movement toward his six-shooters when he saw Morgan lurch. Men before always went

the other way. But Morgan swung into him, mauls of fists shooting up.

Forgetting the pains in his legs, Two-Gun Pete Farloe yanked himself to his feet, eyes popping, mouth flying open. Morgan had fainted with his left, the right coming in and up, driving straight to the point of the man's chin. With a grunt, DeMoanie was suddenly going back. His head buried itself in Bull Killay's stomach, as Bull stood in the doorway.

Wind going out of him, Killay pitched forward at the middle. A startled grunt came from the crowd as both men went down, DeMoanie flat on his back, Killay sprawled atop of him, all the breath gone out of him.

"We're just starting in, boys!" Morgan caught DeMoanie by the ankles and gave him a jerk that brought him from under the rising Killay. In a spin, DeMoanie was slung around the end of the desk, right on to the steel-corridor door, his head banging into it. Now, as if they had come from nowhere, six-shooters were covering Killay and the crowd. "Come on, big fellow! He'll need company. The rest get going!"

Fire punctuated that, two bullets going to the right of Killay, two to the left. A wild howl filled the porch. Startled men suddenly wheeled back, some tripping and falling off the edge of the porch.

"Get out the keys, sheriff." Morgan was still calm about it. "Keep your hands up, big fellow! Dying's free around here—and that goes for the rest of your mob."

IT WAS like tossing a full-loaded hornet's nest into a dignified court meeting. For seconds no one seemed to know what had happen. The door was closed with a slam, a bolt shooting in place. Even the old sheriff stood there with his open mouth working up and down like a flapping hinge. He got his breath with one gulping gasp, and spoke:

"What—what's goin' on? Why—why, Morgan, you're—you're takin' it too fast!"

"Give me the keys, and just watch the front door and the windows!"

Bull Killay was quickly stripped of his outer weapons and searched for more before he could get over his surprise. DeMoanie was next, handsome six-shooters

and belts stripped away from him and flung behind the desk. His boot legs gave up two little, one-shot pistols. The ordinary-looking belt of his trousers was like a spring when it was ripped off. Morgan spoke:

"Hacksaws in that thing." He almost laughed. "Such a monkey would go prepared! Probably the same thing with this one!" He wheeled to Bull Killay and took his trouser belt.

Killay growled. "Go on!" He shrugged. "You won't find any saws in mine."

"Then," nodded Morgan, "you carry just those in your boot legs. Off with your boots."

Forgetting all aches and pains, Two-Gun Pete flopped himself back in his chair. Morgan had done everything so quickly it had taken his breath away. Even the steel shutters of the windows had been yanked closed and latched. DeMoanie, still unconscious, was in a big bull-pen in the center of the jail, far away from the windows in the walls. "You sure get things goin', though the good it'll do is more'n I know."

"At least they know which side we're on." Morgan could now take time to grin at him. "I don't exactly know what's to happen next. Nobody else does, neither the gang outside nor our two bucks in the bull-pen. They'll have to wait and wonder what we're going to do now."

The addled mob in front of the porch was not long in coming back to itself and going into action. Yells, curses and banging boot heels on the steel floor were turning the bull-pen into a reverberating thunder.

Soon Gun DeMoanie returned to consciousness and stumbled to his feet, glaring wildly around him. Bull Killay was apparently not too ruffled, having been in jams like this for the most of his hectic life.

"You went at it just too fast this time, Gun," he had said. "He come back at you fast."

DeMoanie's yells and bangings were soon whipping men into action. The mob out front was suddenly splitting. In hurrying streams, men were pouring back along the sides of the jail and to the rear, a general yelling going up when the first of them discovered that the back door of

the corridor was open from the outside.

Others might have suspected a trap the first thing, but there was too much excitement here. Like stampeding sheep, men banged inside, the mob behind crowding in at their heels. Every man was armed, carrying at least one six-shooter, and getting Gun DeMoanie and Bull Killay out of jail would not take them long.

"Down the street to the blacksmith shop!" bellowed DeMoanie when he saw the crowd pouring around the bull-pen. "Get crow-bars to open this door—and then we'll blow this entire jail to bits and wipe it off the face of the town!"

But now that more than half the mob was inside, it was something easier ordered than done. Phil Morgan had deliberately left the rear door of the corridor half-open. He had asked old Jeff Longlace many questions about the jail, and had come into Rattlesnake Rock with a clear picture of it in his mind. A few words had silenced old Two-Gun Pete Farloe out there in the office.

The rest of it had been turned into action, Morgan going upstairs with an armful of loaded old shotguns as if he had been here dozens of times, the sheriff limpingly following him, carrying three more guns and a coil of rope taken from a nail in the wall.

With men still crowding into the jail, three or four trying to wedge their way back to the rear door and hurry away to carry out DeMoanie's order for the crow-bars, a shotgun suddenly roared from the northwest corner of the old flat roof. The startled crying of men below half-drowned the long-firing burst from the second gun on the other corner.

Two-Gun Pete Farloe had packed those old muzzle-loaders with tremendous charges of crushed rock-salt, whole black peppers and the hard seeds of mustard and red peppers. Charges like that would not kill men unless the muzzles of the guns were right in front of them, but each charge was a stinging and burning hell.

A man bawled, "I'm shot fulla holes an' afire from top to bottom!"

Again the guns roared and men knocked each other over, snarling and clawing. The few inside the jail who had a notion to get outside again were sud-

denly driven back as a shotgun flamed a blast down in front of the door. Before they could recover long enough to get their wits, Morgan was down himself on the rope.

He grabbed the door, yanked it closed by a strong iron handle. In another couple of seconds he was turning a big key in the lock, then wheeling on to the northwest corner to send another charge of stinging and burning hell into the fleeing men along the side of the jail, while old Two-Gun let go with another blast from the roof.

BIG PISTOL DeMoanie was never out of bed, when he could help it, until late in the afternoon. He was up now, awakened by the gun-roaring and howling. Right behind it came a terrible, all-frightening quiet. He hastily dressed and came down. In a few minutes, men were trying to tell him about it. But it took a long, inhumanly lean old outlaw by the name of Hank Pierce to shout the others down long enough to talk.

"Gun's in jail!" he snorted. "So's more'n half the pick of the best fightin' men in all the crowd—and we can't get them out without the rest of us gettin' killed. Our bunch have their sixguns, but sixgun bullets ain't no good against steel walls. Looks like we're stuck."

Morgan and old man Farloe would not have to leave the jail for a week or ten days if they wanted to stay there. No one could get to them, and even a day or two of waiting would see men taking sides with them, riders from the rangelands turning, men right here in Rattlesnake Rock screwing up their courage.

Fear started gnawing at Big Pistol DeMoanie by the middle of the afternoon. He was only the brother of the king-pin here. Given half a chance, there were men who would turn on him.

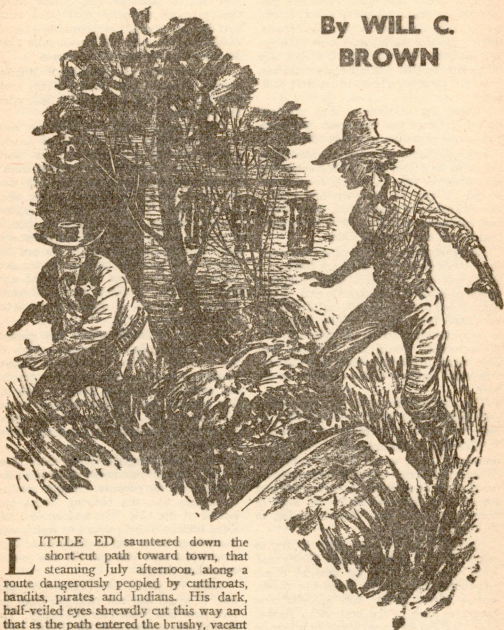
By sunset, beads of perspiration kept dropping from Big Pistol DeMoanie's high, dark forehead. The silence was killing him, not a sound coming from the jail for long periods. Besides, less and less men were drinking at the bars or moving back and forth across the street. That meant that men were sneaking out of town; the crowd breaking up.

(Please continue on page 97)

When he tangled with the boot-hard bandits, all Little Ed had to go on was . . .

BUTTON SAVVY

By WILL C.
BROWN



LITTLE ED sauntered down the short-cut path toward town, that steaming July afternoon, along a route dangerously peopled by cutthroats, bandits, pirates and Indians. His dark, half-veiled eyes shrewdly cut this way and that as the path entered the brushy, vacant block behind the new stone courthouse. He changed his pace to a noiseless stalk. Slim legs in faded blue denim suddenly froze. He whirled toward a clump of low

He could tell that Vogel was pulling out his gun.

bushes. A hand darted to his father's castoff belt knotted around his skinny middle.

The draw was not as smooth as Big Ed or maybe Deputy Vogel or even the Baxter boys would have made. The gun momentarily stuck in his pants waist. It had no cartridge chamber in its rusted frame, the trigger and the hammer were missing, and the bone plate was gone from one side of the handle. But Little Ed, nevertheless, faced the mesquite clump in reckless challenge.

"Come out of there—I've got you covered! Come out with your hands up, you sneakin' Indian pirate bandits!"

Little Ed advanced a few cautious steps, ready to hurl lead against his composite enemy of the day. Then he relaxed, restored his gun to his waist and gave a careless salute of recognition. The bushes had concealed only his old friends, General Custer and Captain Kidd.

An incongruous pair of pals, they were, to be there together in a vacant block of a straggling cowtown still self-consciously proud of being the new county seat. Little Ed had met them, originally, at McCloud's hardware store. They vividly stood out in swashbuckling action and colors on two big calendars which Mr. McCloud had kept tacked to the wall, even after the year concerned had long been swallowed by the past.

The sheriff was not on speaking terms with Custer and Kidd. He wouldn't, in fact, have even admitted they existed.

"Get that foolishness out of your cranium, son," likely would have been his dry comment. "Get an ax going on that stove-wood or go down to the garden patch and start hoeing weeds—they're the kind of enemies you can see. You're getting to be a big boy now."

Little Ed knew better than to try to talk to Big Ed of how he and Custer and Kidd roamed through the summer brush and routed war-painted Comanche bands, sundry pirate gangs, and miscellaneous hardcases such as the born-mean Baxter boys. Big Ed, he knew, would be a granite wall when it came to understanding or approving.

And he realized that Big Ed must be carrying something extra heavy on his mind, lately, with all the talk going around

about the Baxters and the bank robbery down at Chalk Gap. Big Ed was a man who would think the hard everyday facts were problems enough, without wasting time inventing trouble. He would have been apt to listen gravely, saying little, then privately complain to Martha later that the boy should quit roaming around in make-believe play and put in more time on school books and home chores.

"It's only natural at that age!" Martha would probably say tartly. "You look after the bad men, Ed, and I'll look after the good boys!"

The thought of Big Ed, with his long jaw creases and big, methodical hands, and stern eyes that sometimes let pure velvet show through when caught unexpectedly looking down at Little Ed, dissolved Custer and Kidd back to the mesquite bushes. The boy pulled his frayed straw sombrero down tighter on hair of the same faded straw hue and sent his legs churning down the path. He put the Baxter bad 'uns and bank robberies and calendar partners out of his mind and tried to think. . . . *Spool of No. 50 white thread at Isaac's. A quarter's worth of round steak.*

He walked faster where the ground was hot in the low broomweeds back of the building. The combination courthouse and jail, his main stomping ground last summer when Big Ed first took office, was not much of a novelty any more. He noticed Big Ed's great paint horse, Thunder, was not tied in the shade of the saplings.

But Deputy Vogel's rig was there. Little Ed's lips unconsciously drew in at the thought of the deputy. Vogel smelled sometimes like the batwing doors you passed at the City Bar, and an invisible thing back in Vogel's eyes was worrisome. But he had never told anybody that. They would just sush him and tell him to quit imagining things.

Little Ed would have hurried on past now if Vogel had not emerged from the back door and headed for the buggy. The deputy was moving fast, for Vogel. Little Ed thought he must be in a hurry because he remembered overhearing Big Ed say to Martha, once, that Vogel was glue and cold molasses.

"Wouldn't have hired him in the first

place," Big Ed had grimly admitted, "except Thurber insisted he had all those kinfolks in the south end of the county and it would be good politics. He's all right for paper work and jailer, I reckon. But that's about all."

The bull-size head on Vogel's chunky body was pointed down at his lumbering feet, and when he looked up and saw Little Ed near the buggy he jerked nervously, like he had seen a ghost. His unexpected movement made Little Ed jump, too.

"Go on—what you hangin' around here for!" Vogel's hoarse voice didn't sound very friendly. Little Ed squirmed. Vogel had dropped his coat, and now he jerked it up from the dirt and weeds and stomped over to his buggy. Little Ed felt almost scared. He had never seen Vogel look that way before, working his whiskery mouth like he wanted to gobble up something.

"I was just on my way to town for mama," Little Ed offered.

"You better go on home," Vogel said crossly.

The look on Vogel's mole-decorated face was not the indulgent kind Little Ed remembered from last summer when Vogel first became deputy. Vogel untied his horse, hoisted into the buggy, sawed on the lines. He seemed to have already forgotten Little Ed. The boy stared after the buggy dust, then moved on toward the street.

Two people in Isaac's looked at Little Ed and stopped talking while he was buying the thread. And at the meat market, Butch Wilson spoke unusually hearty to him and gave him a pickle to eat on his way home.

Usually, at this hour, the simmering town was empty in the drowsy heat, but a group of men were talking at the bank corner. He loitered along slowly. He liked to hear men talk.

"Shot bad, I heard," one of them was saying. "They've brought him in. Bled a lot."

"They was damn sure tipped off," another man growled. "Ambushed him, that's what they did. They got word he was coming!"

Little Ed heard other vague snatches of talk, and came to a complete standstill when somebody said "... the Baxter

boys." He stood there, glued to the street.

"Hey—the kid!" A man had noticed him and jerked his head warningly. They stopped talking. Old Man Thurber, the banker, who was Big Ed's friend, stepped out and tried to pat Little Ed on the head. He didn't like to be patted, like a baby, and he drew back.

"Been home lately, Eddie?" Mr. Thurber casually asked, but his eyes squinted intently. When Little Ed shook his head, he said coaxingly, "Why don't you come home with me for supper? I'll send word to your mother—and we'll kill a big fat fryer and you can have both drumsticks!"

"She sent me on an errand." Little Ed shook his head again and took the pickle out of his mouth to point at his packages. "I got to get home."

He bounded off toward the courthouse and headed around the building for the short-cut path. Something caught his eye in the weeds. He detoured a few steps, saw it was a piece of paper, and started to move on. But on second thought, he stopped and picked it out of the weeds and dry grass. It was a soiled, brown envelope. There was no printing on the envelope but his fingers felt something bulky inside.

He gapped it open at the flap and peered in. Then he swallowed fast and whistled.

"My gosh! Money!"

It looked like it might be a million dollars. A thousand, anyhow. Little Ed stared pop-eyed at the thick layer of currency—rich-looking bills, with big numerals showing. Nobody was in sight. Big Ed's paint was still gone from the hitch tree. He licked his chapped lips and wrinkled his summer-red forehead in heavy thought. *Finder's keepers!*

He hastily stuffed the envelope inside his shirt and trotted toward home. His bare feet trod exciting heights. He was rich—and he itched to get to his cave and show his awesome wealth to General Custer and Captain Kidd.

MARTHA must have been having company, although it was getting close to supper time. There were three buggies and somebody's saddlehorse in front of the house, and a neighbor woman was walking across the yard toward the porch. Little Ed skirted around the trees of the

side yard and slipped in at the kitchen door. He put his packages on the cabinet. He carefully adjusted the money envelope around over his hip in the loose blouse of his shirt, his fingers tingling just at the touch of it.

He listened. The house seemed strangely quiet, although the low sound of voices came from somewhere. Maybe he would have time to run down the trail back of the house to the Turkey Creek bluff, and hide the money in his cave. He tiptoed to the back door and was about to ease outside when quick footsteps sounded in the dining room behind him.

"Eddie!"

It was Aunt Lucy, Martha's sister, coming into the kitchen. When he turned she put her arms around him and held him close. He squirmed free from her and looked up in surprise. The woman's thin face was tightly drawn and he thought her eyes were wet.

"Where have you been, Eddie?"

"Nowhere much. I brought the steak. Aunt Lucy, have I got time to go down to the creek?"

She caught his hand as if he might escape. Her voice was unusually husky, for Aunt Lucy.

"Eddie, the sheriff wants to see you."

His thoughts, like a stab, went to the bulge of money inside his shirt. He didn't know Big Ed had already come home. The frightening feel of the money was a heavy brick at his waist and he wildly wondered if, somehow, he had broken the law. Aunt Lucy's expression and the way she held him were confusing.

Before he could think of wording for the questions in his head, she had pulled his gun from his belt and gingerly placed it on the cabinet and was leading him through the dining room, out into the dim hall. A few people stood in the hall. Their talking trickled down as he went along toward the front bedroom with his aunt still holding his hand.

Tall, gaunt Mr. Miller, one of the men who worked at the courthouse, stopped Lucy.

"Have you told him yet?"

"No. I'm taking him in there— Ed's been asking to see him."

"Listen, sonny," Mr. Miller creaked down to his haunches so he could face Lit-

tle Ed. "Your dad's been bad hurt. You better know before you go in there. He's been shot by some mean men, Eddie. But he wants to see you, and your mother said bring you in."

He stared at Mr. Miller and everything was spinning around. It didn't even seem like his own house, all at once, but a strange and sinister place.

"Now you go in there and see your daddy," Mr. Miller said gruffly. "You be a brave boy, Eddie, just like him, and don't cry and don't try to talk much."

The bedroom was even gloomier than the hall. He first saw Doc Tatum, sitting still in a rocking chair, his sleeves rolled up, his face looking like he was tired. Martha turned and took a step or two toward him and her arms encircled his head, like Aunt Lucy had done, and he did not try to pull away from where his face was buried in her dress because he was afraid to look at what he had glimpsed in the bed. But Martha pushed him gently back. When he looked up, frightened, to search her face, the strength in her dark eyes helped take some of the wobble out of his knees.

Big Ed was covered with a sheet, except for his face. His eyes were closed, but one big hand groped to the bedside and he caught Little Ed's fist as if he had seen him edge up to the bed. The low, halting words that came from the dry lips in the pale, leathery face, were hard to understand.

"How—are—you—boy?"

Little Ed couldn't say anything. His throat felt like a noose encircled it.

"You be careful, son." Slow, worried words came again from the pillow. "Doc, Martha—you—all—look out for him—somebody — framed — somebody may try—"

That was all Big Ed said then. His words faded away. Only heavy breathing sounded in Little Ed's ears when Martha's hand guided him to the door.

Deputy Vogel was standing with the others in the hall, watching the door, when Little Ed came out. The boy moved blindly to the front porch. He drew a sleeve across his face and leaned against the porch wall, his brain numb. Vogel drifted out and stood back of a little group of men who smoked and talked.

"One of the Lazy S riders happened along and found him," a man was telling a newcomer. "He heard the shootin' when he rode up towards that deserted old Cass house out east of town. The Baxters had been holed up there, evidently. Ambushed him where the trail drops through a rock gully toward the house. Layin' there, waitin'. With rifles."

"If that rider hadn't come along and joined the shooting," Mr. McCloud, the hardware man, commented, "they'd have finished Ed off, sure. But he may have plugged one of 'em. The Lazy S man said there were blood stains up in the rocks over the trail."

"If it was Bill that was wounded," suggested Mr. Blocker, a rancher, "then Coaley will have a hell of a time. Probably him that planned the bank holdup and schemed that hideout at the Cass place. Bill's smart enough, too, to pay off somebody to give 'em warning in case the sheriff decided to mosey out that way. With that bank haul, they could afford it. They got connections around this county."

Somebody turned to Vogel. "No trace of 'em yet, deputy?"

Vogel dropped his cigarette snipe over the railing and shook his head. "Nope. Not a trace. But we'll hunt 'em high and low. Not much we can do tonight."

Doc Tatum came out. The talking stopped, and they looked at him expectantly.

"Got a chance, just a chance," Tatum spoke briefly. "Lost a lot of blood. But he's a mighty strong man, Ed is. If it was me or you, we'd already be goners."

Vogel moved into the house behind Little Ed. "Your pa talk to you?" he

asked, his voice low. Little Ed numbly shook his head. Other people came up and Vogel patted his shoulder. Little Ed headed back to the kitchen and out the rear door into the dusk.

WITH nobody in sight, the tears would hold back no longer. They welled into his eyes and dusted down his cheeks, and he walked blindly through them to grope for the ax at the woodpile. Big Ed was his main hero, and even when he played with make-believe heroes he was trying to be like his dad.

Now his main hero was stricken, a helpless and suffering idol breathing slowly in the white sheets, and he wished he had tried harder to please Big Ed. From now on he would do everything that Big Ed would want him to do. He would chop weeds in the garden and keep up plenty of cookstove wood and study his school books. And soon as it got good and dark he would go back to the courthouse yard and put the money envelope back in the weeds where he found it. That way, nobody would ever know he'd had it. Big Ed wouldn't want him to take something that wasn't his by rights. . . .

The moon was not out and the trail was dark, and so was the courthouse yard. He peered from a clump of post oak bushes. Only the lamp light from the City Bar showed in the distant street. He was about to slip from the bushes and go out into the clearing, when he sighted something in the dark. It was low on the ground, a darker substance than the night, and it was moving.

He could see it move, and hear the rustle in the weeds and dry grass. Little

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Ed strained his eyes, feeling weak in the middle, and then he knew it was a man. The man was moving about out there, around the place where the deputy's buggy usually was tied. He was moving slowly about, feeling the ground.

Little Ed heard a scratching sound, and a match flared. He shut his eyes, opened them again. This wasn't dreaming. The flame showed the face of Deputy Vogel, showed his squinting eyes and the mole on his jaw. The deputy was on his haunches, moving awkwardly at a squat, brushing the weeds with one hand. The match flickered out and he heard a mumbled oath.

The night silence was broken by the alien sound of bare foot rolling a tin can. Little Ed held his breath. The can had made a noise, and when he tried to move away from it a stick crackled and snapped.

The low form in the dark took height. From the movement of it he could tell that Vogel was reaching back and pulling out his gun.

Little Ed ran. His fright erupted in speed, and heavy running feet behind him added to the blind, terrifying urge to get away. His legs seemed wooden, but in actuality he was flying like a deer through the night, out-distancing Vogel. The humming sounds behind him diminished. His heart hammered in his head as he cleared the brushy block, shot across the street ruts and rounded the house.

He was a long time going to sleep. Under the cover, he clutched the crumpled envelope with its thick stuffing of currency. He knew he could never put it back now where he had found it. For Vogel would watch. And Vogel would arrest him, and everybody would know he was dishonest. And that would make Martha sad and Big Ed, maybe, would hear about it, and die.

* * *

They said the sheriff had a fair night. As soon as he could slip away without notice of the household and visitors, Little Ed hurried down the steep trail back of the house to the limestone bluff on Turkey Creek. His cave was really just an enlarged erosion back in the cliff, which he entered by wiggling down through a small hole that opened between two limestone boulders. His ingeniously built wooden

door, swung by ropes from the top of the low cliff ledge, was already raised. Inside, he took the money from his shirt, shuffled the fascinating bills through his hands, then put them back into the envelope and pushed it far into a crevice. He took no time to hold make-believe powwow with Custer and Kidd.

He wriggled out. He got to his feet and looked squarely into the strangely-lighted depths of two narrowed, burning eyes. Deputy Vogel was standing where the down trail came onto the creek ledge.

"What you doin', Eddie?" Vogel took slow steps toward him. His face was unshaven, the lines of his mouth looked drawn and worried.

"Just playing in my cave," Little Ed said. He eyed the path on the other side of Vogel.

"Eddie," Vogel's voice was coaxing and hoarse, "did you find any—something—yesterday, back of the courthouse? Was that you down there last night?"

Little Ed tried to make his eyes look innocent. His voice felt froggish like Vogel's. "No. Why—did you lose something?"

"You know better'n to tell a lie, don't you, Eddie?" Vogel stood nearly over him. His eyes pointed down like two sharp thorns. "You know yore pa would whale the tar outta you if you stole. . . . What did you do with it, Eddie?"

Vogel was still trying to keep his voice coaxing, but the corners of his mouth were tightening and he was working the joints of his fingers. "You better tell me the truth. You tell me, and I won't tell anybody. We'll keep it a secret and that way you won't get in any trouble."

"I didn't find anything." Little Ed stubbornly shook his head. He felt scared, looking up at Vogel—even more scared than he'd been last night.

"What you got in there?" Vogel jerked his head toward the cave.

"Nothing. Just General Custer and Captain Kidd."

The deputy muttered something under his breath. He squatted and peered into the cave opening. He turned back in a moment and looked undecided. Then the red in his eyes flared. He grabbed out roughly, his thick fingers sinking into Little Ed's shoulder.

"You little devil!" Vogel's words boiled out in wild desperation. "Where is it? Tell me! What'd you do with it!" He was shaking Little Ed now and his grip hurt. Little Ed turned murderously angry and tried to keep from crying.

"I—I—didn't find anything!" In his fury he lashed out at Vogel with clinched fist. "Honest—I don't know what you're talking about. You let me go, now!"

He lunged away from Vogel's grasp, and Vogel let him go. Little Ed flew up the trail, and the deputy's slow footsteps and puffing breath died out behind him.

"**H**AS it occurred to you, Pete," Mr. Thurber, the banker, spoke thoughtfully, stuffing his pipe, "that whoever tipped off the Baxters that Ed was planning to go have a look at the Cass place, must be getting a trifle anxious? I mean, if Ed gets well he might remember just who it was that knew he was going to ride out to the Cass place."

Pete Blocker, the rancher, thought this over silently, then nodded. He and Thurber were "sitting up" with the sheriff the first half of the night. That was the neighborly procedure in such cases, since there was no nurse in the town. Other friends were coming for the midnight-to-daylight shift, so Martha could sleep off her exhaustion from the previous night. Little Ed sat in the corner, practically unnoticed. His eyes were heavy, but Aunt Lucy had said he could stay up with the men for a while and help look after Big Ed.

"If the county had the money to offer a good reward," the rancher suggested, "it might help get a line on the low-down varmint that got word to the Baxters."

"But the county hasn't got that kind of money in the treasury," Thurber commented.

The word "money" caused Little Ed's eyes to open again and his head to lift.

"If he's ever found," Blocker drawled, "I'd like to be in on the hangin'."

Little Ed inched out on the floor. "How much reward money would it take, Mister Thurber?"

They looked indulgently at the tousle-haired boy. "Aw, about a thousand dollars, I reckon."

"I got a thousand dollars," Little Ed

said eagerly. "I'll go and get it for you!"

"I'm afraid play money won't do the job," Thurber said gently.

"No—I mean I really got real money!" Little Ed stood up.

"He's all imagination," Thurber said in an undertone to Blocker. "You better be hittin' the hay, son."

The men went on with their talk while Little Ed moved off.

The trail to the bluff had never been darker, nor his legs so wobbly. He had walked the trail at night a hundred times before, yet it seemed unfamiliar now. But the men said some money was needed, and he wanted to do something good for Big Ed so bad that he felt like he'd bust.

He twisted into, and out of, the ink-black spot that was the cave hole, and once again the money was in his shirt. The blackness of the night, even the sound of night birds, made his heart thump.

He was half-way up the trail when he heard the low voices ahead. They came from somewhere on the path, and Little Ed instinctively slipped aside into the brush and briars, silent as dew. It was like he had done many times, stalking fictitious Indians, but it was make-believe no longer. His chest and throat had never felt stopped up like this in make-believe.

"Just keep follerin' me," a man was saying, and the voice was terrifyingly familiar. "I saw it today—it's a place nobody'd ever think to look, and I'm damn sure gonna take care of the boy!"

"Take it slow," another man growled with a low oath. "My leg's killin' me."

"We'll doctor you up good when we get hid in that cave," a third voice grunted. "Vogel can fetch us medicine and a hell of a lot of grub—Lord knows we've paid him enough!"

"Don't talk so damn loud!" That voice was Vogel's!

* * *

It was midnight when Little Ed walked into the dimly lit hall. Martha was up with two men, Mr. McCloud and Mr. Miller, there to relieve Thurber and Blocker. Martha saw Little Ed first and gasped.

His arms were criss-crossed with briar scratches, his clothing torn, and his face was streaked with dirt and tears. But he stood there stubbornly facing them, one hand fumbling inside his shirt.

"Eddie! I thought you were asleep! Where on earth—" Martha started toward him. But he braced himself and stared defiantly at his mother and the men.

"They didn't think I had a thousand dollars!" He whipped out his hand, clutching a soiled brown envelope. "There it is! That's for the reward money, Mister Thurber. Now can you find out who it was?"

The banker thumbed through the bills, his eyes narrowed to slits. "Where'd you get this money, Eddie?" he asked, almost in a whisper. They all stared at the boy in awe.

"It's good, ain't it?" Little Ed demanded.

"Yes, it's good," Thurber nodded gravely. "It's plenty good—the serial numbers show it to be from the Chalk Gap bank holdup!"

"Eddie!" Martha stared at her son in consternation, but he was drawn up with his shoulders squared and he didn't look to Martha like just a little boy at all any more.

"I found it back of the courthouse, where Vogel dropped his coat," Eddie said clearly. His chin tried to drop but he manfully brought it up again. "I—I was going to give it back. I know I shouldn't have—"

"Where Vogel dropped his coat," Thurber murmured. The men looked at one another.

Heads slowly nodded.

"Anybody know where Vogel is now?" Blocker asked, his voice hard, his face tight and drawn.

"I do!" Eddie's head was nearly down to his chest again.

"Where is he, son?" Thurber asked patiently.

"I—I did a bad thing," Little Ed's voice quavered in admission. "Mister Vogel and two men went down and crawled into my cave. I slipped way around to the top of the ledge and, while they were in there, I let my secret trap door down." He held sheepish eyes up to meet the five pairs of wide stares. "It's a big wood thing that slides down between the rocks, and you can't open it except with ropes from the outside. I worked

all summer on it so it would work the way it does."

He swallowed and planted his fists on his skinny hips, in a stance characteristic of Big Ed. "I did it because they had no business going in my cave, and I don't like Mister Vogel. He chased me, and he caught hold of me and shook me and tried to make me tell him all I knew about the money."

"The other men," Thurber grasped his arm, "who were they, Eddie? Who were they, son?"

"I don't know," Eddie said. "Except one said his leg hurt and one cussed and said Vogel would get them some medicine and grub."

There was an eruption of commotion, then, and the men were bustling around. Thurber and Blocker were talking about guns and a posse and torches for light. Then the men were gone, and Martha was looking at her son. For a minute she couldn't talk.

"Eddie," she said, "get those clothes off and get in a tub of water. You're filthy!"

Little Ed's mouth opened to protest, but Martha's next words closed it again. "You're a big boy now, Eddie—so you can start tonight washing your own neck and ears!"

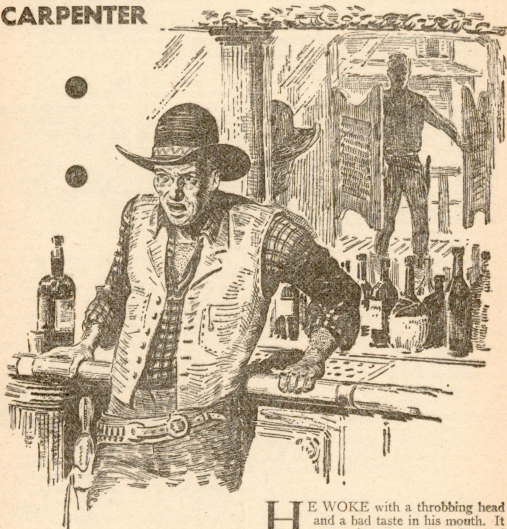
That was an innovation that made bathing almost a pleasure. Made sleeping good, too. He barely knew when Martha came in and left a light kiss and a warm tear on him. Next morning, when he awoke, his briar scratches didn't even hurt and it was hard to tell whether all the things tumbling through his memory were truth or make-believe. One thing, though, he knew for certain. Custer and Kidd would have to get along without him today.

When the sun came up, the blade of the ax was flashing up and down in its early rays, and the echo of steel biting into wood sounded clear down to Turkey Creek. And also into the half-open window of a bedroom where a head on a white pillow slowly turned to listen. Then, in the dim morning light, a smile worked its way to gray leathery lips and the tired dark eyes of the sheriff closed peacefully in strength-giving sleep.

HANGOVER IN HELLTOWN

By JOHN JO
CARPENTER

"Won't do you any good to run from it,"
Jim said.



Bottle-battler Jim aimed to pay an old debt of friendship, if it meant playing a bullet totin' stand-in in a deadman's role.

HE WOKE with a throbbing head and a bad taste in his mouth. It was a frosty morning. He had gone to sleep in his clothes, and was chilled to the bone as well as nauseated; yet none of his physical discomforts equaled the misery and terror he felt at having fallen off the wagon.

When a man is a confirmed drunk at

twenty-eight, he hates his own image worse than any older man could. Jim Owens had not been drinking for almost five months.

But somehow, he had let his self-respect slip through his fingers.

Shivering and retching, he got off the bed and stumbled to the water pitcher. He saw his own face in the mirror, a gaunt and wretched apparition with a tortured mouth and bleary eyes surrounded by day-old whiskers. He knew he dared not try to shave—his hand was not steady enough.

He gave a yell and drew back his hand. The drinking glass crashed into the mirror. In the adjoining room, a woman gave a sleepy cry of alarm.

A man's voice soothed her. "Don't pay no attention. Jim Owens is likely seein' snakes. If he gets rackety I'll kill a few for him."

Jim stooped over and washed in cold water. It did no good.

When he went downstairs he saw it was barely daylight, yet Lowell Chatfield, the hotel man, was already stoking the fire in the barroom stove. Lowell's look was unfriendly, unlike yesterday at this time.

"Was that you, makin' that noise?" Lowell asked.

Jim said, "Yes. Don't ride me now. I ain't in no shape for a lecture."

Lowell stuffed one last chunk into the stove. "I ain't wastin' no sympathy on a confounded—" Then he saw the agony in Jim's eyes. He wiped his hands on his pants and headed for the bar, and sympathy came to his eyes. "What you need is a shot to stiffen you, and some breakfast. The Chink just went past to open up the caddy."

Lowell poured a double shot in a tumbler. Jim's mouth moistened for the first time this morning. He took hold of the glass and lifted it.

It was not revulsion at the smell of the whiskey that made him set the glass down again. Rather, it was the awful joy—and it scared him.

He pushed it away, shaking his head. "See if you can get it back into the bottle, Lowell," he stammered. "Hate to waste anything."

He went out and stood on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, looking bleakly at the one town that had offered him a

chance. It was old Frank McKissick's town, and Frank's son, Emery, had seen to it that it gave Jim his chance.

Olympiad was just now waking up at five o'clock on a crisp October morning, and it stirred to life without any of the agonies of Jim's awakening.

"I'm licked," Jim said. It was a comfort, at least, to face it. "I ain't scared of any man on earth, or any horse, or any high place, or of work, or debt, or anything but booze. Some things you can lick, some you can't. It's a good thing to know before I'm carryin' too many chips on me."

He heard slow hoofbeats as he went down the street. He turned in at Mee Yuey's place. Mee Yuey knew instantly everything that happened in Olympiad, but there was no condemnation in the look he gave Jim.

"Too much dlinkee? Li'l sody, then ham 'n eggs makee slun shine, you bet." The squat little Chinese with the homicidal eyes and the gentle heart stirred a spoonful of baking soda into a glass of cool water. He chuckled as Jim downed the drench.

Jim set the glass down just as Roy Hunt came in the door. Roy, too, had been drinking a little. He was an older man, heavier and stronger, more phlegmatic, and habit had not made drinking hell for him.

He gave Jim a curious nod. "Fell off?"

Jim said, "Dragged my feet a little, I reckon," and turned to the Chinese to order ham and eggs that he did not want.

Roy ordered coffee. Mee Yuey's morning brew was not yet ready, but a potfull from last night was warming on the stove. Mee Yuey set out two cups.

Roy stirred sugar into his, grinning. "Emery's a friend of yours, so maybe I shouldn't say it, but Jim, I can't he'p but laugh. Did you know—old Frank called off the weddin' between Emery and Corsetta?"

"I didn't know that."

"You wouldn't." Roy gave him a sly grin. "Hear you didn't know much of anything last night. That's when it happened."

Jim shook his head. "Roy, like you said, the McKissicks are friends of mine. I know how you feel, but lay off."

Roy nodded and said, "Hell, I wouldn't gossip to a man's best friend behind his back, but after the spectacle Emery and Corsetta made of me I reckon I've got a laugh comin'. Old Frank, after givin' Corsetta money for a divorce from me, gettin' her the post office, stakin' her until she got on her feet, then old Frank won't let his son marry her because she's a divorced woman!"

He guffawed. Jim flinched a little, but he bent to his ham and eggs. Well, Roy was right, in a way. Wife-beater, chronic borrower, hard drinker and loafer he might be, yet surely a man had a right to joke at the way Emery's romance had turned out. When respectable people's respectable instincts met at cross purposes, surely the riff-raff were entitled to laugh at the confusion that followed.

Jim could understand because he knew old Frank McKissick. Frank was a small man. But he had money, power, land, credit, cattle, reputation. He had never been wrong in his life. He did not brag about this fact, but his whole life turned on the conviction that he could not be wrong.

Roy interrupted his thoughts with, "Corsetta caused me enough trouble. Let her cause the McKissicks some now. It'll come out, who was right and who was wrong when we split up."

Jim found himself standing. His hands trembled. His nerves were in no shape for a struggle with temper.

Roy shoved back his empty coffee cup and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Jim went over and looked down at him. "A man that is a man," he said, "wouldn't talk about any woman that way."

"Jim, I don't take no correction from no souse. If Corsetta—"

Jim slapped him.

Roy's face showed the handprint briefly. Suddenly he let out a roar and came up swinging. His big fists knocked Jim's guard aside. Mee Yuey yelled and came over the counter with his leaded persuader in his hand. The hickory knot caught Roy behind the ear, stunning him.

Jim had already started the blow and this morning he lacked the fine timing to stop it. He hit Roy in the mouth, not hard, but Roy went down on his knees.

Jim spat blood. His head was clearer.

He had taken several hard punches from Roy without knowing it. He could think now, even if he had very little command over his body.

On his knees, Roy said, "When you're sober again, watch out."

"I'm sober," Jim said.

"When you're half a man, then. You slapped me. I don't take that from nobody." Roy staggered to his feet and straightened his hat.

Mee Yuey went back behind the counter. "Twenty-fi' cent, please," he said shrilly:

JIM fumbled in his pockets, turning them inside out one at a time. He felt himself flushing as he met Mee Yuey's eyes. It had not occurred to him that his credit might be challenged, that Mee Yuey would draw a line, after last night's spree.

"It seems I'm broke," he said.

"Al-lite, you bloke!" the Chinese said impatiently. "You pay someday, you bet. Yes, yes, pay someday. Allee time got money dlink, too!"

Jim shrugged and went out.

Corsetta Hunt was opening the post office when he passed by. She was the first Olympiad postmaster ever to hang mail for the early flyer. This had helped redeem her in the eyes of many of the townspeople, who resented first that she had married Roy Hunt, and second that she had divorced him.

Corsetta was not a native of Olympiad. Oddly enough, Roy had met her through Frank McKissick. Corsetta had been the daughter of one of Frank's old friends, and she had come to Frank's place at her father's death for a brief visit.

Emery was away then, in one of the periods of estrangement that had separated him from his father regularly since he was sixteen or seventeen. They fought, Emery left; Emery returned, and they made up again—until the next time.

Roy Hunt was working for Frank McKissick then. In three months, he had the seventeen-year-old orphaned girl so infatuated with him that old Frank did not even feel safe in firing him.

"I wanted him right there under my nose, where I could watch him, until she came to her senses," he said.

But even that did no good. They eloped.

When they came back, Frank built them a little house and made Roy his foreman. That did no good, either.

It was then that Emery came riding home, bringing with him a hard-drinking wreck of a young man who had nimble hands when they were steady. He was Jim Owens. Frank McKissick took Jim under his wing, and after only a ten-day sobriety test insisted on financing him in a shop of his own.

"If you can stand it ten days you can stand it a lifetime. You're young and there ain't no excuse for you havin' the habit. Emery ain't got much sense, but he can pick men. He gets that from me. The town needs somebody that can mend and repair. We ain't even got a blacksmith," he said.

Jim had howled, "Blacksmith! I'm a cowman. All I want from you is a job."

"No job." Frank shook his head. "I pick my own men. You'll like blacksmithin'."

And, strangely enough, Jim did like it. There was one good reason—he made money. More than he had ever thought he had in him to earn. The handling of metal seemed to come naturally to him. He shod horses expertly from the first, and his customers came back.

Their respect for a job well done helped him support his self-respect. And if now and then he worked late at night only because it was the only way to keep from surrendering to a burning thirst, no one knew the difference.

Corsetta snapped the padlock back into the hasp and threw the door open. She nodded without smiling at Jim. She had dark circles under her eyes. He could sense her disapproval. Her own life might just have been wrecked, yet she had scorn for Jim Owens.

"I dragged my feet a little, Corsetta," Jim admitted.

"Dragged your feet? You fell in the gutter! I heard all about it," she said.

He followed her into the post office. She canceled three letters that had been shoved under the door during the night. She put them into the bag, pulled the latch shut and snapped it. Jim took it from her and threw it over his shoulder, and together they went down toward the mail crane by the depot.

"I heard a few things about you, too," he said.

Corsetta looked like she needed a drink.

"Don't cringe," he said sharply. "Don't let on it makes any difference."

"It does make a difference, though."

He climbed up the ladder and hung the mail sack into the clip. The train was already screaming toward them, a mile out on the prairie. They said nothing until it had passed. The sack vanished from the crane and another one rolled at their feet.

He hefted the mail sack, shaking the dust from it. Their eyes met. She was small and dark and plump, for one thing, and she was too serious for him. The feeling he had for her was deep friendship.

"If you're thin-skinned, mebbe you better carry your own mail back, Corsetta," he said. "It will cause talk. Frank McKissick has just forbidden his son to marry you."

"He did not!" she flared. "He forbid me to marry Emery. He told me, not Emery."

"Sure. Because he knew you'd obey and Emery wouldn't. Frank's the man that befriended you. People will ask why you're not good enough for his son. They'll wonder what Frank knows about you that they don't. When they see you walking down here and back with a reformed drunk, you know what they'll say."

"If you put it that way," she said, "I guess I'll have to learn not to be thin-skinned. This is a good time to start."

He swung the sack over his shoulder and they started back to the post office.

"I thought of that," she said, in a low voice. "I knew people would wonder what Mr. McKissick knows about me. They'll never understand him. Do you know what he said to me, Jim? He just said, 'Corsetta, I helped you get free of that scamp because, in a way, I was responsible for you marrying him. But that's a legal matter, and a McKissick is more concerned with his conscience than with the law, generally. I don't want Emery to marry a divorced woman. In the eyes of the Lord, there's only one way a marriage can be dissolved.' That's what he said to me, Jim."

"Sounds just like the old hellion," Jim said.

They walked on to the post office in

silence. They reached the door and he started inside. Suddenly she gave a little whimper. She snatched the mail pouch from him and darted in, slamming the door in his face.

ACROSS the street, old Frank McKissick was just dismounting from his horse. A natty dresser, he wore expensive serge trousers stuffed into hand-stitched boots, a pearl-gray shirt, an embroidered vest, and a freshly-brushed black hat. It was cold, but he prided himself on his hardiness. Until the snow flew, he would wear nothing but that vest.

The early sun glinted on his white hair, which he wore long. He tied the horse methodically before jerking his thumb at Jim.

Jim crossed the street to him. "Morning, Frank."

"Morning, Jim." His eyes narrowed. "Been drinking?"

"I dragged my feet."

"What a fool thing to do! You're not the kind of a man that can drink."

"That's what I meant to tell you, Frank. The shop is worth about twelve hundred dollars to a hustler. I owe you about eight-fifty. I'll sell you my equity for a hundred bucks."

"What a fool thing to say!" Frank exploded. "One slip, and you want to quit cold. Any man can make one mistake. Start over again. Don't give me that foofaraw about having the habit. A man twenty-eight can't have much of a habit."

Jim made one more try. "I'll start over again, sure. But I'm giving you a chance to save your investment. Your—your experiments don't all turn out well, Frank."

McKissick frowned toward the post-office. "How's she takin' it?"

"How did you expect her to take it?"

"Well, that was how I felt."

"Wouldn't it feel funny to you if you were wrong once?" Jim said.

Frank flushed, but he laughed. "I can make mistakes, but not many, and I back my guesses with my own chips, Jim. Have you seen Emery?"

A sudden chill came over Jim, and he felt the need of a steady drink more than ever.

He grabbed old Frank's thin, wiry arm. "You didn't make the mistake of tellin' Emery—"

"I told him," Frank said, "that he couldn't marry a divorced woman."

Jim gave him a push. "Frank, you old fool, you didn't think that Emery would go a step beyond that statement. Did he ask you what about if she was a widow?"

"I told him," Frank said, in a voice that was suddenly tense and frightened, "that it wouldn't do any good, what he had in his mind, because a man couldn't marry the woman whose husband he had killed, either. Oh Jim—"

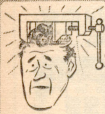
The little old man clung to him a moment. His fingers bit into Jim's biceps as he fought surrendering to terror.

"I guess that puts it up to me," he said. "Any idea where Emery went?"

"I seen him foggin' down the road ahead of me most of the way, but I lost him two-three miles back."

Jim frowned. "He didn't come into town or I'd seen him."

"Roy Hunt's been working for the Broken Wheel. There'd be only two places



**SCALP
FEEL TIGHT
AS A VISE?**



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Emery would look—here and at the Wheel. Jim, I'll hire you the best lawyers in the United States. I'll go to the Governor. I'll pay you fifty dollars a day for every day you're in trouble—"

Jim's eyes flew open. Well, as usual, the old man was thinking farther ahead than anyone else. Jim had thought only of going after Emery and taking care of him before he committed murder. Of course that wasn't good enough, he realized now. When Emery got a thing on his mind, he was as headstrong as his pa. What old Frank was thinking was the only real answer. . . .

It made him a little sick at his stomach, but he pretended he had never had any other idea.

"I never exactly butchered me a man before, Frank," he said, "but it can't be much worse than killing a beef, once you get your mind set."

"I'll see you don't suffer—too much," Frank said.

Jim frowned thoughtfully. "It may not be too difficult, at that. I was drunk last night, and I'm not exactly hearty this morning. I've already had trouble with Roy. He threatened to get me. If I go armed, I've got every reason on my side. If I run into him—"

He suddenly clutched old Frank by the shoulder.

"Only see that Emery never knows we talked about this, if you want to keep your son!" He paused. "I need a drink. Come with me to see that I don't take more than one."

He did not own a gun. They stopped at his shop, and his hands trembled so hard that old Frank had to unlock it for him. There were three guns in his office, left there for repairs. One old Colt .45 was little more than a souvenir. It had been somebody's grandfather's gun. The rifling was gone and the trigger dog was worn so smooth the trigger caught only one time out of ten.

Jim steadied his hands by sheer will power long enough to remove the trigger. He laid it aside and tried the hammer with the edge of his palm. Once he had known how to shoot this way. It was a side-show trick, and he learned it from a side-show man. But it was an old killer trick, too, and a good one, because it let

a man use both of his hands at the job.

They went to the hotel then, and Lowell Chatfield's face showed surprise when Frank McKissick ordered two double shots.

"Before breakfast, sir?"

"I have eaten!" Frank snapped.

"Yes, sir!"

Oddly enough, the whiskey gave him no sensation of pleasure, and it did little to settle his nerves. He realized it would take a pint to do that job, and by then he would be in no shape to meet Roy Hunt. The plain truth was that, after a night like the last one, he was in no shape to meet Roy no matter what preparations he made.

"One's my limit," he said, going through the formality of refusing a sociable second one, for Lowell's benefit.

Just as though it was his only concern in life, old Frank said steadily, "I never urge a man to drink, Jim. By the way, why the gun?"

Jim wiped his mouth to keep it from twitching. The whiskey was boiling in his stomach, he was dizzy and weak and sick.

"I—I had a little trouble with Roy Hunt," he said. "Whipped him, and he threatened to get me. I'm in no shape for another fight, sir. If you see him, pass the word to let me alone until I'm—on my feet again."

"It's none of my business," Lowell said suddenly, "but he was in here ten-fifteen minutes ago with a gun on, lookin' for you. That is, he was lookin' for somebody, I didn't know who. I'd stay out of his way, Jim. If he sees you with a gun, that's just a dare to him."

"I've got my work to do. I can't hide from him."

"Jim, you can't fight him! You couldn't hit a bull with a scoop shovel this morning," Lowell said.

"Roy," said Jim, with a sudden laugh, "wasn't exactly sober last night either. I guess this one will have to be pretty close range."

Standing there in front of the batwing doors, looking across at Corsetta in the post office, thinking of Emery and Roy Hunt and the tangled web in which he was only one matted string, he felt cold and tired and lonely.

"Why couldn't they let me alone?" he whispered to himself. "By now I'd have boozed myself to death. Why did Emery and Frank have to interfere with my life, like they did with Corsetta's, and Roy's? Because that's what it's going to be, just like I said—just like butchering a beef!"

As much as he disliked Roy, it was no killing matter. It had become one only because Frank McKissick had made it one. He set off down the street with the old .45 swinging ponderously at his hip, his hands wet with sweat, and nausea wrenching his stomach. He knew the awful depression that always followed a drunk. A man saw clearly then. Why couldn't this have happened before his spree, when he still could get excited enough to work up to a killing rage?

HE WENT down the street, looking for his beef to butcher. He stopped in at several places to say, "Seen Hunt this morning? I was pretty tight last night, and I'm shaky this morning. No, I ain't looking for him, but he jumped me when I was drunk and he made his brag to get me. You might pass the word for him to postpone it." Each time he tapped the gun and walked on.

He came out of the feed store and saw Emery dismounting at the hitch rail. Emery was a little taller than old Frank, but he had the same fine-boned wiriness, the same straight-backed good looks. Jim had ridden with him several months before Emery lured him to Olympiad to "reform" him. He and Emery—well, they were friends.

"Howdy. What brings you to town?" he said.

Emery grinned on one side of his mouth. His blue eyes took in Jim's gun.

"Pa's horse is down the street. Roy Hunt ain't out at the ranch where he works. You're all dressed up in a .45. What do you think brings me to town?"

He suddenly sobered. "Jim, you don't figure to take a hand in this, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Because if you do," Emery said, his nostrils going white, "it will be something you'll regret for a long time."

"Emery, you go down and talk to Corsetta. Don't be a fool. You and her fix this up. Run your own lives."

"Like you do," Emery said pointedly. "You've got a hangover."

"I dragged my feet a little," Jim admitted. "I had a talk with Corsetta. Your pa took an unfair advantage of her. Go square yourself, if you can."

He was stalling for time, and he knew he had failed when the one-sided grin came back and Emery said, "Haven't you heard? Corsetta's a married woman. It ain't proper for me to speak to her—yet."

"Well then," Jim cried, his voice rising and going out of control, "you take one side of the street and I'll take the other, and we'll corner him and butcher him like beef. Get out of my way!"

His temper split down the middle. He lunged at Emery and knocked the smaller man aside with his shoulder. Emery came up swinging and spitting curses, but Jim had the advantage; the shock of being attacked by an old friend left Emery with his guard down.

Jim swung. He saw Emery's eyelids drop halfway, and he caught the man by the shirt front and eased him to the street. He looked up and saw old Frank McKissick angling toward him across the street. He helped himself to Emery's gun and pitched it to Frank.

"The jig is up. I've got to hunt him down and do it quick." He licked his lips. "Before Corsetta knows, before Emery wakes up. Where is he?"

"In—in the saloon. He was up to your room looking for you."

Jim crossed the street swiftly, with his thumbs hooked in his belt. He shot one glance over his shoulder, a look that took in the entire sunny street. He reached the saloon, threw back the swinging doors and stepped inside.

Roy Hunt was at the bar. He may have seen Jim in the mirror, or he may have just seen the look on Lowell Chatfield's face. He had a glass of whiskey and water halfway to his lips. He set it down quickly, splashing a little on his gun hand.

He was a big man, with the kind of sleek and still brutal handsomeness that made it easy to dislike him. And yet he had only lived within his rights. In Frank's own words, he was still Corsetta's husband.

"It is not a killing matter, Roy," Jim

heard himself saying dully, "but I'm going to kill you."

His hand started trembling, but it was not hangover this time. He took a small step forward, bringing his legs apart, teetering on the balls of his feet. His left hand came up slightly.

Roy saw that left hand come around and he flinched visibly. Jim took a step forward and Roy took a quick one backward.

Jim shook his head. "Won't do you any good to run from it," he said. "Don't you see, I've got to kill you."

Lowell Chatfield quickly moved out of their way.

Roy leaned forward and sweat poured from him as he toyed with the thought of going for his gun. Jim waited.

Roy swallowed and let his hands come away from his sides. "You don't have to kill me," he choked, his lip trembling. "I—I shot off my mouth but I was drunk. I didn't mean anything, Jim. You—you don't want to pull on a man that don't want to pull on you, do you? I—give me a chance, Jim!"

His teeth began chattering, and Jim looked at him and said, "Will a few drinks do that to you? I've drunk a lot more than you have, so you can't complain. Draw your gun!"

Roy wretchedly yelled, "I swear I didn't mean it!"

Then Jim picked up the one piece of the puzzle that had been missing all this time, thanks to his drink-fogged brain. Old Frank McKissick was the piece.

Jim shrugged his shoulders and let his hands fall. "Take your drink," he said to Roy, "and then get out of the door by the back way and ride and ride before Emery McKissick catches you. When you shoot off your mouth to me, it's one thing; but when you talk of Emery's girl, it's another. Take your drink and git!"

Roy did not want to take time for the whiskey, but he drank it because he was eager to obey, to do anything that was told him. He backed all the way to the rear door. It slammed behind him, and Lowell Chatfield heaved a sigh and muttered, "He owes the Broken Wheel five bucks he drew in advance. He won't

even go out there after his stuff. Jim, I didn't know you fanned a gun."

"Didn't you?" Jim said.

He went out and crossed to the feed store. Emery was lying in the dusty wagon-way. He looked up at Jim with hatred in his eyes, but Jim glanced over his head at old Frank. At the question in Frank's eyes, he shook his head. Frank's face fell.

"Butcher your own beef," Jim said. "Get yourself out of your own troubles or don't get into them. Roy's gone. And it don't matter, because Corsetta's divorced. It's none of your business anyhow. Emery, are you going down and talk to her like I said first, or are you going to make me bring Corsetta up here to see you?"

Emery's voice blazed out bitterly, "I'll show you—"

But there was no need for a showdown with Emery. Olympiad gossip caught up at last with Corsetta, and she came running down the plank walk to where Emery was just getting to his feet. Her eyes blazed at Jim, and she came between them, turning her back to Jim and fending off Emery's blows.

"Don't dirty your hands on him! Don't even touch the drunken sot!" she screamed.

It was old Frank who came to his senses and pulled Jim aside, so Corsetta could handle Emery. They both knew, as the girl knew, that Emery's code would not permit him to attack a man he believed to be drinking himself out of a nasty hangover.

Jim and Frank walked down the street silently, going nowhere. Jim stopped automatically at his shop, turning to face the older man.

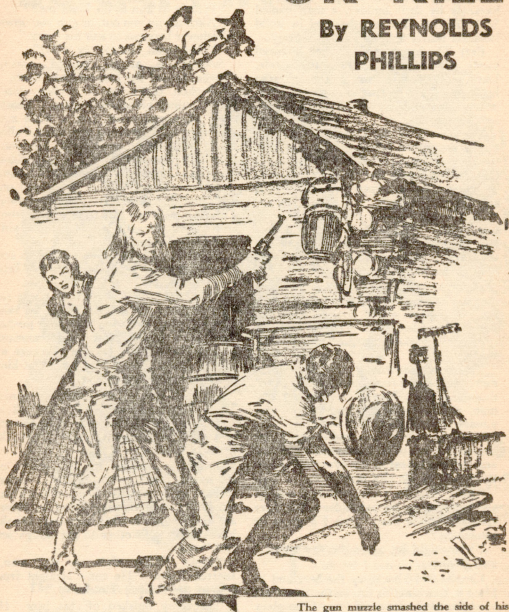
Old Frank cleared his throat. "Jim, I wouldn't worry too much about this. Emery and Corsetta will get over it when they know the truth. And—and about you. I don't want to butt in, Jim, but I wouldn't let that little slip last night worry you," he said hesitantly.

Jim unbuckled the gun belt and started for his forge.

"That?" he said. "Oh, that don't worry me none now. I just dragged my feet a little."

FOG IT, PILGRIM— OR KILL

By REYNOLDS
PHILLIPS



The gun muzzle smashed the side of his head.

*Peace-loving Thackeray hightailed it
from holster-law—smack into Stoke
Fallon's gun-rigged nest.*

ONLY by a considerable stretch of the imagination could you call the place a town. It had four buildings: a blacksmith shop, a saloon and two stores. All of them were roughly con-

structed of pine logs, and they sat in the arid flatland of Grand Coulee.

Three of the buildings were grouped in a lopsided sort of triangle, almost as though they had been dropped there haphazardly by their builder, a man named Stoke Fallon. The fourth stood in stolid isolation nearly a hundred yards away.

Bert Thackeray walked that hundred yards with a patient, measured stride. Little puffs of alkali dust spurted up from his heels. The spring air was already heavy with mid-day heat, and with the ugly hum of flies.

The nearest of the three log buildings had a weathered hitching rail, and now two horses were tied there. Apart from that, it didn't look like the saloon it was. Thackeray pushed open the single door and stepped inside.

At the bar the tall rancher, Denning, was saying, "If President Arthur'd only bull-whip 'em into runnin' that railroad west from Spokane Falls, we wouldn't have prices like—"

He broke off sharply, turning to follow the gaze of the two men who stood beside him. The quick silence struck Thackeray like a gust of hot wind. The three ranchers and the barkeep watched him motionlessly.

Thackeray paused for an instant, then moved across the room, oddly aware of the thumping of his boots. He was a rangy man, a little taller than most. The customary slowness of his movements was misleading. There was something about the smoothness of his hands and his cheeks and the brightness of his eyes that placed the stamp of the city upon him.

"Beer, Charlie." He ordered quietly, and looked from the bartender to the three ranchers beside him. "Am I a ghost or something?"

"You might be, afore the day's over," said Denning.

Charlie slid Thackeray the beer and he lifted it, touching his lips to the foam. He eyed Denning across the rim of the glass. "Stoke Fallon?" he asked.

It was the plumpish little cowman, Harp Kuhn, who answered. "I was over to Spokane Falls yesterday. I seen Fallon. He said he'd be back today—early afternoon, likely."

A tiny chill touched the tip of Thack-

eray's spine. "You told him I was setting up a store here?"

Kuhn pushed at the droop in his stained mustache, nodded. "What would've been the use not tellin' him?"

"What's he aim to do about me?"

"Aims to run you out, or gun you down. Whichever happens to suit his fancy."

"What about Nancy, my wife?"

Somewhere a fly buzzed noisily. Charlie, behind the bar, coughed once.

"Reckon that's up to Fallon, too."

Kuhn drained his whiskey glass. "Thackeray, when you come here a week ago, every one of us warned you what Fallon would do when he came back. He won't stand for competition. So far as business goes, the Coulee's his private gold mine. Us ranchers, we buy our goods and our grub and our drinks from Stoke Fallon. There ain't nobody else to buy them from, and Fallon aims to see that there ain't *ever* anybody else."

Thackeray's bright eyes seemed to age, in the space of a few seconds. A little tremble ran along the line of his jaw.

"I left Philadelphia because I was fed up with gents like Stoke Fallon," he said. "I was fed up with big men who pushed little people around. Nancy and I came out here to Washington Territory because we figured it was about as far from that kind of civilization as we could get."

Denning said, "You made a mistake, Thackeray. Out here, we've got all of civilization's faults and none of its virtues. If a man wants to protect his rights, he protects them with a gun."

Thackeray touched his hip, where no six-shooter had even hung. "I figure there's ways to settle a dispute without guns," he said tightly. "Bad as things are in the cities, at least men don't usually have to kill each other to get things settled."

"Stoke Fallon ain't no city man," snorted Kuhn. "He come straight from hell to the Coulee, Thackeray."

Thackeray finished off his beer. He said, "Well, you tell Fallon, for me, he can go straight back where he came from."

He turned and walked back across the room, conscious of their eyes following him. As he closed the door behind him, he could hear Harp Kuhn's voice:

"He's invitin' his own funeral, that

kid. Just as sure as shootin' he is."

Walking the long, hot hundred yards back to his little store, Bert Thackeray thought about that. He'd first heard of Fallon in Spokane Falls, from a young man named Carbird, who had handed him the deed to the little Coulee trading post.

The store had been built by Carbird's father, and at first he'd had a good thing. Even now, in the early nineties, commerce had not yet touched the territory between Spokane and Puget Sound, the vast, prehistoric land that straddled the dry bed of the ancient Columbia. There were a handful of small cattlemen, and they'd had no place to trade this side of Spokane. Carbird did a good business, at first.

So good that Stoke Fallon had come along and put up his store and smithy and saloon in Carbird's dooryard. Then Fallon had decided the territory was not big enough to hold two merchants, so Carbird must go. When Carbird failed to see it his way, Fallon had gunned him down—killed Carbird's wife, too.

Young Carbird, scarcely out of his teens, had scampered for Spokane Falls with his tail between his legs. It was there, on the way East, that Thackeray had met him.

It was only on reaching the Coulee, a week ago, that Thackeray had learned the true picture of things. The men of the Coulee had warned him to leave while Fallon was away, but Thackeray didn't feel like running.

Now he entered the cabin that was his new home and his store. Nancy smiled up at him, with some dabs of fresh red paint at one corner of her mouth and her brown hair done in a sort of braided halo about her head. He thought, *What if one of Fallon's bullets should hit her?*

"Finished it," she said, almost sassily, and held an oblong board up for him to see.

It was a lettered sign for their store: *The Pair Of Treys*. Nancy had once dabbled in art at school, and the lettering and the two painted playing cards that decorated the sign were very competently done.

Before he could speak, she sensed there was trouble and guessed what it was. She looked about the room, at the neatly arrayed merchandise they had brought by wagon from Spokane Falls.

"We can't run away and leave all this," she said, her small round face sober.

He nodded and grasped her hand, paintbrush and all.

"We'll stick around," he said.

HE WAS outside, nailing up the sign, when he saw the great golden-haired man coming toward him from the cluster of buildings. He knew instantly that it was Stoke Fallon. He straightened his shoulders and sighed a little.

He watched Fallon, and half expected to hear thunder rolling from the shock of the man's boot heels against the ground. Time seemed to hang between them, like a living thing. A vagrant gust of breeze stirred the shiny golden hair that hung to Fallon's shoulders. He wore no hat to cover it.

He arrived then, and stood before Thackeray, looking down at him as he might look at a stray mongrel. Stoke Fallon said, "When the shadow hits that Coulee wall, Thackeray, you be on your way." His voice was mellow, rich in overtones. Rich, too, in the same strange sort of hypnotism that stared from his gold-flecked eyes.

Thackeray made himself meet those eyes, painfully conscious that he was in no way a match for the man. "I bought this place and paid for it," he said quietly. "You can't order me off my own property."

Fallon's face showed no expression. "When the shadow hits that wall," he repeated. With that, he had delivered his ultimatum, and he turned to leave.

Thackeray said, "Wait."

He would try logic. "Do you really think you can keep competition out forever, with only a gun?" he asked, when Fallon turned to face him again. "The railroad's bound to come, and bigger men than me."

He paused, but Fallon only stared at him. He tried again:

"There's going to be a town here someday, Fallon. Maybe not much of a town, but enough so you can't own it all. Now's the time to get it started on the right track, peaceably. It'll work out more profitably for you in the end."

For dragging seconds, Fallon continued to study him. Then, abruptly, he stooped

and snatched something from the ground beside his boot. He held it before him, squirming between thumb and forefinger, and Thackeray saw it was a large grasshopper.

Casually, the finger and thumb closed, like a vise, crushing the insect's head. Still casual, Fallon half shrugged, let the dead creature fall to the ground. "I expect the railroad. And a bigger town than you think. And I'll handle them both—Like that."

"You get the hell off my property," said Thackeray.

He saw the surprise touch Fallon's eyes, sharp and sudden; saw the man's fingers stiffen close to the bone-handled six-shooter at his hip. For an instant he thought he was going to get it, right there. But Fallon's hand relaxed.

"Only one man ever told me to get the hell off anywhere," Fallon said. He might have been saying, *Tomorrow it's going to rain, I think*. "He's buried out in back there now—with his wife."

Thackeray was aware of a noise behind him. He looked around and saw Nancy standing in the doorway, and he was struck by the irrelevant thought that, in that instant, she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her.

"It must make you feel very powerful to be so expert at burying other men's wives," she told Fallon. Her voice was firm and the sunlight danced like little sparks in her eyes.

Fallon said. "Thackeray, you shut that she-wolf up."

Thackeray felt the hot anger flare inside him. He took one step forward and drove his left for Fallon's jaw. Thackeray was used to fighting with his fists. He saw the shock and quick pain cross Fallon's face, and he followed with a straight, hard right.

Fallon's hand flashed down, up again, and Thackeray caught the swift blur of metal. The gun muzzle smashed the side of his head, exploding bright lights in his brain. It lifted and raked him again, and he knew he was falling. The last flickering bit of consciousness brought him Nancy's voice and told him Nancy was coming toward Fallon. *Stay away*, he thought. . . .

When he came to, pain was pounding like a great pulse against the walls of his

skull. There was dust in his mouth and his eyes and he was half sitting there on the ground, trying to push himself erect with shaky arms. He got his eyes open and saw Nancy lying close beside him.

Her braided hair tumbled loosely in a rich brown cascade upon the earth. Her blue calico dress was ripped, revealing the white smooth skin of one shoulder. There were bruises upon her arm, and an angry welt upon her temple. Fear washed over him like a wave.

Then he saw that she was breathing.

He got to his knees and lifted her gently, and carried her into the cool shade of the cabin. Stoke Fallon had gone, returned to his three-building layout to await the coming of sundown—the shadow upon the distant cliff.

It took Thackeray five minutes to bring Nancy back to consciousness. She sat up on the bed and looked at him with her quiet eyes.

"He hit you with the gun," he said woodenly.

She nodded. "I shouldn't have rushed at him. But he swung that gun barrel, and you had only your fists. I would have killed him if I could, Bert."

WORDLESSLY, he turned and walked from the room to the front half of the cabin which served as his store. He fumbled among the merchandise he had so hopefully laid in stock, and found a gun belt and cartridges. He slipped the shells, one by one, into the loops of the belt, dug up a holster and hung that on, too. He put on the belt, fumbling a little with the buckle.

Then he broke a new Peacemaker out of its box and began wiping off the oil with a bandana. He was doing that when he looked up and saw Nancy standing in the bedroom doorway. Her face was pale, and she had one hand on the door jamb as though to support herself.

"Bert," she said, very softly. "He'll kill you."

He looked at the shiny gun in his hands. "There are some things a man can't take, Nancy. When a man's wife gets beat up, that's one of them. I reckon you'll have to let it work out the way it will."

She came to him, a little shakily, and took both of his arms with her hands.

"We'll go away, right now," she said. "While I've still got you, Bert. We'll go across the mountains to the Puget Sound country and try it again."

He shook his head. The ache from the blows was still a sharp, pounding thing. "I've been running away from the world long enough, Nancy. I guess a man's got to live with it, bad as it is—or die with it. I'm all through running now."

She was sobbing just a little, but her eyes were free of tears. He thought again how beautiful she was, and he did not want to leave her. But he thought, too, of Stoke Fallon's rough hands upon her, and the flashing gun barrel.

Thackeray bent and kissed her, then pushed away from her. "If I don't get back, go to Denning's ranch. He'll see you get to Spokane Falls, and you can catch a train for back East."

He went out the front door, shoving the Peacemaker into his holster. The three log buildings seemed a long way off and he walked toward them with a steady stride, little wisps of alkali dust curling up from the toes of his boots. He knew Nancy was watching him from the doorway, but he did not look back.

The gun felt strange and heavy at his hip as he walked. He thought of the speed with which Fallon had whipped out the six-shooter to strike him down.

There was a third horse tied in front of the saloon, beside those of Denning and Harp Kuhn. A big bay, with the dust and sweat of a long ride still on him. Stoke Fallon's horse.

Thackeray heard voices inside and he pushed at the door latch, threw the door open. The voices stopped as though a

knife had cut them. They seemed frozen there—Kuhn and Denning at a table, Kuhn with a hand to his mustache. Stoke Fallon at the bar, a whiskey glass half way to his lips.

Thackeray moved into the room. Fallon set the glass gently down. He stood with his back to the bar, little glints of sunlight from the window doing a dance on the streaming gold hair.

Thackeray walked toward him, slowly, conscious of the crunching of his boots against the silence. He let his right hand hang stiffly, close to the gun at his hip. He watched Fallon's hand move down, too.

"Go ahead," said Thackeray. "I'll give you a draw." He wanted to moisten his dry lips, but didn't. "I'll give you a draw, and I'll plug you twice—once in the gut, Fallon, and once right between the eyes."

Looking at Fallon's eyes, across the distance of ten feet, he saw the quick surprise there. The same swift touch of surprise that had struck them when he'd said, "You get the hell off my property."

"I told you to be on your way by sundown," said Fallon. His fingers flexed, tensed again.

Thackeray ignored him. "You shouldn't have touched my wife, Fallon. Now you've got to leave here—fast. Hear me, Fallon? You leave or I've got to kill you."

Vaguely he was conscious of Charlie, the barkeep, edging toward the end of the bar. He heard a chair scrape as one of the ranchers arose.

It was not fear in Fallon's eyes. It was uncertainty. They shifted from Thackeray's face to his gun hand, back to his



Jack Bailey
NIGHTMARE
QUEEN
FOR A
DAY
MUTUAL
NETWORK
SONIC
RELIEF

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face again. His look seemed uncertain. "What do you know about pulling a gun?" Fallon was trying to make a sneer of it.

"You try me and find out," Thackeray invited. He hesitated bare seconds; then: "If you prefer it another way, Fallon, all right. We'll take off our guns and use our fists. One way or another, it doesn't matter."

He moved his hands slowly to the buckle of his gun belt. His eyes did not leave Fallon's right hand. This was the time. Fallon could shoot him down now, as easily as he could shoot a sleeping man. Or he could decide against it because there were three witnesses and it might not help his reputation to kill a man who was taking off his gun.

Thackeray slipped the belt end from the buckle, let the whole works slide gently to the floor. For a moment Stoke Fallon did not move. Then he said:

"I can kill you with my fists, too."

FALLON removed his gun belt, laid it atop the bar. He stood there facing Thackeray, like some great golden god about to strike with an impersonal sort of vengeance. Looking at him, Thackeray felt ridiculously small and scrawny.

Very deliberately, though, he said, "I got an idea you're all talk, Fallon. You've got these people buffaloed."

For the first time actual, visible rage came into Fallon's face. He took two huge strides toward Thackeray, and that was as far as he got.

Thackeray swept in with unaccountable speed. Both hands flashed. He snapped the left to Fallon's chin, and drove his right high against the man's cheekbone. Fallon grunted, but the blows did not even rock him onto his heels. Instead he smashed a tremendous fist, like a sledgehammer, into Thackeray's belly. Thackeray half doubled with the pain of it, and got his elbows down there just in time to catch two more blows.

He let his feet carry him out of range. While he fought to get back his breath, he waited for Fallon to come to him, remembering the tricks he had learned in a hundred dirty alleys of the city. You did not try to out-slug a giant like Fallon. Reason dictated that. But within Thack-

eray, reason had been smothered at its roots by the chill, hard hate that filled him.

Fallon came, storming, like a huge bear. The blows beat about Thackeray in a rising fury, and he remembered the tricks. He kept his elbows busy catching the body smashes. He rolled his shoulders and bobbed his head. He turned deadly blows into glancing punches that failed to knock him off his feet.

But he couldn't ride them all out. His head pulsed with the throbbing force of a hammer-blow. The warm salt of blood rolled upon his tongue. He drove his own left deep to the big man's taut belly muscles, and they were like a wall of logs.

A wide-swinging right hand caught him along the jaw, and he went to his knees. Fallon's knee came up, sharply, caught him under the chin before he could rise. He went over on his back, rolling swiftly, and came to his feet.

Fallon was pounding at him again as he regained his balance. He stood his ground and drove home punches of his own, but he might as well have been hitting the wall of the Coulee. He heard someone swearing methodically at the punishment he was taking.

Even as he went down again from a blow, he knew what the others must be thinking. What Fallon must be thinking, too. They believed he was taking much more punishment than he actually was. They did not realize that he was taking most of it on clever elbows and arms and shoulders.

He climbed doggedly to his feet.

"I can take everything you've got," he said grimly. "And when you've used it all up, I'll get you. Remember that, Fallon. I'll get you."

He walked into Fallon again, punching. His arms were dead weights now. They stood there forever, the storm beating about them.

A solid right drove him against the bar, and he lurched into the clear for a moment. He said, "Keep trying, Fallon."

Fallon's advance was almost cautious this time. Thackeray could sense the difference, the uncertainty in the man.

They came together and stood almost leaning upon one another, slugging home the blows. More of them were slipping

past his arms now, and they wracked him with red, searing agony. One of them caught him in the face and he fell on his hands and knees. For a minute everything blotted out.

He never knew how he got back onto his feet. He just found himself standing there, and Fallon was standing there, too, staring at him. And he saw the thing in Fallon's eyes then. The man's eyes were shrieking it at him: *Why the hell can't I keep you down?*

Thackeray grinned through torn lips. "It's my turn now," he said. "My turn, Fallon, and I'm coming for you. I'm coming to get you."

He walked to Fallon, somehow concealing the shakiness of his legs. From somewhere he tapped a hidden reservoir of power and drove his fists at the sun-browned face before him. Fallon retreated a step, two steps, before his deliberate fury.

Fallon was throwing them back at him now. But there was something missing. He didn't know how long they stood there trading the blows back and forth. He knew only that he was ready to fall down, all by himself, when Fallon sagged to his knees.

The big golden-haired man climbed back to his feet, and Thackeray pumped two blows into his belly. He raised his sights and smashed him in the face, once, twice. It was apparent that the man had never been beaten before, guns or fists, and the edge of panic showed in his eyes. Thackeray hit him once more in the face, and he fell again.

He arose slowly this time, like a great wounded beast. Thackeray dug down for the last of his strength, and he put all of it into a left and a right to the head, swinging from far back with the weight of his shoulders behind them. He continued swinging, long after he had to.

Stoke Fallon collapsed, slowly, upon his face. His golden hair spilled out in a strange, bright array upon the crusted earth of the floor.

Thackeray clutched at the bar for support, turning to face the others in the room. Another man had come into the saloon: Beaver, the giant-armed man who ran Fallon's smithy. The silence was a

ponderous thing about them. It seemed to touch everyone.

Thackeray reached into a pocket of his levis and pulled out three crumpled bills. He tossed them, wadded up, to the floor beside the unmoving Fallon.

The others stared.

"What the hell are you doing that for?" said Denning.

Thackeray moved his swollen lips, gritting at the pain. "I think it's time for Fallon to leave this country. I'm buying out his store."

He looked around at Beaver and at Charlie, the barkeep. "I reckon Denning or Kuhn would be happy to lend you two some money, if you should happen to want to buy the saloon and the smithy off Fallon. . . ."

Ten minutes later, Stoke Fallon lurched silently from the door, mounted his big bay and rode slowly into the distance. Thackeray was certain that he would not return.

Kuhn stretched out a hand. "It took a mighty good man to whip Stoke Fallon with his fists."

"I didn't whip him with my fists," said Thackeray. "I just talked him into believing I could do it."

Denning handed him the gun and belt he had dropped. "That ain't all you talked him into believin' you could do." He tugged at the Peacemaker gently, grinning. "You better get a mite larger holster next time, boy."

"I hope there won't be any next time," said Thackeray. "I hope everybody'll be neighborly—and do business at the Pair of Treys, of course."

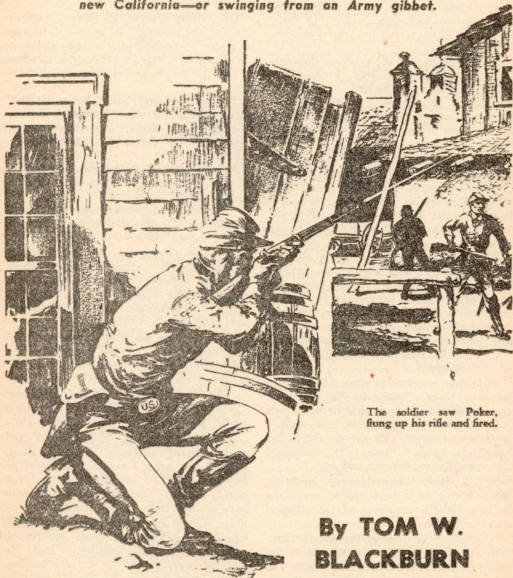
"Pair of Treys," echoed Denning. "Where'd you get a name like that for a tradin' post?"

Thackeray grinned. "I got into a card game coming through Spokane Falls. After I got here, I thought it might be nice to name the store after the hand that won it for me. You don't always have to have the best hand to win, I guess."

He walked away from them, toward the lone log building. He could see Nancy standing in the door, waiting for him. He thought he could see that she was smiling, but he knew he was still too far away to tell a thing like that.

JUAN POKER'S GALLOWS GOAL

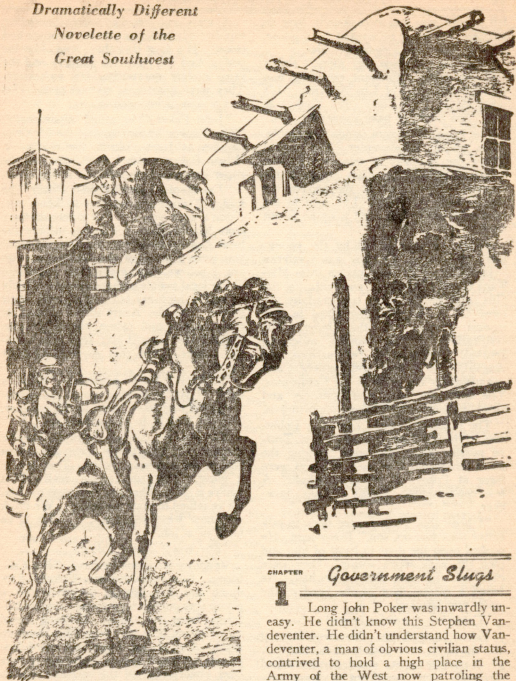
The one-time mighty Scourge of the Sierras, Juan Poker now had the choice of betraying the working men of new California—or swinging from an Army gibbet.



The soldier saw Poker, flung up his rifle and fired.

By TOM W.
BLACKBURN

*Dramatically Different
Novelette of the
Great Southwest*



CHAPTER

1

Government Slugs

Long John Poker was inwardly uneasy. He didn't know this Stephen Vandeverter. He didn't understand how Vandeverter, a man of obvious civilian status, contrived to hold a high place in the Army of the West now patrolling the southern portion of the Californias. He didn't know why the Army had picked him up or why Stephen Vandeverter wanted him. Poker could step lightly on either side of the law, as judgment demanded. He could make enemies in high places as well as low. And the dust he

left behind him was occasionally long in settling. He could be wanted for a noose, a firing squad, or a medal of valor.

"This isn't Mexico, any more," Poker told the young lieutenant escorting him through the plaza of Los Angeles. "It's good old U. S. A., now. It's Yankee as hell. You ought to have a warrant, son."

The young lieutenant nodded agreeably. "You tell Mr. Vandeventer." He stopped before the doorway of one of the older houses, fronting the plaza opposite the church. "First door at the top of the stairs. And be careful. I've men in the rooms on either side, and a squad is out back."

Poker was not misled by the youngster's pleasantry. The boy was a veteran—hardened by the long march from Missouri to the Californias, via Santa Fe, the Gila, and the Mojave; tempered by the mess U. S. officials now faced in this newest Territory in the Union. The civilizations of two peoples, miserably snarled. The laws of two nations, entangled. The lethargy and gentleness and astonishingly hot pride of the *Californios*. The harshness and avariciousness and short patience of Yankee opportunists.

The lieutenant meant business. Politeness to the contrary, this was arrest. Traffic passing along the walk fringing the plaza recognized it as such. Glances were flung at Poker. A few sympathetic. A few condemning. Mostly curious, however.

"I hope this Vandeventer likes to talk better than you do, son," Poker said. He pushed open the door in front of him and took the wide stairs within. They were carpeted. So was the upper hall. He found a carved door at the head of the stairs and knocked.

"Come in—" a voice invited.

Poker stepped into the room beyond the door. It was simply furnished. A great portion of its usual furniture had obviously been cleared out to give a busy man room in which to work. The bed remained, high-posted and canopied, in a corner. And the wash-stand with its inevitable porcelain pitcher and basin. But the chairs and chests which should have been there to complete the room's comfort were gone. In their place, standing in the center of the room, was a littered desk.

A man was hunched over it, writing rapidly. He looked up as the door clicked closed. His face was thin, long, like his body. And the eyes and features had the same mobile nervousness of movement. They were wise eyes, shrewd ones. This was a man of importance.

"John Poker?" he asked impersonally. "The Yankee known among the Mexican families as Juan Poker?" he continued. When Poker nodded, the man put the paper down and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm Stephen Vandeventer, Poker," he said. "I don't expect you to know me. I don't want you to. I've come out here from Washington. I was able to have the local Army detachment pick you up while you were a guest of the Machados, who are, I believe, among the most important of the local people and are therefore likely to resent high-handed tactics with their guests. But the Army didn't protest at my request and when the Machados learned who wanted you, they didn't protest, either. Does that serve to identify me?"

"Enough," Poker admitted. "What is this? If you're locking me up for something you may have heard in the *cantinas*, I've got a right to call witnesses."

Vandeventer smiled briefly. "We've listened to everything they say about you in the *cantinas*, Poker. That you're a ghost. That you're the devil. That you're a saint. That you're a legend. And we've talked to your witnesses. We think we know what you are. . . . This is an offer of a job."

"For you?" Poker asked.

Vandeventer shook his head. "For California. Commodore Sloat, Colonel Fremont and Kit Carson reported that a group was quietly organizing to split California from the Union. Nothing based on irritation, like the Bear Flag thing up north. A good deal deeper and more dangerous. A small group, intending to take over government of the territory for its own use. I was sent out here to track this rumor down."

"That's sort of my line," Poker agreed. "If I could help—"

VANDEVENTER shook his head. "Not in the tracking down. That's done. We know our man. The trick is

now to flush him out into the open. We happen to know he's waiting for the right kind of a leader—he doesn't want to step out in front, himself—a leader who can unite outlaws, peons, rancheros, and miners. That's where you come in. We think you're the kind of man he's been waiting for. And we intend to give him reason to approach you. We intend to make you a public figure overnight—in an attempt to bait our man so far out on a limb that he just can't crawl back. Interested?"

"Landine?" Poker asked.

Vandeventer nodded. "Shane Landine is our man. A kind of a legend, himself. A legend of devilry and vicious, clever ruthlessness. We think he's getting ready to turn the people of California against themselves, so that he can have what he wants from the ashes."

"I'll take your job, Mr. Vandeventer," Poker said quietly. "I've been looking for Landine, myself. How do I start?"

Vandeventer smiled. "Arresting you was part of it. Putting a guard around this house. So is the peon who about now is very furtively leading a good horse into the alley between this building and the one next to it. And then there's the indictment drawn against you—a number of little items which might be determined illegal, but which have made you a lot of friends in the Californias, and which have gone a long ways toward smoothing rough spots between the two peoples here. We're going to publish it and make a fuss about turning the whole force of the government out to hunt you down—after you've escaped."

"Escaped?" Poker blinked curiously.

Vandeventer nodded again. "You see, Poker, the lieutenant very foolishly left you armed when he sent you in to see me. It will be gossiped that I am a government prosecutor. My charges will be considered unjust. Sympathy will be with you. Your friends will back you up—maybe Shane Landine will back you up. . . . I deserved killing."

Poker stared at the man.

Vandeventer stood up. "You will fire a couple of shots in this room. We'll bang over some furniture. You'll dive out that window, take the roof below into the alley, and ride out of Los Angeles on the horse

waiting there. To make it look real, the soldiers will be shooting at you in earnest. It'll be up to you to not be hit. And in half an hour, Los Angeles will hear that I am dead of your bullets. I'll keep very thoroughly under cover until our plan has succeeded or failed."

Stephen Vandeventer looked at his watch. "We've been talking long enough. When you leave this room you're a fugitive, grimly hunted and completely on your own—until you send me word that you have enough evidence on Landine to hold in the Federal courts."

Poker nodded.

Vandeventer walked around his desk. With a sudden movement, he lifted Poker's nearest gun from its holster. He fired one shot into the back of his chair and another into the wall behind it in rapid succession. Handing the weapon back to Poker, he smiled again.

"Good luck!" he murmured.

A STARTLED inquiry sounded from the next room. Feet pounded on the stairs. A man shouted somewhere out behind the house. Poker lunged for the window. The sash of the window was partly open, but not wide enough to take Poker's long, solid body. He kicked the window, a pane shattered and glass shards skidded over the roof. Poker dropped to his haunches. A horse was below; a long-lined, powerful animal, spirited, restive and startled.

One of the soldiers, who had been stationed in the backyard, rounded the corner of the house. The soldier saw Poker, flung up his rifle and fired. Poker snapped a shot at him, close enough to make him jump clear of the burring splinters it tore from a scant inches from his head. The trooper ducked back, shouting. Poker swung from the roof, dropped to the ground, and leaped to the waiting horse.

The street, the plaza, seemed the best bet. Poker sank his spurs, bent low, and galloped from the mouth of the alleyway into the open of the square.

A rifle in an upper front window of the house opened up. It was joined an instant later by another. Shouts reached out past him—out ahead of him. Traffic in the square dodged for safety, adding further shouts to the clamor. Poker lay

low across the pommel of his saddle, lining for an opening in the plaza which would lead him out around the base of Fort Hill and into the brush of the river bottom, where he knew he might shake the pursuit.

But this way was suddenly blocked. A heavy, eight-mule Army van, stacked with supplies, creaked into it and halted. Behind him, the troopers who had been stationed in Vandeventer's house and in the yard were mounting and forming. The one remaining way clear lay through the main streets of the town and Poker had an aversion to streets when escape was in his mind.

He hauled his horse up, glancing swiftly around him. Almost directly in front of him was an old feed lot and corral, unused and in disrepair. A squat man appeared behind the bars of this, worked with fastenings on the sagging gate, and began to swing it open. A happenstance, likely. But another avenue of escape. The rifle fire from the house was becoming more accurate, now that he was motionless.

Poker let his horse out again and rammed through the partially opened gate. Instead of the surprise he expected on the face of the squat man behind it, the fellow grinned encouragement and started pushing the gate closed again. Poker pulled his horse behind a house of sorts, flanking one side of the weed-grown corral. A door of this burst open and two Californios piled out. Poker dismounted, drawing a gun and eyeing the palisade of the corral's back wall for footholds over it. One of the two Californios from the house swung up into his quitted saddle and sawed the horse around. The other Californio slapped this one's leg.

"Out the little gate, Arcel!" he said swiftly. "Ride like the devil was at your knee. Keep on toward San Bernardino, if the horse lasts. Let them think our friend has taken shelter with the Mormons!"

The Californio in the saddle jumped the horse forward. The gateman opened a narrow slot in the rear paling of the corral. The remaining man wheeled on Poker:

"Here, into the house—quickly!"

Poker dodged in the open door. The Californio pressed into the house behind him and slammed the door. Dropping a

heavy bar across the panel, he leaned against it, listening. Seconds later more horses piled into the corral and around behind the house. Angry, military voices hailed the squat man who had manipulated the gates.

"You—where did that rider go?"

"Señores, how would I know?" the gateman whined. "I open a gate, he comes in. I open another, he goes out. But in such a hurry. Without even a thank-you!"

"The devil with your thanks!" one of the mounted soldiers snapped. "You're lucky you didn't get a bullet in your head from him for your pains. Get that other gate open—move!"

THE gate creaked on its hinges. The horses swiftly lifted to stride. Again the corral quieted. Presently there was a knock on the door. The Californio leaning against it, slid the bar and let the squat gateman into the house. When the bar was back in place, both men eyed Poker carefully.

"Trouble with the gringo soldiers, eh?" the gateman asked slyly. "A bad business!"

"There'll be more of it before I'm through with those brass-mounted, cross-bred coyotes!" Poker growled, less than half acting as he recalled how close he'd come to losing his blood to government-issue ammunition slugs. His companions shook their heads as though disapproving, but he was aware the slyness of their scrutiny had not lessened.

"Maybe you desert, eh? Or sell to them not so good horses?" the gateman asked.

"I taught them a lesson!" Poker snapped. "I taught the big smoke that even the Army can't go around hauling a man in on arrest without anything on paper to go by. It's time the damned government learned this ain't Missouri. It's California!"

"And this lesson?" the gateman persisted.

Poker palmed a gun and spun it. "This," he said laconically. "The best teacher in the business, *amigos*. One slug in the brisket and another between the eyes."

The gateman whistled, obviously impressed in spite of himself.

"You killed the man in that house where

the Army has been?" he breathed. "Killed him? . . . Lopez, use you ear in the plaza. See if this is true."

The second man nodded and moved to the front of the house. Poker heard a door close there. He continued to spin the gun in his hand, half in idleness, and he eyed the remaining man, saying:

"Those gates didn't open accidentally. You're no friend of mine. You better quit asking questions and start to answer some!"

The gateman glanced uneasily at the gun and dropped into a battered chair. "I think we are friends," he said swiftly. "Listen. Juan Poker is a hard man to approach. You've got to know just how he feels about a thing or you might be asking for trouble. We wanted to get hold of you before you went down to Machado's ranch, but you didn't stay in town long enough. And we couldn't get to you at Machado's. We didn't want to risk finding out if we'd be welcome there or not. So we were trying to figure a way to get you back into town when the Army took care of it for us. Took care of bringing you back, and it looks like the Army took care of giving you a reason for listening to us, too."

"We?" Poker said bluntly. "Us?—You better start using names, friend."

The man nodded ingratiatingly. "There Arcel. He rode your horse off for you. And Lopez, listening to the talk in the plaza to see if you lied. And there's me, Ed Burton. That enough?"

"For now," Poker agreed. "So you wanted to see me. What about?"

"But the horse comes first, ahead of the cart, Poker. Let's hear what Lopez

heard, outside. Here he comes. After that, we'll talk."

Lopez came back in from the front of the house. He eyed Poker with a new respect. He nodded at Burton. "This Juan Poker is everything the peons say he is—everything the rancheros and even the policia say he is. The important Yankee in the house across the way had Poker arrested at the Machados. A long indictment. The important Yankee intended to hang Juan Poker so the Army and the government can claim it has accomplished something there."

Burton nodded impatiently. "But what happened in the house?"

"Who tells you about this affair?" Lopez asked, his speech showing his Latin blood and deliberation more thoroughly than it had before. "In good time, amigo. Señor Poker is brought to that house. The important Government Yankee tells him what is to come. Very unfortunate. The important Yankee is dead. Quite thoroughly dead. Of two bullet wounds."

Burton grinned with obvious relief. He turned back to Poker. "All right," he said. "You did it, then. So what do you do now? Hide?"

"Do?" Poker said with a bold grin. "Why, lead 'em a merry chase and even up my score against them and the rest of these government fools like Vandeventer. But no hiding, Burton. No clearing out of the country. I was here first!"

Burton began to chafe his hands together. "This is working out nice, Poker. Too nice, I might think—if it wasn't for the dead man across the plaza. The boss is going to find you very useful—and I think he'll know how to give you a hand with

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evening your score." He paused, smiling.

"The boss?" Poker asked blankly, then deciding to play the balance of this hand, at least, with bluntness he added, "Landine?"

"Shane Landine," Burton agreed blandly. "The boss of a lot of people who don't like the way things are going in California. He's upstairs. You ready to talk to him?"

Poker smiled. "As ready as he is, Burton," chafed his own hands together, secure in the knowledge that Burton could not read the real source of his satisfaction. Vandeventer would not be long in getting his report on the details of Shane Landine's plans and operations.

CHAPTER

2

Hangiree Fruit

The magnetism which made Landine so dangerous among a people as susceptible to personal charm as the Californios was immediately apparent to Poker when he stepped into the upper room Landine occupied. In different dress Landine could have been an ordained minister in one of the more impassioned and inflexible religious sects one heard were sprouting into being here and there in the East.

Landine had thin, sensitive features. His eyes were large, deeply set, and the purpose aflame in them could easily be mistaken for devotion to high principle. He had a slight body. And his voice was organ-like, deep and pleasant and compelling, when he spoke to Poker.

"A man sometimes rides a long trail to reach where he is going, John Poker," he said. "Sit down. I've wanted to talk to you a long time. Lopez was just up from the plaza to tell me what the excitement was out there. You have done a great service for California. Stephen Vandeventer was a man dangerous to all of us who have this unhappy land's interests in our heart."

"The hell with the country!" Poker said surily. "It was my skin Vandeventer had on the fire."

Landine's brows raised. "Harsh talk from the friend of the peons—of the little ones here, Juan Poker," he suggested.

"A man's skin and his pocket comes ahead of everything else, Landine," Poker

said. "Why do you suppose I've been six months trying to run you down?"

"I've wondered about that," Landine answered. "I thought I had the answer. I thought you figured I was—ah—dangerous to California. Maybe I believed too many of the stories about you—that you were fighting oppression and injustice wherever you found it."

"Maybe you did," Poker agreed flatly. "Point of fact, I wasn't risking somebody else using what I've been a long time building here—a lot of friends and a lot of power in small places. I wasn't risking your taking it over and making something for yourself. The best way to stop you seemed to hunt you down with some of the medicine I just gave Vandeventer."

"Um—" Landine said thoughtfully, his eyes probing Poker's face. "I'll admit I've had Arcel and Lopez and Ed Burton and some other of my men looking for you with about the same idea in mind. I don't like competition, either. But it occurs to be we might work together, Poker. You're a fugitive, now. I could give you shelter, a way to reach the ears of your friends. If you'd preach my sermon to them, I could make a place in my plans for you—right beside me."

"If you could keep the Army off of my neck, I might do some of that preaching, Landine," Poker conceded with apparent caution. "There ought to be enough chips in this game for California to fill up both of our pockets when we're done."

"You're a sensible man, Juan Poker," Landine smiled. "I should have regretted doing away with you. We'll make a good team, I think. And the work is ready for us. The first furrows have been turned. The peons of California are poor, but they're a strange kind. They count happiness and full bellies above money—and pride above everything. It is through pride that I've finally been able to reach them and stir discontent. The government of Mexico made fools of them here. They all know that. Now I tell them the Yankees will make them slaves. It gets results."

"Why not?" Poker said with more bitterness than he had intended to show. "There've been enough Yankees who have tried to enslave everyone too small to fight back. It's not hard for most Californios

to think all Yankees and the Yankee Government are the same stripe!"

Landine tilted his head forward. "Sharp observation, my friend. And do I detect a note of heat? Could you be assuming that in the last year I have done a modest bit to further that feeling of hatred for Yankees?"

Poker thought of the countless reports which had filtered in to him of Landine's complete disregard for ancient deeds and long-established property lines, his scorn for the traditions of inheritance.

"You've done enough, Landine," he agreed.

"So mine is the most hated Yankee name of them all," Landine said. "I made it so, purposely. And you're wondering how I can hope to stage a revolt against Yankees and yet head it myself."

"It bears some thinking," Poker admitted.

Landine laughed. "You put things softly for a man who can show flint when he wants to. I've done the thinking. *You're* the answer. You're going to head the revolt. The word is out, now. Arcel is carrying it. Burton will be gone when you go downstairs. And Lopez. Each going to trusted messengers who know their way through the back country—who have friends there. Night after tomorrow, all of the important discontents in the southern half of the country will be up in a bowl in the hills near the head of Soledad Canyon.

"You know the place, Juan Poker. Tiburcio Vasquez has used it, often. Vasquez Rocks, they call it. You're going out and round up your most influential friends in addition—those you think will listen most readily to talk of a revolt against the States. You'll have them at the Rock tomorrow night, too. And while I listen, you'll sell the southern half of California the idea of my revolt. I won't be seen, but I'll be there, with the most important of my helpers, watching and listening. I can't be cheated. . . . A smart man wouldn't try, Poker."

POKER glanced at the windows. Things had moved swiftly. "I'm smart enough, Landine," he said easily. "But I don't do the impossible. My friends are scattered. Tomorrow night is close. I can't reach them if I stay here. And they won't

listen to me if I'm followed. Yankee taint and suspicion travels swiftly and far on the California winds."

Landine nodded. "Clear out when you want. Go where you please. You can't get out from under my thumb. You don't dare with every Army detachment in the valleys on the lookout for you. I've got no cause to fear you and none to follow you. There are horses and saddles in a shed back of the corral. Take what you need. I'll be waiting for you at the rocks."

Poker turned out the door. Below stairs, he found the house empty. He stepped out into the darkening corral. It, also, was deserted. Crossing it, he found the little gate through which Arcel had ridden his horse. Beyond this was a small, unroofed pole enclosure. A number of excellent horses were within it. He chose one which looked good and located a saddle with a tree which suited him.

He saddled the animal and rode down a narrow track toward the brush bosques along the river. He rode briskly for half an hour, riding the sun out of the sky and night down solidly. In so doing, he wove a trail impossible to follow. Satisfied with this, he swung back toward the heart of the little town and carefully approached the rear of the house which was Stephen Vandeventer's headquarters in Los Angeles.

Both floors of the house were brilliantly lighted. Only the room which Vandeventer had occupied seemed partially darkened—as though but a single lamp burned within it.

So, to get his report to the government man, it was a case of Poker retracing the route of his escape from that room earlier in the day. It was delicate business. Soldiers were still on guard duty in the rear yard of the place. Double sentries were striding overlapping beats across the plaza front of the house. Uniformed figures passed frequently behind the lighted windows of the building.

It took the better part of a quarter of an hour to find a satisfactory waiting place for his horse three yards away, where discovery was unlikely, and to slip with the shadows in under the eaves of the low roof below Vandeventer's window.

Soundlessly, handling his long bulk with the slow and balanced care of a man long

accustomed to silent motion, Poker wormed onto the surface of the roof to the window he had shattered, earlier. His surmise about the single lamp in the room had been correct. Turned low, it burned on Vandeventer's desk. The man himself, however, was stretched out on the canopied bed, apparently in siesta.

Poker slid through the window. Outside, in the hall, he could hear the tread of another sentry. And the movement of other occupants in adjoining rooms pressed against his consciousness.

A stubbed candle burned on a stand beside the bed. Poker crossed the foot of this, listened at the door for a moment, and turned back to Vandeventer. His hand was outstretched to shake the government man rousing when something checked him, froze him in immobility.

Vandeventer was not sleeping. There was a round blue hole in the man's forehead. Vandeventer was dead. With stunned fixation, Poker bent over the body. Dried blood from another wound in the midsection had stiffened Vandeventer's shirt. Poker sucked in a long breath.

What was it he had said to Ed Burton about taking care of Vandeventer? Something about a slug in the head and another in the brisket. The incredibility of his position struck Poker like a blow. Actually he was an agent of the government. However, his superior—the one man who knew the nature of his business—was dead. And the elaborate plan that superior had woven, now had sprouted teeth. No officer in the Army would believe Juan Poker was innocent of the charges in Vandeventer's indictment, to say nothing of believing he was innocent of Vandeventer's death.

What had been intended as a trap for Shane Landine and his companions was now a trap for Juan Poker. And this dead man's bedroom was no place to be. Poker wheeled toward the window. As he did so, feet sounded in the hallway beyond the door, drowning out the more measured stride of the sentry. A hand twisted the knob.

Poker fired swiftly, close to the jamb to avoid hitting any of those outside if possible. The shot had the desired effect. The man who had gripped the knob shouted with startled alarm and released it. He apparently stepped back for a moment in

indecision. In that instant Poker dived again out the window onto the roof below.

He hit the ground, and leaped through the yard of the neighboring house. Shouts rose behind him. Soldiers in the plaza raced along parallel to him and cut suddenly back. Four of them. For an instant he thought he'd be cut off from his horse. Then the animal was in front of him, led up by another mounted man. Poker reached for the saddle and swung up.

Shane Landine released the reins to him and leaned back in his own saddle with a soft chuckle.

"You see, Poker?" he breathed. "I don't even trust the Government. I had a man in Vandeventer's house today. He made sure the work you were supposed to have done was actually done—properly—after you left. I think you'll serve me, now. Or you'll hang! Now, ride, you fool, they're almost onto us!"

CHAPTER

3

Death's Volunteers

Wheeling his horse and slanting over the horn of his saddle, Landine rode hard for the plaza. Poker followed. Behind them, army carbines spat angrily. A window in the house beside which they rode fell with a clatter of broken glass. Shouts rose. As Landine galloped into the plaza, half a dozen horsemen swung in with him, then cut behind Poker, effectively masking their retreat. In the darkness and the uproar of the plaza, the young lieutenant and his command would have hard work trailing the fugitives.

Landine continued to ride hard, swinging in across the shoulder of Fort Hill at the closest approach of the eminence to the plaza. In half a dozen moments, he was deep into the tules and sycamore brush carpeting the bottoms of the Los Angeles river. He reined up here, grinning as Poker sawed his own mount to a halt.

Two of Landine's men drew up, short rifles cradled with unmistakable preparedness across their thighs.

"A neat coup, Poker," Landine said with satisfaction. "I'm quite proud of it. You are not the easiest man in California to trick! And you've shown a loyalty to the little people—the insignificant peons and laborers and small ranchers and un-

ers, Yankee and Californio, alike—which could be troublesome. You could feel that Shane Landine intended to make them personal slaves. I don't think I could have trusted you. But this way I am sure. When a man's own neck is in a noose, he's not apt to worry much over the luck of others, eh?"

The man laughed and Juan Poker for an instant could see the full sweep of the danger in him. His shrewdness, his sureness, the implacable detail with which he shaped his plans. Alone, an army would be helpless against this man. What was needed was an equally clever hand at plans. What was needed was Stephen Vandeventer's smoothness at counterplan. And Vandeventer was dead.

"All right," Poker said. "You've copped your bet. You're right. I went back to that house to tell Vandeventer he could plant his army at Vasquez Rocks tomorrow night and take your whole outfit—paid hands and sympathizers, alike."

"And now?"

"You're the one that's giving the orders, Landine."

The man chuckled. "There's nobody I'd rather hear say that than John Poker, my busy friend," Landine said. "It's not complicated. Get your little ones. As many as you can raise. Bring them to the Rocks. Work them up, Poker. They're gathering to fight for the salvation of their beloved California—and your own neck, incidentally. I've got the malcontents, the dregs. But they're uncertain tools except in certain work. I need an honest section of the people behind me, so that others will join. Bring me those and I'll see you have your part of what I'm building. Fail and I'll see you hanged—nice and legally, by the government. And I needn't remind you that until tomorrow night, you ride with your own life at stake. I'm sure you'll be careful!"

Landine chuckled again, nodded at his two men, and turned his horse into a trail through the brush.

Poker watched him go with a heavy, bitter, angry burden of helplessness. When Landine's party had ceased to make noise in the brush, Poker turned up the course of the river. It was a fair ride to Vasquez Rocks. . . . And he had much to do along the way.

DAWN was gray over Mission San Fernando. The great valley which bore the name of the mission lay like a huge, flat-bottomed bowl to the south and east, blue and hazy in the thin light. At its far end, beyond the rise of the Caluenga ridges and the mountains flanking the rancho of the Verdugos, was the notch which led down into Puebla Los Angeles. Juan Poker remounted beside the huge scrub oak under which he had rested briefly and rode on toward the mission.

The brothers there and the few neophytes still attached to the mission were already issuing from the buildings, filing out for their day's labor among the olive groves and the vineyards. Poker idled along until he thought all of the work parties had left, then turned in to dismount before the arched front of the main building.

Father Basilio came out of his cell, rubbed a chipped place in the 'dobe facade of the old building with affectionate concern, and blinked in the sun. Poker stepped up onto the veranda.

Basil of San Fernando was an old friend. And he was indebted to Juan Poker. This mission had seemed the proper place to start. Poker spoke deferentially to the venerable padre: "God's wish for this day, Father."

The old man blinked his eyes again, then crossed to Poker as recognition dawned, his hands outstretched in friendliness.

"You've been long in returning, Señor Poker. Like the rest of the world, are you forgetting Mission San Fernando?"

Poker shook his head. "I remember friends," he said.

The old friar smiled. "And they remember you, Juan Poker! You've come for a visit—or is it help you need from San Fernando?"

"Help, *padre*. The loan of four good riders and as many horses. A day of their time. I must get word to every friend I possess in this valley. I must gather them. And I can't ride so many miles alone in the time I have."

"A personal matter?"

"A matter for all California. A meeting tonight at Vasquez Rocks."

The old padre made a wry face. "I've heard of that meeting. It is not good,

Señor! How can one rise against the Yankee Government until one has seen what the Yankee Government will do for us? Satan travels this earth in many disguises, my son. He could travel as a Yankee named Shane Landine!"

"I must have my friends at the Rocks tonight," Poker insisted. He was on the point of telling old Basil of San Fernando the point and counterpoint of connivery through which he had passed in Los Angeles in the past twelve hours, but the evidence he had seen in Vandeventer's house of the thoroughness of Landine's scheming checked him. Father Basilio was unimpeachable, but Landine might have ears in the mission, itself. "As I told you, I need help."

"I'll not give it," the old padre said quietly. "I'll not ride for you. I'll not order those within these walls to do so. I will tell them of your need. If any choose, they are free to go. And you'll have your messengers. This mission is not the only place where there are men who think more of Juan Poker than they do of California or even of their own honor. But I protest. I beg you, stay away from the Rocks. Gather your friends, but not to make this Landine stronger!"

Poker smiled gently. "It is good advice, Father," he said quietly. "I wish I could accept it. But the Yankees have made me a fugitive. The law is reaching for me. My one chance of escape lies in the meeting at the Rocks tonight."

THE friar looked long at Poker, then turned back into the mission. In a moment the greenly weathered old bell in the squat bell tower began to peal. In scant minutes those in the groves and the vineyards were filing in. They gathered in the shade of the veranda. Father Basilio eyed them all.

"This man is known to us all," he said, indicating Poker. "He has been our friend. Many of us owe him much. And he has come to us for help. What he asks will tear many bricks from what we have built here—from what Yankee and Californio alike have built since the two peoples of us have been in this valley. If a few bricks are less important than the debt each of you owes Juan Poker, then you are free to do as he asks. He wants four men to

ride through the valley, gathering those who know him at Vasques Rocks tonight."

It was obvious from the expressions on the faces of those on the veranda that Landine had been active in the upper end of the valley. The impending meeting above Soledad did not seem to be news to any of them. And there was ample consternation in many pairs of eyes that Juan Poker, who had ridden so many miles of dun grass to fight men like Shane Landine, should be meeting with him now.

However, it was not four men who stepped forward, volunteering to ride as messengers, but the whole company, except those in the cloth of friars. And they volunteered not only as messengers, but in a body they stepped forward to ride with Poker up Soledad Canyon to the Rocks.

Old Basil of San Fernando shook his head knowingly and his lips parted in a rueful smile.

"It is needless for me to tell you that the devil will be riding at Vasquez Rocks tonight, my children," he said wearily. "You would not listen. Juan Poker also rides up Soledad. And you ride with him."

He paused and turned to Poker. "It is good to trust one's friends, señor. But one cannot trust the devil. I hope you will not be so foolish."

"I haven't any choice, Father," Poker answered quietly. "The first soldiers to see me will shoot on sight. They're wrong, but how can I prove it to them? I have to ride with Landine. None of us have any choice. Soldiers do not make a good government."

The old priest bowed his head and made the usual cruciform gesture of blessing. "Vaya con Dios," he murmured, "go with God—" He turned back into his cell.

Poker moved among the mission men, picking his needed messengers from among them. When the messengers had started on their long, circling travel through the valley to carry Poker's message to small vintners and farmers, Poker ordered the balance of the crew from Mission San Fernando into saddle. One of these—Guizar, the mission smith—reined his horse into the place of honor beside Poker.

"You will need a lieutenant," he said knowingly. "Guizar you will need." He bared a wide expanse of white teeth and a reckless light came up in his eyes.

Poker said bluntly:

"We're joining Landine—listening to his arguments—adding to his strength so he can win us a new government . . . a better one for us. Do I need a lieutenant to listen to another man?"

"No," Guizar agreed. "But me, I am a smart man. In fact, if I was not so honest here—" he thumped his chest—"I think I would be a brigand. And I know what I have heard of Juan Poker. You say you go to listen. Maybe even you *think* you go to listen. But really it is not so. Really you go to make trouble for Shane Landine, not to help him. And you will need a good man and a wise one beside you. I make it a bet señor!"

"Trouble?" Poker scoffed. "I can make trouble for a man like Shane Landine with a few *mestizos* from the mission fields? How many more friends will my messengers find in the big valley? A dozen, perhaps—maybe twenty. How much trouble can be made with these few?"

Guizar continued to smile. "For a Yankee you are wise. And you maybe understand this country a little. But not its people. Not yet. Look, do you know there are hundreds of men living in this valley? Do you know they all have ears? Do you know they have heard of Shane Landine and hate him—that they have heard of Juan Poker and the things he has done, and that they call themselves his friends? They will come. All of them. You will have an army, not a few. And I tell you your need will be for a lieutenant!"

Poker grinned faintly and nodded agreement. "Pass the word to the rest," he told Guizar. "We take the dry fork of Soledad Canyon and wait in the flats there for the others to come up. No fires and no wide riding. We must all reach the Rocks together."

Poker sat apart in the sticky shade of a scrub oak, building the coming meeting in his mind and cutting a clean, orderly pattern of what he intended to do when night was down and they had moved on up to Vasquez Rocks.

As shadows came out over the walls of the canyon, Poker rose and moved among those who had followed him up from the valley. No others had come in during the afternoon. He was a little troubled. A man called out suddenly. One of the messengers sent out across the valley rode up, dusty and tired, and dismounted.

Guizar hailed the man. "Ho, Manuel—where are those you were to find and bring in?"

The messenger shook his head miserably. "Father Basilio rode ahead of me. Everywhere the answer was the same. Everywhere the farmers were willing to ride with Juan Poker on any trail except one which led against California. Let Juan Poker become a slave to Shane Landine if he wished. But let him do it alone."

Guizar glanced at Poker, then led the messenger aside. They talked. Poker frowned. It was not exactly vanity. But he had worked hard for these people. He had made their troubles his own. He had been certain they would follow him. Their refusal to do so disturbed him. He was still frowning when his three other messengers loped in, riding together, and with faces as long as that of the first.

Their report was the same. Basil of San Fernando had ridden through the vineyards and the groves, counseling that this time Juan Poker ride alone. And the people had listened.

The sun was low. Night haze was beginning to drift on the upper hills. Poker gathered those who had come up from the mission around him.

"This will not be easy, tonight," he said quietly. "Landine will not trust me too far. You are armed. He won't like that. And I need his trust in the beginning if my plan is to work."

"Plan?" Guizar asked. "Then you're not going to preach that we should join Shane Landine?"

"Would you murder your grandmother?" Poker asked sharply.

Guizar scrubbed a hand across one

CHAPTER

4

An Idol Falls

The sun was hot. Vagrant winds stirred dust on the floor of Soledad Canyon. The party from San Fernando Mission idled restlessly, waiting for the day to die. Among the most restless was Guizar. He moved from one group to another of his comrades, passing a little time in casual talk with each.

cheek. "No," he agreed thoughtfully. "She is too good a cook."

"Then listen," Poker snapped. "Every man of you leave your guns here. Ride behind me like sheep. Ride like I'd told you Landine was a great man—and you believed me."

There was an uneasy murmur among the group.

Guizar glanced at his companions, then back at Poker. "When has Juan Poker taken away the guns of friends? When has he let others do work for California? You are tricking us. Maybe you believe in this Landine and his plans after all, eh? Maybe the Army is not looking for your skin."

"Come along and see," Poker suggested quietly.

Guizar shook his head. "Not me. I've talked to some of the rest. They're fools. They'll go. They'll walk into your trap. They'll listen while you make a trade for your own skin with Yankee Landine. But not Guizar! I'm the fool who was to be your lieutenant. I'm the man who thought Juan Poker would ride the devil out of his saddle. But I ride to no meeting without my guns. I am no bigger fool than the farmers, than Father Basilio. This is one time you ride alone. I go back to the valley!"

Guizar had spirit. And shrewdness. It was in his eyes. Poker had thought the man also possessed loyalty and he had wanted the man with him. But there could be no compulsion in this kind of a thing. A man had to do only what he would. No more. He shrugged. He turned to the others. They milled uncertainly, but none of them followed Guizar as he moved across to the horses, swung into saddle, and rode down the canyon. Poker spoke to those who remained.

"Stack your guns under this oak. You'll be back for them before midnight."

FIRES burned at Vasquez Rocks. The largest was against a ledge forming one side of a rock semi-circle. Landine and three or four others were gathered there. Poker saw Burton and Lopez and Arcel in the group about the rebel leader. Within the circle of the fires were forty or fifty more men.

A few of the faces among these were

familiar, also. Some Yankee and some Californio. Malcontents of two races who believed that they had suffered for one cause or another. Those whom Poker did not know were mostly mestizos, peons vaqueros, Yankee laborers and drovers and miners—men who had little to lose and much to gain in anything. A potentially dangerous crowd, and yet one which could be receptive.

They eyed Poker's approach, with the men of San Fernando behind him, with guarded gazes. Poker thought that few of them were certain what they expected from this meeting.

Landine stepped out from his fire and Poker rode up.

"You don't have as many friends as I thought, Poker," he said bluntly. "Hardly enough to make the trouble I took lining you up worthwhile!"

Poker swung down. He grinned at Landine. "You'll find I've a few friends in the bunch you've already got here," he said. "And I'm no fool. I knew better than to come in with too big a bunch at the first meeting. I can always send for the others."

Landine nodded. "All right," he agreed. "We haven't got all night. I've already had my spiel. Told them what I planned. Three bunches. One to work south. Los Angeles, San Gabriel, and San Diego. One to work north to San Luis Obispo. A third clear up on the bay. All working together. All hitting at once. A thousand in each bunch—against one ship and about four hundred army regulars. It'll hardly raise any dust. But some of them don't think it can be done."

"No?" Poker asked. "Maybe they'll listen better to me."

"I thought they might," Landine agreed. "Supposing you try." He paused and drew a gun from his belt. He cocked it elaborately. "And pick the right way of saying it, Poker!"

This was it, then. Poker sucked in his breath until the flatness of his belly was pressed outward against the hardness of the buckle on his belt. He was conscious of the sag of his own holstered gun under the side skirt of his coat. He was aware of the truculent wariness of Landine's listening men, of the open curiosity in the faces of the crowd. He swung toward these and

spoke in a soft voice which nevertheless had the power to carry strongly.

"There was unjustness in the government of Mexico, *amigos*," he said slowly. "The old, good government of Spain can't return. Yankees have cheated you. The Yankee Government will cheat you. I have heard many of you say these things. You complain the laws are weak and favor the strong. You say money is worth more to government than men's honor. You say your bellies are full of mistreatment."

He paused. Heads in the crowd nodded agreement. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a smile of satisfaction begin to form on Shane Landine's harsh features.

"You have been promised that Juan Poker would tell you what he believed about Señor Landine's plans. You have been told Juan Poker is a man wanted by the government—that he has killed a government man and that the Army searches for him. This is the truth, as Señor Landine tells it. But the real truth is something he will not let you hear from me! He had the government man killed, a friend of all Californios. It is for him that the Army is looking. And he has been fool enough to think that I would lie for him!"

For a moment Poker was afraid that Landine would be shrewd enough to restrain himself and his men, thus robbing Poker's charges of their teeth, but the man's gun leaped up and fired. Poker felt the bite of the slug as he flung himself headlong aside. Ed Burton also fired at him, but missed. Poker rolled, clearing his own gun, and snapped a shot at Landine. The rebel chief winced and returned the shot. Poker's gun was torn from his hand as though by a giant hand. Gripping

his torn forearm, he rocked to his knees, an inner force driving him up so that he would not take Landine's final shot with his shoulders in the dust.

FROM the shelter of boulders beyond the fires, short carbines snapped angrily. Shane Landine stiffened, stared out into the night with surprise on his face, and buckled forward. Ed Burton crouched down, suddenly dropping his weapons and flinging his hands high. Arcel, reckless and in terror, fired once into the night. The carbines spat again and half a dozen slugs tore into him.

Poker swung slowly to look toward the sound of the firing. Figures were piling over the rocks, running toward the fire.

Not a pair or a dozen or even a hundred. There was no counting them. The men of the valley. All of them. Running forward. Among them he saw Padre Basilio's rounded, aging figure and the tall silhouette of Guizar. Also among them were uniforms and the ramrod figure of the young lieutenant who had arrested him at the Machado ranch and brought him in to the plaza at Los Angeles.

Guizar appeared beside the young lieutenant and guided him with a firm hand to the place where Ed Burton was crouching.

"Landine can't talk," Guizar said harshly. "This one will. Make him sing. You'll find whose bullet killed your government man—the name will not be Juan Poker!"

Basil of San Fernando bent beside Poker, looked briefly at his wounds, and called for bindings.

"Men of the sword and men of God often travel to the same destinations, my son," the old padre said softly. "Forgive

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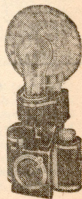
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me if I had to take a different way than you. I knew that you would not cheat the friends who joined you at my mission and that you would not share your danger with them. I know much of this Landine. A priest hears many things. I feared the danger would be too great for you to carry alone.

"So I sent Guizar, whom I could trust, with you to learn your plans and return to me. Meanwhile, I went myself for the others, all of them—ahead of your messengers. And I sent for the Yankee Army. All laws are weak and unjust in the beginning. They need enforcement.

"The Army listened to me. I was no fugitive. And I think the Army even believed me when I told its men that even if Juan Poker had killed his mother, he was too valuable to California to be lost to Shane Landine."

Poker blinked at the old padre. He had been hurt at the mission when the friar would not back him as the others had done. He had felt Padre Basilio had not quite met the measure of friendship. He had been hurt the valley farmers had not joined him in Soledad Canyon. Landine had been, after all, their enemy, too. And in thinking these things, he had done them all an injustice.

The young lieutenant, who had been listening to Ed Burton's unprodded blabbering, came across to Poker.

"I'll nab the man who shot Mr. Vandeventer when I get back to Los Angeles, Mr. Poker," he said quietly. "I know his name. A local volunteer who joined us. And I think I see the plan Mr. Vandeventer asked you to help him with. I should have guessed it before. I've heard much of you. Enough to know Juan Poker would back the Army here, not buck it. I'm sorry for my mistake—"

The lieutenant paused and passed his

hand across his face. "There's something else, sir. We've had a rough march out from the States. I've seen a lot of things since I left the river. But I'll never see the kind of sand you showed when you stood here with Landine's gun practically in your side and made that speech to these people!"

Guizar had sauntered across. "Santiago!" he complained to the lieutenant. "You do not hear the good stories about this man! You call that sand! It was but dust to what he has showed before. You don't know him at all, I tell you. I swear it, there was no real need for us to come to these rocks tonight. Tomorrow he would have been in Los Angeles with Shane Landine's head in a sack. Maybe he lose some blood, but he does his work!"

Basil of San Fernando rose. "We will find beds and food and wine for all at my mission, my friends," he said. "Tomorrow the fields will need tending again. Tomorrow the Army must ride. Tomorrow Juan Poker will start a new trial. There can't be peace and happiness under any new government without much labor and suffering for us all. Like a child, a country must grow. And growing is often painful."

Men brought up horses. Fires were snuffed and buried, Yankees and Californios—former malcontents and patriots and mission men alike working at the chores. And laughter rose among them as they worked. Juan Poker had a punctured forearm and a long tear in the thick muscles under one arm, but he had friends.

His ride from the Machado ranch through Puebla Los Angeles and the San Fernando to Vasquez Rocks seemed neither too long nor too difficult in retrospect. The work upon which he had agreed with Stephen Vandeventer was complete.

THE END

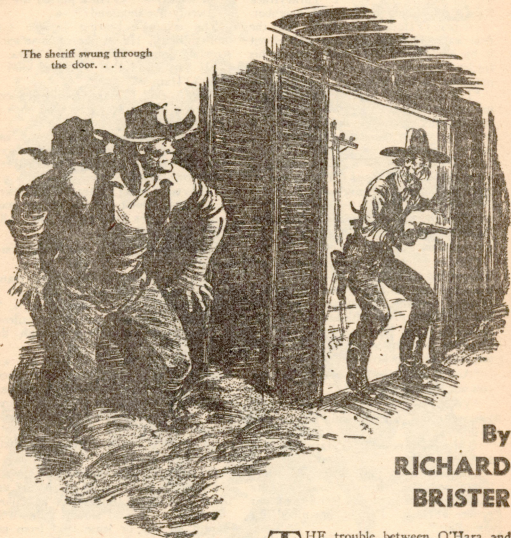
WHO SCALPED WHO?

During the ten-year period of 1862-71, thirty-eight million dollars were expended by the government in a "war of extermination" against the Apache Indians in the Southwest. Including men, women and children, only one hundred Apaches were exterminated—at a cost of \$380,000 per Apache!

—J. W. Q.

RAILMEN COME UP SCRAPPING

The sheriff swung through
the door. . . .



By
**RICHARD
BRISTER**

**The law-backed Colonel handed
hard-fisted O'Hara an ultimatum:
Give up his gold mine of a ranch
—or take a right fast ride to
Tombstone.**

THE trouble between O'Hara and Colonel Lucius C. Bray could not very easily have been avoided. Patrick Aloysius O'Hara had worked his way West to Piperock County on a U. P. track gang, saving every dollar he earned until he saw a piece of land that looked likely to him. The piece of ground that attracted O'Hara was forty miles from the railroad, and O'Hara had tendered his resignation from the track gang by just

not going back. It seemed the easiest way.

Colonel Lucius C. Bray arrived in Piperock some three years later, riding in luxury over rails which had brought sweat to the wide forehead of O'Hara. The colonel bought the old T Turkeytrack Ranch, thus becoming O'Hara's neighbor.

He paid O'Hara a visit shortly after the deal was completed. O'Hara walked out to his hitchrack, a wide smile creasing his freckled features, as he welcomed his new neighbor to Piperock.

"Light down," beamed O'Hara, admiring the colonel's English riding jacket, tan breeches, and hand-carved boots. It was easy to see the dashing colonel had earned his rank as a cavalry man. O'Hara said, "I'm honored, Colonel. Light down, and I'll see if I can scare up a bit of refreshment, and—"

The colonel's long, high-rigged nose twitched slightly as he inspected O'Hara. "That's kind of you. But no, thank you. I'm here on business, friend."

O'Hara stroked a blunt, bristly chin, still smiling by the grace of almost super-human effort. As an Irishman, he took it as very insulting that his new neighbor had refused to drink with him. As a conscientious host, he reminded himself of his duty to remain cordial. He thrust one massive, clinched hand in his pocket.

"And what business would be bringin' you out this way, Colonel?"

"You're in luck, O'Hara. I've taken a fancy to this piece of land. I've decided to buy it."

"Have you now?" O'Hara breathed sweetly.

"I have," said the colonel. "I won't hedge on price, either. Name a figure that'll give you what you feel to be a fair profit. O'Hara. I'm in no mood for quibbling."

A hard glitter burned in the wide blue eyes of Patrick Aloysius O'Hara, then gave way to dancing small devils.

"Sure," he said, "and it appears I am in luck, Colonel. It ain't every day a man with a loose pursestring takes a fancy to me house and home, that I'm hopin' will someday be blessed with the sweet presence of a colleen t' call me her darlin', and present me with a dozen young ones in me own image."

"I'm sure," said the colonel, in a net-

tled, perplexed tone, "I'm sure I don't—"

"Sure and I could kiss the ground at your feet," said O'Hara. "I'm that grateful to you, for makin' me such a fine, generous offer. No quibbling, you say. Shall we say—" O'Hara pursed his lips—"twenty-five thousand?"

The colonel's bearing became even more military. He sat like a human icicle, scowling fiercely down upon O'Hara.

"If you mean that as some kind of joke, O'Hara—"

"Me?" said O'Hara, rolling innocent blue eyes. "Whatever gave you such an idea, Colonel?"

"I could use force, you know," said Colonel Lucius C. Bray, whose handsome face was rapidly turning a mottled reddish-brown color.

"Tsk, tsks," said O'Hara. "Please, sir," he mocked, "don't run me up for court martial. I never done nothin', sir. All I ask is a chance. . . ."

"You won't sell?" said the colonel. "Is that final?"

"I always liked a determined man," said O'Hara. "You're over-doin' it, Colonel. It happens," he said softly, "I heard about the new branch the railroad is planning to build up through this valley."

O'Hara smiled. "I worked me way west on a track gang, Colonel. I still keep myself up to date on what the railroads are up to. This place of mine'll be a small gold mine, once the railroad builds through here."

"You seem quite certain of that," scowled the colonel.

O'Hara grinned banteringly upward. He took his hand out of his pocket and began ticking off fingers as he talked. "First off," he said slowly, "they'll be wantin' to buy or lease land from me. Second, this here's the logical place for a water tower, before they go into that long pull up towards Banning City. That water hole of mine is going to come in mighty handy, and the railroad'll pay me plenty for the use of it."

"Got it all figured out, haven't you, O'Hara?"

"I'm an old railroader myself," O'Hara said blandly. "I can build holdin' pens and loadin' chutes an' set up a small shippin' center right here. That's gonna

save me drivin' tallow off me stock, on their way to market, besides which me loadin' platform and holdin' pen'll pay for themselves in fees from other fellers around here that'll be wantin' to use them."

"I'll give you ten thousand dollars, O'Hara," said the colonel.

"You're a generous man. I couldn't take such a gift from you, though," said O'Hara, "much as I'll be needin' cash for me expansion program."

"Twelve thousand, O'Hara."

"I'm goin' deaf," said O'Hara. "I don't seem to hear you, Colonel. Good-by."

"O'Hara," said the colonel conversationally, "turn around."

"I'm deaf," said O'Hara, and walked on toward the house.

Spatt-t-t! The gun made a flat, brittle epithet behind him. O'Hara had not been expecting any such thing. The colonel had not been openly armed. Where his hideout had come from so suddenly, O'Hara did not know. He watched a small hole appear above the threshold of his small house. The colonel had a steady hand, he decided. The slug had whistled over his head by less than two feet.

PATRICK O'HARA turned slowly. He inspected the snub-nosed .38 pistol in the colonel's right hand. He shrugged his wide shoulders.

"Sure and me hearing's improved for the moment," he said softly. "I take it you learned short arms in the Army, Colonel. You've got a right steady hand. But sure, you don't expect to force me to do business at gun's point, now, do you?"

"O'Hara," the colonel said, almost idly, "it seems you've been stealing T Turkeytrack cattle."

O'Hara's thick red brows lifted. "Have I now? That's interestin', Colonel. I wouldn't've known."

The colonel turned back the lapel of his English riding coat. O'Hara caught the glitter and flash of a silver badge against the man's pepper-and-salt waistcoat. "Glory be," breathed O'Hara. "Where'd you come by such a tarnished-lookin' piece of tin, Colonel?"

"It happens," said the Colonel, "that Matt Billingsley and I soldiered together,

O'Hara. This is a deputy's badge, for your information."

"Aye. I can see that," said O'Hara. "Piperock County could do with a new sheriff, in me private opinion. Matt swore you in personal, did he? What you got on him?"

"O'Hara," suggested Colonel Lucius Bray smoothly, "as a duly registered representative of the law in Piperock County, I charge you with stealing T Turkeytrack cattle. Furthermore—"

"Furthermore," said O'Hara, "you're makin' me knuckles fair itch for the touch of your jawbone, Colonel." He glanced arrogantly at the gun in the taller man's hand, then waved a thick arm in the bay mare's face. The horse whinnied in surprise and fright, went careening back on her hind legs, smiting the air with flaying front feet.

The colonel swore, sawing at the reins with his left hand, trying to hold his seat as he aimed the gun at O'Hara with his free right hand. The gun popped once. The slug whistled harmlessly past O'Hara's huge shoulder.

O'Hara grasped the colonel by one ankle, and ripped the slender man from the saddle. O'Hara swung him like a blacksmith swinging a heavy hammer. The colonel, cursing venomously, was trying to bring the gun to bear on O'Hara.

O'Hara kicked his man in the wrist, and sent the gun flying. He picked the colonel up and swung a clubbing short right hand to the smooth chin. The colonel went sprawling. He stood up, took a short riding crop from inside one hand-tooled boot, and brandished it at the approaching O'Hara.

"I warn you, O'Hara," he snapped. "You'll sweat in jail if you lay another hand on me. I'll swear you've been stealing me blind. I'll say you resisted arrest when I came to have it out with you. Better men than you have thrown themselves away bucking a law badge, O'Hara."

O'Hara breathed hard, but paused to consider. His first hot rage had simmered down somewhat, appeased by knocking his man spinning. Logical now, he saw the strength of the colonel's cards, saw the depressing weakness of the hand he was

holding. It was quite hard not to see it.

O'Hara's herd of whitefaces had grown amazingly fast, during the three years he'd spent here in Piperock County. Down in Piperock town, the saloon talk had it that O'Hara swung a pretty wide loop. How else could he build up so fast, Piperock wondered.

Hard work was the real answer to that. The same hard work that kept O'Hara so busy he hadn't time to dally in town, and get better acquainted with his town neighbors. An unsociable man, the town called him. In Piperock an unsociable man—for no matter what reason—was an unpopular man. The town was quite ready to believe any mean thing about him.

If an important, rich man like Colonel Lucius C. Bray, a civic-minded man who had generously volunteered to help Sheriff Matt Billingsley with his law duties, swore that O'Hara was stealing his cattle—well, people in Piperock would be inclined to believe the colonel.

They'd throw a hangrope over the handiest tree branch, too, thought O'Hara, if the colonel could stage-manage things that way. He laid a thoughtful finger against his neck, imagining what a brisly hemp noose would feel like there.

He leaned down, picked up the colonel's .38 pistol, and shook the cartridges from it into the palm of his hand. He tossed it to the colonel.

"Sure it's an interestin' picture you've painted, Colonel. Resistin' arrest, hey? Get along with you now before I stuff that tin badge down your throat. And if it's a scrap you're after, I reckon you've broached the right party for it. . . . I'll be havin' a bit of talk with Matt Billingsley, and explain a few facts of life to him!"

MATT BILLINGSLEY was a sprung-kneed, slouch-shouldered jasper with a bland, moist eye and a constant grin. He was grinning right now as he stared up at O'Hara. "Yep," he said drily, "I'm sure grateful to you, O'Hara. If you hadn't come in under your own steam I'd of had to ride out and fetch you. Cattle stealin's a right serious—"

"That's what I'm here about," growled O'Hara. "Bray seems to have taken a

liking to my land, Sheriff. I wouldn't sell, so he's taken this way of forcin' my hand. If he claims I been swingin' my loop at any of his T Turkeytrack cows, he's lyin' to you."

The sheriff did not lose his smile, but it soured a bit at the edges. "Colonel don't strike me like the kind of man to misuse the truth, O'Hara. I don't know nothin' about him buyin' your land. All he told me is you been runnin' your brand on his mavericks. I reckon I'll have to lock you up for the time bein', O'Hara."

"Sure and you got another think comin'," snapped O'Hara, and pulled a small derringer out from under his leather jacket.

The slouching lawman glanced at the gun, holding his constant smile with a visible effort. "You're aimin' that pea shooter at the Piperock County law, O'Hara. You tryin' to convince me you stole some of Bray's cattle, are you?"

"You're not putting me behind bars, Sheriff. So far, it's only Bray's word against mine. You don't seem to want to hear my side of it."

"I do my duty the way I see it. When I hear a man's been stealin' cows off his neighbor, I figger it's my job to lock that man up, investigate them charges, and hold that feller for trial. Put that gun down, O'Hara. You can't beat the law."

"Sure and I can try," grated O'Hara. He held the derringer on a line with the slouching man's limp stomach, and moved in a backward arc toward the door that gave onto the main drag of Piperock. "A freeze-out, is it, Sheriff? Well—"

"Stop right there!" said a clipped voice from behind O'Hara. It was the voice of Colonel Lucius C. Bray, coming from the door that connected the sheriff's dingy little office with the jailhouse.

O'Hara stood like a statue. "You ride fast, Colonel," O'Hara suggested. "I take it you've reloaded that popgun."

"Drop that derringer, O'Hara!"

O'Hara let the little weapon fall to the floor with a clatter. He turned with his hands up to face the colonel. "You really think you can get away with this, do you, Bray? Accusin' a man of thievery's one thing. Provin' it on him's another, I'm thinkin'. Even if you do have Matt sewed up in your pocket."

"Now, you look here," snapped the sheriff. "You can't talk like that in here, O'Hara—"

"Shut-up, Matt," snapped the colonel. He nodded toward O'Hara. "Put him in a cell."

O'Hara said, raging, "You can't make this thing stick, Bray. You're cooking your own—"

The colonel's soft smile stopped him. "Later in the day, O'Hara, Matt and I and a few of the boys are going to ride out to your place and look over the stock in your home pasture."

"Sure and you won't be pinnin' anythin' on me, neither," said O'Hara. "My place'll bear inspection any time."

"Not tonight," smiled the colonel.

"Y' mean—" O'Hara felt a weak sensation/slide through his middle. "You've planted somethin', you tricky spalpeen. You've taken advantage of my bein' short-handed and snuck some of your cattle onto me land."

Bray said, "You're not a popular man in these parts, O'Hara. There's no telling what may happen, when the word gets out you've been misappropriating my cattle. Of course—" he smiled broadly—"Matt and I'll do what we can to keep the boys from breaking in here to get you."

"Of course," sneered O'Hara.

"But there's only two of us, after all," Matt Billingsley cut in, smiling. "And what's two men against a lynch mob, O'Hara?"

O'Hara looked at the floor. A realist, he said slowly, "It ain't bad, Bray. Sure it ain't bad." Beside his hips, his huge fists were clenching.

The colonel said, "I wouldn't make another play if I were you now, O'Hara."

"No?"

"No. I'll-shoot to kill this time. I could say you were resisting arrest. Matt'd back me on that."

"I guess he would," admitted O'Hara. He stood there, debating. He felt a thrust of reluctant admiration for the colonel. The man had worked swiftly and with cunning, to trap him.

"I wish you *would* make a play," said Bray softly.

"So you could buy me place at auction?" said O'Hara.

"Are you ready to sell?" asked the colonel.

"I'll sell," O'Hara nodded, and watched the surprise wash over Bray's face, watched the slow smile grow in place of the tight scowl which had been there. Bray let the gun drop to his side slowly.

"Well, now . . . that's more like—"

"I'll sell," said O'Hara, "for twenty-five thousand," and made a scooping motion at the floor. His agile hand came up filled with the derringer he had let fall there. He stared at the colonel above the gleaming gunmetal. He said, "Easy does it, Colonel. I'm a hard man to kill. Don't touch that trigger if you know what's good for you. That's it, just sit quiet, Matt."

Matt Billingsley said, "You can't shoot a lawman and live to tell about it, O'Hara. Why don't you admit that you're licked? You shoot one of us, and you'll end up hanging from a lynch rope in a matter of hours. And yet, one of us

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could plug you right now and claim you was resistin' arrest."

"I got a good mind to do just that," Bray smoldered, looking at his gun. "You do," snapped O'Hara, "and you'll buy your own ticket." He backed around toward the door. "Me ranch still ain't for sale, Colonel. I'm ridin' out o' town, Sheriff, and—"

"You won't ride far," snapped the lawman. "Colonel and me'll follow your dust and plug you on sight, O'Hara. I told you you're under arrest. Why don't you sell your place to the colonel? Don't be a fool, man. You can't stand against us."

O'Hara said thoughtfully, "If I shoot either one of you, I'm layin' myself wide open to a charge of killin' a lawman while resistin' arrest, hey? And if you shoot me, you're just doin' your duty? Is that the size of it?"

Mat Billingsley nodded. "You're no fool, O'Hara. Why commit suicide? Sell out to the colonel."

O'Hara smiled at the sheriff. "I just wanted to draw you out an' see what kind of a snake you really was, Matt. I don't know what Bray's got on you. But it must be plenty, if you're ready to commit murder for him. I'm ridin' out."

"We'll be right behind you," the colonel said conversationally. "You're signing your own death warrant, O'Hara."

"Maybe." O'Hara sidled to the door, backed through it slowly, then slammed it fast and ran to his horse, which was patiently swishing flies at the hitchrack. He was mounted and twenty yards down the street by the time the sheriff and Bray reached the verandah of the lawman's office and started taking potshots at him. O'Hara heard the slugs whine overhead. There were women and children on the plank walks. The colonel and Billingsley hadn't dared to really aim at him.

HE SWUNG north out of town, giving his horse a free rein. Lucius C. Bray and Matt Billingsley wouldn't waste much time coming after him, he realized, and the thought sent a thrust of harsh anger coursing through his thick body.

"Sure and they can shoot me down like a sittin' duck," O'Hara thought. "And I don't dare lift a hand against them in

self-defense." He put frantic spurs to his horse's flanks. . . .

Sheriff Matt Billingsley and his Deputy, Colonel Lucius C. Bray, could just make out the black dot upon the horizon which was O'Hara. The colonel applied spurs to the flanks of the mare, and snapped out bitterly, "For a man who's supposed to be gun handy, you seemed damn reluctant to side me back there, Matt. What's the matter? Losin' your nerve?"

The slouch-shouldered lawman spat as he glanced toward the colonel. "Lay off me, Bray. I'm gettin' fed up on your naggin'. I said I'd side you against O'Hara, but I never figured on committin' plain murder."

"Not murder," grinned Bray. "We're going after a fugitive from the law, Matt, remember? Naturally, if he resists arrest, we'll have to—"

"I don't like it."

"Maybe," said the colonel, "you'd like me to spread it around Piperock how you escaped from a military prison eight years ago, Matt. How you'd been sent there for showing the white feather in battle. Maybe you'd like to go back and complete that sentence."

The sheriff squirmed in his saddle. "You rotten son. Mebbe I oughta do some blabbin' myself, Bray. People might be interested to hear you never got above private rank, in the Army. You was a private when you took over a guard's job in that prison, and you was still a private when you completed your hitch. You got your nerve, posin' as a colonel. They's laws against that too, in case you're forgettin'."

"Maybe," grinned Bray blandly, "I'm a Kentucky colonel, Matt. I never claimed I was a colonel in the Army. If people choose to think that, I can't help it. But you'd better play along with me, if you know where your bread's buttered."

Matt Billingsley stared darkly at the white spot between his horse's cocked-back brown ears. "I done everything you asked so far, ain't I?" he asked sullenly. "Deputized you, and backed your hand in the office, and—Hell, Bray, ain't there no way but to run him down and gut-shoot him?"

"If the stubborn fool refuses to sell—no."

"But . . . it don't seem like his place'd be worth *that* much to anyone. I mean—"

"Trouble with you, Matt," said the colonel sharply, "is you have no imagination. That place of O'Hara's will be a small gold mine in a few short years after the railroad pushes through there. I'm not going to fool with him. I mean to have that place. And I won't stop at killing."

The sheriff squinted across the flat, heat-shimmering surface of the prairie. "We're gainin' on him, Bray."

The colonel leaned forward eagerly in his expensive saddle. "Ride," he said tightly. "Ride, dammit!"

* * *

O'Hara could feel his horse slowly falling to pieces beneath him. He was a stocky man, a heavy man with little grace in the saddle. He looked back worriedly, and saw that the colonel and Matt Billingsley were now only a half mile behind him.

O'Hara's worried eyes picked up a plume of smoke on the horizon. It was coming toward him, he saw, and squinting against the brightness of the afternoon sun, he saw the bell-shaped stack of a freight train.

He reined his horse around in a slow curve toward the on-coming train. Arriving at the track, he soothed his horse, which was shying away from the chuff-chuffing locomotive, then spurred the exhausted beast into a run alongside of an empty boxcar.

O'Hara swung off his horse and into the empty just as the first fusillade of shots from the colonel and Matt Billingsley reached him. From within the rattling boxcar, he watched the two badge toters swing onto the freight, several cars behind him.

He cowered in a corner of the swaying empty, hearing the pair calling to each other as they moved forward upon the tops of the cars.

"Which one's he in, Matt?"

"Dunno, blame it! Lost track of that when we were ridin' to switch onto the train."

"Make a search along through here.

I'm going up ahead and tell the engineer to stop this train. O'Hara's not going to slip through our fingers this way again."

O'Hara heard the colonel's high heels thuck sharply against the catwalk above, heard the slower cadence of Matt Billingsley's footfalls.

There was a metallic series of sounds, as of a man descending a steel ladder, then the sheriff swung around and through the door by which O'Hara had entered. He held his sixgun in his hand. He was squinting hard into the darkness, trying to accustom his eyes to it quickly.

O'Hara moved swiftly. He picked chaff from the floor of the car, flung it into the lawman's face. Billingsley's gun bucked in his hand. O'Hara kicked at it, saw it fly out of the sheriff's grip, and flung himself happily at the slouch-shouldered badge toter.

Billingsley brought his knee up at O'Hara's stomach. O'Hara caught the man's flung leg firmly, and hoisted. Matt Billingsley went back off balance. He fell on the seat of his pants, skidding upon the wheat chaff covering the floor of the car. He screamed in panic, feeling the floor lose substance beneath him as he skidded right out the open door.

O'Hara tried to grab and save him. He was too late. He saw Matt Billingsley drop, clutching frantically at the side of the car, heard the man's terrible scream as he fell toward the track. Then the clickety-clack of the wheels on the rail ends drowned out all other sounds.

O'Hara stood panting. He picked up Matt Billingsley's sixgun from where it had fallen, tucked it into the waistband of his trousers. He had not killed Matt Billingsley, he told himself firmly. The sheriff had killed himself, by his foolhardy attack upon O'Hara.

"Sure I can't raise a gun in me own defense against the law," muttered O'Hara. "But luck took care of the sheriff. As for that spalpeen, Bray, if I could just get me two bare hands on him—"

O'HARA stopped, even as the train began to slow down. A sick fear came to life in O'Hara as he listened to the dying click of the wheels on the rail ends. Shortly, he heard the strident calls

of men up and down the resting line-up of freight cars, wanting to know what was the matter. There was a short silence.

O'Hara dropped to the ground and took two hurried steps, when a voice snapped behind him: "One more move and I'll drop you in your tracks." The voice seemed to come from atop the empty. "I got a rifle trained on your backbone. Better freeze, till that deputy sheriff that's come aboard has a look at you."

O'Hara froze, not even turning his head at the sound of men running down the cinders toward him. He heard Bray's sharp laugh, a high cackle of triumph, and swung brittly toward the sound. Bray was standing not ten yards away, training that snub-nosed .38 on him.

"Guess this is the end of the trail for you, O'Hara. You're comin' back to Piperock an' stand trial for cattle-stealin'. Where's Matt?"

"That's your worry, Bray. Throw down that law badge a minute, an' we'll shoot this thing out man to man." O'Hara glanced at the railroad detective atop the car who held a rifle trained on him. A wide smile suddenly creased O'Hara's freckled features. "Slim! Slim Allerton! Where you been keepin'—"

"Patrick O'Hara," beamed the other, and slowly lifted his rifle. "How are you, man? And what's the idea of leavin' the track gang flat with never a word about quittin'? We was worried about you, O'Hara." The tall man, once a co-worker with O'Hara on a track gang, now advanced to the position of railroad detective, said soberly, "What's all this trouble between you and the law here, O'Hara?"

Bray said irately, "Steer clear of this, friend. As long as I represent the law in this county—"

"What county?" said Slim Allerton softly.

O'Hara pricked up his ears. A slow smile crossed his features.

Bray snapped, "Piperock County, naturally."

"Naturally," said the railroad man. "Only this here happens to be Gould County, Mr. Law. Which means that badge on your vest don't pack no more weight than the tin it's made out of."

O'Hara said happily, "Man to man, Bray. I've been waitin' for a chance like this at you."

Bray's gun spoke first. O'Hara felt the thrusting stab of the .38 slug slamming through his left shoulder. He was spun like a top as he brought his gun up. He held fire, gasping and groaning at the pain in his shoulder.

He fired with deliberate calm, squeezing the trigger as his father had taught him long years before. His slug took Bray in the leg, and the man went down to a kneeling position, his face white with fear and hatred. He was lifting his pistol for another shot at O'Hara when a group of shouting trainmen ran up.

Slim Allerton said, "Leave them be. I'm seeing fair play here."

Bray shot again. O'Hara felt the whisper of the slug past his cheek and knew how dangerously close he had come to his grave that time. He let go with Billingsley's big six, walking ponderously forward, closing the range on the chalk-faced colonel.

Flame leaped in a fiery red snake's-tongue from the muzzle of the big Colt's Peacemaker. A tiny hole appeared in the colonel's English riding jacket.

The man dropped to the cinders like a cut wheatstalk and lay twitching, as blood stained his shirt front.

"Thanks, Slim," said O'Hara. "I'd never've guessed we'd run clean into Gould County already."

The railroad detective snapped at two burly brakemen. "Lift that feller up and put him in this boxcar, what's left of him. We'll haul him along into Gould Junction, and turn him over to the mortuary." Slim Allerton moved close to O'Hara, watching the workmen push Bray's body into the empty. The detective winked at O'Hara.

"This ain't Gould County," he whispered.

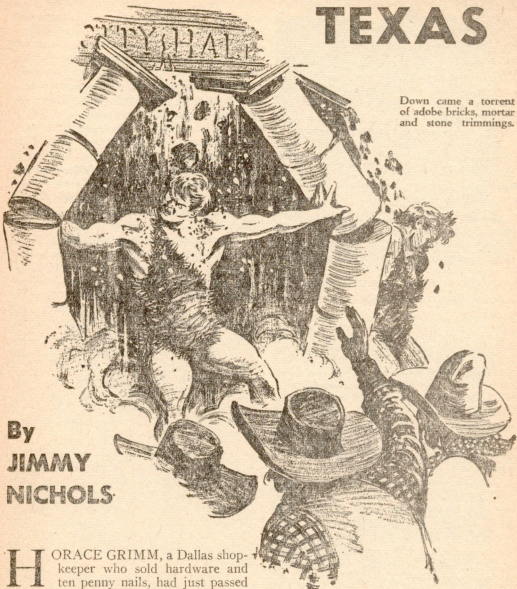
"But, you said—"

"I figured the law had you on the run, and I wanted to help you," Allerton said. "Meanwhile, you and me's the only ones that know this ain't Gould County. I reckon I can keep that a secret, if you can."

"I reckon I can," grinned O'Hara broadly. "I got special reasons."

TWIN TERRORS OF TEXAS

Down came a torrent of adobe bricks, mortar and stone trimmings.



By
**JIMMY
NICHOLS**

HORACE GRIMM, a Dallas shop-keeper who sold hardware and ten penny nails, had just passed his own fiftieth birthday when his wife, Matilda, gave birth to twin sons. If Dallas reeled with shock, Horace and Matilda were even more astonished. It seemed impossible that this quiet, mild-mannered, meek couple could have produced two such lusty offspring. Their twenty years of married childlessness made the whole thing more amazing than ever.

Once they became accustomed to the

*Because he had twin sons, all men
lionized meek Horace Grimm.*

idea, however, the mother and father were delighted. They named the two boys Lon and Paul, and settled down happily to watching them grow. It was quite a sight. As Horace put it, "It's not bringing them up that worries me. It's holding 'em down!"

From the beginning it was evident that Lon and Paul would be outsized. By the time they started to school, they towered head and shoulders above the other six-year-olds and regularly engaged in jolting physical combat with boys eight years their senior. But it was when they were twelve that Dallas was suddenly and forcibly aware that it had a pair of modern giants within its limits.

It happened as the result of a Bible lesson. Lon and Paul were in Sunday School one morning, sitting in the back row, staring at their reflections in the toes of their mirror-polished shoes and trying hard not to yawn as they gazed across the cool churchyard into the sunlit prairie beyond.

Suddenly, Paul sat up straight and began to listen with great interest to the Biblical chapter that was being read in a singsong monotone. He raised his hand.

"How's that again?" he demanded. "You mean to say this fellow Samson just went out and tore down a hull buildin' with his bare hands? I don't believe it!"

"It says so right here," and the unperturbed Sunday school teacher waved his black tome.

"Tell me more," commanded the twin with great interest.

"Well," began the teacher, "there isn't much to tell. The temples in those times were built of columns—kind of like the stone posts that hold up the doorway of the City Hall. Samson, being a very strong man, just went out and put one hand on one column—and one hand on another—and pushed. Down they came!" The church bells, pealing out at the end of the service, terminated the lesson.

Paul and Lon were fascinated as they scuffled homeward through the noonday dust.

The next day, as the Texas sun shone white in the sky directly overhead, the cattlemen, merchants and hangers-on along the main street of Dallas witnessed a strange and terrifying sight. Down the

road from the west came two paint horses. If the animals looked a little wild-eyed, it was excusable, for in their saddles they carried two huge male figures, broad-shouldered and powerful. They were bare-footed, wearing only thongs in a kind of Greek sandal, and around their waists were slung gray wolf skins. Stupefied, Dallas recognized the Brothers Grimm.

Silently, swiftly, they slid from their saddles, walked up to the portals of the City Hall. There they paused, held a swift whispered consultation. Then Paul put his back firmly against the stone column on the right of the door and the flat of his hands against the other. Lon arranged himself on the opposite side in precisely the same way. They began to push.

The building swayed noticeably. From the rear, someone yelled, "It's an earthquake!" And from the front hall, someone bellowed, "Stop it, you young idiots! You'll tear the building down!"

"Are ye tellin' us?" drawled Paul, and continued to heave. Two more mighty efforts—then down around their ears came a torrent of adobe bricks, mortar and stone trimmings. The columns, split in two, toppled sideways across the doorway. Then the entire front of the building collapsed. Beneath the half-ton of rubbish, the tails of two mangy wolfskins jerked convulsively and were still.

It was two hours before they dug them out, limp and blue in the face from lack of air. They were carted home, bruised from head to foot, in their father's spring wagon, trailed by three or four dozen angry or curious citizens who demanded, every time one of the modern-day Samsons raised his head for air, "Why did you do it? Why?"

"We was just doin' our Sunday School lessons!" Lon answered. That was their story, and they stuck to it.

Meanwhile, they continued to grow. Six foot three at the age of fifteen, they weighed over two hundred pounds apiece and boasted circumferences of eighteen inches around the neck. "Too thick to hang!" they used to josh their father, but aging Horace Grimm only smiled and shook his head. Despite their size, the two were polite, good students, hard workers and as honest as the good examples set

them over and over by their parents.

When they lost their tempers, however, as boys will, they were a caution.

Once, engaging in a game of ball with two teams of schoolmates, they took offense at an official decision handed down against them by a kind of umpire, or rule-maker, who was overseeing the game. Dropping the round, stuffed hide ball that they had been pitching, they picked up the unfortunate official and tossed him back and forth over the fifteen feet of space between them until he yelled for mercy.

A YEAR or so later, they half-killed a band of outlaws whom they surprised holding up their father's store. Before the advent of his tremendous sons, Horace had been a frequent victim of robbers. He himself was so little and meek and non-combative that he almost invited abuse. Men pushed him off the street into the wagon ruts, strode into the store and helped themselves to a handful of nails without bothering to pay. Even small boys had sometimes followed his stooped, bald-headed figure, whooping and jeering, and tossing rocks through his windows.

Since the twins had been old enough to be seen and heard, however, things had been different. They had started by dealing summarily with their contemporaries. Now the children in the neighborhood were glad to run small errands for Horace Grimm or carry business messages, anytime, anywhere.

The twins were working in the store, throwing barrels of nails around in the storeroom just for exercise, when seven members of Pete Gunther's outlaw gang strode in the door. Pete, fresh from suc-

cessful holdups in the north, was on his way across the border. In Dallas, he planned for one more big robbery—at the Grain Exchange Bank—and, more important, a chance to re-arm. In a close brush with the law, the gang had left most of its long-range weapons in a hideout two hundred miles behind them. Horace Grimm sold rifles and ammunition.

But that day, he neither sold rifles nor gave any away, although Pete Gunther had planned it that way. No sooner had the seven armed outlaws crowded up to the counter and slapped Horace to the ground than two tornadoes charged out of the rear. What happened in the next five minutes was never completely or accurately recorded.

The desperadoes were tossed around like bean bags, bounced off the walls and ceilings, slammed head first into kegs. When they finally broke loose and streaked for the light of day it was with the honest conviction that they had been attacked by at least fifty club-wielding vigilantes and routed by another hundred or so fresh federal troops aided by several fiendish Indian scouts.

At any rate, that was the story they carried back to Gunther in his hideout and their appearance was so devastatingly one of utter defeat that it sent the whole gang scuttling, ill-armed and without funds, across the border for good.

The brothers Grimm did not lose their tempers again for another six years, and when they did it was, sadly enough, at each other. A pretty new schoolteacher named Rose Wakeman was the cause of the dispute. Lon and Paul had both fallen

(Please continue on page 96)



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BLOOD IS THICKER

By DENNISON RUST

THAT last evening when I came up to the cell door, he opened the little slot and pushed the tin cup and plate of supper at me. I was extra careful in setting it down, because I'd learned to be almighty careful about anything I did around Clyde.

Through the little barred window behind me, I knew the red sun was going down behind the Piñon Range. The bob-whites were just starting in their sharp whistling, and I thought maybe that would be the last time I'd ever hear them.

Just then the sun came out from behind a cloud for an instant. On the ceiling, I saw the bent shadow of the gallows with its cross-piece. The way the shadow was, one of the window bars looked like a rope coming straight down—though I knew it wasn't. I'd heard them all afternoon testing the rope with sandbags, and then Sheriff Gallup had coiled it up and taken it into his office to keep it free from the dew.

The hanging had been set for tomorrow and already folks in buggies and buck-boards and a-horseback were crowding the town. You could hear 'em plain enough. We didn't have legal hangings so often then, that it wasn't worth a day's ride to see.

Clyde's white teeth grinned at me through the bars. He hadn't lost any of his fancy looks or swagger in the five years since I'd seen him on the outside.

"Listen to the suckers! They're sure going to be disappointed having their ride for nothin'—"

I grabbed the bars hard. "What the hell you mean, Clyde?"

He laughed and slapped his thigh. "So the sheriff didn't have time to let you in on the big news, huh? There ain't going to be any hanging. He just got a wire from the governor. A pardon's on the way, Parson!"

My stomach churned up in a sick kind of flutter, but I just eyed him steady. "So we'll both be on the same side of the bars

again in a matter of hours. The same side, Clyde."

He dragged up a stool and sat there, his boot-heels resting on one of the iron cross-pieces while he dumped tobacco into a wheat-straw, twisted and lighted it.

"A sanctimonious son like you, Parson," he said soft and lazy-like, "would find a Sunday-school moral in this, wouldn't you? But what did all that Bible-spoutin' get you, up to now? A gimpy leg that wouldn't let you set a saddle an' do a man's work. A nice view of the sky through a set of iron bars. An' your daughter bringin' you home-cookin' once in a while. Hell, even if someone had fixed it for you to make a break a long way back, you wouldn't have had the guts to do it!"

And the trouble was, I knew he was right.

Clyde exhaled, and snapped the stub of the cigarette through the bars so I had to dodge to keep it out of my face. I saw his flash of white teeth, his cruel grin and heard his laughter again. The kind of laugh that I'd heard him use before, and that made me both sick and blind mad.

When he talked again, his voice was silky and mocking. "Nope, Parson, I got the only text that pays off: Always look out for Number One, and the hell with the other gent. Loyalty an' fair play an' such-like are all right for suckers. But they don't win no big pots.

"Look at the time you got goled when we crossed the Red in flood time on that Bar B drive. I knew I had to get out when my horse got fouled up in that mess of swimmin' half-panicked steers. An' in that water I knowed that your horse could only carry one of us—so I dragged you off his back. You could of grabbed his tail, an' maybe you did. But I was the one to get out with a whole skin, an' you was half drowned an' crippled to boot.

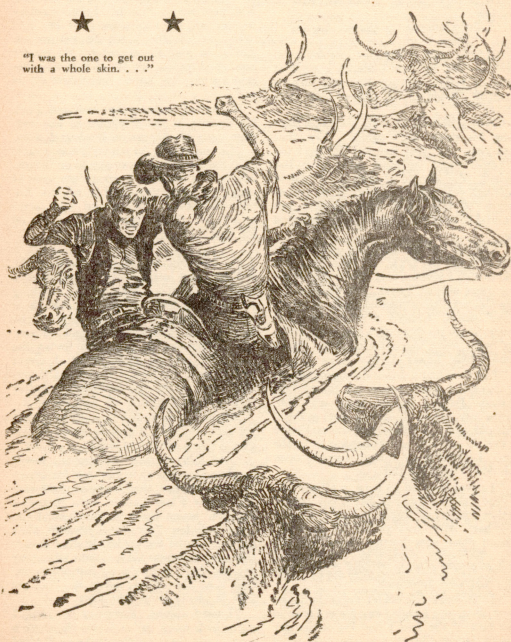
"I gotta hand it to you. You never uttered a squeak about it afterwards, nor

—AND HOTTER!

One slug would stop Killer Clyde from pulling the dirtiest deal of his vicious life—but Parson had to fight the blinding hatred that clouded his gun-sight.



"I was the one to get out with a whole skin. . . ."



took it up. Not that you would have stood much chance if it came down to a real argument. But I had my eyes open for Number One, an' you were just the trustin' kind of sucker I was looking for. If I didn't thank you then for savin' my hide, consider yourself thanked now."

I felt sort of cold all over, though my hands were sweating. I rubbed them on my levis.

"A little late for the thanks, Clyde," I said. "There were a lot of people who saved your hide at the cost of their own. Mebbe—yes, by dam'—mebbe even that little ol' yellow cur-dog that you turpented at Dodge at the end of that same drive."

Clyde guffawed at that, his hand slapping his thick thigh again. "Say, that was rich. An' that fool cur did save me a gun-whippin' by none other than Bat hisself. You should of seen it. You'd of laughed yourself sick, instead of volunteerin' to ride night herd because you wanted to save your wages to get married on."

"Only it was kerosene, an' not turpentine that did the trick. I'd took on a few too many, I reckon, and found myself on the other side of Texas Street where the townies was hidin' behind their wimmin-folks' skirts. Caught a couple of their fancy, stuck-up daughters out for a walk, an' what more natchural than for me to grab a kiss, Texas style?"

"Just then half a dozen deputies charged down, an' I made tracks for the highest saloon. Barged in, an' there was Bat, yellin' my name. I ducked out, grabbed this cur and run behind the store. Found a can of coal-oil, and poured it onto the pup. Lighted it an' tossed it in the open window, right into Bat's face."

"I never laughed so hard in all my life. There was that fool cur, like a yip-yappin' comet, blazin' an' tearin' tail up and down the bar. Men was yellin' an' shootin'. Damn place near burned down, an' Bat got a free singe, better'n any barber could do it. I lit a fast shuck outa there. Yes-sir, that was shore rich."

My stomach felt colder an' sicker than ever then, and I coiled my fingers around the butt of the gun I had hid under my brush jacket like it was the only solid thing in the world.

"Take a leaf from my book, Parson," Clyde was saying. "Doh't forget that to you, Number One is the first to look out for. Well, mebbe you did, at that, because you did marry your girl when you got back from that drive. Even after my tellin' her she was a fool to tie herself down to you an' your gimpy leg."

"Not that I wanted her, or any woman. Not permanent, that is. I like tumble-weedin' an' the excitement that lies just over the hill too much to get myself dallied to any apron-string. No matter how good-lookin' the bit of fluff is inside said apron. But nope—you didn't do so bad."

He leaned back on the stool and stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, drumming his fingers on his barrel-chest.

"Dunno exactly why it is," he said, soft, "but the woman always seem to go for me. Maybe it's because I treat 'em sort of rough yet respectful—that is, at first. An' tell 'em nothin'. Strong and sorta mysterious an' dangerous-like. They all go for that."

HE LEANED a bit closer against the bars and instinctively I edged back a little, though there likely wasn't anything to fear from him. It was just that there was something about him, beyond the fact that he was merciless and without any compassion or pity, that fouled the air. And yet, for some reason I didn't recognize at the time, I stayed on, listening, even while my backbone felt like worms were crawling up and down it.

Maybe I was afraid of what he hadn't yet said, and was still more afraid of not giving him a chance to say it.

"An' still speakin' of women, here's another example of lookin' out for Number One, Parson, that ought to show you. You know Floss Latour, even though I bet you never been in her honkytonk. They call her "Ice-Box" because she's supposed to be the coldest-hearted floozie this side of Kansas City. That's what they say, an' that's what she is. But not to me. She runs the dump; owns it. An' my take is plenty from that place."

"I need dinero. Plenty of it. Hell, I gotta look good, an' a fancy rig costs a man. I got three saddles that would blind you with the shine of their inlaid silver."

I never rode a plug or a Nabby pony in my life an' never will. Yet sometimes even my luck runs sour. An' when it does—an' no questions asked, mind you—there's always Floss. Not that I don't pay her back, when I think of it, an' happen to have it handy.

"An' here's another funny thing." His smile was real soft, now. "It ain't only wimmin like Floss that like me. It's all of 'em. I mean church members; gals an' wimmin who'd ruther die than get rouged up or smoke a cigarette. Respectable folks whose daddies would run 'em off if they even suspected that I was, like they say, poachin' on their preserves.

"Like tomorrow night. Believe it or not, I got a date with the sweetest little hunk of calico you ever see. Palomino hair, like a gal I once knowed years back, but who's since died, built like this—" and in the dim glow of the lantern his hands made a shape like this—"and a laugh like far-off church bells.

"Now, if I was a sucker, I'd play it a sucker's way. Let her reform' me like she says she wants to do. Settle down, an' turn into a Bible-spoutin' holier-than-thou no-good like her old man. Only I know what she wants, better than she does. Here, Parson, if you think I'm lyin'."

He turned away a moment, to get something, and my teeth were pressed together so tight that my jaws ached, like my fist did around the hot handle of the gun, sunk deep in my waistband.

I took the piece of perfumed note-paper he extended in my left hand, and his soft laugh was like running a rat-tailed file over every nerve I had.

"What're you shakin' for, Parson?" Clyde said. "Trouble with you is that you're so dried up you wouldn't recognize a good time when it's within spittin' distance of you. You—"

But I wasn't listening. It was as if that writing, carefully shaded as I had so feared and all but known it would be, was made in letters of fire, burning bright from the faintly ruled paper into my brain. The note said:

Dearest:

Here is that "gift" you wanted, and I hope it will help you. I'll be down at the grove with two horses, like you said, at midnight. I know I'm doing wrong, but maybe, when

Daddy finds out that you're not really what people say, but fine and honest and good, he'll forgive you, and your

Dorrie.

"You see, Parson," Clyde said, sweet and easy, "I got two strings to my bow. The Governor's pardon—an' Dorrie."

Dorrie's note, of course, had been written before the news of the Governor's wire had come. And, as the paper fluttered to the floor, I knew more clearly than ever just what I had to do.

I dragged for my gun—too slow.

For Dorrie's "gift" was out and smashing flame from Clyde's hand. I remember a red-hot fist hitting me, jerking my shoulder around and slamming me down, while smoky thunder roared and shook the jail cell and corridor. I was so sleepy that I could scarcely see Clyde's dim shape, so numbed that it took both my hands there on the stone floor to hold my own gun steady and squeeze off one shot, and then—and this took the rest of my strength—another one.

I saw Clyde go down, and I heard the clatter of his gun as it dropped, and the

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pound of feet, and shouting. After that, I don't remember much of anything. . . .

DORRIE was there when I woke up on the cot in the sheriff's office, along with Doc Griswold and half the town, I guess. Including some of the folks who were going to be cheated out of a hanging.

And I didn't need Dorrie's hand on my forehead, or the look in her eyes, to know that whatever made her write that note was now all gone. That she was my daughter again, and that all the wildness was out of her blood—the same wildness that her old dad had had so long ago, when he and Clyde had gone up the trail together.

I still have the clipping from the *Weekly Argus* that they wrote about the fracas. But that was only, so to speak, the outside story. Because I must have, at the last moment of consciousness, got that note and wedged it up on my pants pocket. Dorrie gave it to me that night, when we were alone, and we watched it burn together.

It was a nice little write-up they gave me. Here it is; just like they printed it, almost fifteen years ago.

DARING JAIL-BREAK FOILED! NIGHT MARSHAL IN HEROIC GUN-BATTLE WITH KILLER!

"Pardon" A Hoax!

The County Jail Thursday evening was the scene of an exciting gun-battle when the notorious gambler and convicted stage-robber and murderer, Clyde Beulow, alias "Gentleman Jack" D'Arcy, made a last minute attempt to shoot his way out of jail to freedom.

From some unknown source, the felon had secreted, or had been given by an as-yet undiscovered henchman, a Colt .44 with which he attempted to kill Night Marshal "Parson" Jeffers, in charge of the jail, and make his getaway. The marshal's aim was better.

Marshal Jeffers was just removing the prisoner's uneaten dinner, and stopped to say a few words to Beulow, whom he had known when they were both young trail-hands during the days of the great cattle drives, when, apparently, Beulow drew his gun and attempted to assassinate the mar-

shal and thus release himself with the official's keys.

Although painfully but not seriously wounded, the marshal managed to draw his own pistol and shoot the killer, already convicted for holding up the Bristol stage and killing the driver.

One curious feature about the affair remains something of a mystery. Shortly before sundown, a telegram was received by the sheriff, signed by Territorial Governor McCabe, stating that the prisoner's attorney had uncovered evidence proving Beulow innocent of the stage-robbery, and that a pardon would be forthcoming. The wire was apparently sent from a north-bound Texas and Pacific Train some three hundred miles from the Territorial Capitol.

Later, it was found that the governor had not left his home, and that the telegram was a forgery, apparently sent with the intent of throwing local officials off their guard, and to facilitate the prisoner's gaining his freedom.

Ye Editor, however, by dint of some discreet sleuthing, discovered that a former notorious resident of our fair city, one Flossie Latour, who left "for her health" along about Thanksgiving time, had opened another establishment in Trigger Gap, located on the main line of the Texas and Pacific R.R.

It was common gossip that she was friendly with the late Beulow, and it is not inconceivable that she might have known about the mysterious telegram before it ever went over the "talking wires." When Trigger Gap becomes as forward-looking, progressive, and civilized as our own Longhorn City, we predict that Miss Latour's tenure in the Gap also will be of short duration.

Meanwhile, Marshall Jeffers is improving daily, under the excellent care of his daughter, who plans to accept the position of teacher at the new Longhorn City schoolhouse in the Fall.

Trigger Gap Gazette—Please Copy! For the benefit of any of Miss Latour's friends who wish to try out our hospitality, please note that our able carpenter, J. C. Fillmore, can yank up a gallows in half a day's notice, and there are a lot of local folks who figure they were cheated out of one hanging, and would sure like to see another.

That's about all. But there's one thing I still catch myself wondering about, when I look at that little herd of palamino-haired kids playin' around the ranch here, where Dorrie and her husband live. That is, did Clyde ever know that I followed his advice, and for the first time that I remember, looked out first for Number One?

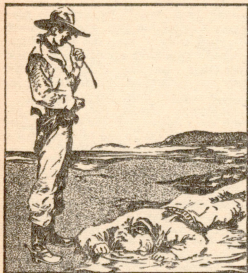
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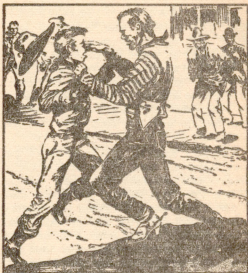
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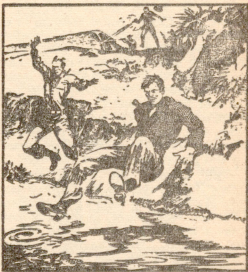
The Whistler Kid, trouble-shooter for the Cattlemen's Association, was puzzled by the bushwhacking of Squinty, wrangler of the Cross J—and further puzzled when he discovered that every bone in Squinty's body had been broken.



Layton, foreman bully of the Cross J, resented the young Whistler Kid sticking his bill into Squinty's murder. Layton confronted the Whistler in the town of Silver, started a fight and tried to gouge the Kid's eyes.



A big cattle raid drew all the fighting men from Silver—except the Whistler. He purposely stayed in town and met a pretty girl who clung to his gun-arm—while a rustler slugged him from behind.



The Whistler taunted the mad-dog killer chief, and had to make a desperate escape down a hillside under fire. . . . The complete story of the Whistler will be told in William R. Cox's novel—*"Hogie That Devil, Whistler!"*

SIX-HORSE HELLION

By B. S. JOHNSON

CHARLIE PANKHURST learned the workings and manipulations of a toach and six when he was knee-high to a Concord's rear axle. Apprenticed at Worcester to Ebenezer Balch, who owned the finest stables in all of Massachusetts, Charlie was known as the hardest-working apprentice in the company.

Charlie's first big job came when he was hired to boot Birch and Stevens stages over established eastern routes. When the West opened up, Birch and Stevens sent him to take over the dangerous Oakland-San Jose run in California. "One-Eyed Charlie"—he lost an eye when a horse kicked him—was soon the most popular man on the run. Many an old timer pointed to the short, stocky whip as the outstanding apprentice to saw a rein, and the passengers soon agreed.

On the Stockton-Mariposa run one day Charlie with a passenger-loaded Concord came to the flood-swollen Tuolumne River. The bridge across was plenty rickety, and Charlie pulled his team to a walk. As the horses pranced frightenedly across the wooden structure, Charlie saw the beams sway drunkenly, timbers beneath groan. Instead of pulling his team up short, Charlie put the whip to the six and sent the team and Concord hurtling across the bridge. He pulled up on the other side, and he and his gray-faced passengers turned to see the bridge crumple and plunge into the swirling river.

Such incidents left Charlie unperturbed. Once, when he was rattling his reins at a merry clip along a gravel-ribbon mountain road above a thousand-foot drop, a nervous passenger began asking him questions. "How can you see your way through all this dust?"

"I don't—I smell it!" snapped Charlie. Then: "Fact is, I've traveled over these mountains so often I can tell where the road is by listening to the wheels. When they rattle, I'm on solid earth. . . . When

I can't hear 'em—" He gave his passenger a significant grin, and snaked out his black whip to urge the team faster.

Charlie swore like a muleskinner, drank moderately, gambled little and spent money in moderation. But in sheer nerve, Charlie skimped little. An example . . .

Newcomer Charlie was trotting his team and Concord over the Oakland-San Jose route for the second time. Suddenly he heard the barked command: "Drop them reins and hoist 'em!"

Caught completely off guard, Charlie could do nothing but comply. But as the agents made ready to pull away Charlie told them soberly, "I wasn't expecting this—but, boys, don't try it a second time!"

Not long after the first robbery, another gang of highwaymen jumped Charlie's stage at approximately the same place. Charlie let his Colt do his talking this time, and before the would-be bandits could say "hands up," Charlie had pumped three of them with lead.

The wounded men turned their horses and ran for their lives, with Charlie's shots following them. A little later a posse found the body of one of the agents in a tunnel near the crime. Charlie never had any trouble with highwaymen again.

In later years, Charlie was forced to quit the stage lines because of rheumatism. He bought a ranch near Watsonville, California and settled down.

Later, Charlie sold his ranch and moved to a smaller place near the Seven-Mile House on the outskirts of Watsonville. The quick charm of the quiet, husky little fellow won him many friends among his neighbors. Whenever Charlie was in need of help his neighbors eagerly supplied it. When Charlie passed on at the age of 67 in 1879, it was to these people that he left his small estate.

They, too, were the first to learn the incredible truth that whang-leather tough One-Eyed Charlie Pankhurst was a woman!



The savage came at Hollis silently.

• • • REDMEN BLAZE THE WAY

*Hollis was a natural-born yellowbelly
who'd rather crawl than fight—Hollis
thought.*

By PAUL CHADWICK

HIS sickly face was rimmed with dirt and sweat and gunsmoke. He lay on his belly, trembling with fear, hugging the dry earth under the last wagon in that long, gray train. Below his thin cotton shirt, close to his heart, a painful tightness gripped him as if the veins and muscles might burst at any moment, spilling out blood even before Nez Percé bullets ripped his flesh. Mechanically he pressed the trigger of

his carbine and plucked shells from his cowlhide belt to reload. But in between shots, listening and watching, his thoughts wrestled fiercely with the question of why fate had tricked him so.

Parties of settlers before him had reached their goal, the green ranges and gold fields of California. Why then should this one group be marked for savage attack?

There was no answer John Hollis could accept in the blood-curdling yells of the Nez Percé riders, racing by in the dusk. They were circling nearer, closing in. All around him, men and women were dying. Each time a scream or a groan reached him, it was like bloody fingers tearing mercilessly at his own insides.

Nothing in the life Hollis had left behind had prepared him for this hour. He wished that someone back there on his father's farm in Kentucky, when he had first considered coming West for his health, had given him full warning of what he might face.

Tales of gun-fighting and Indian attacks had made him uncertain at the start. He had no stomach for violence and he knew it. But, gradually, had come the foolish conviction that such things could never happen to him. To others, yes. But not to John Hollis.

And now he had learned his mistake too late.

Darkness and fear closed in around him, piercing the thin walls of his manhood, bringing him face to face with the shameful image of what he actually was. A weakling. A coward.

The fight was a jumble of fantastic pictures; of yelling Indian raiders, dim shapes in the dusk; of cursing men, screaming women, of the horribly shrill squeal of wounded horses, of gunshots and eye-blinding flame. Each time a Nez Percé fell, two more seemed to spring up and take his place. Hollis felt that he was shooting the same man over and over, without sense or purpose, as if his carbine had the devilish power of spawning afresh whatever it slew.

He came to his last shell finally, thrust it into the smoking breech of his gun with full knowledge of what it meant. The wagon train was doomed. Others around him were running short of ammunition.

The flames of two burning wagons leaped steadily higher. A team of panic-stricken horses broke loose, tearing crazily through the smoke. Hollis smelled the bitter rankness of their scorched hides as a steel-shod hoof almost drummed his face to pieces. They went down screaming and kicking, tagged by random shots from the dark.

A Nez Percé warrior rode straight toward Hollis' hiding place, his coppery face emerging into the firelight like a devil from hell. Hollis could see the hard black eyes, the open mouth, screaming its hate. He fired and missed, and heard the crack of the Indian's rifle before the shaggy pony wheeled.

Hollis stared down at his hand in paralyzed wonder. Splinters of wood were needed there and the walnut stock of his carbine was shattered. His numbed fingers hardly registered feeling, until he saw the long sliver standing out from his wrist and the dark blood oozing up around it.

He tore the thing away from his flesh with a cry. It was terror more than pain that drove the sound from between his teeth. He pushed his gun from him, twisted, crawled like a scurrying lizard back among the dark halves of the wagons, clutching his wrist, sobbing, hardly aware of what he did.

He wanted escape when there was no escape. He passed by dead faces, shut his eyes to hold away the sight of them bathed in the cruel, slanting light of the flames. He wanted darkness, quiet, a hide-out where he could bury himself.

His groping fingers found the high-rounded forms of two dead horses that had fallen neck to neck. He tugged at their legs in clumsy desperation, pulled them apart, wedged himself in, taking his refuge as it came to him like a terror-crazed animal seeking the dark. He made himself small and knotty, breathing the fleshy rankness around him till shock and fear and nausea made him faint into darkness.

WHEN he opened his eyes again he lay suspended in a vacuum of death. It was all about him. In the cold horses he pressed against, in the dark shapes he knew were scattered under the wagons,

among the still-smoldering ashes—and in the breathless quiet of the night.

His head reeled and his eyeballs throbbed. He dug tense fingers into the thick hides of the dead horses for a moment. Then he backed away with revulsion.

This abject silence was worse than the nightmare action that had preceded it. A miracle had happened—but it seemed more like a curse. He was the only survivor. He was alive, but of what use was it to him or anyone else? Even the Nez Percé braves, scalp-hunting as they must have among the ruins, had not bothered to look for his worthless carcass. He was of no more value to anybody than the carrion horses he had wedged himself between.

Hollis dragged himself out. The night chill struck his thin, damp shirt and made him shiver. The cold was pointed up to needle sharpness by the lonely fear that seeped into his spirit. He must get away, put space between himself and this scene of death. . . . He crossed the turf that had been cut to ribbons by the sharp hoofs of the Indian ponies. There were dead men lying here, too. He worked his way shudderingly between them.

Over beyond the open valley where the wagons had made their last stand, there were brushy hills rising. He remembered how the sunset had tilted over them, spilling its liquid gold on the men and women who were doomed. If he could only reach them while he still had life!

Forgetting the pain in his wrist, Hollis thrust doggedly ahead, moving stealthily through buckbrush and over rocks, till he reached the first low hill. Up on the summit, hidden behind tumbled boulders, he fell exhausted and lay for many seconds in a half-conscious state.

Starlight touched his face finally, teasing his bloodshot eyes open. The miracle of his survival lay upon him like a weight. He gave in to a strange, self-torturing doubt as, step by step, judging himself harshly, he went back over his actions, wondering where he had failed.

It wasn't easy to see. He had stayed there and fired and brought his Indians down like the rest of the men. He had held on till his last shell was gone and his carbine broken. The wagon train's

destruction could hardly be laid at his door.

Yet the feeling of doubt persisted. He half rose on his elbow, staring down toward the scene of the massacre, noting the gleam of the dying embers. Even they seemed to mock him. He felt like a breathing ghost encased in flesh that had no right to live. He didn't belong there on this hilltop under the stars, he told himself. The West, in letting him live, had somehow rejected him.

Silent he lay there, till the brooding quiet of the night was broken by a sound that floated up from the valley below. Hollis thought at first it was the cry of a coyote or of some night bird. When it came again, clearer, louder, his heart-beat almost stood still. The sound was a thin, piping tremor, calling out something he couldn't understand. But his ears identified it as the voice of a child.

He was halfway down the brushy hill, moving recklessly, rattling stones in his haste, before he sensed exactly what he was doing and before doubt came.

He stopped and began trembling again, biting his lips. Suppose there were others who had heard that voice—a Nez Percé scout perhaps?

His terror came back in a dark, chill flood, the nightmare terror of the battle he had seen and lived through. He couldn't go back. Whatever that thin cry meant, he couldn't run the risk of falling into Nez Percé hands. Their hatred of the invading white man was justified and he knew what his fate would be. A man had a right to save himself.

He stood there silent, shivering, staring desperately down toward that camp of death. The cry was repeated. There was a note of frenzied urgency in it, of appeal that almost by-passed Hollis' reason. It set up a tingling in his spine and made his throat feel dry.

Why did this, too, have to happen to him, he wondered? He didn't belong in this wild, raw country. He had known it while the fight was going on, and again up there on the hilltop under the stars. He was outcast, rejected.

A light flared down below in the wagon camp, and Hollis sucked in his breath. Someone had thrown fresh fuel on one of the piles of smoking ashes. A tiny

flame licked up and became a hungry torch.

Hollis could see the single Nez Percé brave who stood there, a living statue carved from copper, his expressionless face gilded on one side by the fire's light. He waited with dread clutching his stomach. Even if the Indian were alone what could he, John Hollis, do?

The movement the Nez Percé made, was casual in its pagan grace. Hollis had expected it, yet he shuddered at the sudden gleam of the knife. That thin voice in the darkness, that other survivor, would be stilled presently. There would be only the empty darkness then, and Hollis alone with his phantoms and haunting doubt.

He made a faint, whimpering sound in his throat. He fought back the terror that almost stifled him, drove his unwilling muscles to action, moving downhill through the brush and across the open space where the shaggy ponies had wheeled. The Nez Percé was stealing away from the fire now. The crackle of the flames prevented the Indian's sharp ears from hearing Hollis' coming.

Unerringly, the redman crept toward the spot where that piping voice had come from. His fingers clasped the hilt of his knife; his copper-hued features were impassive.

HOLLIS, unarmed, quickened his steps. Something above self, beyond all reason, drove him through the fog of fear that dogged his steps. He moved like a sleep-walker, obeying some inner compulsion. At the very last, he snatched up a charred bit of wagon tongue, the only thing his groping fingers could find as a possible weapon.

He stepped on a scorched piece of canvas then, and the Indian heard him. In that instant of turning, the Nez Percé's black eyes seemed to recognize Hollis as the only other survivor, a desperate, quaking scarecrow risen from the ashes of this white men's grave.

He came at Hollis swiftly, silently, as a leaping panther would. It was more terrifying than those yelling figures coming out of the dusk on their shaggy ponies. It was one man, a savage, intent to kill and certain of his power.

Hollis struck blindly, fearfully, his charred wood deflecting the arcing blade in that first deadly thrust. He heard the Indian grunt and smelled the rank odor of his half-naked body. The Nez Percé steadied his balance and lunged again.

The knife came up in an understroke that Hollis barely sensed. He used his wood like a whip. He struck downward as he might at the head of a snake, pirouetting on one booted heel and almost falling. The wagon tongue smacked against flesh and the Indian paused a moment, letting the knife drop from his hand.

Hollis tried to club the black head that loomed before him with its beads and its wisp of feather. But the Nez Percé was too quick for that. A hand flashed up and Hollis found himself holding his wagon-tongue weapon, while other fingers clutched and tore at its opposite end. Hollis did the only thing he could think of—a trick remembered from his boyhood. He braced his feet, let go suddenly and stood still.

As the Nez Percé stumbled backward, unbalanced for a second, Hollis flung himself forward. His hands met over the copper-skinned throat and he carried the Nez Percé down, hanging on while their two bodies hit the ground. He dug his thumbs into the dark windpipe, felt other hands clasp his own throat.

Eye to eye, glaring, they fought for silent seconds, save for the thrashing of their bodies and their gasping breaths. They turned and twisted among the ashes, burning their clothing, bruising their skins in a dozen places. But Hollis hung on. In that struggle of death, he forgot all thought of himself, remembering only that cry that only he could answer.

He was almost unconscious, a red mist swimming before his eyes, before the Indian let go. Even then, when the Nez Percé's hands relaxed and when Hollis could breathe again, he hung on fiercely, afraid to do this thing by halves. No whisper must go back to the tribe of what had happened. Their only chance—his and that other's—depended on thoroughness now. This was the frontier West, where a man had either to kill or die.

He got up finally, sucking in great, gasping lungfuls of night air before he turned and stumbled toward the spot

where the voice had come from. It was there where two overturned wagons had reeled drunkenly together, near a gray tangle of canvas flattened by trampling feet. But as Hollis drew the canvas apart, he saw, in the flickering firelight, the tousled head and the pale tear-stained face of a little boy.

Their eyes met in somber wonder for a moment. Then the boy found his voice again.

"I kept still long as I could, mister, till I thought the Injuns was gone. Where's my mama?"

"You can't see her just right now," said Hollis gently.

"Why not? Where's my daddy then?"

Hollis said nothing. The lump in his throat was too big for words to pass by. He tried to look away, but the little boy's bright, accusing eyes held him.

"You mean—" The boy's lips failed and trembled. "You mean the Injuns got 'em, don't you?"

"Let's talk about that later, son," said Hollis. "We've got to get out of here right away—you and me."

"I can't," said the boy. "My foot's snagged in between two wheel spokes an' this canvas is holdin' me down." He paused and looked at Hollis wonderingly. "You fought one of the Injuns just now, didn't you, mister? You a cowboy?"

"No," said Hollis. "I'm no cowboy, I reckon—not yet, anyway."

"But you figure to be?"

"Maybe," said Hollis. "Maybe."

He extracted the boy in silence, moving the gray canvas aside, finding the little worn shoe that was caught and pulling the

spindly leg out gently. There were no bruises on it, no wounds or fractures that Hollis could see. He lifted the boy up under the armpits, set him down on his feet.

He looked at him for a minute.

"Can you walk, sonny?"

"Sure. But ain't we even gonna look for daddy and mama?"

"Not now, sonny. We haven't got time. We've got to hurry. They'll understand, don't you figure?"

"I—I guess so."

"Then come on."

"Where to, mister?"

"I don't know," said Hollis honestly, but there was buoyancy in his voice. "We'll go West, I reckon. This is *our* country, sonny—the country your daddy and ma was aimin' to settle in. And you and me is partners. We didn't plan it that way but it's how it turned out. You understand, don't you, sonny? You know what I mean?"

The boy looked up and nodded. His eyes were filled with tears, but they met Hollis' unwaveringly.

"Sure I understand. We're all that's left. Mama an' Daddy—" He choked. "My name's Bill, mister. What's yours?"

"John," said Hollis.

The boy slipped his hand, warm and trusting, into Hollis' big one. He and Hollis moved ahead into the darkness. But it was friendly darkness now. Hollis was no longer lonely, doubtful. He left the death and the hell behind him, walked toward the new life that beckoned him and his partner over beyond those star-studded hills.

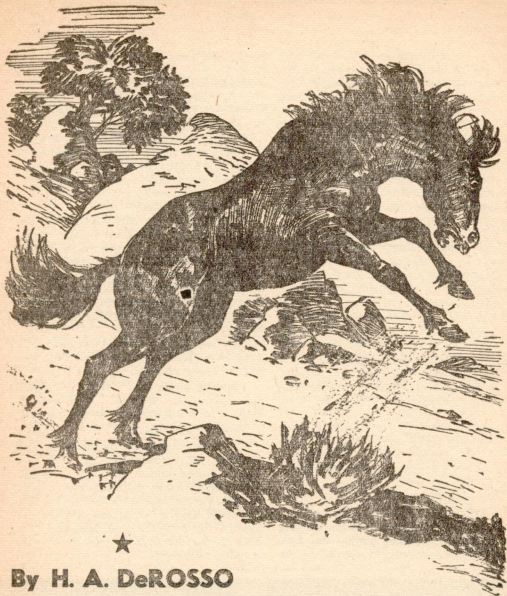
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★
By H. A. DeROSSO
★

CHAPTER

Mountain Death

1 Belmiro came up the rise, kneeling his big buckskin over toward me, his swarthy face the color of dead ashes. A sickness lay in the pallor of his face and he inclined his head once and I thought

he was going to vomit. But he straightened in his kak and wiped his mouth with the back of a big, black-haired hand.

"Ferro, Ferro," he breathed in an ill, quivering way. "Dios, Ferro!"

"You found him?" I asked.

Belmiro's head ducked again. "Si, Ferro," he mumbled. He was a short, thick man with broad, powerful shoulders and huge biceps. His chest strained the buttons of his white cotton shirt. He was rather gaily dressed with his brown and

★ ★ THE COLD RUNNING IRON

*Bewitching Germaine wanted to take Iron Smith down
memory lane—to a rustler's hideout and a renegade's grave.*

*Smashing Rustler's
Novelette*



*I steadied the Winchester as the
stallion's arched neck came in the
sights.*

white calfskin vest studded with shining, silver conchas, a bright red sash around his waist and the huge, peaked sombrero on his straight black hair. Only the tight, worn buckskin chivarras deferred to his calling, for Belmiro was a good vaquero.

Some of his tension had started working into me. Maybe it was his speaking in Spanish, for Belmiro could speak English with no trace of accent. Maybe it was that yellow, turgid fear and nausea on his wide, bearded face. Maybe it was the premonition that was there in me.

"Well, where is he?" I said.

"Ferro," he began, swallowing hard.

Then he lapsed into English. "Iron. It's terrible, Iron. It's no good to look."

"I want to see," I said, reining my bay around. "It's what we came up here for. I want to see Lenmark. If you don't want to go back, tell me where he is and I'll go alone."

"Iron," said Belmiro again in his ill voice. Then he spread his hands in resignation. He kneeed his buckskin around. "All right, Iron. It's up the canyon a little ways."

The canyon spread its winding, serpentine way deep into the Predicadores. It was a barren mountain range. The high, ragged peaks poked sullen crests toward the burnished sky. Sagebrush dotted the slopes and rises, and mesquite and greasewood took their solitary stances here and there.

I looked up at the forlorn, forbidding mountain crests toward the shimmering heat in the sky and I thought of Olin Lenmark and the way his Morgan saddler had come home with an empty saddle. The sour, sick look on Belmiro's face and a cold, ominous shudder racked me.

Ahead, the canyon took a sharp turn and Belmiro rode around that and up a small rise. There he halted, waiting for me. He pointed down the slope to where three clumps of mesquite huddled together. He tried to speak and made a sick sound.

Lenmark, what was left of him, lay behind the mesquite. It wasn't at all pretty. I'd knocked around in my twenty-seven years and I'd seen dead men on both sides of the border. But none like Olin Lenmark.

He lay there in a puddle of blood and

torn flesh. The ground was littered with hoofmarks, not the soft impressions left by a walking horse, but the deep, sharp imprints of a stamping killer.

I rode back to Belmiro. He was sitting on a rock with his face in his hands. I didn't like it any more than he did but it had to be done.

"Well, we've got to pack him in," I said. "Let's get started. . . ."

I had been working for Olin Lenmark's Bridlebit for almost seven months. He had been a widower when I first joined Bridlebit but about four months ago he went on a cattle buying trip, and when he came back he brought with him his second wife, Germaine.

I HAD known Germaine St. Clair back around Roswell. That had been my stamping ground for a couple of years. I don't hold to be much good but I was always pretty neat and handy with a running iron and I could run a cold brand as well as the best of them. That gave me my name—Cold Iron Smith. The Smith part I tacked on.

Being good with a running iron and not worrying much about anything, a man gets careless and gets in with the wrong people sometimes. I saw how it was and how it would be and so one day I just saddled my bay and headed for the horizon.

I guess Germaine had a part in it, too. I had thought once that she loved me but I guess that all the time she was waiting for some rich old man with a large ranch—like Olin Lenmark—to come along.

She never mentioned the past to me but once, and that was to tell me that if I wanted to keep on going straight I could stay on at Bridlebit and she'd never let on that she knew me. I had started getting over her. Besides, a man can't keep on running forever. And Bridlebit was a good spread to work for.

Maybe Evie Lenmark had a hand in my staying. She was Olin Lenmark's daughter by his first wife. Evie was about five years younger than Germaine, not yet twenty-one.

She was a tall girl with a liteness in her walk. Her hair was the color of a golden palomino and I'd seen the same blueness of her eyes in a sparkling mountain spring. Maybe she wasn't as pretty as

Germaine, but there was more to Evie Lenmark than just her looks.

Evie wasn't the aloof kind. She mingled with the riders, giving a hand at roundup, dropping in at an isolated line cabin with a cake or some cookies. The men all worshipped her and I guess I was no different.

There really wasn't anything between us. I took her to a couple of dances and that's about as far as it went. After all, I was just one of her father's riders, broke most of the time, a past behind me which was better forgotten and never knowing when I'd get careless with a running iron again. I just left it like that. . . .

Belmiro and I got Lenmark in and after that everything was just a blur. Belmiro went straight to the bunkshack where he found a bottle and got to work on it. I just hung around outside, the shock of it still inside me.

I didn't have any supper. I ran through a whole sack of Bull Durham and when I didn't have any more I looked up and saw that it was night. The darkness enveloped the land in a vast, silent, brooding way. The lights in the big house glittered.

I got up from where I'd been sitting on a barrel behind the saddle shed and went into the bunkhouse. The fellows were almost all in bed, it was that late. I got up on my bunk and peeled off my shirt.

I looked down at Belmiro, who bunked below me. He was lying fully dressed on his bed. The bottle in his hand was almost empty. Sweat glistened on his face and a glaze shone in his eyes.

He waved the bottle up to me and grinned. "Have a drink, Iron?"

I shook my head. I got my boots off and lay back on my blanket.

Below, Belmiro began to sing.

*"La cucaracha, la cucaracha,
"No la puede caminar . . ."*

Someone began to swear across the room. It was the thin, hook-nosed rider known as Slim Fogarty. "Don't we have enough of this on Saturday night?" said Fogarty. "Shut up and go to sleep, Belmiro."

The lamp was doused and the smelling darkness filled the room. Belmiro kept right on singing.

*"Porque no tiene,
"Porque la falta,*

"Marijuana que fumar . . ."

"Damn you, Belmiro, shut up!"

"La cucaracha, la cuca—"

"Belmiro, we'll tie you down, Belmiro. We'll rope you to your bunk and gag you. Open your mouth again and we'll do that."

He stopped singing. I heard a gurgle as he took another swallow of the bottle.

Below me, I could hear Belmiro squirming around on his blankets. The darkness kept pressing down against my eyes. I kept them open. If I shut them, the images would come searing across my mind and I didn't want that. No wonder Belmiro got drunk.

He began muttering to himself. It was in Spanish and I didn't pay much attention to it. The words kept flowing incomprehensibly past my ear and all at once two of them caught my mind.

I sat up in my bunk. I didn't know what it was. Something far back in my mind, so dim I could not even guess at what it was.

I leaned over the edge of the bunk. "What did you say about a black devil, Belmiro?"

He stopped cursing. The bottle gurgled and then just the hoarse sounds of his breathing.

"What was that about a *diablo negro*, Belmiro?" I asked again.

"Nada, Ferro Frio, nada," he muttered.

"Are you starting it, too, Iron?" came Fogarty's angry tone. "Leave him alone. Go to sleep the both of you."

"Belmiro," I said, "what did you mean about a black devil?"

"Nada, Ferro," he mumbled. "I don't remember, Iron."

Someone gave a short, dry laugh from the end of the room. "Don't get excited, Iron. After killing that bottle, he's probably seeing plenty of things right now—including little black devils. . . ."

CHAPTER

2

Cold-Iron Memories

I was working the Predicadores for strays the day that Germaine came to me. It was a month after Olin Lenmark's death. I hadn't seen her except around

the house and then it was only to say hello.

I had topped the rise and reined in my bay and I looked down the slope and saw her coming on the Morgan that that Lenmark had used to ride. She rode right past me and down the slope a little to where some rocks thrust up out of the hillside. She dismounted and sat down on one of these. Her eyes lifted up to me.

"Aren't you coming down, Cold Iron?" she asked.

I rode the bay over beside the Morgan and left them side by side. I walked over to her.

She made a pretty picture seated there like that with her bared, browned legs drawn up beneath her. She was wearing a divided riding skirt and a yellow silk blouse opened low. Her blue-black hair was drawn tightly back and tied with a red bow at the back of her neck.

She was watching me with a studied amusement in her soft brown innocent-looking eyes. I couldn't take it. The whole thing was starting inside me again and I couldn't get over the feeling of the utter hopelessness of it. I dropped my eyes to the ground.

I know I didn't look like much. There were patches on both knees of my levis and a tear in my right shirt sleeve. The toes of my Cheyenne boots were scuffed and worn. The .44 Colt at my hip was an old, battered conversion from a cap and ball pistol. I had a week's growth of reddish whiskers on my face.

"When are you going to sit down here, Iron?" she asked, patting the rock beside her. Then the jibing tone returned to her voice. "Or are you too bashful?"

I sat down beside her. Mingled in me was the sharp scent of sage and the delicate odor of lilacs from her hair and the knowledge that she was there close enough for me to touch.

Germaine reached over and put a cool hand on mine. "Iron," she said, "are you still mad at me, Iron?"

"Is there any reason why I should be?"

"Don't talk like that. I need you, Iron."

I gave a short, hollow laugh. "You own a ranch that you yourself don't know how big it is. You have more cows than you can tally. I own a good bay, a Porter saddle, a Colt and a Winchester and the clothes on my back. And you need me."

Her hand tightened on mine. "Don't be like that, Iron," she said almost viciously. "I don't have anything. Olin left me only half of Bridlebit. The other half belongs to Evie."

"That sort of puts you in my class," I said bitterly. "Half of Bridlebit sort of evens you with me."

"Iron," she said and that sudden, quick anger flared in Germaine's eyes. "I don't see why I keep throwing myself at you, Iron. I really don't have to. You know that, don't you? I really don't need you."

"The way you always needed me in Roswell?"

She bit her lower lip and the teeth marks remained. She spoke somewhat stiffly. "That was a mistake. I own up to it, Iron. I was wrong all the way. Now keep on reminding me about it. Don't ever let me forget it."

I took her hands in mine. She lifted her face again. I kissed her. Finally I released her and she sat there like that with her head dropped back and her eyes still closed.

The hopelessness came flooding back over me. I jumped to my feet. I should have mounted the bay and got the hell out of there.

"I want to go away with you," she began. "I want to leave my half of Bridlebit behind and go with you."

I stared at her. Her eyes did not waver from mine. I watched how the sun drew the deep, shining blue from her hair.

She saw that I was not going to speak. She waved a hand in a small, irritated gesture. "You've seen how it is, Iron. My owning half of Bridlebit is like owning none of it. The hands are all for Evie. They'll do anything she asks of them. I'm just a stranger. My word is no good with them."

"You seem to do all right with Belmiro," I said.

She smiled slightly. "I'm his type. He just happens to regard me as more of a woman than Evie, and so he's for me."

"What are you leading up to, Germaine?"

She sighed. "You're proud, Iron. You'd never have me if I owned part of Bridlebit and you were just a broke cowpuncher. I thought once that what I wanted more than anything was wealth and security."

Well, I got it. I never was happy with Olin. I can't stay here with all these ugly memories. Let's go away together, Iron. Let's start all over again, you and I."

Germaine lifted her head when I did not speak. She smiled wanly. "Is it Evie, Iron? I've seen you look at her. Is it her?"

I put my cheek down against her hair. My lips touched her ear. "I don't have anything, Germaine. I don't have anything at all."

"You've got a running iron."

I pushed her roughly from me. She stumbled and almost fell.

A pained cry wrenched from her and then she was running after me. "Iron, Iron," she sobbed. "Let me explain."

THE anger was still white and hot inside me. "I told you I was through with that. I told you I'd never run a cold brand again."

"I'm not asking you to do anything wrong," she said in a quivering voice. "The cows are mine. I'm entitled to my share of them. There's nothing wrong in that."

I stared at her. "Cold brand Bridlebit stock?" I asked, puzzled.

"Can't you see?" she said, clutching at my arm, her fingers digging in urgently. "I don't want any part of Bridlebit. I'll just pick up and go off and leave everything to Evie. But we've got to have something to build on. You can hair-brand those hundred calves and run them into the Predicadores and in a few weeks the hair will have grown back and then we'll run our own brand on them. Can't you see what I mean, Iron?"

"Wouldn't it be much simpler to just come right out and tell Evie and claim them as yours? She should be willing to settle for your share of Bridlebit for a measly hundred head."

"Oh, Iron, you don't understand," cried Germaine. "It wouldn't look right. Olin's just been dead a month and then the way you found him and all that kind of thing. I don't want to have to face Evie about a thing like this. I just want to pack and leave without saying good-by. Don't you see yet, Iron?"

"It seems awfully complicated," I said.

"It'll work, Iron," said Germaine. "You're a good, fast man with a running iron. There's a lot of places in the Predicadores where you can cache a bunch of cows. Say you'll cold brand them and then go away with me. I want to make up to you for all that's happened in the past. What do you say, Iron?"

This was isolated country up here against the Predicadores. The mountains loomed grim and sinister and the sun beat down relentlessly. In two weeks I had not seen another rider outside of Germaine. She made two trips to see me. She said she could not come oftener for fear of detection but I did not mind. I was doing all right on my own.

I was staying in an old 'dobe line camp. Germaine brought me my supplies. There were enough strays and stragglers up here for me to work on. I had never cared to use a wet blanket. It was a lot of bother and then this was desert country up here. Besides, I had a pretty steady hand and I could just singe the hair without leaving a permanent scar. Then I'd chouse these cows deep into the Predicadores to an isolated valley where they could stay until the hair grew back for the permanent brand.

On this trip in I was chousing five white-faces when the sound came from behind me. My bay pricked up his ears and whinnied and I whipped him around, yanking out my .44.

The breath was dry in my throat. What I was doing filled me with an icy apprehension. If someone had been spying on me—

The sound came again, from the other side of a rocky hill. I sent the bay around the foot of the slope, the .44 cocked in my hand. The bay whinnied again and I cursed. Then I was around the hill.

The buckskin had a big, fancy Mexican saddle and the reins had fouled in a mesquite bush, keeping the buckskin captive. Primitive terror shone in its wide, frantic eyes.

"Belmiro," I whispered, feeling the word choke in my throat.

I untangled the fouled reins and then tied them securely to the mesquite. I mounted my bay, leaving those cold-branded whitefaces to shift for themselves and struck into the Predicadores.

I followed the same canyon into the Predicadores. There seemed to be something malignant in the sound of the bay's stepping. The horse went around the sharp bend in the canyon and up the rise and down the other side to where I'd found Olin Lenmark.

There was nothing there. Wind and drifting sand had obliterated all marks of the tragedy. Just the three clumps of mesquite remained, huddling fearfully under the glare of the sun.

I sent the bay on up ahead, scanning all those barren slopes of the canyon, searching behind all the sagebrush and grease wood. Sweat poured down my face and into my eyes.

I found him quite abruptly. The bay topped a rise and I'd lifted my eyes a moment to the hot, brassy sky overhead and then the bay reared high, blowing a shrill shriek through its flaring nostrils. I had to grab the horn to keep from being thrown off, and the bay spun on a dime and hit back down the slope. I hauled on the bit until blood colored the bay's mouth and then he turned, fighting me all the way up the slope.

It didn't hit me so hard this time. I must have been getting used to it. There were the same hoofmarks, deep, savage imprints. There was the drying blood matting the ground. Belmiro's white cotton shirt was a torn, sickening crimson. The silver conchas of his gaudy vest were crumpled. There were a few, scattered tatters of his red silk sash. . . .

I buried Belmiro—what there was of him. Then I got on my bay and rode back down the canyon. When I got to my line-shack, I found Germaine waiting for me.

I told her about Belmiro. I told her to say something about his having quit. He was always bragging about a woman down across the border and I told Germaine maybe she could say that Belmiro had suddenly got it in his head to go see his woman.

We couldn't let the truth come out. With two men stamped to death, they'd start combing the Predicadores for the killer horse and they'd find those cold-branded cows.

I can't tell the half of those dread days that followed. I didn't work the Predica-

dores that deep and if I had I would have avoided that canyon. But still the fear was always with me. My nerves were all on edge and I was as jumpy as a wild mustang corralled for the first time by the time I got my last whiteface cold-branded. I just sat down, put my face in my hands and huddled there, thinking that now I wouldn't have to haunt the Predicadores for a few weeks.

I had started on my way back to headquarters when I spotted the tracks of the two horses traveling side by side toward the Predicadores. I reined in the bay, pondering those signs, and then the significance of them hit me, filling me with a quick, cold, dread fear.

I turned the bay and started after those tracks. They kept mounting and winding into the Predicadores and when they headed for that canyon, the dread became a pounding, frantic thing in me.

I quickened the bay's pace. The tracks were still side by side, the gentle imprints of a leisurely ride up the canyon. It was where the canyon bottom narrowed to a passage a bare ten feet wide that I spotted the third set of tracks. One pair of tracks coming out of the canyon—alone.

I dug the rowels into the bay's flanks. The canyon widened into a winding avenue avenue, walled with steep-pitched slopes. . . .

The palomino was nibbling at a few clumps of short grass. The palomino was like the Morgan saddler and the buckskin. Like them, the palomino wore an empty saddle.

"Evie!" The word came out of me in a shout. "Evie!" I cried it again in a sick, frightened way.

This time the spurs really made the bay scream and I kept raking those lathered flanks and the giant hills kept throwing my cries mockingly back at me.

CHAPTER

3

Black Devil

None of the others had been this deep. I passed the mesquite clumps where Olin Lenmark had met death. I thundered over the hilltop where Belmiro had been trampled. The bay raced into a narrow, high-walled gorge that shut off the sun. Here in the dimness his hoofs drummed

a hollow, dismal song as I hunted for her. "Evie!"

The mountains threw my cries back to me.

"Evie," I called in a choked way.

It was her voice. A primal, stricken fear shrieked in her tone and it must have been like this with the others. The bay raced around the foot of a barren, sage-dotted hill.

She was running and stumbling and getting up, screaming, and running to fall again. I saw the stallion then. Black Devil, the words flashed across my mind. He was black as the pit of a bottomless gorge, and a good nineteen hands high. He was evil incarnate.

He had come down from the upper reaches of the canyon. His course lay straight for the whimpering, stumbling girl. A harsh, shrilling scream trumpeted from the stallion.

"Evie!" I shouted, drawing my Winchester.

She had stopped, facing the stallion, transfixed by the horror of him. She threw her hands up over her head letting out a frightened, despairing wail.

The terror had penetrated my bay. He was fighting the bit and plunging and shying. I threw a shot across my body but the slug went wild. I couldn't do anything on a horse as crazy as my bay was right then. I leaped out of the saddle, hitting the ground on spraddled legs. The bay wheeled away, the force of his terrified rush flinging grit into my face.

I dropped on my stomach. I tried to sight down the barrel of the Winchester but the sweat was too thick in my eyes. With a trembling hand I brushed the dank wetness away. The stallion shrieked again. Evie was down on her knees, huddling there limply, whimpering piteously.

The rifle shook in my hands. I steadied the Winchester as the stallion's arched neck came in the sights. I fired. The stallion slid to a halt not five feet from Evie.

I fired again and again. He trumpeted a cry and started off at a weaving, lurching trot. I fired again. This time he went down, his huge head sliding a little along the sand, and then the only sounds were my labored breathing and the sobs of Evie.

"Evie, Evie," I said, dropping to my knees beside her. "It's me. It's Iron. Everything's all right now, Evie."

I took her arms and suddenly she was next to me, face buried against my shirt. "Oh, Iron, Iron. I didn't want to come. I knew what it meant but I had to come. There was a gun, Iron. I'd have been shot. I started to run as soon as I was off the palomino and then he showed. There was the gun. I had to do it, Iron."

I pushed her back from me, shaking her. "Who, Evie?" I shouted. "Who had the gun?"

"Iron," she sobbed, voice rising to a shriek. "The gun, Iron. I wouldn't have come if it wasn't for the gun."

"Who, Evie, who?"

"Germaine. . . ."

She was waiting at the line-camp again. Her face was rather drawn and pale. There were tight, deep lines around the fine shape of her mouth and a cold intensity in her eyes. I did not miss the holstered Bisley .38-40.

I dismounted beside her and reached out a hand toward her. She drew back rather sharply. There was a speculative look in her eyes.

"Well, it was a good try, Germaine," I said bitterly, "but it didn't quite work out."

She cocked her head a trifle to one side, looking up at me with studied coldness. "Stop laying a blind trail, Iron," she said stiffly.

All the old hurt lay there inside me.

I beckoned sharply with my head. "I got to Evie before the stallion did," I said grimly. "He'll do no more stomping for you, Germaine."

"Evie?" she whispered sharply, eyes widening suddenly with fear.

"She's unharmed. She told me everything. Your little scheme to get Bridle-bit seems to have got tangled up right at the end."

She had recovered her poise. Her shoulders squared. I saw her eyes drop, take in my gunless waist. My Winchester rode in its scabbard on my saddle. Evie had my .44.

"Well, Iron?" said Germaine challengingly.

I shrugged dejectedly. "It's out of my hands. The law takes over now."

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Would you really turn me in, Iron?" she asked softly.

I nodded.

A DISDAINFUL smile quirked her lips. She leveled the Bisley at my belt buckle.

"I never thought we'd end up like this, Iron," she said in a low, dead tone.

My throat felt raspingly dry and my heart pounded. "Before you pull that trigger, Germaine, would you answer a few questions?"

Her lips spread in a thin, humorless smile. "Sure, Iron. For old times' sake. Shoot."

"Lenmark and Belmiro. They were your work, weren't they?"

"I married Olin for Bridlebit—and not to share it with him, either. Belmiro knew about the stallion. He was the one gave me the idea. Then he started a little blackmail so I had to dispose of him. They were both quite easy, Iron. Just ask them to go riding with me, then pull a gun on them, force them up the canyon and make them dismount. And I'd ride off with their horses. The stallion took care of the rest." Her eyes narrowed. "Anything else, Iron?"

"Me," I said, feeling the nausea rising in my stomach. "I fitted in, too, didn't I? You had to have someone to throw the blame for your murders on, didn't you? One dead man would be an accident. But three—"

"If those cold branded cows were to be found and someone was to send an inquiry to Roswell, wouldn't that cinch things for me? It wouldn't take much urging to make people believe I'd killed Lenmark and Belmiro and Evie because they'd discovered my thieving. Is that what you had in mind for me, Germaine?"

Her face was very white. Her voice was hoarse and strained but the hand holding the Bisley was very steady. "I had no choice, Iron. I had to cover up somehow. It was just your tough luck that you were handy. I don't like doing this to you, Iron, but you know too much."

"Before you shoot, Germaine," I said, "look behind you."

She uttered a laugh. Her finger tightened around the trigger.

"Put a shot in the ground, Evie," I called, "just to let her know you're there."

Even as the gun blasted, Germaine was whirling, gun trained on Evie. I leaped to knock the gun up, bullet screaming off at the burnished sky.

I caught Germaine's arm and twisted. She managed to fire again, the bullet digging into the sand at our feet.

I finally twisted her arm enough for the pain of it to make her drop the Bisley.

Germaine calmed then. "No, Iron," she gasped hoarsely. "They'll hang me, Iron."

Another day I might have listened to her but that was all in the past. My heart just didn't feel that way any more. It hardly had any feeling left.

"Shall we go, Germaine?" I said hollowly. "The law is waiting. . . ."

Afterwards, I got my things together. I rolled them in my blanket and gave a last look at the bunkshack. Then I went outside and got my bay. I hadn't intended saying good-by to anyone, especially not to Evie, but she must have been watching for me. She came running across the yard, catching me by the arm as I was

about to mount. "Where are you going, Iron?"

I paused there with my back to the saddle, looking down at her. There was a tired sadness in her face, a haunted loneliness.

"I want to thank you for not prosecuting me about those cold-branded cows," I said. "I believe Bridlebit can get along without me. Good-by, Evie."

"No," she said, pulling hard on my arm, keeping me from swinging up into the kak. "I need you, Iron. I'm all alone now. I wouldn't know what to do without you. Can't you see, Iron? I'm begging you. I'm shameless, Iron, I love you so much."

The ache was warm in my throat. "You know what I was, don't you?" I asked thickly. "You know what I was around Roswell."

"I don't care what you were," she cried, digging her face against my shirt. "It's what you are, Iron, and what you'll be. Oh, Iron, don't ever let me go."

I closed my arms about her.

"No, Evie," I said huskily, "I'll never let you go. . . ."

THE END

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(Continued from page 7)

the arm and held in place by retaining straps. One strap loops over the shoulder to support the gun, and a second strap is belted around the body to keep the holster in place.

Such an arrangement puts the gun where it is instantly accessible, but is not particularly comfortable because of the retaining belt. Alteration of this retaining strap so that it passes across the back and loops over the far shoulder makes the rig more convenient and less noticeable. Fastening the end of the holster in position adds to efficiency.

Here, again, we encounter the problem of the proper holster. Several kinds are used, varying from the full pouch with a protective flap to the spring-clipped skeleton with a retaining cup. Each has its points. The pouch holster permits unhampered withdrawal of the gun, but the weapon must be lifted clear of the holster itself. With the spring clip, the gun can be freed with a single snapped motion. Friction from that clip causes a momentary drag and may tend to slow a smooth draw.

Exact placement of a shoulder holster may be made within certain limits, and this must be determined by the user. As with the belt gun, some men prefer to carry their weapons at a particular slant. The height of the holster may also be adjusted. Two guns are carried by adding a second holster, and refitting the retaining straps.

Various other gun rigs have been designed for special purposes. A complete harness can be tailored into a coat, and a holster concealed in each side pocket. Wrist-band holsters are made to carry the compact but deadly derringer, and can be converted to fit small automatic pistols. Hideout guns are carried in a number of ways limited only by the ingenuity of the designer.

A split second gained in the draw may spell the difference between life and death. Two factors control gun speed: swiftness of movement and distance of travel. Obviously the sooner a man can get his gun out of leather, the quicker he can go into action. Some designers have equipped holsters with a swivel fastening so that

GUN-RIG ROUNDUP

the guns carried in them can be fired through the open bottom. A slight twist lines the gun without the necessity of drawing.

Other clever craftsmen have constructed open-sided holsters from which a gun can be snapped with a minimum of motion.

Each refinement of a gun rig is made to shorten drawing time, and ever since the quick draw became an important factor in combat, gunmen have made every effort to increase their speed by the least part of a split second. They have tried any number of devices with this thought in mind, always hoping to find a way to beat the other fellow to the draw.

Some of these devices are good. Some, like the "greased holster" the old-timer likes to tell about, only sound good. Figure that one for yourself: A greased or oily surface is a dirt catcher. And a dirty holster is no help to a smooth draw. Nor is it beneficial to the intricate mechanism of a gun.

Some of the other gun tricks advocated by the storytellers likewise fail to stand up under close scrutiny. The uninformed observer finds it hard to judge the true facts in "gun talk." Confronted with a host of conflicting details, he is too easily convinced that the possession of special paraphernalia endows the user with a magical gun speed—which is the way legends grow up.

Nothing is farther from the truth. A really fast draw is the result of constant practice and personal ability. This is not meant to belittle those excellent gun rigs that have proved their worth in actual use. Proper equipment is always a good investment, and becomes a "must" when it can spell the difference between life and death.

Each new refinement of a gun rig is made to shorten drawing time, and in a gun fight between experts, the least tiny advantage is vital.

But the best gun rig in the West never helped a cowboy with a rusty draw out of a tight.



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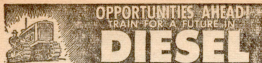
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 71)

under the spell of her high-piled golden hair and her Texas-blue eyes and each one felt, desperately, that he had to be the only man in her life. Bitter words led to blows and it was nothing less than a battle of titans.

All Dallas came to see it. For six hours they fought, rolling and pummeling, giving and receiving enough punishment to kill six ordinary men. Their mother pleaded with them to stop. Their father ordered them to stop. The sheriff put them under arrest. All to no avail. Then, toward sundown, someone brought word that Rose Wakeman had eloped to Carson City with a passing tinware peddler who could play the guitar. Lon and Paul stopped fighting without even a moment's hesitation.

But these were fighting years. It was 1861, and the guns were booming to the North and to the South. With their father's hesitant permission, the twins took their shattered hearts off to mend in the lines of butternut gray that were pushing forward at Bull Run. Not much was to be heard of them during their years of service.

Stories drifted back about their heroic performance at Vicksburg when, with all the mules shot and dying, Lon and Paul hitched themselves to the huge artillery pieces and dragged them, one by one, back through the sucking mud so that the defeated army could have the chance to fight again.

Somewhere, sometime, the terrible twins got their fill of fighting. Perhaps they merely grew up. But when they came back to Dallas—Paul with a halting, always unexplained limp—the two were quieter and seemed to be looking to settle down.

The appearance of Martha and Violet Jones, daughters of a new minister, settled the issue. Within a year after the end of the Civil War, Lon and Paul were married and settled together on spreading homestead ranches, neatly fenced in with barbed wire. There, they lived the rest of their days, raised between them some eight or ten children. Needless to say, no one ever tried to tear their fences down.

I'LL TAME ANY TOWN!

(Continued from page 22)

When darkness settled, Big Pistol DeMoanie, himself, was ready to go. The big steel safe in the hotel was loaded with money. There was more in the little bank in Steamboat Buttes. But Gun DeMoanie had not ended his wealth there. Upstairs there was more. Big Pistol knew where to put his hand on that cache, although his brother had never suspected it.

He had four men he could trust, lean Alex Wolf, an Oklahoma outlaw; Sam Slack, short and dark; Rube Barrow, a big redhead; and Rick Parker, a buck-toothed young Texan. By nine o'clock, slipping down the rear stairs with two heavy canvas bags tied together across his shoulder—a fortune in those bags taken by simply rolling back the rug and lifting a board in the floor of Gun DeMoanie's bedroom.

The sneak-away was without a hitch. At the southwest corner of the town, his friends were waiting with his horse and an extra horse, both tall, long-legged and fast. In a matter of seconds they were up and riding, a brother running out on a brother after robbing him and leaving him locked up in that dark, silent jail.

The others followed his lead, knowing the crazy notion in his wild brain, their eyes on those two canvas sacks so carefully tied to his saddle horn.

It was quiet when they came to old Jeff Longlace's hitchrack. In an orderly group they swung down, DeMoanie again transferring the canvas sacks back to his shoulder, a move that made the others glance sharply at each other. All of them could see that the drapes were drawn, yet light was coming through them.

Big Pistol tried the door. It should have surprised him when he found that it was unlocked. With a sudden slam, he shoved it open and bounded inside, the others behind him just as they had promised, each with a six-shooter filling his hand. At that instant the light was blown out on a small table in the corner of the room to the left. A jerky shot from Big Pistol's right hand all but drowned the one word that tore from his lips:

"Morgan!"

It was like snatching open a sound-proof door on hell. Roaring shots tore

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back. Another yell came from Pistol DeMoanie as he lurched backward, shot through the hips. He fell against somebody, half-out the door, and heard old Alex Wolf snarl and felt him coming down.

Sam Slack was next, killed there on the porch before he could get off the edge of it. Rube Barrow and Rick Parker were halfway back to the hitchrack when the drapes over a window were whipped aside. A six-shooter slammed through a pane of glass, the shots cutting them down.

Leaving old Two-Gun Pete behind, Morgan had slipped out of town—suspecting just what was going to take place. Now a lighted lantern was thrust around the corners of the house at either end of the porch, a command coming from the window with the broken pane:

"Fling your guns away or finish dying!"

"Don't shoot!"

The others might have tried to finish fighting it out. Big Pistol DeMoanie's outburst stopped them. Gritting their teeth and groaning, they lay there listening to him rave. Like a coward in pain, Big Pistol was blaming everything on his brother now.

In a minute Rube Barrow was cursing him. "We come here to help you steal off with that gal!" he cried out. "All you shoulda wanted was a few miles of tall hills between you and any posse. Our mistake was in not shootin' you—and taking them money bags!"

After he had taken their six-shooters and tied their hands behind them, Morgan turned to Jeff Longlace.

"Quit thinking of Utah. A gun fight a year ago wiped out the last witness to that jail delivery. Turn your thoughts into getting the Longlace back on its feet! Unless I'm run off with a shotgun," he looked at the girl, "I'll be here to help you. It's hang-up time as far as guns are concerned for me."

"Phil," she cried. "Is it all through now?"

"Yes." He was suddenly smiling. "Cutthroats always finish each other off when they get caught in a trap. It's peace for us, now, Rocky."

THE END

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