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SMASHED
TEN-THOUSAND
HIRED GUNS!**

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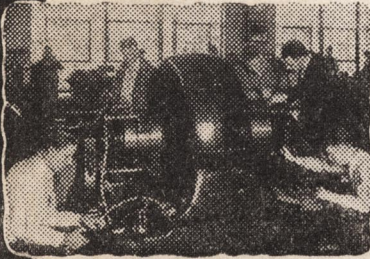
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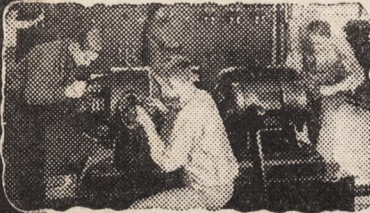


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TWO-GUN

Vol. 3, No. 1

January, 1942

WESTERN

NOVELS MAGAZINE



★ ★ ★ SMASHING BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★ ★ PAGE



COLT-CUB WHO SMASHED TEN-THOUSAND HIRED-GUNS!

by Luke Tyler

6

Gun-hung and battle-ready, Clay Bent would one day get up from his faro layout in that Idaho gambling-hall, and Canyon Creek would know a new brand of law and order draw his time in silver or lead, and every dark trail son who fogged in gold-greedy would choose to hightail pronto or take up sudden residence in boothill!

★ ★ ★ THUNDERING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★ ★

Satan's Sixgun Slaughterhouse.....by T. K. Hawley 80

Bill Coultras had burnt a brand or two, and his holster and .45 weren't whispering against his leather-clad thigh without meaning, but even an owlhoot orphan had his honor, and no hankering FOR too much rustling and murder!

★ ★ ★ THRILL-PACKED FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELETTE ★ ★ ★

Bushwhack Bounty.....by Archie Giddings 60

The Kid wasn't exactly scared, yet three bushwhack tries on his life in a week might well have spooked the toughest range-cub!

★ ★ ★ 3 FAST-ACTION SHORT STORIES ★ ★ ★

Powdersmoke Is My Plow!.....by Adam Mann 70

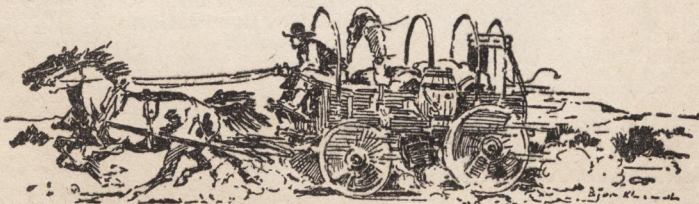
That land-grabbing cowman could hire every leadslinger in the Gila to down Kent Colter, but the fearless young sodbuster would still be plowing hard-won range behind his two-gun barricade!

Longrider's Cutbank Creed.....by Mark Lish 98

Bucky Mallerson was one battle-cub who savvied the longrider's creed—not to be taken while able to fill his hand and pull a trigger!

Colt-Wise—Or Plum Loco?.....by Ralph Berard 106

The button must have been gun-famous or just plumb loco, throwing down with two blazing Colts on Harn Grimrod's whole rustler horde!



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HOLLIS F. HAYES,
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Colt-Cub Who Smashed Ten-Thousand



Flaming .45's spewed their hell-ticketed lead, and

CHAPTER I

CANYON CREEK STATION

RIDING up the bend of Canyon Creek, the horseman in gambler's attire peered for signs of life at the stage station a few pony jumps forward—but saw none.

"Let's see, the stock-tender here is named Siler," he mused aloud; "must be asleep—and if he is he's due for a bawling out. Westbound will be shoving along in less than an hour and he ought to be working on the fresh

hook-up. There's going to be cooperation on this line, everybody strictly on the job; those who don't want to abide by rules can draw their time, in silver or lead."

A grim little smile accompanied the last words. Clay Bent's expression was habitually pleasant; he was no rowdy type of frontiersman, but far more deadly than many a badman who looked and acted the part. Tall, broad of shoulder, narrow of hip, with flat paunch, he had the appearance, on a horse, of being a compuncher masquerading in the conventional long-skirted frock coat and low-cut vest of the

Hired-Guns

By LUKE TYLER

Author of "Desolate Range Gets a Rebel," etc.



it was showdown in the dust!

Canyon Creek cowpunchers who didn't run Clay Bent's brand of law and order could draw their time in silver or lead, and dark trail sons who fogged in gold-greedy might choose to hightail pronto or take up sudden residence in boothill . . . Such was Clay Bent's bullet edict, for he'd tame this bloody Montana wild frontier if he had to wipe-out every gun-merchant who roamed it with his own two killer Colts!

Western cardman.

No neckerchief draped the abbreviated collar of his white shirt; the ends of a black string tie dangled in funereal contrast across this snowy bosom. Spotless linen cuffs protruded an inch or

two from his sleeves.

Just as he had gotten up from his faro layout in a gambling-hell over in Challis, Idaho, was Bent attired, even to the spurred riding-boots encasing his broadcloth trousered legs to the knees,

A GUN-HUNG KID GIVES MONTANA A NEW BRAND OF LAW

AND ORDER! — GREAT BOOK-LENGTH GRASS-WAR NOVEL

for he was an enthusiastic horseman and not altogether a "town man," as were most professional pasteboarders. Hence the tan of face and hands, instead of the usual pallor of gentlemen of his ilk.

IN one item of dress Bent had made slight alteration; at the gaming table his existence depended, because of many nasty situations, upon the use of a brace of "dog-legs," or pocket derringers, .44 caliber. Now, on either hip, he packed a regulation Colt's "Frontier" .45, in the handling of which he was very superior. Regularly he had practiced with them—to "keep his hand in"—far from dreaming he was training for the job he had stepped into a couple of weeks since.

Mr. Ben Danvers, president of the Silverbow Stage Company, operating throughout Montana, had been "bending the elbow" in Bent's place of employment at a time when one of those nasty situations arose beside the faro bank. Mr. Bent had mastered the same with twin belches of smoke and fire from the "dog-legs," which nobody but himself realized were in his hands—that is, himself and victims, and the latter's knowledge was of minute duration.

Mr. Danvers was at all times appreciative of artillery expertness and particularly so now, weighed down as he was with business problems that seemingly could be solved only by a policy of counter-violence. Horse rustlers and road agents were bidding high to wreck his staging enterprise; the situation had gotten entirely out of hand.

"If," said Danvers to Bent, after complimenting him on his derringer wizardry, "you could haul off with a pair of Colt cannon the way you do those dog-legs, I'd gladly offer you a few-hundred-per-month job that would take the kinks out of your legs, if it

didn't put kinks in you elsewhere." The brown countenance of the gambler had suggested to the experienced eye of the stage-line owner that four walls and a tobacco-smoked atmosphere were not exclusively the great habitat of Clay Bent.

"If I could?" Clay had echoed, smiling. "Well, I *can*, Mr. Danvers, if I do say it myself. Sam Colt's forty-fives roll for me just as nimbly as these H. D. smaller barkers. I don't wear the big ones in here because derringers are easier to flip in a crowded room, where ranges are short—I realize they wouldn't be of much account in the open spaces.

"Now, that money you mentioned isn't a third of what I corral here in a month, but a little action from a pony's deck would be a welcome change at this time. You notice," he held up one foot, shaking it to make the rowel of the strapped spur jingle, "I wear 'em always, except in bed. Ride every day—toss the big guns. So, what's your proposition? You look woeful and I'm listening."

Result: as superintendent of the Silverbow Stage line, Clay Bent was this afternoon approaching the "change" station at Canyon Creek, making his first official tour. Dan Danvers had given him unlimited authority; he was to use his own methods, unhampered, in "cleaning up," rehabilitating the one-time paying line.

Bent, weary of faro-banking, would almost have been willing to give, instead of receive, the three hundred dollars a month for the privilege of working out certain pet ideas for the maintenance of law and order, because, primarily, of the opportunity afforded for adventure.

But little of the frontier was tamed, and especially wild were the Montana trails over which the Silverbow Concoords were routed.

CLAY dismounted at the little log shack which, with stable and corral, was designated "Canyon Creek Station" on the company's road map; grounded the unbuckled reins and crossed the rotting platform to the ajar door of the cabin.

He walked with normal tread, it being no trait of his to "sneak"—unless, of course, circumstances of life or death specially warranted it. He desired that the stock-tender should hear him coming. Pushing the door, his height obliging him to duck slightly to clear the overhead frame, Bent went in and instantly was made aware that his conjecture touching on the station-keeper's inactivity wasn't far wide of the mark; Jonas Silver slumbered—but the new official of the Silver Bow Stage Company soon realized that it was in his last sleep.

Clad in woolen shirt, coarse trousers and boots, the gray-haired man was stretched prone before an old bureau (pathetic piece of furniture in this uncivilized outland), the lowest drawer of which was open. One arm of Siler inclined upward, the hand hanging over the drawer's edge, and Bent, stepping closer, perceived the dead fingers clutching a photograph, the back of it uppermost.

The two-gun superintendent removed and tossed aside his Denver-poked Stetson, with its rawhide throat-latch, and, before ascertaining the cause of Siler's decease, prompted by strong curiosity, he plucked the picture gently from the tight though lifeless grip. A feminine face was portrayed, that of a girl just entering her twenties, the erstwhile gambler hazarded; features irregular, she was pretty, not beautiful.

Bent, in his close association with dancehalls, had seen handsomer girls, but none whose faces had appealed to him so instantly and in just the way that this one did. Neither shy nor

bold. Fine mouth. Lots of wavy hair. The eyes looked at him levelly and he wondered about their color.

"That photographer," his glance traveled to a corner of the mount, noting the imprint of a St. Louis studio, "either knew his business well or too well—it's a speaking likeness or a flattering one. Siler's daughter, I reckon."

He laid the photo on the bureau-top, and stepped to turn the clothed clay over against one knee. Bent, until this moment, had imagined that heart-failure or the like had expelled life from the body of the stock-tender. True, the heart had failed, but lead, not disease, was the cause. The left side of his shirt front was a mass of gore, stuck to his body, and Bent, giving keenest attention to the surroundings, now saw a bloody trail leading bureauward from another part of the one-room shack.

Without more than cursorily examining the wound, the superintendent laid the lead-poison victim back on the floor and strode across to a side window overlooking the stage corral. Now that he was aware a killing had been perpetrated, his first thought was one questioning the motive for it. Stock lifting, the bane of stage line existence, was what he had in mind, but when he perceived the horses drowsing within the pole enclosure, he altered his opinion.

Some other reason was behind the slaying and, keenly desirous of solving the mystery, he followed the band of red across the floor to its beginning and stood there, looking back at the body. From vest pocket he drew tobacco sack and book of papers; and when his cigarette was burning, his detective instinct, which all men possess to greater or lesser degree, was doubly stimulated.

"Was shot down here," he soliloquized. "Ah, there's his gun," catching sight of it in a corner well laid with

shadow. He wondered how the weapon had fallen so far from where, apparently, the body of its owner had originally sunk—until he discovered the cylinder badly jammed. Siler's killer had shot the stock-tender's .45 out of his clutch, spinning it into the corner, then deliberately salivated the old man.

BENT paced slowly forward to the bureau, leaned against it, smoke pouring from his nostrils. His gaze shifted from the face of the dead man to the pictured countenance of that attractive girl.

"You," said the superintendent, addressing the photograph after some concentrated thought, "are the cause of this, I'm gambling the works. Guessing, and I can't guess it all. But I'd say that the man who murdered your daddy was interested in you and he wasn't a worthy character.

"When the killer quit here he must have thought your daddy dead, but dad wasn't—that is, he had life enough left to drag himself over to this bureau, open the drawer, get out your photo for a last look; and, incidentally, give me the only clue there is to go by. I'd never thought of a girl being at the bottom of it otherwise, and I'll have a doubly good chance of nailing the killer because, in one way, he'll be off guard—never suspect pa died with a clue in his hand. I'm no sleuth, but I reckon I'm the right man on the right track."

Clay removed his frock coat, and turned up his clean cuffs. He had noticed a spade in the corner where he picked up the jammed-cylinder gun. And not long after, with the stage horses watching him between the poles of the corral, the superintendent laid the blanket-wrapped form of Jonas Siler in a grave midway of shack and stable.

Bent determined to find out, some-

how, where in St. Louis the daughter of the stage hand lived. He didn't know whether Mr. Danvers would compensate her, beyond what pay was due Siler, as it was evident he hadn't met his fate defending the interests of the Silverbow line. But — Clay wasn't broke himself.

It occurred to Bent, as he was dusting the earth from his hands—hands capable-looking, muscular, but small for a man of his build—that the westbound coach should have been in by this time. He glanced at his watch—it was much overdue. Down the canyon he looked, but there wasn't a sign of its dust as yet.

The superintendent, his big gun holsters sighing against broadcloth-trousered legs stalked to the stable and from the neat array of tackling in the harness-room made his selection, trailing with it back to the corral. He went inside, closing the gate, and fell to gearing four of the sleek horses.

Harnessing was something new to him, but handling horses was not, and although it took him longer than the same work would have occupied the late Siler, in fairly good time the four-in-hand stood equipped. He flung open the gate, picked up the lengthy reins and, trotting at the heels of the wheelers, drove the team outside and brought them to a stop near the station. Tying the reins to the hitching-bar, he occupied himself smoking and watching the trail east through the canyon.

But no coach came. When the stage was an hour late he gave up watching. Expecting it every minute, he had thought to let search for the address of Siler's daughter go until after the stage's arrival and departure; now he would have to do that important thing still later. Something wrong that the westbound didn't show up—holdup or accident was delaying it.

The eastbound from the west

wouldn't be in for two hours yet. Clay resolved to ride east and learn what he could. Accordingly, he drove the new hook-up back into the corral and shut the gate; returned to the shack to don hat and coat; and, closing the station door, hairpinned his patient pony by the platform.

AWAY he rocked over the canyon trail, the skirts of his coat breezing back and revealing the lethal trappings usually concealed, the six-gun handles topping either hip. Bent had been over the entire line once before, by stage and in the company of Ben Danvers, heading for the eastern terminus to have the duties of his position explained and certain papers and equipment turned over to him. The headquarters station was at Kingpin.

Six or seven miles along the trail, halfway between Siler's change station and a town at which Silverbow coaches stopped for ten minutes, Bent encountered the overdue westbound. The yellow Concord, at a standstill, hogged the road that here was narrow and bush-flanked thickly enough to please the most particular bandit. The driver was going boxward over the wheel as Clay Bent swept into view, his hat brim pressed up in front by the wind.

Bent flung a hand high in the plains manner of salutation; the stage "whip" looked at him curiously, even suspiciously. As yet the new superintendent had not by any means met all the employees of the stage line, and Jerry Luger might be forgiven for regarding him, a stranger, askance, considering the recent experience Luger and his passenger outfit had gone through.

He was minus one of his lead team by reason of an outlaw's bullet, and had but a little while since stripped the dead animal of harness and, with the help of a male passenger, removed its body to the trailside brush. Besides

the horse, Mr. Luger had lost the strong-box, property of Wells Fargo Co. Express—and a piece of his left ear for rash vocal eruptions.

"Who're you?" the stage driver, showing in his eyes a desire to reach for hardware, demanded of the nearing horseman. "In this danged life either stickups or hossflies is allatime lightin' on a feller. Are you—"

"I'm the new super," replied Bent, reining up and casting an understanding glance around. "No need for me to ask what's happened. How much in the strong-box?"

"Forty thousand, 'cordin' to the waybill. So you're Mr. Bent, huh? Heard talk of you. Howdy." Luger jumped off the hub of the wheel and ambled to the right stirrup of the two-gun rider, clasping the small hand the superintendent extended.

Whiskered, leather-skinned, tobacco-chewing, a tough specimen, but the only breed of man with nerve enough to tool a stage over the lonely reaches of Montana, Luger looked curiously at Bent's hand as the latter withdrew it from the driver's crushing grip; then Luger scrutinized the ex-gambler's set-up, the two guns. "If I didn't know that size don't count for nothin'—an' admittin' you look real other ways—I'd say, Boss Bent, you was kinder lady-fingered." Blunt was Mr. Luger.

"I've heard that name before," Clay smiled easily, somehow liking the other instantly and more inclined to trust a man so outspoken than one reserved in speech. Clay foresaw they would be friends. But other matters pressed for attention. "Bandits been gone long?" Bent asked.

"Twenty minutes, I reckon, mebbe half hour," answered Luger. "Nothin' but the same details as always in a holdup, so I opine I don't need to tell 'em. Lookit my blasted ear! But, gosh, I can stand it; ain't a tougher

animile in the Little Rockies than me. Sorry it had to happen, Mr. Bent.

"Say," he said wheeling suddenly toward the coach, at the window of which Bent had just noticed the protruding heads of a man and a girl. With a startled feeling Bent recognized, or thought he did, the same feminine face as in the photograph clutched by old Siler. "Say," Luger repeated, "Andy Drawbaugh is in there—there you are, Andy!" as he caught sight of the man leaning from the stage. "You said you hadn't met the new boss no more than me—yere's him!"

THE girl's head disappeared, so did the man's; the stage door opened and the man stepped into the road. He was not much older than Bent, a trim-figured fellow, smooth-shaven, and he came forward with a smile, hand out. He wore a stiff-rim Stetson, a vest of calf-skin, and his boots were highly polished. The inevitable long gun on long thigh, of course.

"Greetin's to the new chief!" he said, in a not unpleasant voice, reaching up, while Bent reached down, answering his smile. "I was off duty when you came through my station; been ridin' the run to check up on things, huh?"

"Yes," nodded Clay. "I'm getting into harness on the jump, so's to cut a new deal for Mr. Danvers as soon as may be. He don't care how quickly the line is running clog-free again."

"I should think not—it's in a awful mess right now. You can count on my help, Mr. Bent—best I'm able to give. I'm cheerin' for you, but the hoss thieves an' agents has this line most tied in a bowknot."

"Yes. Drawbaugh, you're stock-tender at Scarred Butte Station, aren't you? Been rather curious to meet you, more than all the other station men, because Mr. Danvers was telling me how you'd never had a horse stolen

and every wrangler but you has. You must keep a sharp watch."

"Since you force me to say it, Mr. Bent, I do. When I'm on the job, I'm *on the job*. They've tried to raid me, but—" He patted his gun-butt. "Never tallied on 'em for keeps, I reckon, as no bodies was ever found afterward. But shore I learnt 'em it was a smoke-eatin' job to take company property away from me."

If a gambler is ever to rise above mediocrity in his profession, he must be, above all things, a student of human nature. Clay didn't know whether he liked this Drawbaugh or not. He looked you in the eye, wasn't falsely modest nor yet boastful. Ben Danvers had praised him, and Ben was supposed to be hard to deceive in judging men and character.

But there was a jarring note somewhere in Mr. Drawbaugh's melody, and Bent decided to hold opinion in abeyance, allow the model stock-tender every chance of erasing that vague impression he gave of being in reality not what he seemed on the surface. Clay revealed to the probationer nothing but interest in what Andy said, wearing his "faro-face" which, far from being expressionless, was disarmingly pleasant.

"I'm mighty sorry," said Bent, "that this forty thousand is grabbed the minute I take the reins. All the stickers-up wore the usual hanky?"

"Yeh." Thus Drawbaugh and the driver in chorus.

"You'll never track 'em from here, boss," further said Luger. "Nothin' but rock for miles, dang it an' them! Eight hank-faces this time; they shore was plenty organized to keep us from bustin' their game, even if Draw is a zippy gunner."

"I hadn't a chance 'nless I wanted to die as is," grinned Andy.

Bent nodded, then introduced the subject that had been milling in his

hindbrain since glimpsing the girl's face. "Who's the little lady inside?"

"Miss Siler, Phyllida Siler, from St. Louis, out here to visit with her paw—Canyon Creek Station, you know," said Drawbaugh. "I met her at the Kingpin terminal—reckon my relief man at the Butte told you when you come through—an' I'm takin' her far's the canyon. Her paw an' I was pretty friendly, though I never saw her before."

CLAY'S mind was working fast. His eyes were doing extra duty, but the closest scrutiny did not reveal what he hoped to see on Draubaugh's smooth, tanned countenance; or in his eyes; not even when the superintendent, in a law tone, said, "I have bad news for Miss Siler. I'm just off the creek myself, headed back to look this coach up. Jonas Siler is dead—and buried." "He ain't!" Drawbaugh stared blankly.

Luger spat copiously. "Hosses all lifted from the corral, I s'pose? 'Tain't nothin' new. Murder an' stealin' is the me-noo served up to this line reg'lar from day to day." He felt of his clipped ear, settled the dust on his right with a squirt of amber, "Still an' all," he said, as if to himself "that bandit lead didn't no more'n hum in the drum."

"It was murder right enough," continued Bent, "but the motive wasn't plain sign; not a horse gone, so it wasn't rustling this time." He appeared to divide his attention equally between Drawbaugh and Luger—but he didn't.

The three talked in the lowest tones they could muster, Andy and Luger following the example set by Bent, thinking the "inside" passenger could not hear—hoping so. Bent had closed the lower drawer of that bureau at the tenderless station, putting the photograph in it; now he wished he had appropriated the picture.

"Well, that's doggone peculiar Siler should be killed if it wasn't hoss thieves after his stock," opined Drawbaugh. "Road gents never bother, that I've heard tell, with anything but the stages, them knowin' there's no jack at the li'l change stations, like mine an' Siler's. He had no enemies, never mentioned none—a peaceful old gent, understood hosses."

"Many's the time," remarked Luger, "that I borrowed a chaw off'n him, when I was out."

"The killer," quoth Bent firmly, "won't get away with his low deal—I'm shoving all my chips on that murder. Now to break the news to the girl; I'm sure sorry for her. She'll hate the West forever after today, I reckon; pikes into a holdup, first off, then get's a lapful of crape. Perhaps, Drawbaugh, since you're acquainted, you'd better do the telling. But introduce me."

Andy wheeled, and strode back to the stage door, Bent reining pony after him, doing his "prairie roll" to hoofs-ward, whipstock under one arm, the lash riding through the dust. Andy opened the stage door and—the three men looked in upon a huddled form.

"She heard us!" Bent exclaimed.

"Yeh." Drawbaugh climbed inside. "She'd got over her road agent scare pretty good—in fact, wasn't near as upset as you'd thought a greenhorn girl would be. Canteen, Luger!"

"What 'm I thinkin' on!" Luger discarded his whip and hustled to the boot of the coach.

DRAWBAUGH, aided by Luger, brought Miss Phyllida around; Bent meantime sitting outside on his pony and mentally vowing that St. Louis photographer had known his business well, had not flattered the subject. Bent's distrust of the Butte stocktender increased as he watched him bathe

the girl's face. Phyllida, when sufficiently recovered to notice those around her, was introduced by Drawbaugh to "Mr. Bent, superintendent of the line." Leaning in the window, Clay fingertipped his hat and smiled. Tactfully he inquired where she meant to go. While she was hesitating, the tears coursing down her cheeks, Drawbaugh said:

"I'll see her as far as Saddle City at the other end, Mr. Bent. She can put up at the hotel there an' take time decidin' if she wants to go back to St. Louis or not. That all right, Miss Phyllida?"

She nodded wearily. "Poor daddy and I hadn't seen him for five years!" She seemed on the verge of swooning again and hastily Andy reached for the canteen held by Luger. But Phyllida recovered.

Finally Bent spoke: "See you again, Miss Siler. I'll find out what the stage company will do remuneratively in the matter of your father's death. I'm new to this job, so I can't say positively, but rest assured I'll do my best."

She did not reply; her weight of woe was too great at the moment for her to frame any. Bent perceived this and reined away from the coach window, tapping forefinger against hat-brim. The driver climbed backward out of the stage as Drawbaugh was making the girl comfortable on the cushions, and Bent followed Luger up to the front of the Concord.

As Luger rose on the hub of the high wheel, bringing his head on a level with that of the mounted superintendent, the latter, hearing the voices of the Scarred Butte man and the girl in conversation, leaned to whisper in the "whip's" ear:

"If she wants to stop and look at her father's grave, and get any of his things from the station, do it. But you see to it that Drawbaugh takes her

on to Saddle City. That's my orders to you. And keep your mouth shut!"

Luger stared at him a moment, head twisted over his shoulder; then he nodded vigorously, silently.

"You'll have to do your own hooking up at Canyon Creek," said Bent aloud, feeling sure he was trusting the right man. "You'll find a four-in-hand harnessed, in the corral—I got them ready. In case the agents left any little thing that might guide me right, I'm staying around here awhile; when I get back to the next town—Boulder, isn't it?—I'll send a man to replace Siler."

"You're geared high an' handsome, Sup," complimented Mr. Luger, finishing his climb to the box. "Here's 'til we meets ag'in!" and the hissing lash crackled over the horses' heads; the coach shoved off. Bent swung hand at Drawbaugh in the window; the girl was reclining on the cushions.

CHAPTER II

THE TRIGGER-TWITCHIN' BBEED

BEFORE the looted Concord was long on its way westward, the gun-fighting superintendent had made a discovery. Having been told in which direction the bandanna-faced eight vanished, he pointed his pony off the road, down the precipitous embankment, through stubble of brush, and sliding to the bottom, cast a glance southward. He couldn't see far; buttes intervened. The land between was broken shale.

Running a stage line through mountainous country advantaged road agents to the limit. Where the route crossed the plains, the agents never bothered to lay a bush-up. They weren't fools, to take chances by leaving tracks in

prairie loam. But here there was no dearth of rock-ribbed territory to render the game comparatively safe. This fact, principally, had spelled unretarded success for the human wolves who preyed upon Mr. Danvers' border to border stage line.

Clay Bent realized he had the job of his life on his hands, and it put him on his mettle. What Clay suspected, from information Danvers had been able to give him, was that a single organization was operating, viz., horse thieves and road agents were banded together under one head. This belief he based on the fact of the methodical and regular "cleaning" of stages and corrals. Danvers offered rewards, Wells Fargo offered them, but none of the money had ever been collected.

In the stations and all over the towns on the Silverbow route, from east end to west, these notices were posted, but no names were mentioned in them because nobody knew whom to name. Danvers scouted the idea of two gangs in one, with one chief for both; then he wondered if the horse thieves worked independently of the road agents.

A few years back the former might have been Indians; the Blackfeet were busy horse thieves in the old Indian-fighting days and the nags in the stage company corrals would have been a constant and irresistible temptation to them. But these natural-born horse lifters were long since reservation-herded and seldom caused trouble of any kind.

White brothers, with a liking for the money horseflesh would bring and not the horses themselves, as had been the case with the Indians, had taken the red brothers' place as raiders of the unsettled regions. Bent, despite the opinions solidly expressed by Mr. Danvers, was persistent in drawing his own conclusions.

Gazing south, with the buttes ab-

ruptly cutting off his view, although he knew he wouldn't have seen a road agent on the skyline at this late hour, even had the vista been unbroken for a dozen miles instead of limited to two or three, Bent jerked around in the saddle at the sudden whinny of a horse close by; his own mount answered. Hoofs clicking on the shale, a saddled pony came trotting up from the east, head high, looking as if it were on its way, but didn't know where!

"Hello, pony!" exclaimed Bent, who had a big heart for horses. "Did you get lost in the shuffle?" Changing reins to his left, he extended right hand, moving his own horse, with knee pressure, to meet the other saddler.

THE strange horse, as they met, poked friendly muzzle in Bent's hand. He got down from the saddle to examine the animal, shoulder and hip, for a brand. It was safe betting that this was one of the road agents' saddle band, as leather-gear'd pones weren't in the habit of traveling the lone trails without riders. A brand was on the horse's shoulder, but it was evidently so badly done and was now so old that Bent couldn't make it out. Even a cowboy, more accustomed to reading such than the exgambler, couldn't have deciphered it. Further he discovered, in the pony's left hip, a deep gouge; a raw, red wound.

"Something with a sharp edge. Aces to Jacks!" exclaimed Bent, "it was a corner of the strong-box; Outlaws lifting it on this nag must have let it slip—it would be pretty heavy, I reckon—and one corner cut the pony, scaring him from under. He ran—so far and fast they couldn't catch him up again; and I suppose his boss had to double with some other rider. Now he's over his scare and wanders back. Not such bad reckoning," Clay laughed to himself, "for a fellow who makes no claim

of being a sleuth-hound. Might be a clue to the rider in these saddle-pockets."

He went through the latter, but a package of sandwiches was in one, and odds and ends of no clue value whatever were in the other. The saddle had no initials upon it, either iron-burned or brass-studded, (methods of marking ownership often followed by the plainsman); so, at the last, Bent was no wiser than he had been at first.

He wished he had something to apply to the pony's hurt, but he hadn't. He marked with an angry eye the animal's scarred flanks telling of a rider who did not know what it was to spare the spur. Later he discovered a jaw-breaker spade-bit in the pony's mouth.

"You had mighty good reason to lope off, pal," said Bent sympathetically, fondling the velvet nose. "It's a wonder to me you'll go near a human. Maybe you'd like to get revenge, lead me to this master that rakes hell with spurs and a spade-bit—what say?"

With the hope that the pony might possibly guide him to the rendezvous of the band, the place it was accustomed to going after raids, Bent looped the reins on the saddle-pommel and cast the animal loose on the shale. He waited for it to start off, any direction—he put that up to the horse. But it refused to leave him.

Bent's kindness, probably the first it had experienced, seemed to have enslaved that equine heart. The two-gun man was willing enough to reciprocate affection, but not to the extent of "copering" the chance to run down the road gents. Much as he disliked doing it, he whooped the affectionate pony away from him; even picked up small stones and hurled them, to chase the animal.

But, though it shied off many yards from this changeable human, the pony would not quit the vicinity. Thinking

it might go of its own accord, if given time, Bent resolved to camp down where he was, under the rocky embankment. He consumed the sandwiches taken from the outlaw's saddlepocket. These sufficed for supper.

The sun slanted its last rays. As darkness drew on, Bent heard ponies pounding and the rattle of wheels coming from the west—the eastbound was tearing at the usual rate Silverbow stages traveled. Where he and his horse were, neither stage driver nor possible passengers could see them, and Bent didn't trouble to reveal himself.

HE LISTENED to the rumble and patter pass overhead, drift into the distance and become lost; when, by comparison, the silence of his surroundings was intensified. Being a "town man," this silence should have ragged his nerves; but he had not known only the environment of the gambling-hall. Camping trips, alone or accompanied, were ever his pleasure when life at the faro layout or poker table palled.

Still, he had to admit that the yapping of the coyotes out toward the cluster of buttes—a black smudge until the stars flashed their incomplete light—was a friendly sound. He didn't even mind the womanish scream of a panther, nor the deep-throated baying of a pair of timber wolves, up the trail westward somewhere. All company, somehow—the hostile note was struck out by his own loneliness.

Bent made no fire, first, because he had nothing to cook; secondly, because he didn't feel the need of it for warmth, though the night breezes in this altitude were no zephyrs. As staying awake all night had been part of his routine for not a few years, it was no hardship for him to fend off slumber this night. By sleeping he might defeat the very purpose that kept him here—any time

the outlaw's horse was likely to walk off.

Even though the girl he had met that day was savory food for thought, Clay found the vigil tedious. Once he considered gathering brush for a fire, by the light of which he might while away time with solitaire—then recollected he had no card deck along. So he used up every flake of tobacco in his sack, and could have used more.

But the outlaw's pony wouldn't desert. Bent saw the sun rise for the first time in months—and he yawned. Usually this was the time he sought a cot. The friendly, stubborn pony roved in the offing. The ardor of its friendship seemed to have cooled, for when Bent, deciding he was but wasting his time here, called the browse-hunting animal into feed with his own horse, "outlaw" merely pricked ears.

The superintendent could have ridden the animal down, but of what use would that have been? He didn't want it; the cayuse was of no particular use to him, except as it might have served as dumb guide. Knowing the brute would be obliged to travel far to grass, Bent dumped on the rocks what his horse left in the feed-bag, so that "outlaw" could come and get it after he was gone.

The two-gun man saddled and bridled and rode up over the edge of the embankment. The outlaw's horse made no effort to follow him. He evidently mistrusted him after that uncalled-for shower of stones. The last the smiling Bent saw of the animal, it was cautiously approaching, neck outstretched, the spot where the oats had been flung.

The superintendent arrived at the station in the little town of Boulder just as the employees were tumbling out of their bunks. Quickly they rubbed the sleep from their eyes when they saw who had visited them thus early.

Bent detailed a man to head for

Canyon Creek and take Siler's place, being sparing of his information anent the latter's demise. If Siler's belongings hadn't been removed, the new man was to leave them as found, and he (Bent) would ascertain from Miss Siler what she wanted done with them.

Then Bent turned his mount over to the care of a wrangler and visited a restaurant on Boulder's main street. Coming back to the station he half-undressed for a couple of hours' sleep, charging the agent not to let him lie a minute longer.

BEN DANVERS himself came in on the morning westbound and, learning from the agent that Bent was there, roused him. Clay told of the latest holdup, the replacement at Canyon Creek, and what he had done, or tried to do, toward apprehending the robbers. He also vowed he would "get" the killer of Jonas Siler, but he did not allude to his suspicions and deductions. Mr. Danvers was unable to add anything to his knowledge.

"Seems you're blocked right this minute, and there's a stack of paperwork at headquarters needing your attention," said Danvers, at the last. "Better go back to Kingpin and clean up there, turning over to your assistant all he can handle. Then you'll be free to hit the trail and stay on it a week or so without worrying about headquarters."

Mr. Danvers went on westward. Bent snapped his fingers impatiently after the "big boss" had gone, when he reflected he had forgotten to ask whether the stage company would "do" anything for the bereaved Phyllida. He returned to Kingpin on the next eastbound, leaving his saddle horse at the Boulder stage corral.

It was a couple of days before Bent was ready to leave headquarters, for, being so new to the job, its details re-

quired more thought now than they would later, when he "had the hang." He journeyed westward at the end of that time, by coach, Saddle City his destination, intent not wholly on business of the stage company.

The superintendent took along what a puncher would have designated a war-bag, containing certain articles likely to be useful to a man in Bent's dangerous position. When the coach reached Scarred Butte Station, where Andy Drawbaugh was boss wrangler, an assistant stock-tender drove out the fresh hook-up.

Andy, said this helper, when questioned by Bent, was sleeping—it was his regular time off-duty. Later, at Canyon Creek, Bent interviewed the new stock-tender; Miss Siler had removed her father's effects.

Saddle City, western terminus of the Silverbow, was reached about midnight. The frontier town was lively plus from this hour until dawn, much wider awake than during the hours of daylight. The honkatonks roared: there were many of them. And there was enough transient trade to jam all regularly; cowpunchers, miners, frontiersmen of every calling of the frontier.

Clay Bent quit the stage station almost immediately after arriving and, having obtained from the terminal agent the name and location of the Saddle City Hotel (the only one), pushed along the board sidewalk toward it. The noise was mostly indoors; comparatively few people were on the street.

At the very poor apology for a hostelry Bent asked for Miss Siler, but no such name was on the register. The night clerk assured Clay that no young girl was stopping there at the time, and none had for several weeks past.

Muttering thanks, the ex-gambler turned away, masking his apprehension and anger. He wished now that he had alighted at Scarred Butte and in-

terviewed Drawbaugh, said to be sleeping; perhaps he had been, but. . . Bent had no idea where to look for the girl and the thought of her being without a protector in such a tameless town—even if something hadn't already happened to her—was not conducive to his peace of mind.

BENT was undeniably interested in Phyllida and the interest was of a high order. Shooting square with women, in the frontier code, had ever been a religion with him, just as he had religiously run a straight "faro bank" or whatever card game he happened to "sit in." His distrust of Drawbaugh was primarily responsible for the darkest suspicions of what had befallen the girl.

Bent started back to the stage station, thinking the agent might possibly help him out. He had not inquired of this man whether he had seen Drawbaugh and the girl together; Luger, the driver, encountering Bent at Kingpin headquarters, reported landing them in Saddle City—that was all he knew.

Hands deep in trousers-pockets, thus thrusting the mencing gun-butts boldly forward, Clay sauntered along the creaking boardwalk, subconsciously aware of the blaring noise issuing from places he passed.

Three horsemen drew up at a tie-rack fronting a joint with a stable lantern suspended on a rod above the sign, "Bearpaw Pete's Saloon and Dance Hall." This trio clumped across the sidewalk boards and entered the wide-flung door a minute or two before Clay came abreast of the honkatonk. He paid them no heed, except to note their number.

And he might have passed on and thought of them no further, thereby missing an opportunity of championing a girl who was badly in need of a champion, had not two horses begun

fighting at the hitch-rack; these, tied at the far end of the pony line-up, were two of the animals from which the latest pleasure-seekers had dismounted. Bent, lover of horses, quickened his stride; he cuffed the nose of one animal which was viciously trying to bite the other, the latter rearing as high as the knotted reins would allow.

The cuffing quieted the temper of the vicious cayuse to some extent; it was a pretty "bronc" chunk of horseflesh. But right after the blow, a man who understood equines was stroking the muzzle; and the horse, seeming to realize it, did not try to bite him. Bent put his other hand on the nose of the horse attacked. Somehow this bronc looked familiar. It was powder-faced and looked like the one he had endeavored, a few nights ago, to coax into leading him on its master's trail.

Startled out of his usual poise, glad of the illumination flooding a welcome to the honkatonk, Bent quickly left the tie-rack and stepped around to the ponies' switching tails.

As he examined the powder-face, Bent would have shouted with exultation, had he been given to emotional outbursts, for he saw the mark of the treasure-box edge on the pony's hip. Some grease had been smeared on the wound to heal it, but unmistakably it was the same sore, the same horse.

This was luck, the gaming-table kind! Clay wished now that he had taken a squarer look at the trio, for there wasn't much doubt they were three of the gang preying on Silverbow stages. The powder-face must have finally—and foolishly—wandered back to its unmerciful master, or been retrieved by him while scouting the stage road.

There was a chance, of course, that someone not the original owner had happened along and picked the animal up—but a slim chance, unlikely. A

saddled horse would be a dangerous thing for a stranger to appropriate, as the real owner might cross his trail; and a man charged with horse thieving was often accorded swift injustice.

SO, feeling that Lady Luck had turned her broadest smile his way, Bent patted the "give-away" pony and started into Bearpaw Pete's. He couldn't identify the trio by sight and if no other method succeeded, a strict watch at the hitchrack for them to come out and mount would "work the charm." He had 'em!

The stage superintendent stood "hoisting" one, at the long and crowded bar, considering expedients, when two hands closed over his left arm and a feminine voice exclaimed:

"Well, if you're not drops for sore eyes, Clay Bent!"

He knew "who" before he turned to gaze into the uplifted rouged and powdered face and daringly exposed snowy bosom, although he hadn't seen Mazie Purwin for a couple of years. But she looked the same old Maizie, or rather, young Maizie, boldly beautiful, not a day added, perceptibly, to her years. Bent wasn't particularly pleased to have encountered her. She had always thought more of him than he of her. Mazie had drifted, so had he—both seemingly in a circle.

"You," said Bent, a slow smile breaking, "are the same little Venus as always."

Mazie's eyes were stars. "Looking handsome as a broadcloth Apollo yourself, my dear. Why the twin cannon?" patting one of the .45 hand-grips. "You used to pack cunning forty-fours—cunning but terrible."

"Gun-riding for the stage company. Cleaning up for them—if I can. And I think I can."

"You," complimented the big draw-card of Pete's place, "can do *whatever*

you want. And by the way, how about the old salute?"

"Well, Mazie. . . . frankly, I don't love you any more, but". . . . He bent and took his rouge medicine. "A drink?" said the convalescing Clay.

"When did I ever refuse?"

"Never—that I can remember. And you carry it as cleverly as you do your age, sweet sixteen twice—or is it thirty-three?"

"You haven't forgotten how to count. Let's take a table," suggested she. "This bar's too much like a loaded hitchrack."

Bent, believing she might be of assistance to him, acquiesced, though he didn't want her to think there was even a remote chance of a fire being stirred up from the ashes of the old love.

Over their liquor—and Clay drank sparingly, being a heavy drinker at no time — the superintendent finally got down to the subject interesting him most, the trio of saddle-forkers. Had Mazie noticed three men come in together, just a few minutes before? And if so, did she know where. . . .

As luck would have it the girl had been near the door when they entered; yes, she'd seen them, and, more luck, knew them. The Dacer boys, brothers: Al, Dick, Sam. And suspected of being in shady business. Called themselves cattlemen, but where they ran their steers was a mystery unsolvable.

"I'll tell you what they are," said Bent, with assurance, knowing of old that the girl, like so many of her kind, could be absolutely trusted to play square, "bandits. They belong to the gang making a good thing of the stage line. I'd admire to ask them what they've done with the forty thousand dollars taken from the westbound a few days ago."

He told her about the hurt-hipped pony that had "clued" him into Pete's. "Where are those fellows?—I wouldn't

know them if they were sitting at this table. Nor do they know me that I'm aware of—not yet."

Mazie looked a trifle worried. "A woman's fears shouldn't be roused over such as you, Clay, but the Dacers are hell's own babies, and there are *three* of them. . . . Having a party in a booth on the gallery," she reluctantly admitted, when he pressed her.

SHE thought to take his mind off the dangerous Dacers by going on: "One of the girls with them is the greenest hand at this game you ever saw. She doesn't drink, nor swear, nor anything. Awful. . . . well, not the shrinking violet sort, but a 'with care' package — glass breaks, you know? New, just here a few days, but if she lingers long—"

"Which room are those big gamers in?" Bent asked, his mind on the outlaws more than on what Mazie Purwin was latterly saying; otherwise, he might have mentally linked up the girl of Mazie's recital with the missing "little lady" of the stage. Miss Purwin pouted at her failure to change the course of his thoughts and had not answered Bent's question when a door on the gallery burst open, letting out sounds of violence.

A girl in a shining metal-stitched dress fled through the opening and along the gallery; and after her racked a big, flannel-shirted man in noisy riding-boots. "You damned scare-cat, hold on!" this fellow shouted.

"Is that," said Bent, his upturned gaze traveling swiftly from man to girl, girl to man, while the eyes of most everyone on the honkatonk floor were similarly lifted galleryward, "one of those hell-twisting Dacers?" He glanced back at the door of the room which had erupted the runners and saw two more men, two more girls, watching the race with interest—and scarcely

needed the affirmation of Mazie.

"Yes, that's Al Dacer, worst of the lot, if there is any worst. And that," she added with the sneer of a professional hardened to the game, "is the greenhorn *lady* who don't like to play! I guess the party got too sloppy for her already. . . . Clay, don't mix in!" for he had half-risen, was staring hard as he caught a full-face glimpse of the fugitive girl.

She had reached the head of the stairs leading from gallery to main floor, well in advance of Al Dacer, and started down at a pace which, considering her high-heeled slippers, menaced her neck, even though there was a pine hand-railing to grasp. Small wonder that Bent stared—the lost was found.

Phyllida Siler didn't see Bent's face in all the sea of upturned faces, naturally; and might not even recognize him singled out and at closer range, as she had seen the ex-gambler but once and under trying circumstances, not helpful to making a lasting impression.

The "yip, yip, yip-ees!" and fleeing curses in voices of both sexes clearly proved sentiment to be against the girl and for the man, something that made Bent's lips spittle-flecked as if he had swallowed wolf poison.

The girl was halfway down the stairs, plunging from fry-pan to fire, as it were, though manifestly more afraid of what was behind than before. Al Dacer was clattering hotfoot after, leaping two steps at once when Clay Bent, shoving hardily through the throng near the landing, darted up, springing *three* steps at a time.

"Mr. Bent!" gasped Phyllida, as he confronted her. She didn't foolishly beg his interference in her behalf; his presence there could mean naught but such intent—his face was a warrior's! Here was one friend in a situation in which, if ever a girl needed a friend, Phyllida Siler did!

"Keep going!" exclaimed Bent, as she paused in her dizzy flight, and he sprang up another step to get between the girl and her pursuer.

AT THAT instant fire burst from the hip of Al Dacer, who didn't know the butter-in from a wooden Indian but was disposed to settle all such with hot lead, promptly. If he targeted the girl by accident, for Phyllida and Clay were close together on the stairs when Dacer made his draw, that would worry the outlaw none—plenty of other girls in Bearpaw Pete's.

But Al hit the one he aimed at, though not exactly in the spot he intended, which would have been a fatal drill. Clay Bent sagged against the railing, seizing it with one hand. Phyllida cried out, turned back. "Go on!" commanded Bent sternly, "get out of range." As she obeyed, he wheeled, jumping left-handed gun from holster, supporting himself with his right.

It was a draw that outclassed Dacer's for speed. The bullet struck the outlaw as he loosed a second shot, spoiling his aim but not boring him vitally because the shock of the lead Bent had absorbed had momentarily unsteadied the gambler. The latter mentally scored himself for not anticipating gunplay by the man at the top of the stairs the minute that he (Bent) horned into the affair. His attention had been taken by the girl.

Along the gallery a Colt crashed, slug burning through the hat of Bent. One of Al's brothers had "uncorked" from the door of the "party booth." Bent swung his gun in that direction, triggering; but the lead damaged the door-casing only. Sam Dacer had ducked inside. He and Dick, the third brother, peered cautiously around the frame, the two girls with them not daring even that. Bent, wounded and with two points of danger to watch, was in

bad case.

Al Dacer had sat down solidly when the stage line superintendent's Colt planted lead in him; he saw his opponent was one of those dangerous two-gun men, usually "hell to kill." Al, as Bent's attention switched from the gallery room to him once more, suddenly stood-up and heaved against the doubtful stair-railing, careful not to push so as to overbalance himself. Al was heavy.

With a splintering crash the railing tore loose from its supports and Bent, midway up the flight and leaning on this rail, was hurled downward to the dance-floor, the plunge synchronizing with a burst of smoke from his gun. But Al Dacer stood on that railing stairway untouched this time.

CHAPTER III

THE PRETTY LADY FROM PETE'S

FOR all that he was wounded and taken by surprise, Bent landed almost catlike, jarred rather than actually hurt by his fall. The railing crashed clear of him and he struck none, for, as the deck of a battle-cruiser is cleared for action, so was the dance-floor deserted for the men to war in, when Al Dacer trigged his first shot, with a desperado's disregard for the ethics of fair gunplay.

As his hands and knees met the floor, a shot was shaken, by the forcible contact, from Clay's six-shooter; and he slumped down on his side, the uninjured left. He turned over with surprising swiftness and *then* the spectators realizing how hard it was to down or even long disconcert the smoke-trained trigger-twitching breed. A lightning shot winged at the upright and so amazed Al Dacer that he crumpled

up altogether.

With Al's "measure taken," as he had good reason to believe, Bent, leaning on his right hand, rolled smoke at Sam and Dick Dacer, who had incautiously projected themselves from the safety of the private room when the railing broke. Their fingers clasped guns, but they never used them, with such paralyzing suddenness did Bent act, after his fall.

The latter's position, however, was such he couldn't properly "bead" either of the two brothers. At that, he could select only one for (the fact probably had escaped the Dacers) this was the last shot in his colt. He missed Dick Dacer narrowly, but the miss, in a way, scored a hit, as both brothers executed an undignified "to the rear, march!" stifling joyous shouts over what had seemed, a flash before, to be another Dacer triumph.

Bent dropped his empty lead-poisoner and yanked the one from his right-hand twisted holster.

From different directions, Phyllida and Mazie were about to step to the side of the floored two-gun man, when he saw them and shook his head.

The young women looked at each other. Phyllida harbored no special ill-feeling for the dance-hall harpy at that moment, but Mazie felt differently toward Phyllida. Mazie judged that Clay and this "goody girl" had known each other elsewhere, for she had heard Phyllida utter his name.

Jealous rage, born partly of the realization that "Miss High-tone" had something on her in morals, if not looks, drove the dance-hall jade to a threatening advance upon her rival. And without a word Mazie clawed into Siler's daughter like a leopardess.

Phyllida didn't quite understand why she drew this furious attack upon herself, although aware that her professional "sisters" regarded her efforts at

aloofness with an evil contempt; but Phyllida wasn't one to bear blows without striking back, and furthermore was a sturdily built girl.

This second battle raged on the sideline, beneath the gallery, the air filling with hairpins as each girl yanked down the other's tresses and sought a hold on the roots. Meanwhile Clay Bent was awaiting a hostile demonstration from that upper room. Once, and briefly, he glanced toward the fighting girls, then back to the point of original and stronger interest.

The sprawled figure of Al Dacer on the stairs he did not deem needed further attention. Blood was running freely inside Clay's shirt and consequent weakness was blurring his vision; this weakness soon would render his gunwork uncontrollable and ahead of such calamity he earnestly desired to "get" the other two Dacers.

HE DIDN'T try to rise because he thought the attempt would fail and the least the enemy knew of his condition the better for him. From the way Sam and Dick shunned that open door, Bent reckoned they thought him better able to draw a bead than he really was.

"Hell's own babies, eh?" Bent wished they weren't so infernally timid! But that was only his fancy. However, not even a carefully protruded gunbarrel rewarded his glued gaze.

While thus a lull descended on the war activities of the men, the girls still battled on, scratching, punching, hair-jerking, and Mazie had none the best of it, to her great surprise. Suddenly a voice boomed outside the wide honka-tonk door.

"I sh'd osculate a bell-mewl! This hell-brindlin' has gotta lay off or there'll never be no decent folks will stop in Saddle City. She'll never grow up outta the cow an' minin' class! An'

as marshal o' this here bellerin' infant, shore I'm seein' to it law an' order's observed if I gotta surround the damned cradle with a semiterry!"

The speaker by now was visible, heaving in through the door, his huge spur rowels loudly clinking. Something familiar in the voice had caused Bent to tear gaze off that fascinating private room. Were the Dacers observing closely, if covertly, here was prime opportunity.

They did observe, but—the man arriving was one they did not care to weave pistol smoke with — most assuredly not with him and the gambler-garbed two-gun man together.

Bent didn't notice that the supposed corpse of Al Dacer, on the derailed stairway, stirred; that booming voice aroused in the "dead" qualms identical with those of his brothers in hiding—and none of the three was a coward.

Unheeded, for the noisy newcomer had become the focal point of nearly every eye below, Al Dacer crawled up the few steps to the top landing and struck along the gallery, stagger-running as he stooped, for the room where his brothers were. He whisked around the door-frame without collecting any more leadpepper spots.

He was wounded, but much this side of mortally, and for the last few minutes he had been "possuming" successfully, realizing that in Bent he had no ordinary gunman to deal with. The slightest movement on his part, Al knew, would cause Bent to send another shot to finish a good beginning.

The new arrival downstairs was huge, vertically and horizontally, togged in the usual cow rider's costume, but minus chaps, and with a nickel-plated badge on his breezing vest. He packed two guns, hitched. He was whiskered like the old-time miners, but wasn't old and had never been a miner.

"Mitch Bullock!" exclaimed Bent.

"Clay Bent, you ornery shortcarder!" boomed the owner of the booming voice. "Was you the author o' them pistil crackin's? An' why're you a-settin' there on the floor?"

"Not for fun, Mitch," replied Bent, smiling, although he was in not inconsiderable pain. "My days of playing on the floor have been over some years. You'll notice that railing—"

"Didn't before!" spluttered the big man, just then stumbling over it, stretched across the floor; his gaze had been concentrated on this "gamblin' man" he had known—and as a square shooter, despite the greeting—in more than one roaring camp.

"Bayed three stage-friskers," went on Bent. "There's one on the—" He pointed toward the stairs with his Colt and his sentence was chopped when he perceived the space formerly covered by Al Dacer's body now vacant.

"Upstairs, Mitch, in that room with the open door!" he said as he turned his head suddenly to meet Bullock's eye. "That's a town marshal's tinware, eh, Mitch? Bully old Bullock! Fellows they call the Dacers, who've been wolfing on the Silverbow line . . . Mitch, if I could stand I'd pike along, but—" He waved the gun-fitted left hand weakly, still relying on his right for body support. "Mitch, if you'll shoot 'em out on the gallery I can chip in."

"I'm needin' no help, tell a bell-mew I'm not!" rumbled the ponderous town marshal, and shouted at all and sundry; "Lend Bent a hand to a cheer, some o' you-all! . . . an' hey, you two sizzlin' shemales," as he noticed the breathless but still raging Phyllida and Mazie, "quitcha spit-firin'!"

BUT they were heedless and Mitch Bullock made no move to separate them just then. At his commanding shout and as he turned toward the stairs, a few of the dance-hall patrons

shuffled uneagerly in Bent's direction, making no effort to beat one another.

"Never mind," said Clay sharply to these lukewarm Samaritans; "you didn't give a hand before and I don't need one now." So they drew back, huffish as hot bread.

Bullock boldly mounted the stairs; thud-clinked along the gallery to the open door; pulled his gun as he reached it. His hands were so big that the butts of the big .45's fitted in them as would the grips of .22's in an ordinary man's.

"Come outta that, you peroxide bums;" Clay Bent heard him vociferate as he poked head and Colts around the door. The two "gayety" companions of two of the Dacers lost no moment in gliding out, past the marshal.

"Where's them skunk-bits?" he next demanded, bellowing after the girls chasing down the gallery. He got his answer from the street, through the open window of the whisky and talcum scented room—a thud of horses' hoofs! The Dacers had lowered themselves to the wooden awning in front of the honk-atonk, coasted down to the edge, and dropped off onto their horses. This while the marshal was buffaloing around below.

That was one trouble with Bullock as a peace officer; he lived up to his surname — blundering and bawling about, he never could tackle a situation quietly. But he was courageous to a fault, with a heart as big as the Rockies. He dashed to the gallery-room window as the hoofbeats broke forth, but the shots he poured over the sill neither added to the injuries of Al Dacer nor nicked the others.

"Buff'los o' Brazos!" rumbled Mr. Bullock as he stamped like one of the afore-mentioned animals out along the gallery and down the stairway. Bullock was from Texas. He was what might be termed an itinerant law and order man; wandered from untamed

town to untamed town, offering his services as special marshal, sheriff, deputy, anything in the badman breaking line.

"When a 'hell-roarin' place was changed from a state of war to one of peace he was wont to move on, seeking other camps to conquer. Bent had met him last in a town as wild as Saddle City and seen it "whipped" into docility by the loud-talking but entirely genuine Mitch.

"They've done sloped," complained the town marshal, arriving in front of the ex-gambler. "But you-all gimme a dee-scription of 'em, Clay, an' I'll pop eye for 'em to come back. Ain't nobody stretched you a fin yet?" he roared.

"They would've, but I preferred not to have them," replied Bent, fighting faintness. He didn't believe the wound inflicted by Al Dacer was serious, but it had lost him much blood. "Do the favor, Mitch, to separate those ladies." He might have been anxious for Phyllida, had he not perceived how the stock-tender's daughter was holding her own—and more.

"Shore — they're crazy with hell's heat!" boomed Bullock. "Told 'em before to quit that cat-fussin'. An' if folks don't listen to me the first time, shore they hear me the second!" The big man steered for the feminine batters.

MAZIE realized she had grappled her match (and over). Her fury at this discovery, coupled with her jealous rage, brought her to a point where she was reaching, as she fended off Phyllida with one arm, into her corsetless gown for a vest-size derringer, when the hand of the town marshal clamped on her shoulder, whirling her to one side. Simultaneously, with the other hand, he whirled Phyllida.

"I'll kill her!" panted Mazie.

"Then you'll wear hard-twist where you got them paste pearls, you painted jezebel!" declared Bullock. And Mazie Purwin, knowing this was more a promise than a threat, let fall her lifted hand without revealing the derringer. Scratched, bruised, dress as much off as on her, the dance-hall "regular" faded back through the crowd.

Nail-torn, battered, tattered, also, the girl who had scored more nearly a win than a draw, turned in the footsteps of the big peace officer as he heeled for the center of the room. Phyllida's legs trembled so they barely were able to bear her up; it was rather blindly that she covered the distance to Bent.

"I don't know why that girl had it in for me so," said Phyllida dazedly, as Bullock lifted the two-gun man to his feet, retaining one ape-long arm around him to hold him erect. Phyllida was more than half talking to herself, but Clay answered:

"Well, I can guess, Miss Siler. And . . . you come from St. Louis, but you've got the give-and-take spirit of the West. Congrats!"

And then Miss Siler burst into tears — nervous reaction.

"Mitch," said Bent to the giant, "fetch her along out of here, she don't belong." The big marshal turned his head to look into the tear-streaming eyes of the girl beside them. Mitch realized his gambler friend spoke the truth, and though the situation was somewhat of an enigma to the marshal, he required no explanation before acting. Bent's word was good.

"Little blossom, just you lope ahaid of we'uns for that door," directed Bullock. The girl dragged her uncertain feet thither. And none made objection to her going, not even Bearpaw Pete himself. He was gaudy in a flowered vest and striped trousers, with lank black hair pomaded to make it shine

and smell. Since the gunwork was a matter of the past he again took up his usual stand at one end of the bar. The roving eye of the Texan warrior saw this Pete spectacle and "it" he addressed: "Whatever way is this to keep the peace like I told you-all to do, B'arpaw? There was enough lead shaken to pepper soup, if lead was pepper, 'fore I came in here, from look o' things!"

Bearpaw replied smoothly, shifting his cigar. "I can't ride herd on the actions of everybody, Mitch. If you tighten the rein too much they just about bust the leathers . . . you savvy my meaning. And, if you'll question your friend there, who's a stranger to me, I think he'll admit responsibility for starting the ruckus. He horned into a little party that was none of his."

BENT had been leaning his head against the marshal's massive shoulder from the first and Mitch hadn't noticed an increase in his weight, an unusual sagging of the body until, looking down—Bullock was head and shoulders taller even than the tall gambler—in expectation of a pungent answer to Bearpaw's statement, he discovered Clay's eyes closed in unconsciousness. Mr. Bullock did not express any surprise thereat; but he waved his beard once again at gaurdy Pete.

"He ain't none able to reply at this presize junkchoor, but I'm layin' three to one, by the buff'los o' the Brazos, he had good reason for hornin' in. Stands to reason, what he said about the filly yon. You Pete, don't let me ketch you sellin' lickier an' daisies to them outlaws that sloped—less'n it's to hold 'em while you're on your way to tell me!"

Bearpaw nodded, but under his breath he cursed. "Damn you to hell, you big bull! I wish you'd get wrecked. You'll ruin this town yet."

Bullock headed out, raising the body of Bent across one shoulder as if he were handling an infant. Phyllida was on the stoop and, wordless, fell in step with the longstriding officer—that is, she walked as fast as she could.

There being no sufficient money in town-marshaling to make ends meet, Bullock was running an outfitting store on the side, selling such goods as were necessities to cowmen, miners and overlanders. He lived over the store and there, also, had his marshal's office.

There was no jail, no need of cells, for anyone Mitch took was taken "boots on." The old fire-eater never recorded his notches in any way—he couldn't count that many.

On the way to his outfitting store—"Bullock's Emporium" the sign, self-painted, read—Mitch stopped at the door of a doctor's home, one of the two doctors in Saddle City and the one least likely to be whiskey-tight.

When Clay Bent came to he was occupying the marshal's bed, a cot with army blankets for mattress and covers. The doctor was there, as were also Mitch and the girl. Bent looked for her first. When he saw her, quite safe, the blood from the scratches washed off her face, Clay breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

"Keep her close to you, Mitch," he charged the hairy marshal, and sank his head deeper in the blanket-roll pillow and slumbered.

Around noon next day he was ready to talk. Al Dacer's bullet hadn't done much more than let out a quantity of blood ere it passed on its way. Clay said he felt able to get right up and mount a horse; but that, of course, was not to be thought of for a few days.

"Must get back of the layout as soon as may be," he told Bullock earnestly. "Just started in to deal for Mr. Danvers. He's not paying me to lie abed."

Bent forthwith cleared up much of the Texan's puzzlement by telling him what his business was.

"Whyn't you come here an' enlist me when you located them Dacer hellions?" inquired Mitch, in tone of injury. "I ain't in the habit of lettin' no private gunscraps be pulled off in a burg I'm law-learnin'. You know that, Clay."

BENT nodded. "But I didn't know you were here, Mitch. Only the second time I've been in Saddle City. The time before I just got off at the stage station, stretched my legs and climbed on again, that was when I was going east to headquarters with Mr. Danvers. You tell the agent to telegraph my assistant at Kingpin that I'm laid up for a few days—now don't forget; and fetch my war-bag from the station. Where's the girl?"

"Downstairs, 'tendin' store. An' lookin' pretty as a wild rose in the kind o' gingham frock I been sellin' a plenty of to homesteader's women-folks. Be glad to have her workin' for me if she wants to. I ain't got no clerk an' lose sales when I gotta take a pasear on official bizness."

"That'll be the ticket, Mitch. I'd have asked you to do that same thing in another minute."

"What about the kid? I don't savvy. She told me next to nothin' herself. Howcome she to be in B'arpaw's?"

"That," replied the stage line superintendent, with a tightening of the jaw muscles, "is what I'd like to know for sure myself. Cold-decked, Mitch, I've a strong suspicion. . . suppose you send her up, Mitch."

Mitch did, taking on the counter-jumping job himself. Phyllida Siler revealed that, en route to Saddle City, Andy Drawbaugh had casually "reckoned" she would need work; her savings weren't sufficient to live on, were

they? They were not, she told him.

Drawbaugh then asked her if she was skilled in any particular line: could she sing, play the piano? He thought that he recollected her father mentioning once that she could play. Yes, she could. Luck, Mr. Drawbaugh had said, because he could get her a job that paid well in a "sort of music hall." And he took her to Bearpaw Pete's.

Learning what she was up against—a trifle late—she had spoken to Pete about going to the "police." He had laughed. There were no police in this border town, didn't she know it? (But Bearpaw probably hoped, as he said this, that Phyllida wouldn't encounter Marshal Bullock and communicate her plight to him.)

Through the recital Bent's small but strong hand, lying atop the blanket covering him, was clenched in a hard fist. He wouldn't settle with Bearpaw Pete first, but with the original skunk-bitten, hell-born. . . . God! a fellow found himself at utter loss for fitting names.

Phyllida related her experiences up to and including the preceding night, when she had been dragged upstairs by one of the Dacers, who recognized her face as a new and fresh one among the painted collection. And then, Al Dacer . . . well, she had fled.

"You're out of harm's way here," Bent forgot his anger sufficiently to reassure her. "Mitch wants to give you a permanent job. But Miss Siler, haven't you any folks to go back to in St. Louis?"

He rather hoped she wouldn't be leaving Saddle City, not for a while anyway; yet he strove to view unselfishly, and consider what was best for her. "It's certain," he went on, without awaiting a reply and lying very gracefully, "that the stage company will remunerate you over and above what wages were due your father, and

I should be very happy to advance—”

“Oh, no,” she interrupted, “I couldn’t think of borrowing. I—I hardly know you, Mr. Bent . . . and anyhow, I don’t believe in it. No,” answering his question, “I have no kin in St. Louis—none anywhere, now.”

She folded her hands in her lap most pathetically.

BENT noticed that tears came into her fine eyes. She was thinking of her father, last of her relatives to go—and in such a manner! Bent felt his own eyes strangely smarting. Though a gambler, Bent was first of all a very human being, and his interest in this girl had grown to astonishing proportions.

Said she, in controlled voice: “But I suppose I shall go back there, to St. Louis, when I’ve saved enough. I can’t begin to thank you for what you’ve done, Mr. Bent . . . and I’m very grateful to Mr. Bullock for making that position for me. I will do my best, though I’m afraid I’m awfully stupid about the goods he sells—”

“You’ll catch on quickly enough, I’m sure. Mitch is rough, but mighty kind . . . the sort who could be like a father to you . . . or an uncle.” Bent was leaning forward. “This town, of course, is red raw, not at all like St. Louis, for instance, but it may get better and . . . well, after you’re here awhile you may like it . . . that is, if it improves.”

He was not saying just what he wanted to, and wasn’t just sure what he should say. This was a mood of indecision, new for this usually direct and composed cardman. “Would you mind,” said he, giving it up, “handing me the tobacco sack and papers from my vest on that chair-back?”

He rolled, lighted. He asked if her father had ever mentioned Drawbaugh in his letters. He’d written, hadn’t he?

“Yes, he wrote—some. Father never had much chance to go to school and he hated to push pencil. He knew I was coming out. No, he didn’t mention Drawbaugh; and I don’t know how Drawbaugh ever recognized me at the station; but he walked right up and introduced him—”

“Probably saw the photograph you lately sent your father,” interrupted Bent, pursuing a line of thought that caused his lean fighting jaw to jut. “I saw it, too,” he explained, “when I . . . found your father.”

He was glad to reflect that he had taken pains to sand the blood issue marking where Siler had dragged himself and lain, so that when Phyllida entered the way station the scene was, at least, not harrowing. “As for Mr. Drawbaugh, he’ll be obliged to do some tall explaining why he took you to such a place as Pete’s.”

She nodded, but did not comment. “Have you . . . have you any idea who might have killed my father?” she asked presently, seeming not to associate Drawbaugh with the deed.

“Well . . .” Bent paused for a moment in indecision . . . “well, let’s say that I hope to get the man who did it very shortly.” He inhaled deeply. “Where are the things you took from the Canyon Creek station? At Pete’s?”

“Yes; and I had a purse with some few dollars in it.”

“Good old Mitch will be glad to make a trip to Pete’s after them.” Bent made a mental note to caution the marshal against killing Bearpaw in the process; the honkatonk man, Clay suspected, had a conscience top-heavy with guilt, whether it weighed upon him or not, and he would be valuable alive until the slayer of Siler was positively identified.

“You ask Mitch to come up, will you?” he requested as the girl, rising, said she ought to be getting back to the counter, adding that she would run

up every once in a while to see if he wanted anything. The ex-gambler was selfish enough to let it stand as a promise.

"How does the face feel?" he un- luckily asked as she was on her way to the door. The marks of Mazie's finger-nails were not very prominent on the satiny skin of Phyllida; a bruise on one cheek was the only real disfigurement and the doctor had applied a lotion relieving much of the inflammation. "Corking scrap you put up," Clay added.

"I'm not used to fighting, but . . . why that woman would have killed me—she said so. Why, I think she was—was going to pull a weapon from her dress, when Mr. Bullock stepped in and parted us." A curious light came into Phyllida's eyes as memory served her. "What did you mean when you said you could guess why she attacked me—remember?"

NOW, Bent had no wish to ring in a cold deck on this improving of his acquaintance with Phyllida by admitting even a forgotten love for Mazie Purwin. He knew girls almost as well as he did men, and he knew likewise that the arrow of jealousy was a poisonous and dead-aim dart. Clay cursed the unguarded moment that his lips had let slip what she now called him to account for.

"Why," said he, thinking swiftly, "I meant the lady regarded the strong difference between the two of you as as ground for violent dislike—even hate. And being whiskied up . . . you saw enough of the life to know that all girls in a joint of that kind carry forgetful fluid, in varying quantities, all the time."

Phyllida's pretty head nodded. The explanation apparently satisfied her and she went out. Mr. Bent breathed easier, sank back on his blanket-roll and blew

smoke rings, oblivious to the strident noises of the much alive frontier town coming through the open window facing main street, for he was building air castles.

He wondered in what light Phyllida regarded gentlemen who presided at gaming tables—or had. She didn't appear to be a prude, yet many girls nursed "queer ideas" from narrowing home influences.

The stairs began to groan mightily. Bullock was coming up. His interview with Bent was short. Toward Pete's headed the marshal, sorry en route that he had agreed to restrain himself.

Bent had tossed his cigarette stub out the window and was composing himself for a little nap, when the door of his room opened a few inches. A painted but beautiful face in the narrow aperture caused his heart to pound, but not with pleasure. Far from it.

"The first time I've done the sneak act in a long while, Clay dear," said Mazie Purwin, coming softly into the room and closing the door as softly. "But I didn't want to disturb you by starting a ruckus with the St. Louis wild cat and waited until she was engaged with customers before I slipped in the front, through that opening in the counter and came up here. I hardly slept at all last night, wondering how you were. But, of course, I couldn't come here with the wild cat and old Bull both on guard. They have an aversion—"

"Right," cut in Bent with a curious, unpleasant smile. "Speaking of not sleeping, didn't those bumps and scratches, which I see are now painted over, have something to do with it?"

"That's cruel, Clay. Why do you say that?"

"It may be, Mazie. You're hinting you did not sleep because you worried about me. Well, let's get down to the point."

"Why?" she asked, breathing in on him. "I'm as attractive as—"

Bent cut her short. "I'm not playing with any women, now."

"As if you could fool a woman like myself!" said Mazie. "Why should you throw yourself in the way of getting hurt—killed—unless—"

"I'd fight for any woman against such scum as those Dacers. By the way!" He hardly felt he had the right to ask, meaning to trample her affections as he did. "Do you know a stock-tender named Drawbaugh?—and if so, whether he has regular business relations with your boss, Pete?"

Mazie looked at him a long moment. "Love's off between us—positively?"

"Positively." He hesitated before he said it, but could not give the lie to the girl even for the sake of priceless information.

"Then you expect me to help you on this new job! Maybe angel-face will prove of assistance!" Mazie arose, face distorted by a sneer. "Listen, I'm admitting that I've no more dope to give you than I have already—about the Dacers—but if I had, after what you've asserted so emphatically, do you think I'd be she-fool enough to pass it on? Ta! ta!"

CHAPTER IV

HELL ON WHEELS

MAZIE imagined that the "wild cat" Phyllida noticed neither her entrance nor exit from the outfitting store, for Siler's daughter was waiting on customers both times. But Mazie erred.

When Phyllida perceived Mazie gliding for the stairway leading to Bent, the St. Louis girl realized, with a pang that startled her, that the wounded man

and the dancehall "creature" might have a mutual attraction for each other. Phyllida couldn't deny Mazie's beauty, and Bent was—

But she dwelt now on the obvious fact that Bent had not truthfully explained his remark to her in Bearpaw's. Mazie's jealousy had prompted that attack! Phyllida waxed unreasoning. She hated Saddle City. There was excuse for that! But not for including the whole State of Montana, all the West and everybody in it!

For a moment she thought she hated Bent more even than she did Drawbaugh, the would-be betrayer. But why should her mind run thus? She had no claim whatever upon Bent, and even if he had aided her in distress, she didn't—Yes, she did, and couldn't stifle the truth that he had engaged her interest deeply, more than any man before him.

But he'd never know—no playing fast and loose with her! As soon as might be, she would go away, back to St. Louis, where she belonged. Glad she hadn't accepted that offer of Bent's to advance her money, too.

The upshot of this brain- and heart-storm was that Phyllida never mentioned observing Mazie's surreptitious visit, and though Clay thought the girl a trifle aloof the rest of the time he stayed at Bullock's he considered that he might be oversensitive because of his increasing regard for her.

Mazie's name never passed his lips, either, it pleasing him very well that Phyllida hadn't, as seemed from her silence on the subject, caught sight of the "pretty lady" coming or going that day. Had either one spoken, a misunderstanding that grew from sealed lips might have been explained away; might . . . women are hard to convince in such matters (but no harder than men).

Bent left one morning on the early eastbound coach, bidding Mitch Bul-

lock good-by at the station. He had hoped the "little lady," also, would go over to the station, catty-corner across the street from the "emporium," to see him off. But she did not seem inclined to do so, did not even appear in the doorway of the store, to wave her hand or just to smile when the stage bowled by.

Therefore, Bent was not in the best frame of mind as he journeyed forth from Saddle City, lighting one of a handful of cigars just purchased at the marshal's place, settling back on the seat which was partly occupied by his war-sack, containing, among other things, his pet derringers. He had something to occupy his mind on the ride eastward besides the behavior of Phyllida Siler—the prospective interview with Andy Drawbaugh, for one thing.

From facts variously corralled and coupled to his own conclusions, Bent judged he could put his hand on the murderer of Joanas Siler at Scarred Butte. At all events, an unmerciful grilling was due Mr. Drawbaugh, and something more for the horrible thing he had tried to do to beautiful Phyllida a few days before.

But when, late that afternoon, the stage wheel-creaked and chain-rattled up to the change station at the Butte, Drawbaugh was not the man who drove the fresh four-in-hand, afoot, from the company corral. It was the assistant wrangler. Luger drove on this occasion.

He sprang down over the wheel to assist in throwing off the tugs of the weary, sweating horses due for corral and feed, having the very human desire to impress the "boss" with his worth. Bent then opened the coach door and alighting, walked around to the front of the coach.

"Wrangler, where's Drawbaugh?" he asked abruptly.

THE assistant reacted nervously to the question. He stammered that he couldn't say exactly where Drawbaugh was, that he had ridden away on a saddler a short time ago, saying he would return shortly. Possibly hunting. They both liked sage-hens and rabbits to vary their fare here.

"Seems to me he leaves all the work to you, young fellow. What's your name?" requested Bent.

"Stallings, sir."

"I'll remember it. Now, about Drawbaugh going off—is he in the habit of doing it much?"

"No sir," answered Stallings, but Bent believed that he lied, through fear of the absent stock-tender. It was curious that Drawbaugh had never seemed to be working when the superintendent passed through his station . . . and yet, perhaps it was not so curious. Andy stood adjacent to a crater that was about to erupt, and it wasn't the crater of a geyser.

"You tell Drawbaugh," said Bent as, Luger announcing all ready, he climbed back in the stage, "that I want him to report at headquarters tomorrow—sure!"

"I'll do it, sir!" assured Stallings, his rather weak face twitching. Luger "highlined 'em," the coach body rocking locowise on strap hinges, wheelers and leaders settling to collars as if they meant to "circus" through them. This runaway energy would not be apparent at Kingpin, eastern end of the line.

In the coach, smoking the last of the "los sastres" sold by Marshal Bullock, Bent was reflecting cannily that Drawbaugh would have left a better excuse for absence with his assistant had he guessed the superintendent was coming through this day. But doubtless Andy believed him still "under the weather" at Saddle City; for, of course, word of Bent's battle in Bearpaw's place would have traveled up and down the line.

"If Mr. Danvers would like to know a first-class skunk at first hand—" Bent's rumination was broken by the thunder of a Colt gun, the angry shout of Luger in answer to a threatening, "Sky 'em, Jerry!" This was an hour out of the Scarred Butte way station.

"What the hell's bitin' you bandanna pikers!" rose the voice of Luger again, in a sort of yelp. "No dust ridin'—just the mail."

"Some registered stuff in it we can use, I reckon," an unknown bayed. "Toss 'er loose, Jerry, an' don't keep runnin' off at the head or I'll salt you down!"

"Aw, well . . . Goddamn it, if it wasn't for them smoke-poles I wouldn't" growled Luger. There was a "plop!" in the roadside, indicating the fall of the mail bag.

Fight-light brightening his eye, deeming this the golden moment, Clay Bent pressed down the handle of the stage door and sprang to the road, left side, where the bandits seemed congregated. Surprised, for an instant were the "bandanna faces," but not Mr. Luger, who was expecting the new boss to "sit in" directly.

Bent's hands brushed from hips to the skirts of his coat as he landed with a jingle in the dust, left leg a little forward of the right and bending at the knee, head drawn in—the gunfighter's crouch. When his hands lifted, which they did with a speed to give the bandits "movie eye," both were "filled," and twin fire tongues launched from the blue muzzles.

TWO bandits near the wheelers sprawled, cut down so quickly they neither had a chance to unlimber nor yelp at death's sudden call. Bent caught the gleam of a bandage on a man beyond the fallen two—Al Dacer, no doubt, Al with the spread of a bandanna masking his brutish countenance.

"Hoping the two I killed were your brothers, Al, here's one for—" Bent's ringing voice died on "for" at the whining whang! of a rifle up above, on a crag. Not thinking of danger overhead, he hadn't observed an outlaw crouching on the broken cliff, where a view obtained of a mile of trail east and west. Even at that the lookout himself had not been alert enough to prevent the drilling of two mates. Apparently the shot partly evened up for his slowness, though, for the superintendent pitched down, landing with nose and forehead inside his hat, a .45-.90 hole through the "Denver pike" in the crown.

"It's a damned pity you couldn't 'a' burnt loose sooner, Gannet!" shouted the bandaged Al Dacer to the crag-watcher, who had started careful descent of the cliffside. "Stay where you are," the fellow arrested his slow-motion progress, "an' lookout for us—can't tell but what this slick jasper of a sup'intendent has some gun-riders back along an' we don't want no second surprise."

Al, while talking, walked toward the fallen ex-gambler. "He got our Dick an' Bolton, an' that's mighty more'n should be." So Bent had "got" one of the brothers, though he wasn't able to hear it.

Another bandit trailed a pace behind Al Dacer; this was Sam. Bent moved as they approached. Creased, but not badly, on the head, he had come partly to his senses; in full possession of them he might have "possumed" to advantage, tricked off subsequent happenings.

Al Dacer saw him jerk. Instead of throwing the gun in his hand, Al leaped, coming down with one boot on the stretched left arm of Bent, terminating in a six-gun. Sam Dacer was not slower to act, and in imitation, his boot-heel crunched on Bent's right arm. Each outlaw stooped, jerking from the paralyzed grip of the superintendent the

"dead march" instruments.

Luger jeeringly commented, and it nearly cost him his life, for death of Dick Dacer and Bolton had not sweetened the naturally bitter disposition of the others. "Takes the bunch o' you to wood up that baby—Bent's his name—'Hell' Bent, I calls him after seein' him perform! If you hadn't chocked a block under while his wheels was spinnin', shore he'd fanned the guts outta you—"

Warning slugs dusted the driver's hatbrim right and left. Luger locked his teeth and fell to speculating on what the bandits would do with the boss, for whom he had conceived an intense liking. If there was anyway of lending a hand, with half-show of winning. . . . He knew this gang of old, though; they killed on slight pretext, rarely chucking lead to the ozone.

THE two surviving Dacers yanked Bent upright, Sam peering at the scalp-wound inflicted by the Winchester. "Gannet must be goin' lame," he remarked to Al. "But I dunno. . . . I'd just as lief there was the chance to snap this feller's life-line a little original, after him doin' for Dick. You know, Al, I've often wondered what'd happen to one o' these big Conco'ds unhitched on the slope yon." This with heavy sarcasm, as he nodded his head to indicate the far side of the trail.

"Gentlemen," with hellish politeness said Bent, whose knees showed an inclination to buckle, while before his eyes the two bandannaed faces jumped erratically, "if you will return my guns and give me two minutes to straighten my sight, it'll be a pleasure for me to take you on in a pack—my hand against all yours and no favors asked."

"No favors, huh?" snarled Sam Dacer, jerking savagely the arm he gripped. "Why, it's a favor you're askin' to give your shooters back. An' ketch us doin' it! You're the new super

that's goin' to clean up us kind o' men, eh? Well, you made what you'd call a good beginnin', I s'pose, but it's how you finish that counts."

"Plain to be seen," quoth the ex-gambler, "that my barking dogs and I represent Injun sign to you boys. Al, you're not risking another shot in your hide? No? And I've been told you were so bad! Mr. Drawbaugh along this trip?"

"Stock-tender at Scarred Butte?" said Al Dacer, as if he barely had heard of Andy.

"No other," retorted Bent, with twisted smile. "Don't bother denying he belongs to your outfit, Al—I'll stick to my own figuring. Reckon the chief don't ride with his men; he furnishes the brains and they do the work." He turned his gaze, which was approaching normalcy, over the shoulder of Sam Dacer, seeking a familiar figure up ahead.

None of the bandits there could be said particularly to resemble Drawbaugh in build, though behind the masks, any one of them might have been he. All had lean and wiry rider's figures. Bent's eyes came back to the nearer featureless men. "Since you boys won't accept my invitation to a shootfest—and I sure thought you'd take me up, not that you were yellow"—such talk sometimes has the desired effect—"why—"

"Listen, Mr. Hell Bent," began Al Dacer.

"Hell Bent!" exclaimed the rechristened man. "That's a new one on me."

"Your driver popped it—" explained Al. "Likewise an' also you're goin' to be hell bent shore in a couple o' shakes if not sooner."

"Nothin' truer!" Sam Dacer turned head toward the rest of the men. "Get that Jerry off—no, not with a gun, for I want him to tote news o' this to Kingpin an' throw the fear o' God into Dan-

vers. Get the coach over on the slope an' unhook the hosses."

Mr. Bent was in no doubt as to what lay in store for him. He had hired out to Ben Danvers with eyes open. He was, like most gamblers of his type, a fatalist. If his hour had struck, he would shortly be a wreck within a wreck; if this was not his "time," he'd yet see the outlaw's trail end.

He watched with a half smile that was wholly grim as the swearing Luger as induced to hop from his seat of might and was relieved of his Colt which he yielded as fussily as a mother parting with an infant to a stranger's embrace.

AGENTS seized the bits of each of the lead horses, pulling them off the road; the coach wheels grated on and heaved over small boulders in the way. From the edge of the Silverbow road, downward in a drop that would have caused an average horseman no uneasiness, swept a slope rods long; at the bottom a ridge-swollen plain splayed to farflung distance. The slope was boulder mounted and gently undulated—no racecourse for a four-wheeler unpiloted.

Sam Dacer had conceived a method of destroying the enemy that was bound to be sensational, and that was not likely to fail of its object. The stage was stopped a few yards from the slope's beginning, the wheels were chocked with boulders, the four-bronc team unhitched.

The two Dacers followed in the wheeltracks with the prisoner, and en route, Sam, noticing a faint clicking noise not made by the spurs of any of them, investigated under the skirts of Bent's coat and found a pair of handcuffs attached to his belt, behind the righthand holster. Duplicates of these were in Clay's war-sack. He was traveling now-a-days equipped like a deputy U.S. marshal, prepared to take badmen

alive. He had anticipated fitting Andy Drawbaugh with the "come-alongs" discovered by Sam.

"Well, lookit these here!" Sam exclaimed, and detached the handcuffs from the belt. "Better for your hands than rope. Bent. I reckon, now, you'd meant 'em for us. Hey, Al?"

"Yeh," Al laughed. "Return 'em to the gent with thanks." The bracelets clicked on wrists readily extended. With Sam Dacer, Mr. Bent thought that the cuffs were "better" for his hands than rope; the Dacers had overlooked something. Mr. Bent walked onward between them with more life to his step.

The bandits' horse-guard had ridden over the rim of the road, towing the bunched saddlers; he wanted to miss none of the finale. Even Gannet, the look-out on the crag, who had been ordered to watch Luger, slid down off his perch (from which the view was only partial of the slope the coach was booked to navigate) and took his stand on the high bank, warning Luger not to try any "jumpjackin'."

Jerry asked profanely why it should be expected of him, unarmed against a Winchester. Deceitful Mr. Luger! He had observed the guns taken from Clay Bent lying where they had been tossed by the quick-acting (but not so quick-thinking) Dacer boys. And Jerry was between this pistol brace and the man with the .45-.90, a rather negligent party and far from the head of his class except in the matter of rifle marksmanship.

The stage driver began to edge toward those tempting weapons, standing so that he faced Gannet, who, while his gaze was held much below, had ears attuned for another, more immediate region. He went only an inch or two at a time, halting, wearing a scowl, as if disgusted at his ill luck, whenever his guard happened to remember to

look at him.

The nitwitted Mr. Gannet never noticed, the few times he thus "remembered," that Luger was always inches nearer the guns than he had been the time before. But then, Mr. Gannet never even saw the guns!

Down the slope men and horses were grouped to the left of the stage, not excepting the Dacers, there was secret admiration among the road gents for the unbending nerve displayed by the man in black. Sam Dacer jerked a saddle string from the kack on a mount held by the horse-guard.

He straight-armed Bent to the ground, and as the gunman's booted heels flipped up—Bent endeavoring, playfully, to stab Sam with a spur—Al waded in to assist his brother in drawing the unruly legs together and applying the substitute hogging-string.

AT A nod from Al, a bandanna face stepped to open the coach door; the two Dacers gathered up the wrist-cuffed and ankle-rawhided Bent, and swung him in upon the floor. They saw the war-sack on one cushioned seat, but it never occurred to them that there could be anything of value in it. There wasn't exactly—the value of its contents was to the owner.

As the door crashed to, kicked by Sam Dacer, Al called for the rocks chocking the wheels to be shoved from under. The men thus ordered had to leap nimbly after execution, for the yellow Concord rushed like a sky-bound rocket—only in the other direction. Bent was on his way, he wasn't sure where.

But the trail thieves were—yes! The original and nerve-tingling spectacle shot their devils' spirits high; the group broke up, all jumping for the saddlers because they happened to be at hand. Whooping a wolf chant, every bandit on the slope raced to be in at the roar-

ing finish! They caught up, leaning hard cantleward, split upon either side of the stage, and accompanied it recklessly. They even threw their guns and added to the scars already marking the Concord's past experiences with their breed of men; this shooting having no purpose save the valving off of steam. One of the "wildbunches." The four stage broncs were not to be left behind; they lunged downgrade clashing their harness.

Lying on the coach floor, Bent was expending his energy to more purpose than the road agents, working like a fiend, for he realized that at any moment the coach pole or a wheel might crash into a rock and capsize the stage. He needed only a few minutes. He was squeezing his small right hand to its smallest compass—it slipped from the circling steel.

The left hand was easier, with the right free to aid. Work of seconds to twitch his ankles loose . . . he reached for the warsack, which had bounced off the seat on top of him, and from it extracted the .44 derringers in the use of which he had drawn Ben Danvers' attention to him as a likely candidate for "clean-up" superintendent.

Clay had been careful to keep his head below the sills of the stage windows while he worked, for the road agents were hammering close on either side. The first intimation they had had of his transformation from helpless prisoner to master of his fate—and theirs—was when a derringer discharged one of its two barrels over a sill, tearing the already wounded Al Dacer from his saddle.

So great was the combined clamor of men, six-guns, horses and coach-wheels that the bandit hot-spurring next to Al, his handkerchief mask afloat in the breeze and revealing the lower half of his face, wouldn't have understood why Dacer toppled had he not spied the small balloon of smoke rising above the

stage window. This startled road gent swung at a new angle the gun he had been wastefully spilling into the coach body and the air, but the last slug in the cylinder never passed the muzzle.

THE derringer's second barrel sifted its load, the bandit swayed over his horse's neck, tumbling ahead of the animal which, next instant, tripped over his body and flattened upon him. But the man had ceased to breathe before the cayuse dropped, kicking furiously.

A third wild rider had his cry of amazement shut off in his throat, the death-rattle superseding it, as Bent brought his other derringer into play; and the victim went careening wilder than ever downslope, clutching his pony's mane with a grip that slowly relaxed.

Bent had one loaded barrel left, and there were four outlaws "needing notching" on the other side of the coach. He referred for ammunition to the war-sack, acting much more speedily than words can tell it, and recharged the three empty barrels with half-ounce balls. Occupied with yelling themselves hoarse and frittering away Colt loads, the four remaining outlaws, one of whom was Sam Dacer, did not hear the sputting cracks of the short-barreled .44's which took toll of their brethren.

They did not hear, but the sense of sight warned that all was wrong when Sam, chancing to glance aside, saw his brother and another sprawled off their horses. The mount of Al's third companion (dying in his saddle) was keeping pace with the stage, thus preventing its rider's limp condition from being seen by the last Dacer and his mates.

Sam let out a howl like a wolf, understanding and yet not understanding. Suddenly Clay Bent pushed head and shoulders into the window on that side; the derringers flashed and popped; Clay was kneeling, his arms on the sill

to steady his triggerwork. He killed Sam Dacer and the road agent directly behind with little compunction, swiftly slugged them through while they were hurling lead at him, disadvantaged by the bouncing of their ponies more than he was by the jolting of the stagecoach, which its leather hinges relieved. The outlaws' bullets shaved the woodwork around the gunman.

The last two riders, somewhat fearful at this display of skill, showed a desire to rein off out of range, but their horses seemed to have bits in teeth and refused to comply with the frantic jerks. No spade-bits here, such as the Dacers used. A sudden dizzy slewing of the stage, as the nigh front wheel struck a small stone, took Bent's attention off "bronc" men and horses, warning him that his good fortune thus far in steering clear of the boulders on the slope might be about to change.

He thrust his head for out—the outlaws were giving more attention to their cayuses than to him that moment—and looked down. He was not far from the bottom, where the plain began, and veering into hazardous channels because of that little stone—the long pole pointed in line with a huge boulder. Bent knew he must jump, or pile up, a broken, bloody mess, with the ruined coach; a leap was extremely dangerous, but the alternative was certain death.

He hesitated none in choosing; lunged to the farther side of the stage, swung the door, sprang far out. Striking the ground, he seemed to rebound, and rolled, over and over.

FORTUNATELY his tenacious hold on the "dog-legs" did not break. The horse-fighting men, witnesses to this plunge for life, gave up battling their mounts and commenced triggering, thinking Bent an easier target outside the coach than in it, less dangerous to themselves. The stage, rolling faster

than the buck-jumping horses progressed, had put the "lone-hander" in clear view. The road agents figured all advantage was theirs, but. . .

Bent wrenched to a stop, upon his knees, the derringers spitting a chorus. Backward off his horse one agent fell, tossing his arms, his spurs reflecting sunlight, the other blasted his last shot into the air and swooped to the slope in a sidewise dive.

Crash! and crash; not the sound of guns this time, but of wood breaking, cracking asunder. The coach pole had collided with the big boulder, had split off close to the front axle, and had routed the rock from its bed by the impact. The Concord itself turned wheels up; and end over end, strewing broken parts, went bowling plainsward. Bent, for a moment, stood watching the doomed coach in which, but for the smallness of his hands, he would now be a "burnt up" passenger.

Shortly Bent's attention was drawn upslope by the detonation of a Colt. Involuntarily he ducked. But the bullet had not been sped at him. Mr. Luger had reached the pistols of Mr. Bent and neatly bored Mr. Gannet while that near-savage was stricken dumb by the amazing spectacle of slaughter before his eyes. It was somewhat like taking advantage of a half-wit for Luger to "salt" the rifleman thus—though Jerry should not be too harshly judged—for Gannet was so stunned as to stand with jaws foolishly wide and Winchester muzzle nosing the rocky ground.

Luger ran out on the slope in view of his "fighting fool" boss and started down. He was swinging a pair of six-guns. They were Bent's; and Bent, straining gaze upward, guessed it, as the tough little driver came on.

"Fetched 'em along, cap'n!" Luger announced, when in easy earshot. "Roll on Yellastone! how'd you do it—getcha

loose, I mean? Can savvy the foggy end—I knowed! Shore I told them stickers-up that your name was *Hell Bent*—'Hell on wheels' was the li'l puffo'mance you just put over, huh?" Mr. Luger chuckled at his own wit as he prodded onward to the superintendent's side.

BENT smiled; he had to, though the slaughter just perpetrated—for the common good and essential if the Silverbow Stage line was to continue its useful existence—had left him in no smiling mood. "I heard from one of the Dacer boys you'd re-christened me." The admiring "whip" was upon him and the revolvers slid into the ex-gambler's hip-holsters. Bent explained just how he had been able to liberate himself unaided.

"Say, most everything's good for somethin', ain't it?" the appreciative Luger grinned. "No more will I cuss out lady-fingers. Ain't nicked or hurt yourself when you jumped?"

"No. That shot I heard awhile ago finished the last of the gang that stopped us?"

"Yep." Luger spat and related "how it was." "My coach," he finished, looking toward the crushed heap of wooden junk on the edge of the plain, "is shore prime kindlin'. I'll try'n take better care o' the next one you gimme, boss. But shore this was the greatest, fightin'est day I've spent on the Silverbow line. *Hell Bent!*—yessir, that's you!"

"Luger," said Bent, "we'll peep behind the kerchiefs these fellows are wearing. I hope to find Drawbaugh's face under one . . . and yet, in a way, I don't."

"How does that size up?" questioned the driver. "Don't quite getcha."

"Well, I believe firmly that he's an enemy of the line. But there's a personal score to be settled between us—

not counting in the murder of Siler."

"Pussional . . . oh, the girl?" Intelligence flashed in the driver's eyes (he had cursed the luck that made him miss the "battle of the honkatonk"). "Shore I never suspicioned Draw was as raw as he 'pears to be! Say, boss, reckon you'll have to send a gang o' diggers to clean up this kittle o' stiff. Us two can't do it. An' lookit the passel o' hosses—ours an' theirs, or mebbe all ours in the beginnin'. Some that was rustled, huh? Glad we saved the mail-sack."

Talkative Luger accompanied Bent on his round of the bodies and pointed out faces he had seen at Saddle City, besides the Dacers', never thinking that he met the same men behind masks on the trail. All were patrons of Bear-paw's, too, which might indicate that Pete stood in with them, shared in spoils. Was Pete chief, not Draw-baugh? The face of the latter was not revealed among the many bared to the dying rays of the sun.

CHAPTER V

BRANDED "S"

AN army officer, with the shoulder-straps of a major and wearing the fatigue uniform of the cavalry, restlessly paced the platform of Silverbow headquarters station at Kingpin. He carried a triple-locked satchel, which looked as if it might contain money. It did: about twenty-thousand dollars. The Concord scheduled for the run westward in ten minutes rattled up from the direction of barn and corrals, back of the headquarters building, and stopped at the landing-block.

Jerry Luger was hanging to the ribbons, his right cheek bulging with "spit-mixer." The Wells Fargo express agent

and an assistant issued from the office on the first floor of the building, lug-ging between them the weighty strong-box, which they passed up to the driver on the roof. Luger took the waybills from the agent and dropped them in the crown of his hat. That box the major eyed nervously. He heard Luger say:

"I reckoned Mr. Bent had about wiped out the road gents last trip in, but seems he don't think so — leastways ain't takin' no chances. 'Our game-bag ain't full, Jeremiah,' says he to me."

"I'm agreeing with him," replied the agent. "He's going along this trip even though we're sending a mighty good messenger, Tommy Spurr. Mr. Bent figures a double guard won't be too many."

"Glad to have him, glad to have him, he shore can play pot with bandits," grinned Luger.

Major Hornaday, 9th Cavalry, U. S. A., looked relieved at the news that a double guard was to ride. He had overheard, at the hostelry where he stayed the night before, talk of the fighting prowess of this Mr. Bent, new superintendent of the stage line notorious for its holdups. Mr. Bent's presence would ease his mind regarding the valuable satchel. The major was paymaster at Fort Stockett, not far out of Saddle City.

It was the first time Hornaday had had to trust to civilian transportation. A wire awaiting him in Kingpin, from his post commander, advised taking a Silverbow coach, as the usual ambulance transport and soldier escort couldn't be supplied on account of the "regulars" hitting trail after a medicine-faked bunch of Siksikas.

As stage time neared, a wrangler came up from the corrals, bringing a saddled pony of trail-tried appearance. Almost simultaneously two men strode

upon the platform from the stage company's office, one of them Clay Bent, whose coat-skirts failed to hide from an experienced eye the fact that he was a two-gunner.

His companion was a few years younger, lean and very hard of eye, and toted a "messenger gun," as fine a weapon for bandit-bagging as ever was devised—Mr. Tommy Spurr, Wells Fargo guard.

"Here's your hoss, Mr. Bent," called the wrangler and the superintendent nodded and stepped toward the animal at the platform's edge.

Major Hornaday stared. He was unable at first glance to reconcile the pleasant-faced Bent in his trig gambler clothes with his own preconception, from talk, of "Hell" Bent, fighting man. He would more readily have taken the aggressive-looking shotgun rider for Bent. Hornaday stepped over to Clay as the latter was gathering his pony's reins on the pommel, while Spurr climbed up beside Luger, and introduced himself.

"Must admit I wouldn't have pointed you out to anyone as 'Hell Bent himself'," smiled the officer.

Clay returned the smile. "A name invented by that crack-brained driver up above. I don't subscribe to it at all. But you know, major, out here a fellow gets looped with a title and can't shake it somehow."

"Usually a name like that fits. I've been in the Army of the Frontier long enough to know cowboys. Bordermen are very apt at titling, just as the Indians are. I'm your fare—seems the only one—and freely confess satisfaction that you'll be along, Mr. Bent. This line has a tough reputation for safety last and—" He told of the telegram from the Fort Stockett commandant. "Not worried a jot about myself, you understand, but I wouldn't care to lose this payroll money."

"We'll put you through okay, major, if it's humanly possible to make the play," assured Bent. "Big consignments to two mining companies are in the strong-box." He swung to the saddle. "Traveling horseback behind, I figure the Wells Fargo boy and I can work a whipsaw if we're put on."

Major Hornaday turned as Luger shouted. "All aboard that's goin'!" At crack of the lash, thrown by an expert hand, the Concord's wheels began to revolve. It rocked away from the station toward the western limits of Kingpin and the long trail, where it might meet with any adventure, any calamity.

The gun-fighting superintendent, idol of the stage hands—at headquarters at least—since his single-handed triumph over the Dacers and pals, loped alongside the coach and held converse with driver, messenger and the "inside"—and sole—passenger.

Bent had not stated to anyone that a very particular reason for accompanying the westbound was his desire to check up on Andy Drawbaugh who hadn't, as ordered two days ago, reported to headquarters. Clay felt confident that Stallings, the assistant wrangler, would have relayed the summons.

Not until they were well along toward Scarred Butte did Bent drift back to take the dust of the stage, holding his pony to a fifty yard gap. They passed the spot where the holdup terminating so disastrously for the holdups had occurred, and Luger, with gusto, reviewed the event in detail to Tommy Spurr, although that deadly-eyed hireling already had heard it twice from the tobacco moist lips of his box partner.

WHEN Jerry had finished, Tommy grinned as none would have supposed he could, to look at his severe, young-old face. "You runnin' it as a maggyzine serial?"

"Meanin'?" Luger's eyes were wicked of a sudden.

"I overlooked you can't read no more'n blind pig. What I mean is you've got my ear-alley plumb blocked with that scrappin' yarn. Third installment—"

"Aw," interrupted Luger, biting, "gather yourself a boket o' cactus daggers, shotgunner!"

"Where at in Montana do you find 'em, tell me!" Spurr's grin loosened into a laugh. "Your mind's grazin' outside your native state, dirty face!"

"Yeh? Smooth me wrong, I'm some daggery little plant myself!" dared Luger. But there was more good humor than ill beneath his surface manner.

They were about two miles from Drawbaugh's station and where the trail was fringed with box elders and rock-lined, when, without even rattler warning—and this was a new practice for road agents—a Colt roared on the right. Bent, riding a curve, but with the stage in partial view, saw Spurr jerk violently. He was to the left of Luger, and the driver, clinging to the reins one-handed, reached to steady the messenger, who would otherwise have headed off his tall perch.

Ascribable to the trail's bending, Clay could not as yet have been seen, since no lead burned his way. He didn't long remain ignored; as he quit the turn, one, two shots crashed and he heard lead hum. He might have been "tagged" had he not been moving in a way unforeseen by the ambushers.

Off his horse he sprang, jerking rein to throw the animal, as he reached the end of the curve, and a Colt reared in his right hand. He fired as he sank behind the flopping pony, hardly expecting to score, but giving the bandits notice of his "sitting in." Yanking up the throat-latch of his hat, he tucked chin against the sweating hide of the horse, and reached down to drag up the left-

holster Colt.

Several more shots barked from the danger-point in the elders, and it was difficult to judge whether four or five men were engaged. There were not more than that, possibly not that many. Bent supposed he, not the coach, was the target, but wasn't putting his head too high to establish the certainty of this.

A suspicion that the road agents numbered less than four or five persisted with Clay, based upon the fact that driver, messenger and passenger had not been accorded the usual chance to "reach" before the shooting began. But even two or three men, properly entrenched, could be as dangerous as a dozen in the open, provided they could hold their intrenchment.

A whanging crash uptrail lured Bent's eye coachward. Luger had hauled in his team not far along the road from the fire-bursting elders. Able to see without exposing a targetable portion of himself, Bent watched the smoke drifting from one bore of the messenger gun, back into the face of the messenger, who lay flattened upon the coach roof. And Bent was glad, glad Spurr wasn't dead, as first thought. Even if he was wounded, he was still able to work his scatter-shooter.

The shotgun's noise was supplemented by a Colt's, triggered fast—Luger, kneeling on the dash. And Major Hornaday refused to be a passive spectator. None of this shooting seemed to register. Merely the shrubs were agitated and broken by the lashing hail of buckshot and heavier lead, and Bent guessed the holdups were sheltered by rock that the elders masked.

HE wondered if word of the special gold shipment and the Fort Stockett paymaster—but no, information wasn't leaking from headquarters. It had been the custom of the stage line

raiders to "stick up" at random, taking a chance that the waybills totalled high.

The bandits did not reply to the broadside from the Concord, but immediately following it, opened up on the lone fighter in the road eastward. Bent's horse was killed, expiring with no more fuss than a feeble kick. The superintendent reckoned the slaying of it to be intentional—to help cripple pursuit. The outlaws must fear pursuit by Bent, at least. His finish fight with the Dacer-led gang had had high and wide effect, evidently.

"I wonder," muttered Clay, "if Mr. Drawbaugh is among those present yonder. I wouldn't be surprised."

Hardly believing he could do the enemy damage, though the angle of his fire held possibly more promise of being effective than that obtaining from the coach, Bent pressed synchronous trigger across the horse's carcass. And Tommy Spurr clamored in with the other barrel of his sawed-off. One, or both, bull's-eyed.

A horse shrilled, there was a terrific thrashing in the box elders, but nothing showed. Bent was sorry for that horse, as he was sorry for the pony that had died under his elbows. No joy in drilling horses. The outlaw pony must have moved away from whatever sheltered it before and the bandits doubtless were damning their luck. It made them short a mount. For that Bent exulted.

The desperately wounded nag took some moments to die, and after it had, the silence was heavy. On the coach roof, careful to keep flat, the express messenger was fresh priming his sawed-off. When it was charged, he rolled upon his belly, resting the barrels on the baggage-rail. But silence at the point of attack continued, and dragged on to such length that Bent drew inference the box elders no longer helped to hide a foe.

He decided abruptly on a bold test; to the alarm of Luger and the messenger, he slowly straightened to full height, then suddenly, swinging his guns, leaped over the slain horse and charged the ambushade. He was heedless of the shouts of warning, in which the voice of Major Hornaday joined when Bent's rushing figure crossed his range of vision.

Spurr, with Luger's strong-armed assistance, crawled off the roof to the dash. None on the stage could aid the superintendent by shooting now. There was too great likelihood of slugging him, were they ever so careful. Spurr couldn't stand unsupported, but insisted he should not be left out of the finale. So Luger lowered him from the dashboard and sprang down to catch Tommy as he sank against the wheel.

From the coach interior nimbly descended the major, to lend a hand, voicing opinion that the breathless silence might be a ruse of the bandits to trick all hands away from the stage. Spurr and the driver agreeing such a thing seemed possible, even probable, Hornaday stood his ground by the Concord, prepared to defend not only his satchel but the Wells Fargo box, while Luger dragged the stubborn shotgun man after Bent.

With not a single slug fired to stay his progress, the iron-nerved Bent, loosely holding his Colts for a throw-down, crashed into the elders. He ran against a slanting slab of rock, several feet in from the outer fringe of shrubs, decorated with lead splashings. To one side of it, legs extending into the crushed shrubbery, lay the unlucky horse. Bent rounded the rock, lips tight over his teeth—but no men were there.

A HUNDRED yards down the embankment yawned the mouth of a draw. This was the avenue of exit for the road agents. They must have

despaired of annexing the shipment; some horse was surely carrying double. Marks of boot-heels and of pony hoofs there were in plenty behind that protective rock slab, and cartridge shells, .45's. Bent sped for the head of the draw, wedged between two very low hills; but a glance along its length revealed no sign of the fugitive trail thieves.

Hurriedly Clay retraced his steps, and was looking over the dead horse when the driver and Spurr hove in to join him. The horse was equipped with a bridle, but no saddle, and branded "S" on the hip in view—the iron-mark of the Silverbow Stage Company! Somehow, the absence of a saddle suggested that the horse hadn't worn one recently and not that its owner had removed the gear before quitting the vicinity of the rock.

From this it might be deduced either that the outlaw's starting-point wasn't so far distant or that he had been in a big hurry. This was the first pony bearing the stage company's brand to be found in the possession of outlaws known as such. The distance to Scarred Butte, now—

"Want I should onhitch one o' the team for you to lift their trail, boss?" inquired Luger. "I can easily spare a leader, a goer. Scooted through that draw, hey? Took notice they settled your little four-footer soon enough."

Bent's decision as to course of action was made. "Don't believe I could do any better than to go on with you to Scarred Butte," he said enigmatically—or so it was to Tommy Spurr. Luger, knowing some things that the Wells Fargo guard did not, apprehended to a degree. A sight of the "S" brand on the sprawled pony helped his understanding. Releasing a huge cheek-load, he said:

"K'rect, boss! We start now, huh?"

Bent nodded, asked Spurr where he

was hurt and how badly, and commended his display of "sand." Spurr denied "showing" anything that deserved praise, yet he was undoubtedly pleased. "I hire out to fight an' aim to do just that, till I can't lift the old thunderbuss or see," he declared.

Shortly the coach was creakingly under way again, Bent sitting inside with the major and Spurr resuming his place on the box, against everyone's wishes but his own. His wound bandaged so that at least the blood flow was stopped, Tommy looked pale through his tan and sick, but—"road gents bet carefully" would have been healthy advice to any contemplating war upon him. When they rolled into the change station at Scarred Butte, no hook-up was ready and waiting. The superintendent descended as the coach slowed down.

"Not even Stallings on the job this time, boss," remarked Luger, as he sprang to the ground holding the bunched reins, and gave Bent an expansive, knowing smile for a tight-lipped one.

"No," said Bent; and that was all. But he was inwardly vibrating with a song of success. Appeared to be a cinch case. He turned toward the corral while Luger was unhooking, and when the driver trotted the trail-weary four-in-hand to the enclosure, Bent had made good headway, for an amateur, in harnessing the fresh broncs.

MAJOR HORNADAY'S proffered assistance had been declined, as he confessed to less familiarity with the work even than Bent. When the new team stood to the pole, impatient to start, and Clay shut the stage door behind the paymaster, remaining on the outside, Major Hornaday looked surprised.

"Not finishing the run with us?"

"Got important business here, major. I want to give this wanderfooted stock-

tender a warm welcome when he returns. Isn't the first time, you understand, that he's been caught off duty. As to further hold-ups, don't you worry; never heard of two attempts the same day, even on this line! And Tom Spurr is still on the fighting list, not to mention yourself and Luger, if—but, so-long!"

"Give him hell for me!" Luger belowed, with meaning not clear to anyone else but Bent, as he booted the brake and shot the lash signal to the four-in-hand.

Bent watched the stage cruise outward in its self-raised billows of dust, and then approached the log station. It was not long until sundown, and already the interior of the one-room shack was so shadowy that he lighted a lamp, with tin reflector, on the wall. Door and windows he left open, so that he could detect hoofbeats at a distance, and fell to making a systematic search of Mr. Drawbaugh's effects.

Darkness descended, yet he had found nothing of a criminative nature. He was mildly disappointed, but he was none the less certain that he had the right man in mind as chief of the plunderers (though Bearpaw Pete had once occurred to him as a possibility).

Concluding his unfruitful labors, Bent rolled a cigarette to aid his mental processes, and, striking a match, was crossing the floor doorway when he noticed a creaking underfoot, as if one of the boards was loose. He was on the point of stooping to investigate this, a loose floor-board suggesting a cache to his quick mind, when a jingle and thump outside the window facing east, as if a man booted and spurred had slipped, brought him erect with a jerk.

Laying hand on gunbutt and tossing away his smoke, the superintendent softly advanced on the window. He hadn't reached it when a voice he knew well, and unfavorably, hailed him from

the doorway:

"Please to grab for the roof, Mr. Bent!"

Bent swung around, half-drawing his gun, but let it slide back when he perceived the dead bead and deadly look of Drawbaugh. He observed the stock-tender was shy one boot. Andy noticed the trend of his boss's gaze and indulged in unamiable grin.

"You're as easy to fool as the rest, if you are a card sharper with alleged brains an' me only a bonehead hoss wrangler!" he jeered. "You savvy, don'tcha? Just threw my boot up against the shack, figgerin' you'd think it was what it wasn't, me at the winder. Then I slid round the corner."

"Call yourself a bonehead? If you hadn't the brains to think up that trick, Draw, you wouldn't have the brains to run the organization you do," replied Mr. Bent easily, though inwardly chafing that he had thus allowed himself to be caught. "Can see now I made a mistake in lighting that lamp. Had it been dark here you'd have ridden up bold enough and our positions might be different."

"DON'TCHA think it! Keep those hands up, Mr. Bent!" Drawbaugh advanced into the room, limping since one heel was higher than the other, Colt balanced with a sure hand. "Don'tcha think it! I ain't goin' to shutlip much, because to-night'll see the end o' you an' your meddlin'. Shore I'd 'a' bet the ore dump on your bein' here, if there was a light or not. I been expectin' you ever since I didn't come to headquarters, an' when I saw you in the road to-day, no trouble to figger ridin' gun-herd wasn't all that fetched you west."

"It's a show-down, all right," nodded Bent. "I'm glad you're going to patter voluntarily and not make me waste breath with questions and urging"—

just as if he were master of the situation and not the other.

"Your nerve's good, like most gamblers'," acknowledged Drawbaugh with grim appreciation. "But I wouldn't run off at the head any, you bet, if you wasn't holdin' a spade you can't discard." He had nearly covered the interval between them.

"'Count o' you bein' round the bend, we didn't see you when we first popped at the stage today; an' afterward swapped congrats we hadn't taken a chance in the open. I'm admittin' respect for your gun-slingin', Bent, and, you see, there was only two of us—all I could round up at short notice. You kinda thinned out my road bunch the other day."

"So that was the way of it," smiled Bent. "Just two of you. I hope your pal is dead, as dead as the Dacers?"

"Well, not yet." Then Drawbaugh, matching lightning, almost, raised his arm and slashed down, the gun-barrel flattening the crown of Bent's hat and dropping him senseless.

CHAPTER VI

HIS EARS IN JEOPARDY

CLAY BENT glided back to a conscious state and the realization of a situation more unenviable than that preceding his sojourn in the dark. Arms twisted under him and tightly lashed, he lay upon the shack floor with Drawbaugh standing near. Strange he should notice it first, but he did, that Andy now wore the missing boot. From the flush on the other's brown face, Clay guessed he had been drinking while his (Clay's) wits were "sheep-trailing."

"Well, murderer, it's not usual for Lady Luck to show me such disfavor."

The ex-gambler remarked, staring coolly up. "But she has whimsies, like all ladies. Man alive, I think you must have split my head open. Does the brain show?"

"An' that's but the beginnin'," Drawbaugh leered down. "What d'you mean murderer?" His tone was vicious . . . the whisky fumes were rising.

"Aces to jacks! Must I explain? You killed Jonas Siler, of course."

"What makes you think so?" Drawbaugh had been certain the new superintendent suspected him of complicity in the stage robberies, knew Bent had learned of his introducing Phyllida Siler to Bearpaw's (hence the summons to headquarters), and, deeming his game was played out, planned a get-away for this night. But it had not entered Drawbaugh's calculations that Bent was so astute as to connect him with the Canyon Creek murder. A killing more or less mattered none, but curiosity impelling him, Andy questioned:

"Wait a mo'," he said abruptly; "this is goin' to be interestin'," and he lurched across the room, to return with a chair. Upon this he lifted Bent, blowing a strong whiskey breath in the ex-gambler's face. "Now, shoot!" Andy planted himself before Bent, swaying a little.

"It was a little matter of deduction that I'm reasonably proud of," said Bent steadily regarding his enemy. "Siler wasn't quite dead when you quit his station. He dragged himself from the corner where he fell *when you jammed his gun before salivating him* and opened the lower drawer of that old bureau to get at his daughter's photograph. He was holding it when I found him, dead, and I figured that the man who killed Siler must have done it because of the girl, that it was the outcome of an argument between a true father and an undesirable citi-

zen."

He paused. Drawbaugh was practically tongue-tied for the moment by the other's shrewd reasoning. He did mutter, "I'm beginnin' to see," as if to himself. But Bent pursued his explanation still further, however.

"When I met you on the road with the girl after that holdup, I didn't know whether I'd found my *undesirable citizen* or not; but, on finding Miss Siler in Pete's dancehall and hearing from her later the lies you had told, I cleared up all doubt that you were the hellion I wanted—and no use to deny it!"

"Ain't denyin'," rumbled Drawbaugh; "you're right, you doggone bloodhound! Pretty good for you. I ain't too mean to give credit where due, not me! Makes no difference o' no kind, for I'm ready to cut an' slope, but I shore didn't know Siler was able to move after I drilled him.

"Yeh, it was over Phyllida we quarreled. I saw her picture an' heard she was comin' out. 'You keep away from her,' Jonas warns me, knowin' I had a interest in Bearpaw's honky—"

"So that was it. I wondered some why you hurried her right off to that joint . . . the dirtiest kind of money, you lousy pup!" Bent forgot his headache and his peril in scorn for this apology of a man.

DRAWBAUGH did not apparently resent being called a "lousy pop." "Yeh, that was the reason. You see, good-lookin' girls is kinda scarce out here. I wouldn't 'a' killed the old man just to get hold o' her. But he went plumb crazy that mornin' when I grinned after he told me not to come foolin' round when she'd arrove. He drew—I fired at his gun first—then at him."

"And you went on to meet her, carrying that stain! Drawbaugh, I've got some respect for desperadoes like the

Dacers, but you—" He needed not to finish in words; his looks conveyed far more than words could.

"Well, what you think about me ain't goin' to bother you long—nor me. You're smart, but I outsmarted you in the end. Shore I'm cashin' in tomorrer at Pete's, sellin' him my interest, an' hittin' for another state. This stage line is fine bizness for me, but after doin' the necessary by you—"

Bent would have been glad to let Drawbaugh ramble on and make revelations interminably, but, realizing that unless a change in their relative positions was effected the knowledge gained would be so much knowledge lost, he cast about in his mind for means to the end of making it usable information. Drawbaugh stood unsteadily, not far from him, thumbs hooked in the armholes of his vest.

Abruptly Bent heaved off his chair and with his head butted the outlaw stocktender in the belly, driving him backward and down on the floor in a squirming heap. Drawbaugh's breath left him as if it meant never to return, but he was a rawhide. As he fell, and Bent started in another direction, intent on getting his hands loose somehow and a gun into them, Andy managed to swing his booted legs against the superintendent's, tripping the latter and hurling him flat.

Unable to break the force of the fall with his hands, Bent's already aching head received a solid bump, causing him to vision constellations innumerable. He wasn't "out," though, and was floundering around, trying to get up, when Drawbaugh, rage driving him and laboring like a bellows to catch his breath, contrived to heave over upon the superintendent, straddling him and pulling gun.

Once more the latter's barrel smacked Clay's sore cranium, stilling him. Drawbaugh continued to sit

astride of the luckless ex-gambler until his own respiration was normal, then, feeling of his sensitive stomach, arose.

He stumbled over to a table, threw the demijohn there over his forearm and filled a tin cup. It had a kick such as to make him blink. Then his eyes, with a wicked, calculating gleam in them, began an apparently aimless roving of the shanty, coming once to rest on the body of the superintendent. At the last Andy shook his head.

"Ain't room enough in here to work it right. Hope I didn't crack him too hard that last time," he muttered. "Le's see—where in hell. . . . I know!"

He walked to Bent at a trifle surer gait, fastened a muscular hand in the ex-gambler's coat collar, and hauled him across the cabin floor and outside. Toward the horse corral he laid course, straining like a fresh wheeler on the tugs, for Bent was heavy. Once he lost his grip on the collar and the senseless superintendent dropped face first in the thick dust. Drawbaugh secured a hold anew and tugged on.

Once within the enclosure with his marked man and the gate closed, Andy grouped along the top pole for a rope he kept there. Whacking at the milling shadows of horses, he headed for the snubbing-post, nearly in the center of the corral, poor Bent totally, and fortunately, oblivious of his journey.

HORSES bought by the Silverbow Stage Company from the various horse ranchers in the country, were supposed to be "busted" when turned over to the stock-tenders, but sometimes the gentling lesson needed repetition. Hence the snubbing-post, to assist in that lively work. Mr. Drawbaugh had it in mind for a use very different, indeed.

Against the post he slammed Bent and held him upright. The ex-gambler was so tall that the top of the post

was inches below the level of his shoulders. Andy thrust him down on his knees. Then, supporting the unconscious and hatless man with one hand spread upon his face, the outlaw passed the rope several times around post and limp body, yanking the turns tight across the broad chest.

Working by light that really was no light at all, and half-drunk, Drawbaugh yet fully realized what he was about, discovering that Bent's bound hands, between his back and the post, tended to throw the superintendent's head too far forward for the purpose in view. Cursing barbarously, Andy stooped to peer in Bent's face and make certain he was not feigning insensibility (that unexpected ram in the belly had cautioned the stock-tender against Clay's tricks).

Satisfied Bent still was in the realm of know-nothing, he pulled slack in the confining rope and as Bent sank against him, untied the gambler's hands. The arms fell down at Bent's sides, hands on the ground. Drawbaugh hauled the rope tight once more and regarded the result with a jerky line of "blue blazes" which meant gratification. Bent looked like a Siksika prisoner ready for the stake route to ghost land.

Staggering a little, swearing at the horses that charged across his path, Drawbaugh crossed the corral again to the gate and let himself out. Back in the station, his course mentally mapped, he removed the oil lamp from its wall-bracket and carried it to the window opening toward the corral, or westward.

Placed at a certain angle on the sill, the lamp shot its rays over the section of the pole enclosure in which the snubbing-post was erected, a considerable area forward and rearward of the post. Low-powered illumination, but it would serve.

"If I make a slip," said Mr. Draw-

baugh to himself thickly, as he leaned from the window eyeing the shadow-barred figure kneeling at the post, the curious horses stalking warily in the shady background, "why it'll just amount to him goin' sooner than later."

He turned from the window and rummaged among his effects noting that someone had been tampering with them—and suspecting who. "But he didn't find nothin'," mumbled Andy, "'nless!" A thought struck him that brough a sweat of rage (and a little dread) to his brow, caused him to spraddle over to the spot where Bent had been standing when he heard the thrown boot.

Drawbaugh lifted two loose boards with a nervous hand, but—"All there, pretty, pretty. I'll be back after you." He shook his finger at the hole in the floor and replaced the planks.

He resumed his searching and finally unearthed from his personal "junk" six bowie knives, nine-inchers, one of which was in a leather sheath such as knife-fighters sewed high in their vests, at the back. Andy headed for the door, then bethought himself of something else, dropped the throat-cutting set on his bunk and got a tin washbasin.

HE FILLED it with water from a bucket instead of taking the bucket, as a man in his sober senses would have done. He eyed the demi-john on the table as he was passing it, and shook his head; he then paused and hoisted a tall one. "Shore I know how to tote *my* lick," he addressed himself, winking rapidly and blowing a little. "I'll sling straight as any unhootched greaser even with what I'm boardin'!"

He spraddled back to the corral, relinquished the knives with a kneeling clash in the lighted area, about twenty-five feet in front of the post-bound Bent, and went over to dash the basin's contents in the superintendent's face.

Andy had spilled much of the water in fetching it to this point, but there was sufficient to rouse Bent, or rather, to finish arousing him, for the brain-deadening effect of the smashing gun-barrel had about worn off.

Bent blinked into the malignant face before his, and Drawbaugh blinked back, for a different cause. Clay at first didn't "get" his surroundings and Andy realized it gleefully.

"Wonderin' where you're at?" The stooping desperado pushed his face close to the other's. "'Tain't hell, but you'll soon be there. In the corral . . . holdin' up the snub-post. Boy, I got the 'riginal ticket for below for you, one-way an' razor-edged." The alcoholic percentage of Andy's breath was enough to tip Bent himself "half seas over."

"You hellish bum!" gritted the gambler, jerking weakly in bondage. "Why've you got me turkied up like this . . . what's in that Blackfoot-Piegan brain of yours, burning? Be half white and give a man a six-shooter chance, half—"

"Half o' hell!" barked the other. "You'll stay where put, as is. Listen—I'm a devil, admit it; how big a devil you're on the road to learnin'; listen—I'm goin' to pack one o' your ears, mebbe both of 'em, for a watch-charm, yeh . . . to remember you by an' show to that Siler petticoat. I'll see her again an'—*you know!*"

Bent was wrought up to such an emotional pitch by this that he spit furiously in the glowering face, scarcely realizing he did it, his teeth showing animal-like. His battered head was unthought of and his weakness changed to the strength of three men; yet he was powerless.

Slowly Drawbaugh wiped a sleeve across his face, uttering a long-drawn oath. "All right, you're payin' for that—payin' costly! You dunno it, but I

can toss knives with the best in Mexico."

"Spawn of some high-yellow Yak, are you?" snarled Bent. "Let me tell you something, you hellion: you may cash me, but someone will get you for it. No, not Ben Danvers or anybody on the Silverbow! I mean Mitch Bullock, the Saddle City marshal. He's a man-getter and a sort of tillicum of mine, fellow. He'll hound you right through the crust of hell's crater when he knows I'm dead. And remember this, too—Miss Siler is under his protection; you've a Chink's chance of getting near her without swallowing Bullock's medicine. It cures your kind of malady!"

"Oh, I reckon this Mitch Bulldoze ain't such a hell-a-miler!" bellowed Drawbaugh. "I'll show him your ears, too, tell 'im whose they are, an'—an' leave him in a puddle o' blood. I've seen the old freight-wagon rumblin' round Saddle City an' I reckon all he needs to quiet him is grease on his axles! Well . . . now it starts!"

HE STRAIGHTENED up and, none too sure of his step, plodded back to the heap of knives, which he stirred with one foot, facing about and snarling cat-like at the post-hitched, kneeling man. Bent could not repress a little shiver. He hated cold steel. And to think of being slashed alive to death, and many another man of tried and sound nerve!

It was no saffron streak that caused him thus to react to anticipation of the knife-throwing; almost any veteran gunfighter, who never turned a hair at the prospect of having his vitals mixed with a few ounces of lead, would admit to "nervous pains" where a knife was concerned.

From Drawbaugh's unsteadiness on his feet it was patent he had taken one or two too many, and probably his skill would be impaired—if he was really

skillful. Bent didn't know whether to be glad about this or not; if the hour had arrived to cash in his checks, he desired to go quickly, and it seemed that, drunk, Drawbaugh was more than likely to kill first throw—by accident.

And, of course, he mightn't, and horrible mutilation would result with death slow in coming. The threat to sever Bent's ears and carry them as a watch-charm! . . . well Andy had admitted being a devil and a big one.

With eyes fixed forward as if the gaze of a basilisk held them, Bent saw Drawbaugh stupidly fumble with the buckle of his cartridge-belt and strip it from him, hurling belt and gun so that they fell in shadow in a curve of the corral, much nearer to Clay than to their owner—but certainly of no use to the bound man.

Nevertheless, Bent marked the spot with a covetous eye, wishing hopelessly for possession of the six-shooter and the freedom of one hand for a split second. In discarding the hardware, Drawbaugh revealed the true extent of his inebriation, doubtless imagining that the gun was burdensome, clogging his actions. He swayed low, picking up two of the nine-inch bowies, the blades of which sparkled back the faint rays of the lamp.

"You . . . you hold damn still, Bent!" snarled the knife-thrower, "'nless you hanker for your throat slit, clear across an' deep, first chuck. I can't see you so awful well . . . bad light . . . damn licker . . . too much. Here comes!"

Fingers closed on the tip of the knife in his right hand, the killer swung arm backward slowly, forward swiftly. From the opening fingers shot a nine-inch shaft of dull light. Kind fate, guiding that steel blade more than the booze-limbered arm and deadened eye of the thrower, drove it into the snubbing-post close leftward of Bent's un-

hatted head, upon either side of which there was scant margin of wood to catch the knife-points.

Bent held his breath at the menacing "shut!" His imagination was so alive that he almost believed he had been struck. But his gaze did not waver from that wavering figure, the source of danger. Drawbaugh balanced himself, aimed and tossed the knife which he had been holding in his left hand, landing it just to the right of his victim.

"Pretty neat for a drunk feller!" he jubilated, peering, as if in pride, at the two horizontal bowie handles. "Never skinned you, just shaved. Oh, I ain't so bad! Now . . . some more."

He drew another pair of bowies from the pile and emptied his right hand. And this time Bent was grooved. He did not painfully realize the knife had cut through his left ear, for its blade was razor-sharp; the pain began afterward. It was sickening, that slithering sensation! The extent of severance he had no means of knowing . . . a terrible stinging set up in the wound. The knife was rigid in the post, below the other weapon on that side. The superintendent gave no outward sign of being targeted, and Drawbaugh evidently didn't know what he had done, for, almost without pause, he launched the second bowie. Whizz! . . . but the blade struck nowhere near the head of Bent. It bit through two turns of the rope and part of the third turn.

BENT, feeling his bonds loosen, almost shouted . . . almost. The whisky was running wild in Drawbaugh's system. He had slung far too low and never realized it. He bent over, reaching for the last two knives.

A desperate, mighty wrench and the gambler parted the weakened piece of lariat, heaved from his knees and leaped headlong in a continuous flow of

movement toward the dark curve of the corral where lay Drawbaugh's belt and gun. The spring, prodigious as it was, did not quite carry him to the weapon. However, it did carry him into full shadow; and, groping before him frenziedly, he scrambled as he lit, knowing it meant life or death.

His eyes might have been seen to glow with a fever of gladness, but for the dark, as his hands encountered leather, then curved, smooth wood, delightful to the touch in that moment. He paused not to look toward the killer until the gun was out of the scabbard and cocked. All this occurred in briefest space of time—seconds, indeed—and Bent was glad of Drawbaugh's intoxicated state, for he had moved to do nothing when the superintendent, crouching on spurred heels in shadow, faced him over the Colt sights.

His pose was one of bovine stupidity as he regarded the prisonerless snubbing-post. Never guessing the accident that had set Bent free, Andy still hung to the last of the knives, his right arm half-lifted, bowie suspended by its tip from the fingers. He couldn't make out what had become of Bent, until the latter spoke.

"Two may deal from the bottom of the deck when the bridle's off in a back-hand game!" exclaimed the two-gun man and lined Drawbaugh's right wrist, triggering. The bullet pierced the wrist, the knife darted down, striking on its handle. Andy's sharp cry was nearly as much a cry of surprise as of pain. "Zip the other bowie into the post!" ordered Clay, who couldn't bead the left wrist with the arm hanging at Drawbaugh's side.

He was prepared to kill (though preferring Drawbaugh alive) should the outlaw wheel half an inch toward the shadow pocket, his covert, with knife still gripped. But Andy, continuing to face the post, flung arm back, clum-

sily forward . . . bang! a second time he was bored by lead from his own gun, the left hand drooping from a shattered wrist, the bowie falling.

To put further knife-play utterly out of Drawbaugh's power was Bent's aim, rather than just to rid him of weapons. And if war is fair at all, some pain in exchange for pain was fair enough. Bent had owned Drawbaugh something and traded; his ear was hurting him terribly.

As the broken-wristed desperado stumbled about, bellowing curses and so scaring the stage horses that they circled crazily anew—one passing alongside and nearly overturning him—the latest whip-master stalked into the light heretofore shunned. "Tell me . . . and stop that damn bull noise!" grated the ex-gambler, taking Andy by the shoulder with a grip that must have bruised deeply; "tell me where the nearest town is. There's one back in the hills not so far from here, I know, and my ear needs a doctor."

DRAWBAUGH turned his gaze to see the blood dripping from the left side of Bent's head, splashing on his shirt where the low cut of the vest exposed it.

"I ain't tellin' . . . damn you, you've ruind my wrists!" The whisky wasn't deadening the pain much for Drawbaugh.

"I'd just as leave kill you here and now, if you insist!" barked Bent, his eyes afire, and he raised the gun. "You'd be a better man with the top of your head off, anyway. Talk about drilling Indians to make 'em good! Quick, now—how are you betting?"

So, the tide of his "sand" at ebb, not flood, what with his shattered wrists exquisitely torturing and the other man holding the drop, Drawbaugh spoke of a town five miles north, beyond the first range of hills—Claybank. Bent

remembered that as the name he had noticed when studying the Silverbow road map.

Horses came first. Bent kicked the two knives lately dropped by his enemy afar, under the lower pole of the corral, and quitting the outlaw's side a moment, cornered one of the flighty horses wearing a hackamore; and leading it, drove the unmasked stock-tender ahead of him gateward. Bent had to open the gate, of course, and they headed for the shack. The profanity released by Drawbaugh was something for even a man accustomed to gambling-hells to marvel at.

Beit tied the hackamored pony to the hitching-bar, asking Andy where he had left the mount forked during the holdup and after. The animal was some distance from the shack, down the road, standing tied to fallen reins. Bent mounted and they started stationward again, Drawbaugh walking straighter now, for he had sobered considerably. Despite his crippled condition, Bent lost sight of him not an instant, forcing him into the cabin while he got a bridle, saddle and saddle-blanket for the unequipped horse.

Incidentally Mr. Bent recovered his hat and his guns this trip. Drawbaugh sat on the edge of a bunk, trying to fight down groans, for he was not the yellow sort; but he could think of something beside himself only when Bent happened to notice the loose floorboards which Andy after his examination of the hiding-place, had not replaced evenly.

"I meant to look at this before!" exclaimed the superintendent, stepping nimbly to rear the planks. To judge from Drawbaugh's expression it was the hardest blow of all, that the accumulation from months of stage-robbing, or at least a goodly part of it, should be revealed to this double-damned Bent of all men; for piled un-

der the flooring were many sacks, some stenciled "Wells Fargo Co. Express."

"Mr. Danvers will be gladder than I am!" remarked the eminently satisfied Mr. Bent, after one look, and he fitted the boards firmly over the hoard. "Outside now, Draw."

FIRST he boosted the outlaw upon the saddled horse and, mindful that the unforeseen often happens, tied his feet with a saddle-string, passing it under the cayuse's belly. Next he put leather on the one he intended riding. Both horses were tied to the hitching-bar when Bent left his prisoner to extinguish the oil lamp. He came back outside, shutting the cabin door, and reached to pull the scarf from Andy's neck, binding it over his own head so as to cover the slashed ear. More than once he had to lock his teeth hard. Untying, he carried up the reins of the other's horse with his own.

As they forged northward, quitting the vicinity of the Scarred Butte, which gave name to the station, Drawbaugh asked one question (though there were others in his mind).

"What you aimin' to do to me?"

"Plenty," was the succinct reply.

CHAPTER VII

FLAMING .45's

THEY sifted, fast as the horses could travel, into Claybank, one of the hundreds of mushroom towns grown up overnight in the gold-bearing regions to supply the needs of the miners who were gopher-holing the rocky features of Montana. Talking of gopher-holing, had a monster of the mastodonic period returned to the field of its early world wanderings, it couldn't have walked many miles, un-

less watchful of its step, without breaking a leg in the numerous placer diggings.

Claybank flourished only moderately, because it was near no bonanza. A doctor usually could be found in these off-trail camps, for the reason that lead, whisky and cold steel cases were frequent; and if he was not needed as an M.D. he could serve in another capacity and profit in working it both ways.

On the trail in, Bent was suffering too greatly with his slashed ear to ply Drawbaugh with questions, even if Andy, likewise undergoing torture, would have responded. Bent believed he had broken the back of the outlaw outfit, but there were still some things yet to be learned. Where had been their headquarters (for they must have had one of some sort)? Had the stage robbers also played horse thieves? And what about Stallings, the assistant wrangler?

As they struck Claybank's main drift, Bent asked a pedestrian—since Drawbaugh, suddenly very tight-lipped, denied he knew—where they might find a doctor. He was directed, with accompanying curious glances. Small wonder—they were a bloody sight.

The gaunt, bearded doctor, who must have looked his best in his undertaker's clothes, put his half-burned cigar on the edge of a center-table as Bent opened the office door and pushed the reluctant Andy in. When Doctor Jennings heard the hoofbeats stop outside he knew he had "customers," but whether bandages or a winding sheet would be called for was not so certain. Usually it was apparent at a glance which, but doc couldn't tell from the bloody condition of these men, until Bent spoke.

The doctor brought the necessaries, heaping them on his table, and prepared to work on Drawbaugh first, as advised by Bent. When he got a good look at Andy's face in the lamplight,

Doctor Jennings batted his eyes.

"Aren't you the fellow who brought that buckshot-riddled boy to me this afternoon?"

Drawbaugh wouldn't answer, only scowled. But why worry, reflected Andy; the boy must have died ere this. The Silverbow superintendent was at once interested.

"Of course he's the same fellow, doc," said Bent. "Silence gives consent, Drawbaugh. Is the boy dead?" to Jennings. "Reckon he got the lead aboard while helping this daisy attack a Silverbow westbound."

"No," replied the doctor, setting to work on the outlaw's wrists, through which Clay's bullets had cleanly passed, "the boy isn't dead, but dying. In the next room. He is a boy, too, and seems to have a weight of woe on his mind that he would like to ease off before going west. Who are you sir?"

Bent told him, and also introduced Drawbaugh for what he really was.

"I was suspicious of the circumstances surrounding the younger man's wound," declared Jennings. "This Drawbaugh said it was an accident—happened while they were hunting."

"Doc," Bent drew Andy's gun from his waistband and laid it on the table, "there's the proper medicine to hand this bird if he starts to act up. I'm stepping in on the boy. Where is he?"

THE physician nodded to indicate a closed door rearward. "It can't hurt him to talk, he's done, and it may ease his last moments somewhat. Won't last more than a few hours at longest."

Bent glanced at Drawbaugh, whose scowl had deepened, indicating that things he would rather not have known might be learned from Stallings if the latter were in the mood to make disclosures. By the doctor's words, Stallings was. The clean-up, thought Bent, might not yet be complete. He went

into the back room, closing the door behind him.

An oil lamp burned dimly on the wall near a bed in which a low-moaning man lay. Bent turned up the wick, the pain his ear was giving him consigned to second place in his thoughts. The face on the pillow had upon it the pallor of near death.

"I really didn't take you for a bandit, Stallings," said Bent gently, as he pulled up a chair to the bedside.

"Mr. Bent, believe me or not, I didn't want to be," replied the youngster. He was the weak sister sort, one it would be really dangerous, suicidal for an anti-law organization to have as a member. "I never wanted to belong, an' today was the first time I'd ever took part in a holdup. Drawbaugh made me go because there wasn't time to get any o' the other men from the ranch."

"Headquarters for the gang, eh?" This was interesting. "Where is this ranch? Don't be afraid to talk, boy, for Drawbaugh is in the next room, both wrists leaded, and where he'll go . . . well!"

Stallings smiled wearily. "He couldn't hurt me any more—nobody can. I'm through . . . an' I'm awful young to die!" Self-pity that was not attractive. "Reckon I'll feel better in the head if I tell what I know."

"Sure," encouraged Bent, who didn't like a squealer, but realized that Stallings was the kind to tell what he knew, under the circumstances, anyway. "Did you know Drawbaugh had killed old Jonas Siler?"

"No, sir!" The dying stock-tender's denial was emphatic and no doubt genuine. "I don't really know all that he and the gang did, but some, of course. I wouldn't have got into the thing if I hadn't overheard 'em plannin' a stick-up one night. They found out I'd listened an' told me I'd have to join or take my medicine, so I joined. They

hung out at a ranch on Rocky Bench an' there was what you might call two gangs under one head, Draw bein' the head.

"One gang did the stage-robbin' an' you, sir, cleaned 'em up the other day. Draw near went locoed over that . . . you sendin' for him an' all. He calc'lated his game was swinging low, that you suspicioned right an' would get 'em to the last one, if they stayed. So he was for movin' out tonight, makin' his final holdup today. Failed there, but still had somethin' else . . . his hoss thief crowd. Funny thing, sir, but the fellers that did the stage-stoppin', Dacers an' them, wouldn't steal a hoss."

"So he kept a separate bunch of men to do the horse rustling, eh?" said Bent. "Well, I can understand that. "There are different classes of criminals, boy, and horse-stealing is considered pretty low on the crime scale. Were you meaning to tell me he planned some sort of clean-up with his horse thieves before quitting the country? Are they at the Rocky Bench ranch now?"

"From what I heard Draw say of his plans, an', o' course, I was included in 'em, we was to meet those fellers at the road fork below Sulphur Crossin' Station, an' all hands raid the stock-corral there."

"**W**HY, that would be the new stock just bought to replace the horses stolen from Sulphur Crossing before I took the superintendentship!" exclaimed Bent. "That station's in a very wild section and we employ four stock-tenders for it, two being on duty all the time . . . but you know."

"Yes, sir, I know." Stallings' chin bobbed slightly. "That's one reason why it's goin' to be ganged, because the stock-tenders there are so hard-baked. An' then, the bunch ain't intendin' to go back to Rocky Bench no more."

"The road fork below Sulphur. That's east, I know where it is and sure

I'll be there to meet them!" Bent's voice was vibrant. He felt a surge of new strength at the prospect.

"They're the toughest fellers workin' for Draw, sir, so I've heard said, though I never saw any of 'em. I never was out to the Rocky Bench ranch."

"They would be. Stealing horses makes a hard citizen. Stallings, I don't suppose there's anything else I ought to know. I'm obliged, boy. Tonight should see a gilt-edge finish put on this organization that's been worrying Mr. Danvers to a shadow."

"Going . . . wounded like you are, sir?"

"Have to—can't let a chance like this slip. Your tin-antlered chief nearly sliced an ear off with a knife—wanted it for a watch-charm. Sanguine fancy!"

"Know he was a knife-fighter; he used to practice throwin' at the snub-post in our corral. Mr. Bent, the loot off the stages—"

"I found it under the station floor. Any idea just what time the horse-rustlers are expected to be at the road fork?" Bent arose, lifting back his chair.

"'Round midnight."

The superintendent leaned to gently take the dying youth's hand. "'By, boy—it'll be for the last time, according to the doc . . . sorry!"

Stallings sighed heavily. "Glad mom ain't livin' to know—nor pap. Good-by, Mr. Bent."

Returning to the office, Bent found the bandaging of Drawbaugh had been about completed.

"I'll look at your ear right away, Mr. Bent," said Doctor Jennings, wondering why the Silverbow superintendent cast a searching glance around the office. It happened that the physician, because Stallings occupied his bed, had erected a cot in this room, and Bent saw it.

"Doc," he said, pointing, "would you mind turning that over to the use of

Drawbaugh for tonight? Don't reckon there's a jail in this hill hollow and I'd like you to put him up until sometime tomorrow. He could sleep in a chair and don't *deserve* any consideration . . . still, hurt like he is, I aim to be human for my own sake."

"Sure," agreed Jennings. "I'll take the easy chair over there. I've slept in it often, and if the boy dies before morning, I may get a few winks in my own bed."

"Fine!" approved Bent, not meaning, as it sounded. "You get bunked, Drawbaugh; I'll be back in a minute."

He returned from a trip outside with the lariat off Drawbaugh's saddle, and Andy, stripping to his underwear, got gingerly onto the cot, asking what the rope was for.

"Don't want the doctor to be kept awake watching that you stay where put, long as your legs are usable, Drawbaugh, I wouldn't trust you not to use them," returned Bent and began to string Andy with the hemp to the canvas cot.

"You ought to take it easy for awhile yourself," said Doc Jennings, as he unwrapped the scarf from Bent's head and examined the ear, half the auricle of which was nearly slashed through and hanging.

"Doc, I'll rest when I can take time—tomorrow. Important work on for tonight—a little scrap," replied the superintendent.

"But, man, even light exercise, not to mention violent—"

"If both ears were lopped, doc, I couldn't miss this meeting. Fix 'er up best you can."

A ripping oath from the bed-bound Drawbaugh. "That damned yella baby told you, did he? I oughta let him die where he fell when that express guard shoved the buckshot in him, 'stead o' ridin' outta my way s'afternoon to fetch him here."

NEITHER Bent nor the doctor paid any attention to Andy. His brows were corrugated and he shook his head as Bent, bandaged, and buoyed up by the thought of wiping the slate clean for Mr. Danvers, left the office and forked his horse. He left Drawbaugh's cayuse where it was.

Clay looked frequently at his watch, holding it close to his face, as he prodded south, then westward, for he had many miles to cover before midnight. He was nearly on time, though, and boldly drummed along the stage road as he neared the fork below Sulphur Crossing Station.

Pulling up at the fork, he stared around in the darkness, listening; the silence was intense. He had been sitting thus but a moment or two when brush crackled along the right-hand prong of the road. A mounted man, whose rifle glinted dully in the starlight, pushed toward Bent up the branch, and another and another horseman followed. Eight of them. Bent had not thought to ask Stallings how many the horse thieves numbered, nor the names of any; probably Stallings wouldn't have known, anyhow.

"Who the hell are you?" barked the foremost rider, peering, his rifle muzzle only a couple of inches from Bent's chest.

"Stallin's, from Scarred Butte," responded Bent, dropping a "g," and hoping Drawbaugh hadn't described his appearance, the gambler's clothes he wore. Still, blood had darkened much of that white shirt front. From any angle at which you looked at it, however, he was taking long chances. He took the chance, cued by Stallings' admission that he had never seen any of the horse thieves; that they, in turn, had never seen Stallings, knew not whether he was a young man or old.

Quick on the heels of self-introduction, Bent declared: "The boss was all

shot up to-day while the two of us was tryin' to clean stage for the last time—got a turrible ear meself. The damned sup'intendent an' Fargo guard was too shootin' for us, an' I just bare got away with the chief, takin' him to the doc at Claybank. Draw told me to come on here, for us to run the hosses like planned an' hit for the border-line, an' he'd join us soon as he could ride. That super is wise to him, of course, but won't never think o' lookin' for Draw in Claybank. So he's safe."

"Uh-huh." The tone of the more immediate horse thief seemed to publish entire satisfaction. "We've never met before, Stallin's, so here's my paw. I'm Jack Beard. No time to interdooce the other boys, but," he laughed gratingly, "reckon you'll git to know what aces they are durin' our wanderin's."

He eased down the rifle and stretched an arm, Bent taking the hand to shake it vigorously, and thanking his stars he had been accepted at "dark" face value. Seemed he had, anyhow.

Now, Bent, nerved up though he was, didn't desire open combat with eight men, of the caliber these were, in his present condition. He wasn't up to the mark and he wasn't a fool. But he had thought of something . . . where to get and how. Chiefly, he wanted as backers the two hard-baked stock-tenders who would be on duty at the station a quarter of a mile above.

"DRAW gimme a little extra instruction for us, to help along the game," he said, and Jack Beard and the men behind and on both sides of him gave strict attention. "You savvy we're goin' against a couple shootin' whizzers up there an' we gotta get them before we can take the hosses. If all hands shackled along in a gang they'd know right aways what was up an' fort in, an' behind them station walls they could cut down a sight of us, mebber

even stand us altogether off. Draw don't want to lose no more men, lost enough. He said I was to ride ahead o' you, them wranglers knowin' me as a stage hand, so's I could be handy to keep 'em from lookin' in when you fellers drift up."

"That's okay!" agreed Beard heartily. "Takes Draw to figger the neat details—an' he don't forget to look out for the boys workin' with him. I s'pose, if he was here, he'd be the one to go up an' lull them tough tenders. You scat, Stallin's, an' we'll trail you cautious."

"K'rect!" said Bent, and reined his horse away. He disliked to turn his back on the wolfish outfit, as he could expect a bullet in it if they waxed distrustful. However, all seemed serene now and better to risk that bullet than pitched battle here. He could feel that the bandage over his ear was soaked with blood already from hard riding; it pained him a good deal, but he had little time to think of it.

As he coursed off up-road in the darkness, toward the way station, the horse thieves lifted bridle-reins and slowly pursued his dust. One of the rustlers abruptly knee-pressed his mount from the extreme rear alongside Jack Beard, in the lead.

"Say, strikes me, Jack, I heard Draw tell one time that Stallin's was a kid. The feller up-along shore ain't one. An' . . . know what that 'ere Sup'intendent Bent looks like?"

"Naw!" Beard rasped, turning on his mate. "Never heard 'bout his looks, only that he was two hell-bats in a fight. It never gimme no misery he salted them boys that did the stage jobs an' was too pure to dirty their souls by runnin' off a nag, neither. But, by God, now you fetch it to mind, Loco, I b'lieve the boss did say Stallin's was a kid. Why'n hell didn't you say somethin' sooner?"

"Didn't think of it—his dope sounded good to me like it did to you, Jack."

"Simmerin' gosh! If that ain't Stallin's, but the super, where'll we get off? He's two-gun, Draw said, but I didn't see . . . mebbe under his coat . . . or arm holsters. Goddam!" Beard, excited, nevertheless realized that to begin shooting at the rider ahead would pre-warn the station-keepers above the Crossing, and cause them to fort up, which was the last thing the horse thieves wanted to happen.

Beard's Winchester held a cartridge in the chamber, but he did not raise the weapon from his saddle—yet. If Bent—they decided it was Bent, not Stallings—could be stopped without sounding an alarm, the raid might still be executed successfully.

Wondering what had really become of Drawbaugh, Beard stirred his horse to a faster pace, using the spurs, his fellows imitating. The dust, an inch or two deep on the roadway, dulled the pounding of horses' feet. The station-keepers, no doubt asleep—with one eye open, as the saying went, and more true than poetic—should not hear it.

But Bent did. He marked the swift increase of pace and heard his assumed name called, not too loudly; this signified the worst had happened, the horse thieves either had guessed his real identity or that he was not Stallings, anyway. He paid no heed to the guarded hail, galloping steadily for the station.

HE thought he knew why the expected bullet had not been fired—yet; and hoped this fear of raising the station's barriers against them would keep the horse-runners from gun-play until, at least, he was nearer his goal. Bent quickened his mount's gait, trusting the fact wouldn't be apparent.

It wasn't noticed, at first, by those behind. Beard quit calling, thinking

Bent hadn't heard him, and afraid to use a louder tone as voices carried far. Jack and mates were spurring faster than ever, though, thankful for that sound-muffling dust.

There loomed the stage station at the Crossing, the corral poles gleaming a dirty white on the near side, the stable bulking darkly in the background, one end hidden by a corner of the station shack. Every station on the line had such a shed for stabling the horses in winter, when the open corral was too cold. This wasn't wintertime, but the corral looked empty to Bent as he strained gaze to the fore, and he thought other horse thieves might have . . . then it occurred to him the stock-tenders probably had stabled the new string of horses for safer keeping. And this was the truth of the matter.

Suddenly a rifle discharged rearward awakened the echoes of the still night. It had become apparent to the horse thieves that Bent would reach the station much in advance of them if a bullet didn't stop him, so Beard, the only man carrying a rifle—six-guns were useless at the range—let go! But unable to line the sights on his target in such light, or rather gloom, he had to chance it.

He knew that he had missed when Bent's horse continued to tear uptrail. Glancing back, Bent perceived them hustling, and remarked that the range would shortly be reduced to convenient Colt-shot. As he had no intention of taking all and giving no return, the superintendent hauled forth one gun from under his coat-skirts . . . just as a second shot from Jack Beard's Winchester slugged the stage bronc.

The animal staggered. But the station was not many yards away. Bent passed up the opportunity to gun, gave attention to lifting his mount, by rein and spur, as much farther as it could go. Such valiant hearts as horses have!

And if anyone does, the Westerner certainly does appreciate this fact.

No exception to his breed, Bent's pony struggled and lunged a few more brave yards, while behind the Winchester "spanged!" again; and as the cayuse collapsed, Bent sprang free of stirrups and toppling body and sprinted hotly stationward. Rushing the shack, he was halted some distance from it by the flash of a rifle through a shuttered window loop-hole.

"It's Bent, the superintendent!" Clay shouted. "Horse thieves chasing me. Open the door!" He couldn't for the life of him recall the names of these stock-tenders and they failed to recognize him, by voice or by appearance, the darkness partly responsible, some blame to be shouldered by the fact they had met the new line boss but once.

"Hoss thief yourself! You can't come no game on we'uns no more!" yelled one of them, Eph Tracy. "No trick'll open this door! Mr. Bent, heh!" He was in way justified for being suspicious, and should not be reproached for championing the stage company's interests even to the extent of committing grave error.

TRACY and his partner, and the two men off duty and absent, had felt keenly the loss of the horses in their care, some weeks ago; and they were resolved the new stock should not go the same way, come hell or highwater.

Bent's position could hardly have been worse. He realized the station-men would never be convinced he was their superintendent in time to save him from the pursuing horse thieves, and as he stood between two fires where he was, turned and scurried back from the station. The corral bars were down. Thundering hoofs drew every second closer, the Colt-armed rustlers chipping in their roaring tunes with the harsh but thinner music of the Win-

chester in Beard's hands.

From the station two Winchesters coughed into the medley, misguided Tracy and his partner thinking the raiders were firing at them, whereas the running Bent was the target. He headed into the corral, just why he couldn't have told, as the enclosure afforded little more protection than the wide, wide open, of which there was superabundance for a man in his desperate case.

As he ran in and around to the far side, Bent shrugged out of his frock coat, yanked both guns and planted himself in a corner—at bay! The horse thieves swept up, two whirling through the gateway, and Jack Beard, with his Winchester, was one. Spang and bang! of Winchester and Colt blended. The rifle bullet fanned a trifle high, but Bent's .45 slug ripped through Beard's heart-side and sent him headlong to the hoof-hardened sod.

Colts boomed together, the man in Beard's rear firing simultaneously with the two-gun man. Bent slew unerringly. The horse thief's lead didn't go true to aim, but it caught the superintendent in one thigh. Down he shifted to one knee.

A man rose close to the corral fence, swung from the saddle over the top pole, nervily enough, and with six-gun flaming, hit the dust inside. He fell sprawling and stayed down. Smoke flooded from Bent, smoke that was fiery and thunderous. Aiming by instinct, he discharged at shadowy shapes inside the corral and out, not certain when he scored and when he did not, latterly.

For he was hit in many places himself and fired his last bullet sitting down. Their full loads of six bullets each had his flaming .45's shaken forth, and the earlier ones had killed swiftly and surely; only when his wounds began to take toll of strength and vision

did he commence to miss "center." And those he didn't kill outright, three in number, he leaded somewhere.

They were scattering out on their horses, fleeing from this devil's own gunfighter, when Tracy and his partner, thinking it queer the raiders staged a fight in the corral instead of attacking the station, scouted forth, toting their Winchesters. They fired together, and together once more, at the scampering trio, emptying the saddles for good (in more than one sense).

Then the station-men picked cautious way into the corral, stepping over grounded bodies and coming finally to the form of Bent, piled up where he had made his stand.

Eph Tracy struck a match on a pole. "Holy hell! It is the boss, like he said, an' looks as if he was killed. We're a coupla the damnedest fools on the earth's crust, Pete! Them *was* hoss thieves chasin' him, then! By God, what a battle he put up!"

WHILE they were carrying him, in extreme anxiety and remorse, stationward, hoofbeats sounded along the stage road. As it was the direction from which Bent and the horse thieves had ridden, the stock-tenders were properly suspicious and laid their burden on the ground, walking away from it a few feet with rifle triggers clicking back. The answer to Tracy's brusque challenge was highly satisfactory, however.

"I'm Doctor Jennings, from Claybank. Have you got a wounded man here, Superintendent Bent?"

"Wounded shore an' dyin' mebbe, doc," replied Tracy. "Shove right along. You must be angel-guided, brother. Mr. Bent's needin' you almighty bad."

Doctor Jennings, worried about a man in the superintendent's condition going out to fight, and at the same time

immensely admiring his grit, had been directed by Stallings to the locality Bent would head for; and, with medicine case and surgical kit, borrowing the horse Drawbaugh would no longer need, Jennings had ridden forth to Sulphur Crossing, judging Bent would need him. The speech of Eph Tracy, therefore, hardly conveyed news.

Two days later, while the doctor was still in attendance at the rude bedside of Clay Bent and not at all sure he would recover, though every piece of lead sifted into him by the horse thieves, last of Andy Drawbaugh's organization, had been carefully removed, the early eastbound Concord brought a lone passenger who was the loveliest being Jennings and the rough station-men ever had looked upon.

"I just heard about what happened to him and I've come to nurse him," said Phyllida Siler.

"Sweetheart?" said the doctor, his lips curving in a little smile.

"Yes," replied Phyllida, matter-of-factly. "Is he conscious? Tell me what I'm to do, doctor," and she began to remove coat and hat.

Doctor Jennings seemed vastly pleased with the new arrival, for more reasons than one. To the awe-stricken stock-tenders, Tracy and Pete, who meant to abjectly apologize for their error when Bent was in condition to listen, hoping they wouldn't be fired for mistaken devotion to duty, the physician said in an aside, "Now, if I can only bring him to long enough to recognize her, I'll have high hopes he'll mend."

Jennings was right. He tiptoed out of the sick-room (this station was two-roomed to accommodate four men) a couple of hours later, leaving the sick man talking to the girl, on her knees beside his bed.

"My dear, *dear* Clay!" Phyllida was crying, "think. . . . I was going to run

away from you, go back to St. Louis, when I had saved enough from my wages at Bullock's. I thought you loved that—dance-hall girl."

"Nothing like it!" whispered Bent. "That's why you acted so strangely the day I left Saddle City—you saw her when she came upstairs? . . . I didn't know or I'd have understood. No tears, please, because I'm hurt. I'm glad of it, since it brought you to me. I've loved you from the minute I first saw your picture, Phyllida Siler!"

"My picture? . . . Oh, I remember!"

HE told her the murderer of her father had been caught, and who he was. She wasn't really surprised. She cried softly.

"Listen," said Bent, the riddled. "I want you to know everything about me, loving me as you do. I've been a gambler, as well as a gunfighter; but I won't have to gunfight after this, nor will the deal-box come under my hand again. I guess Mr. Danvers will keep me on—"

"Clay, I love you, or I would not have come. It's a love that sees nothing but good in you, and it will last for all time!" She put her lips close. He kissed her. He was so tired, but, aces to jacks, so happy!

The late eastbound disgorged still another passenger at Sulphur Crossing Station, a man who softened his usually roaring voice, as well as he was able, when Eph Tracy and Pete put fingers on bearded lips. "He's snoozin'." said Eph, "an' that won't hurt him! S'pose you heerd all—"

"I sh'd osculate a bell-mew! I did! Greatest fight I ever heard tell-of—'ceptin' the one when he cleaned up the Dacer's an' them. Oh, he's *Hell Bent*, all right. That Luger thunk one good think, anyways." Mitch Bullock sat down on a table-edge and swatted

the travel dust from his clothes. The door of the sick-room opened and out came the pale-cheeked Phyllida.

"You danged li'l runaway!" exclaimed Mitch, still softly, "*you're* one reason why I'm on tap. Whyn't you tell me you was comin' here, 'stead o' quittin' the store like uh Injun. Shore I thought B'arpaw Pete had got his paws on you ag'in an' went over there; an' when he said 'no', I didn't believe him an' killed the critter an' a couple others. His place is on the bum, too."

"Oh, Uncle Mitch," said Phyllida, lowly (he had requested her to call him that), "you weren't around and I didn't have time to wait and tell you, if I wanted to catch the first eastbound. I could've written a note, left it on the counter, but never thought. I was so terribly worried. But why didn't you go to the stage station when you found me gone? They'd have told you—"

"Wal," Mitch's voice rose to a louder pitch as he forgot himself, "I did go there—last. You see, honey, I figgered I'd be doin' the community some good an' no harm by wipin' out B'arpaw, an' the excuse I had then was as plumb righteous as a feller'd want."

Phyllida caught the full significance of it, along with his beard-lined grin; she turned as Doctor Jennings pushed the door ajar and said:

"Patient would like to see Mr. Bullock."

"He heard you talking," said Phyllida, wheeling.

Mitch threw his dusty hat on the table top. "I sh'd osculate a bell-mew! Sorry to've waked him, but he must be feelin' chipper, wantin' to see me. I'm some noisy for a sick-room. Little gal," he captured one of the smiling Phyllida's pretty hands, "you come along an' stomp on uncle's foots if uncle's voice goes boomin' higher than what it oughta."

Bushwhack Bounty

By ARCHIE GIDDINGS

This ambusher trying to beef Spur McGovern would never smash hot lead into Spur's back now—he'd have to face the kid behind six-guns now, in the dust, at sunset!



Into his assailants' gun-bloom he poured more death!

SPUR MCGOVERN hurried his bay cowhorse around the last timbered bend of Largo Pass, and the relief of it expelled his breath in a steamy plume. He wasn't exactly scared. Still, those two tries at his life the last week

couldn't help but spook him a little.

Out through the thinning scrub pine he saw moonlight, like spun silver, swimming over the snow-sheeted flats and beyond to the left the winking lights of Amador. The lights reminded him

of frosted bayonets. They also reminded him that he was taking this cold night ride merely for a couple of pounds of staples. Once again he resumed his cussing of Andy Wayne.

But his oaths were gentled by the affection he felt for the tow-headed young cripple he'd taken on as pardner. Andy was a merry little cuss, and whenever Spur growled, his crooked grin and twinkling brown eyes had a way of turning it into a laugh. What Andy couldn't understand was that Spur's growls were aimed at his own good—that he was driving his frail body far beyond its limits. Now take that fence they were building. . . .

Spur's thoughts dissolved in a cat-like gathering of muscles. It was more than hunch that sent him spilling to the hard frozen earth. For out ahead, where the tree growth tapered to scraggly brush, his eyes had glimpsed the head and shoulders of a man.

A RIFLE crashed, and he heard the dull sickening thud of its bullet in the tree trunk above him. He propped himself on an elbow, eased out his gun. Muttering lurid phrases, he lay there a full minute hoping his assailant would come into the open. Then cautiously he rose. Staying with the shadows, he crept toward the bushwhacker's concealment.

"Come out and fight, you gutless whelp!" he shouted.

Then his jaw closed with an audible snap. In the moonlit snow to the right of the manzanita clump was a double set of boot prints. Either two men were laying in wait, or— His question answered itself in a staccato beat of hoofs off in the timber. The attacker had fired once and fled back to his horse.

Spur caught up with his pony and climbed aboard. He ached in every bone from his jolting fall. But more irritating was the knowledge that his

mysterious assailant had slipped away again. Three times in a week. Someone wanted his hide mighty bad. It was damn puzzling, because he could think of no enemy who would want him dead. It was equally odd that the man was such a rotten shot.

Half an hour later, Spur's frost reddened knuckles were rapping on the back door of the Amador Mercantile. Old Jeb Rowan opened up.

"Howdy, Spur," he cackled. "Bet it was Andy that sent yuh in. What's he run shy of now?"

"Staples," Spur told him. "He's all lathered tryin' to get a strip of fence finished tomorrow. He was pretty tuckered tonight so I rode in."

The old storekeeper lit a lamp and looked over his glasses approvingly. "Glad to hear yuh say that, Spur. Young Andy might be bunged up an' puny, but he's got idee's. He'll have yuh filthy rich time yo're fifty."

Spur grinned. He was past fifty, though his lean, whip-like body denied it. There was a little gray in his thick shock of sandy hair, but most people saw the vital force of his ruddy, square features and missed his age by ten or fifteen years.

While Jeb Rowan weighed out his staples, he looked out the darkened store window across the street. Half a dozen ponies stood slack hipped in front of the Rodeo Bar, heads drooped and rumps against the wind. His aching shoulder, he decided, needed a drink.

But when his glance slid away a couple of doors to a little hole-in-the-wall lunch counter he scowled and changed his mind. He'd have ham and eggs. Perhaps he'd get a chance to put a bug in Sheila Donovan's ear. But he couldn't go too far. Horning in on Andy's lovemaking behind his back was risky business.

He dropped his staples in a saddle

pouch and rode around to the street. He had racked his pony and was reaching for the lunch counter door when it swung open. A muffled figure almost collided with him.

"Spur! What in hell fetched yuh in on a night like this?"

Saul Cleveland grinned, and Spur grinned back. He was a man fully as big as Spur, with a bluntness of manner that masked a shrewd active mind. Although Cleveland was a neighbor farther up on the bench, Spur hadn't seen a great deal of him the last few months. He guessed the reason was Andy Wayne.

"Staples." Spur hesitated a moment. "See, we're fencin' off that strip from the canyon down to the creek. "Andy—that is, we figured it'll keep our strays out of your stuff, and—" He broke off, feeling his neck grow hot under his neighbor's widening grin. Cleveland filled in with a booming laugh.

"Hell, yuh don't have to go explainin', Spur. I know that fence is Andy's idee, and I know he wants it so yuh'll have more water durin' the dry season. It don't make me sore. Yuh orter built it long ago. He's got a brain, that young'un."

SPUR smiled. It was pretty swell to have a broad minded neighbor like Saul—a man who weighed things at their true worth and did not make mountains out of anthills.

"Yeah." Cleveland smiled back, his breath making a steamy cloud. "A smart pardner. But speakin' as a friend, don't trust him too far."

He swung away from Spur's puzzled, half-angry stare, his boots making a squealing sound on the frosty walk as he went to his pony.

What could he be hinting at? Spur asked himself. But he was chuckling at his blindness in the next moment

and pulling open the eating house door.

Sheila Donovan was a fetching sight as she came from the kitchen, and as Spur beheld her trim, apron clad figure and smile of welcome he told himself Saul Cleveland should be forgiven. Any rival of Andy's might speak out of turn if the goal were a lass like Sheila.

"Spur McGovern! What in the world!"

Spur ducked as from a flying missile. Then he grinned. "All because of that slave-drivin' pard of mine, Sheila. Still, it's worth ridin' to town for a hatful of fence staples just to sample a plate of your ham and."

"Over easy? I'll have 'em in a jiffy, Spur. Stand hitched."

From his stool, Spur could see her face in the kitchen, and as always he was struck by an alien unwomanly quality in her makeup. It showed on her straight even mouth in repose, and in her eyes as she sized up her customers. He called it hardness. He guessed she'd had a tough time of it.

It was about six months ago that she'd hit Amador, and with Andy it was love at first sight. With her, Spur wasn't so sure. But he did know that Andy was killing himself out on the ranch on account of her.

She brought him his order, set bread and a steaming mug of coffee beside it.

"How's Andy?" she asked.

Spur observed that every trace of hardness vanished from her face with the question. "Not abed yet," he answered, "but it's only a matter of time. He's workin' a blame sight harder than he should."

He stared straight at her and she dropped her eyes. "If he wants to kill himself," he added, "that's his business."

Sheila Donovan straightened, blazing eyed. "I know what you're thinking," she cried. "You think I'm hard and mercenary! You think I'm goading him

on because I want to escape a wife's drudgery!"

She began to sob. Spur could have bitten his tongue out for saying what he had. He had no right to intrude in his pard's affair. But the girl had tabbed his thoughts so accurately that in spite of himself he plunged angrily on.

"What else can I think? You keep puttin' him off, tellin' him to wait till he's better fixed. If you ain't aimin' to marry him, for God's sake tell him so."

SHEILA was not crying, nor did she show anger. For a long moment she stared out into the street where powdery snow had started to fall. She looked so tired and forlorn that Spur was impelled to reach out and catch her hand.

"Something is plaguin' you, girl," he said gently. "Why not get if off your chest?"

She looked at him finally. "I—I might as well," she spoke in a low strained voice. "My father was an outlaw, Spur. He had a pardner called Blue Chip. They got in a tight spot with the law, and this Blue Chip deliberately sacrificed dad in order that he might escape. Dad was sentenced to hang, but he managed to break loose. He was more dead than alive from his wounds when he got to me. He died in my arms after telling of Blue Chip's treachery."

Spur saw that she was trembling, and by that he judged the devastating turmoil of emotion behind her flat bare words. Now he was beginning to understand the meaning of that adamant resolve about her mouth and eyes. He said softly, "You trailed the man here?"

"Yes. I was told that he came here to start a cattle ranch. I opened this place partly because my money was running low and partly because everybody eats at a lunch counter at some

time or other. Seems like I've gotten every soul in Amador to tell me about himself, but so far I haven't a single clue or suspicion."

Spur stabbed at his remaining ham. "In the long run," he observed, "The Almighty can be depended on to deal a skunk his needins'."

Sheila looked at him searchingly and nodded. "You believe I should give up my search. I think if dad could advise me, he'd say the same. But I'm going to keep looking awhile longer. I've just decided," she added shyly, "to give Andy his answer New Years. That is, if he still wants me."

Her smile was a warming tonic to Spur as he climbed aboard his pony. Pulling in his neck to the sifting snow, he felt a measure of her hatred of the man who had double-crossed her dad. A skunk like that was of the same low stripe as the ambusher who had tried to beef him tonight.

But vengeance wasn't meant for a woman's heart—especially a young girl like Sheila. He was glad he'd helped her decide. It would bring a lot of happiness to that little cuss out at the ranch.

Spur avoided the Pass going back, preferring an extra few minutes over the hump to another possible brush with his assailant. Three misses in a row was stretching his luck pretty far.

A light still gleamed in their little double room cabin, and by that he knew Andy was up. He stabled the bay, jerked off gear and carried it to the unhung door of their new barn. He'd been meaning to get it on hinges for a week, but Andy's fence building had interfered.

Now, as he dropped saddle gear to lift aside the heavy door, he noticed that it leaned at a greater angle than he usually gave it. And there were prints in the shallow snow too fresh to have been made by him a couple of

hours before.

Spur swore under his breath. Andy had been in the barn, and instead of leaving the door for Spur to replace he had tugged and wrested with it himself. The damn fool. Why couldn't he obey the doc's orders not to go taking chances with his back that way?

SPUR slammed his saddle on its peg with a vengeance that knocked Andy's to the floor. He grabbed it up, then frowned and swore again. The under side of that saddle was faintly warm. Where in the world, he wondered, could Andy have ridden on a night like this?

He shoved open the cabin door with the question on his lips, but Andy Wayne's cheery voice intervened, "Spur, come on and melt that frost off yore belly. If yuh'd taken much longer, I'd a-drained this pot myself."

The cripple had a couple of mugs set out, and as he talked he grabbed a pot of coffee and limped to the table with it. He was a little shorter than Spur, and there was friendly contagion in his broad grin and lively brown eyes.

It was that friendly grin which had won Spur last year when he had gone forth to drive the man off a strip of creekland above his place. Instead of driving him off, he'd not only let Andy Wayne file on the strip but had taken him on as a pardner. And he'd never had cause to regret it.

Sitting here now, he wished he could give Andy the good news about Sheila. But that must come from the girl's own lips. Instead, he growled, "Why in hell didn't you let me pull that door closed out there? You knew I'd be goin' in the barn when I got home."

"Huh?" Andy seemed flustered for a second. "Well, dammit, yuh have to pick up after me so much, Spur. Makes me sick the way yuh wet-nuss me around. I fetched up this brush knife,"

he added, jerking his thumb at a long bladed *machete*. "It was kinda dull, so I been sharpenin' it tonight."

"Yeah?" There was a sudden driving quality in Spur's sharp blue eyes. "What else you been doin' tonight. Where did you go on your pony?"

Andy Wayne leaned back in his chair, his lids narrowing. "What in hell yuh talkin' about, Spur?" he rapped. "I ain't been out on my pony!"

It was like Andy to flare up that way, Spur thought, but tonight it had all the earmarks of a phony act. That warm saddle proved that he was lying, and he was about to say so when a sudden memory struck him rigid. It was ugly and fantastic. Nevertheless, Andy, by riding fast, could have swung over the hump. He could have gotten there before him. He could have been that ambushed rifleman tonight!

He said woodenly, "Forget it, kid. Reckon I spoke out of turn."

His hands were shaking and he put them under the table. It couldn't be, he reasoned. Hell, Andy wasn't the sort of yellow dog to do a thing like that. It was someone else. But who else could it have been?

He was tempted to tell Andy of the shooting incident, and all that had happened, but forced it back when his memory reverted to Saul Cleveland's terse warning.

Offhand, he would have said that he knew Andy Wayne like a book. It was a little shocking to realize that he knew next to nothing about him. Andy was always telling of his kid days back in Texas. He'd never mentioned what part he came from. He'd never spoken of events in the last ten years, and he was nearing thirty. All Spur knew was that Andy had been topping broncs, and one man-killer of a brute had finally gotten the best of him. That was only a few months before he came to Amador.

SPUR tried to reason sanely, but the ugly suspicion persisted, building as it went. His mind harked back to those two other tries on his life. Each time, Andy had been at the house—supposedly.

And then all at once he remembered his talk with Sheila. Could Andy possibly be Blue Chip—the pard who doublecrossed her dad into the hands of the law? It was a startling conjecture, and opened up a whole new vista for thought.

Andy must have been a sizeable gent before his accident. But for his twisted back, he'd be an inch or so taller than Spur. And Andy admitted he'd been fifty pounds heavier before the bronc crushed his body.

If Andy were Blue Chip, and as long as he wanted Sheila so badly, he'd be low enough to put Spur six feet under to gain his end. That, of course, was the ranch. For Spur had no living kin, and he had willed his share over to Andy Wayne.

Spur went to bed, only to stare wakefully into the darkness, his mind preying on the vicious tapestry. Finally, in sheer exhaustion, he dropped off into fitful sleep.

The sun came out next morning, dissolving raggy storm clouds and all of Spur's suspicions. Basking in its cheery warmth, he looked at Andy's hobbling pathetic figure and cursed himself for a fool. It was a touch of cabin fever, he guessed. Wherever Andy had gone last night, he had a damn good reason for not telling. If it came out later, okay. If not, that was okay too. The incident was closed.

They hitched a team to the wagon and drove to the edge of the timber where Spur had been felling trees and cutting them to post lengths.

They threw on a comfortable load. Andy counted them. "We'll be shy about twenty," he averred. "Let's pile

'em high and we won't have to make another trip."

Spur grinned. "Okay, mankiller," he retorted, "but it'll be a mess if they take a notion to slide off."

"They won't," Andy spoke confidently. "We'll ease 'em up careful, and then cinch 'em on with a couple of ropes."

Andy dragged the posts to Spur. His thick back muscles bulged as he pyramided them on top of the others. At last they were all on.

"Whew," Spur whistled. "That's some jag. Let's get 'em cinched down before an earthquake comes along."

He tossed a rope across the top and was tying it to a bed brace when it grew taut in his hands.

"Hey, I'm under this load!" he yelled. "Wait, yuh hooligan—"

The posts gave way with a rumbling roar. With lightning judgment, Spur flattened in close to the wagon. Even as the posts rolled down his taut back muscles and slammed against the calves of his legs, he sensed the hair-drawn narrowness of his escape. For his first impulse to leap back would have caught him squarely beneath the falling tonnage of those heavy green timbers.

Dazedly, feeling unmercifully mauled, he extricated himself. Andy hurried around the wagon to him in a grotesque, crowhoppery limp.

"God, that was a close 'un," he said shakily. "Are yuh hurt, Spur? I reckoned yuh was clear when I yanked on that rope."

RED murder churned through Spur's brain. It drove home with cruel force that Andy had confirmed his every suspicion. He slapped savagely at the cripple's outstretched hand, his other going for his gun.

He hadn't put it on this morning. But Andy was wearing his. Spur said, blazing-eyed, "If you want me dead,

you damned snake, why don't you gun me now. I'm not armed."

Andy Wayne's face went white. "But, Spur, why would—"

"Don't crawfish," Spur bellowed. "I give you the benefit of the doubt last night when you lied about takin' your pony out. Like a fool, I told myself it was somebody else that tried to bush-whack me three times hand runnin' in a week!"

"Lissen, Spur, I—"

Contempt was too keen in Spur to let him listen. "Shut up! It's mighty plain what's been goin' on in that skunk mind of yours. But you ain't gettin' this spread, and you ain't gettin' Sheila. She'll be hearin' damn sudden what a jelly-gutted coyote yuh really are!"

"Say, yuh locoed maniac, will yuh—"

"Get outa my sight!" Spur plunged harshly on. "Go on back to the house. It's either I buy you out or you buy me out. Make up your mind. I'll see you at the lawyer's in Amador at three this afternoon."

Andy Wayne nodded, a queer-lop-sided smile twisting his lips.

He said, "Okay, Spur," turned, and in his rocking limp, struck out through the brush toward the house.

Spur started tossing the fenceposts back onto the wagon, trying to submerge the terrific wrenching turmoil inside of him. Not since his wife had died had he suffered a hurt like this. He'd cottoned to young Wayne, finding his crooked smile and soft chuckling laughter a priceless, God-given straw to clutch after her passing. And all the while Andy Wayne had been scheming death behind his back.

He picked up the lines and started off. He guessed he'd never finish the fence. But he'd keep working till noon. By that time Andy would be off the ranch.

Head lowered in his misery, Spur did not see Saul Cleveland until his big red

faced neighbor pulled up alongside the wagon.

"Howdy, Spur." Cleveland peered curiously into his pale set features. "What yuh lookin' so mad about? Where's Wayne?"

Spur had never been much of a hand to air his troubles, but somehow this thing weighed so unbearably he felt he had to share it with someone. He gave the surface details, including the fact that he and Andy were quits.

Cleveland stared soberly. He said, "Spur, I was never one to run a man down, but I allus figgered yuh did a rash thing takin' that ranny on. It's a danged good thing yo're gettin' shed of him."

Spur nodded moodily, and Cleveland rode on.

When Spur drove back to the ranch, he found that Andy Wayne had not taken any of his belongings. It might mean that Andy intended to buy him out, and the thought was not a pleasant one. He would hate to leave this prosperous little creek spread. But he guessed there wasn't much danger of that. Not unless Andy had money which which he hadn't hitherto revealed. He might plan to return and get his stuff after the deal was made.

Spur's misery deepened as he rode into town. He went to the lawyer's office a few minutes before three, and it was not until after four that he left, puzzled and exasperated.

HE walked across to the Rodeo Bar. An odd stillness clamped down as he thrust through the batwings. Men stared at him, and the bartender shot a swift glance to his thigh. He shook his head.

"Too bad you ain't wearin' your iron, Spur," he said. "That pard of yours left here a bit ago tanked to the eyebrows and tellin' it plumb scary. He's aimin' to notch you on sight."

Spur nodded without surprise. He poured himself a drink, conscious of the sober glances cast his way. He saw his neighbor, Saul Cleveland, separate himself from the group and come forward.

"It's too bad, Spur, but Wayne is showin' his true color now." He rested a heavy hand on Spur's shoulder. "The man is ugly and dangerous. He made the brag to all of us that he'll have yore hide on a fence by mornin'."

The muscles along Spur's wide jaw tightened. He was not vindictive by nature, yet he shared the ranchman's common hatred of varmints, human or otherwise. Young Wayne could no longer be viewed as a fellow being. He was plain varmint, hopped full of liquor bravado and kill crazy. It meant Spur would have to gun him on sight or Andy Wayne would have him between the shoulder blades.

He said as much to Saul Cleveland, but the big man waved his hand bluffly. "Don't worry about him ambushin' yuh, Spur. I got a pair of my men tailin' him. If he comes near yore place tonight, Cal and Jing will tip yuh off. Tomorrow, yuh can hunt him down and call his bluff. That is, if he's still around."

Spur gripped his neighbor's beefy paw. "Good thing a man gets bogged once in awhile," he muttered. "Then he finds out who his friends really are."

Darkness was closing in as Spur started for home. The chill night air struck through his clothing, sharpening as he crossed the flats.

Andy Wayne's drunken brag was like a knife-thrust in his heart. He wondered if Andy had eluded Cleveland's men. Perhaps he was up ahead in the Pass, crouched, gun in hand. Spur smiled bitterly, and there was no apprehension in him as he entered the Pass. He guessed death held no worse pain than that he had suffered today.

He got home, chucked some dry wood in the stove and warmed a hasty meal. Moving the table away from the window, he ate without tasting the food he'd cooked. Then, taking spare clothing, he built up the crude form of a man on his sidewall bunk and drew a blanket over it. The rest of the blankets, he threw over his arm. He left the light burning, buckled on his gun, slipped out the back door and went to the barn.

It was sure a hell of a note, he told himself bitterly. Last night he'd called Andy a friend. Tonight he was guarding against him as he would a treacherous snake.

Crawling up into the hay, he leveled it off, pulled the blankets over him and lay down. Every bone and muscle in his body was sore and crying for rest. But sleep was tormenting hours away . . .

IT seemed to Spur that he'd been lying there an hour when the shot sounded. It was the sharp twang of a rifle, and seemed to come from the brushy slope extending back from the house.

He slipped from the hay, and was squeezing through the door opening when the rolling crash of a six-gun drew him rigid. The rifle spanged answer, and the two flashes gave Spur their respective positions. The rifleman, he told himself, would be Andy since he was directly in line with the window and dummy he'd rigged on the cot. By circling the barn he could close in behind the cripple and relieve Cleveland's men of their friendly chore.

He drew his gun and hurled himself for the barn corner. Rounding it, he took two long strides, then slid to an abrupt standstill. His startled ears heard it again, this time louder.

"Spur, wait!"

It was a woman's voice. He walked toward it, and now as she spoke again

he saw it was Sheila Donovan. Her slight body was a dark blob against the barn wall.

"Spur," she cried between burst of gunfire, "Spur, that's Andy over yonder. See, he's firing now. Go help him, Spur. I'm afraid there's three or four of Cleveland's men."

Spur heard her out incredulously. He had an insane desire to laugh. "Help him!" he growled. "I'll help him to Tophet—"

Sheila Donovan grasped his arm fiercely. "You fool," she screamed in his ear, "Andy is your friend! He always has been! We saw you put that dummy on the bed and come out here to the barn. That first shot was fired by Cleveland. You'll find he shot through the window at your dummy. Oh, go, Spur! Don't let him be killed!"

Spur threw himself bewilderedly across the yard. Sheila was sincere, he told himself. Had Andy run a sandy on her? There was only one way to find out. He reached cover of brush part way up the slope, at an angle and equally distant from the opposing factions. Between bursts of firing, his voice raised in a strident shout.

"Hey, Saul, where are you? It's Spur!"

"Damn!" There was nothing friendly in Cleveland's oath. "He ran a whizzer on us. We'll gun the pair of 'em!"

He punctuated it with a spattering of lead that whipped the brush on all sides of Spur.

More at sea than ever, Spur's mind found anchor on one point. He was battling this out on Andy Wayne's side. He eased through the mesquite, watching for gunbloom. Off on his left, Andy blasted away and drew a crashing answer. Spur triggered grimly at the flaming target.

There was a gurgling scream, a crashing body. Lead rained his way, whining in his ears and nipping his clothing.

A slug took him in the collar bone, knocking him down. He crawled toward his assailants, wondering why Andy wasn't doing the same. Reloading, he fired and slithered aside. Into their gun bloom he poured more death.

IT must have been that, for all at once there was no sound but the ringing in his own ears. He crawled up to the rocks and lit a match. Two men lay sprawled in death—Saul Cleveland and the hard-case rider he called Jing. The third man was still breathing a little.

Jaw clamped to the pain of his shattered collar bone, Spur staggered down and across the slope, calling Andy's name. The cripple answered faintly, and presently he was leaning over the prostrate figure.

"My leg's busted," Andy muttered. "Couldn't move, dammit, and I wanted to get that black hearted devil so bad . . .

And with that, Andy Wayne passed out. Spur lifted him gently over his good right shoulder and bore him toward the house. He was conscious of a high-soaring gladness which he tried to quell. It was too good—too much to hope for. It couldn't be true.

Uttering an anguished cry, Sheila ran from the lighted doorway. "Lay him right there on the bed," she ordered, and Spur noted with approval that she had the teakettle simmering. "Is he hurt bad?"

Andy's bloodless lips answered shakily, "Naw, I ain't hurt bad. Wrap me up, Sheila, while I do some talkin'." His lips moved in a haggard grin. "No *sabe*, Spur?"

Spur gave a stupefied shake of his head. "I reckoned I was half smart, but blamed if I get this."

Andy looked toward Sheila. "It was her who figgered it out," he explained. "All I knew after yuh blew up today was that somebody was tryin' to frame

us into a shootout. I was feelin' mighty miserable till I talked to Sheila and we started puttin' two and two together. It all added up to Saul Cleveland.

"In the first place, he'd intended filin' on that section along the creek, but I beat him to it. He was shrewd enough never to show us how disappointed he was. But he did beef some to Sheila. Next thing was my courtin' of her. He wanted her purty bad himself. If we shot it out as he planned, one of us would be dead and the other would either skip country or hang. He'd win either way."

"Did he borrow your pony last night?" Spur asked.

"Reckon. I know I wasn't out. Looks like he wanted yuh to light out after him after shootin' at yuh. Mebby he wanted yuh to see it was my hawss."

"But your threat to get me. . . ."

Andy chuckled faintly in spite of his pain. "That was after I talked to Sheila. I took on a few drinks and made my brag, with Cleveland listenin' and plenty more besides. I was layin' myself wide open in case anything happened to yuh, but I had to take that chance. Yuh see, I wanted to smoke Cleveland into the open. I was hopin' he'd take on the job of beefin yuh himself. And he did."

"Well, I'll be danged-busted!" Spur muttered softly. It was all he could say with a lady present.

Andy wasn't through. "I fetched Sheila along," he explained, "to back me up in explainin' things. We was right behind yuh all the way. We watched through the window, and when

I saw yuh rig that dummy and go to the barn to sleep, I decided to let matters take their nacher'l course. And they did!"

Spur's knuckles ran up his stubbled jaw. "You — a doublecrosser," he breathed. "God, what a lame-brained jackass I've been."

ANDY's face went suddenly sober. "Spur," he said, "I never crossed up a man in my life, though this is the second time it sure looked like it. That other time was when I was owlhootin' with a pard named Frisco Jake.

"We lost our ponies and had to get past a big high rock to dodge a posse. Jake held 'em off while I climbed around to get on top. I was makin' a rope fast so he could climb up it when a slug glanced off a rock and creased me. When I woke up it was dark, and Jake and the possemen were gone. I heard he got away, but I've never run across the old hellion since. And I 'spect he never thinks of me but what he cusses a blue streak."

Spur stole a glance at Sheila. Their eyes caught, held long enough to confirm his question. Then she was smiling radiantly for Andy, and Andy alone.

"I was looking around outside," she said, a queer little catch in her throat. "I saw a little hill. Andy, I—how long does it take to build a cabin, Andy?"

Andy's brown eyes twinkled on Spur, even as his arms opened to claim his bride-to-be. "Spur," he said, "I don't reckon we ever will get that fence done. . . ."



Powdersmoke Is My Plow!

By ADAM MANN

That land-grabbing cowman could hire every leadslinger in the Gila to down Kent Colter, but the fearless young sodbuster would still be plowing hard-won range behind his two-gun barricade!



That was when the little gent's guns leapt from leather!

SNOW blanketed the dilapidated huddle of frame and 'dobe buildings with ghostly white, and an icy wind screamed down off the snow-fields. Though it was barely noon, the sky was as black as the devil's own riding boots.

For that reason, Kent Colter failed to see the two men as he edged the short-coupled buckskin into the feed barn, which happened to be the nearest of the snow-shrouded false-fronts. His

first premonition of danger came in the metallic click of a rifle bolt. Then Kent brushed the snow from his ice-crusted eyes and peered at the two men who stood near the open rear doors.

Kent sat motionless for long seconds, eyes narrowed, watching. His worn mackinaw and thin Levi's, slight protection against the storm, hung stiffly on his lean and raw-boned frame. His long-jawed, blunt-chinned face had the expression of a man who looks upon

a familiar scene.

The two men stood a dozen feet apart, one at either side of the open doors. The taller of the pair was stoop-shouldered, paunchy, with a bearded, scowling face and a Winchester held at ready in his thick-fingered hands. His partner, wiry, short-legged, had both hands on the butts of his holstered guns. Both were intently watching the pole corral, twenty yards distant.

The bars were lowered now, and a tall, wedge-shaped man led a rangy dun outside, leaned into the storm and headed for the shelter of the barn. Apparently, he sensed neither movement nor menace in the barn.

THE Winchester lifted, steadied; the little gent's guns leaped from leather. And Kent Colter swung down from the kak in a single movement. He took three sidewise steps into a stall and crouched there, his voice lashing out thinly, like the whine of a quirt.

"Better call it off, Whiskers! Hot lead plays hell with a man's spine!"

A rifle shot drowned out the words, as the whiskery gent with the Winchester squeezed trigger. It was as if Kent's deadly voice had released the slug that smashed into the wedge-shaped hombre's right arm. Then Whiskers whirled wildly, darting desperate glances into the gloom of the barn.

Kent moved quickly into the open and spoke again, dry-voiced. "Here I am, bushwhacker! Shoot at a man that's lookin' at yuh!"

Whiskers wheeled toward him, and Kent's hand winged to the Frontier Model Colts that hung low at his right hip. So incredibly fast was his draw, that the swinging rifle barrel had barely steadied on his chest when he fired—twice.

The Winchester barrel tilted ceilingward as his first bullet sent Whiskers crashing backward against the wall. The

second slug stiffened him, and the Winchester spilled from his fingers. He pitched stiffly forward, struck a wagon wheel, rolled sideways and crumpled to the dirt floor.

His short-legged partner was zigzagging toward the corral. Twin tongues of orange flame from his six-guns pierced the snow-screen. Bleak-eyed, Kent emptied his gun at the shadowy shape. With a shrill cry of pain and rage, the bushwhacker whirled and stumbled behind a shed, leaving a crimson trail in his wake.

Kent was bending over Whiskers when three men came from the rear door of the FORTY-ROD SALOON, to stand beside him. One of them, square-built and leather-skinned, wore a ball-pointed marshal's star. The others appeared to be 'punchers.

"I'm Jeff Reeves, stranger," the marshal said warmly, extending his hand while his mouth widened in a broad grin. "And any man who can down Gip Gruno and make the Apache Kid run like a scairt rabbit is entitled to the key to Whiskey Flat. Said key not bein' available, I'd admire to buy you a drink."

Kent's hand abruptly fell away from his holster, but puzzlement replaced the relief in his steel-blue eyes as he lifted them to the marshal's smiling face.

"This Gip Gruno must've been plumb important durin' his lifetime," he observed dryly.

Before Reeves could answer, a drawling voice from behind Kent murmured, "I wouldn't say important, brother. Gruno was just persistent as hell. He's been tryin' to sink a slug in my back for the last five years. He'd 'a' done it, too, hadn't been for you."

Kent turned slowly toward the wedge-shaped man who had been the bushwhacker's target. "Glad I blew in when I did," he said, grinning. "I never did cotton to bushwhackers. Besides,

there was two of 'em, and they wasn't givin' you a chance."

Reeves said, "Come along and thaw out, both of yuh. This dang weather'd freeze the hair off a brass monkey."

THEY filed into the saloon from which Reeves had come and bellied the bar. Kent had two drinks before his deeply ingrained love of good horse-flesh reminded him that his game little buckskin had not been grained. He shook hands with the marshal and the wedge-shaped gent, who had neglected to introduce himself.

"I may not be seein' you again," Kent said casually, "because I'm head-in' out, come dawn. Thanks for the drinks."

Wedge-shape said, "The pleasure was mine, brother. And about what you done for me today—well, I'll bear yuh in mind."

Two years later, a Spur Rowel cowboy rode up to Kent's homestead in Gila Valley. "Lasker says you got till mornin' to clear out, plough-pusher," the 'puncher growled. "Cowmen and sodbusters don't mix worth a damn, which is why you're on the way out."

A gust of fury swept Kent as he thought of his stacked hay, his stored wheat—and Lorna Raleigh. He'd fought grimly for two long years, beating down the hostility of the Gila ranchers, waiting and working for the coming magic of irrigation. And now, with success practically assured, the arrogant Lasker was ordering him out of the valley.

"You go back and tell Ike Lasker to go to hell," Kent said coldly. "Dry farmers like me have taken some of his best graze, but we took it accordin' to law. Only a yellow-bellied crook like Lasker would wait till we made our improvements, knowin' that we'll soon have irrigation—"

Kent broke off sharply, sensing a change in the 'puncher's manner. As the man swung down easily from the kak and turned pale-blue eyes toward him, remembrance stabbed at Kent like a keen blade. He was facing the runty, ruthless killer who had been Gip Gruno's bushwhack partner, back at Whiskey Flat!

The grinning gunman was eyeing Kent coldly, as though visualizing the vengeance he meant to exact on the man who had once humiliated and wounded him.

"Remember me now, Colter? Or are yuh too yeller to swap 'howdy' with a feller, after tryin' to pin his suspenders with lead?" His lips parted to show uneven, fang-like teeth, and his voice sounded harsh, dry. His hands hovered close to his black-buttoed guns.

"You're lyin' when you say I tried to shoot any man in the back," Kent said hotly. "Not that it makes any difference now, but I didn't have to shoot Gip Gruno in the back. The break was better than even, but I was just too fast for him. Think that over, feller, before you make your play."

The runty killer's grin tightened. "Front or back, Gip's pushin' up daisies. And me, I'm collectin' five hundred from Ike Lasker for a job I'd 'a' done for nothin'. Colter, I'm the Apache Kid!"

Kent stood motionless and said, "Don't be too sure of yourself, Kid. I've learned a lot of gun-swift in the Gila. You're the third man to try to collect that—"

The Apache Kid's right hand swept downward and up in a smooth, breathtaking draw; yet his gun had barely cleared leather when the impact of Kent's bullet smashed him back a pace. He stood stiffly erect a moment, shuddering convulsively, then he pitched face down to the melting snow of the yard.

KENT felt the clammy silence of death crowd around him, only to be shattered by the piercing, horror-frighted screams of the girl who had come running around the corner of the pole-sided barn. She jerked to a stunned halt, her face drawn and set against the horror of what she had witnessed. Silent and unmoving she stood there, but the angry scorn in her dark eyes lashed Kent with the force of a dozen stinging quirts.

"It was my life or his," he began defensively, moving toward her as he talked. "He's the third gun-swift Ike Lasker's hired to down me, Lorna. I didn't have any choice."

Lorna Raleigh whirled and ran toward her ground-tied horse. As she swung lithely into the saddle, she said bitterly, "I didn't believe Lasker when he said you'd been making threats against the Apache Kid. Now I know he told the truth—*murderer!*"

Kent stood there bewildered and watched her ride away—this girl whose smiling encouragement had prompted him to homestead in the Gila.

Deliberately, and without haste, he turned back to the dead man. He stared down at him a moment, somber-eyed, then went unhurriedly toward the black gelding with the Spur Rowel scarred on its hip. When he came back, leading the gelding, he lifted the Apache Kid in his arms and placed him face-down across his saddle, lashed him there. Then he walked down to the barn, saddled his paint and rode slowly out of the yard, leading the gelding.

It was dusk when he rode leisurely into the Spur Rowel ranchyard, keenly aware that furtive eyes marked his arrival. The ranch house, built of logs and adobe, sprawled on a little rise at the head of the valley, alone and remote.

A dozen punchers lounged around the porch, and Ike Lasker peered ex-

pectantly from his rawhide-bottomed chair near the door. Kent noticed that the crew seemed tense, expectant.

Gil Ingle, Lasker's bull-necked foreman, bellowed a greeting as Kent halted the paint, some fifteen yards from the porch. "What'd yuh do, Apache, swap hosses with 'im?"

Kent's hand crawled to his holster. "We didn't swap horses none, Ingle; just lead!"

"Colter!" Lasker gasped.

With an oath, Gil Ingle clawed for his gun, but Lasker cursed him with murderous fury. "Don't touch that gun, you blithering idiot! Kent'd get me, even with a slug in his heart! What the hell's happened, Colter?"

A cynical smile twisted across Kent's lips as he jerked his head toward the gelding. He said, coldly, "I've brought the Kid back to you, Lasker. Looks like you'd give up—or hire real talent."

"You *what?*" rasped Lasker, jerking to his feet. "You mean you had the guts to haul that carrion in here to me?" His hawk-beaked, swarthy face twitched with rage and his heavy paunched frame shook with it, but he kept his hands well away from his guns.

"You owned the Kid, Lasker," Kent cut in flatly. "It's up to you to plant him." He leaned out of the kak and slapped the gelding across the rump, with his left hand.

"Damn you, Colter!" Ingle's voice was razor-edged. "The Kid was my cousin. No sod-bustin' son can plug kin of mine and live to—"

INGLE was streaking to the left, in an effort to put the gelding and its gruesome burden between himself and Kent Colter. But his war talk came prematurely. He should have waited until he gained his objective.

Kent's gun belched flame and bedlam. Ingle loosed a shrill scream and rocked back on his heels, groaning with

the exquisite pain of a shattered hand. The six-gun pinwheeled into the air, exploding harmlessly.

"Quit that bawlin', Ingle," Lasker said, grinning. "And you, Colter—hit the breeze 'fore I change my mind an' turn these gun-wolves loose on yuh. And Colter, I'll be thinkin' over that tip of your's about importin' real talent. There may be somethin' in it."

Kent Colter deliberately wheeled his mount and rode slowly out of the ranch-yard, feeling the hostile eyes that followed his progress. He headed in the direction of his homestead.

He had been riding for perhaps twenty minutes, promising himself over and over that he would sell out for the best price he could get and quit the country, when out of the heavy snow that now fell came the sound of horses' hoofs, the creak and groan of wheels. And two men driving a light wagon suddenly loomed before him, directly ahead and coming toward him.

Kent neck-reined his horse off to the side of the trail and pulled up, waiting. The driver, a lanky, big-boned man with reddish whiskers and yellowish eyes, eyed Kent with evident disfavor, as he yanked the team to a halt. Kent started. In the fading light he saw venom lurking in the muddy depths of the man's eyes, and he recognized him as being Mel Hooket, the undertaker. At Hooket's side, Kent saw a gun covering him, held by a beefy, ferret-faced man wearing a deputy's badge. Windy Belcher, Kent knew—a renegade hoe-man who had sold out to Ike Lasker.

"Keep your hands on the nubbin of that kak, Colter" Belcher said coldly. "You move a muscle, I'll let yuh have it."

Kent grinned down at the deputy. "Get down to cases, heel-dog," he said without rancor. "What dirty chore you been doin' for Lasker, now?"

Mel Hooket shrilled "Bridle your

tongue and listen, sodbuster," and his right hand flashed beneath his rusty Prince Albert, came out clutching a snub-nosed six-gun. "What you done with the body?"

Dan still grinned as the pair eyed him in sullen silence their eyes glinting a cold challenge. "If you're meanin' the Apache Kid," he said tensely, "you'll find him back at Ike Lasker's Spur Rowel. You needn't be in any hurry; the Kid'll wait."

Belcher stabbed Kent with his shifty, sullen eyes. He leaned forward in the seat. "That wasn't a smart thing to say, Colter. It's my duty to warn yuh that anything yuh say may be used ag'inst yuh. Keep them hands on that nubbin!" He flicked a cold glance at Hooket and the latter wrapped the reins around the whipstock and climbed down over the wheel, being careful not to get his lank figure in the line of fire.

"Get the cuffs on 'im, Hooket," snapped Belcher. "The boss wants to augur with yuh some, Colter. We're takin' yuh to a safe place. If you're just half smart we won't have to plug yuh. But don't move them hands!"

KENT sat motionless as the steel cuffs bit into his wrists. With the muzzles of the two guns yawning at him, he had no alternative. But he had the whole picture now. He turned to Mel Hooket.

"Lasker knows irrigation's comin' pronto," he said. "He wants my homestead for little or nothin', and my influence in gettin' the other valley claims the same way, or I'll be buried in the brakes. That right?"

Hooket's muddy eyes probed him queerly as he led the paint close to the wagon, and climbed into the seat. "That ain't the half of it, clodhopper," he said harshly, and handed the reins to Belcher. "We'll let the boss tell yuh the rest."

Twenty minutes later, they turned into a brush-choked draw, a mile to the west of the Spur Rowel ranch house. A dozen yards from the trail Hooket tied the team, and they climbed the slope to where a tiny pole cabin squatted on a small plateau.

Belcher yanked Kent sprawling from the kak while Hooket rapped on the door with the butt of his six-gun. The panel jerked inward and Ike Lasker was framed in the opening. He grinned broadly as Belcher shoved Kent inside.

"Sit down, hoeman," Lasker invited mockingly. "We'll make medicine."

Kent ignored the invitation, said, "Spread your cards, Lasker."

Lasker's little black eyes narrowed and the ghost of a smile tightened his thick lips. He growled, "We'll get right down to business. That little run-in you had with the Apache Kid today—well, I might square yuh with the law, Colter. Just to show your gratitude, of course, you'll do me a little favor. If you show up as smart as I think yuh are, I'll cut yuh in on the jackpot. Interested?"

"Keep talkin'," Kent snapped.

A gleam of cunning fired the rangehog's eyes. He leaned over and tapped Kent on the chest. "Them engineers and stiff-collars are right now on the way to stake out this district. That means irrigation, and irrigation means money, power. For them that owns land. You do like I tell yuh, I'll let yuh keep your homestead. In a few years, it'll make yuh well off. Savvy?"

Kent Colter savvied; savvied all too well. He had only to sell out his nester friends, to betray Lorna Raleigh and her invalid father, and Ike Lasker would graciously permit him to keep what was already his! He laughed in Lasker's hawk-beaked face, said icily, "No dice, Lasker. And as far's the Apache Kid is concerned, you'd never make a charge of murder stick against

me. I shot in self-defense."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," Lasker purred silkily. "I got this thing figured down pretty fine, Colter. You think it was an accident yuh met Hooket and Belcher on the trail? Didn't it strike yuh as bein' funny they'd be lookin' for the Kid's body, a good two hours before we could 'a' got 'em out here from Trailway?"

Kent grinned easily. "Nope. You had it all worked out in advance, Lasker. You figured the Kid would snuff out my light, and you couldn't wait to get me under six feet of dirt. So you had Hooket on the job. Too bad the corpse turned out to be one you didn't order. And too bad—for you—that you overlooked one little point."

"Meanin'?"

KENT laughed softly. "The little matter of witnesses, Lasker. If your bushwhackers could read sign, they'd have seen that a rider saw the whole thing. That rider's word would carry plenty weight in court, too."

"I wouldn't bank too much on that, Colter." Lasker grinned coldly. "What you mean to say is you *had* a witness. Right now, I've got her. *Lorna Raleigh is in the next room, bound and gagged!* Well, do we get together?"

Kent stiffened, and a chill tide of fear washed through him. Fear for Lorna. Slowly, involuntarily, he nodded.

"You win, Lasker," he muttered, his voice a dry lash of dejection. "What's the play?"

The wind wailed and whined around the cabin. Snow sifted beneath the door and through wide cracks in the wall. Ike Lasker grinned his satisfaction and went to the door between the cabin's two rooms. He shoved the panel inward and turned back to face Kent.

"Take a look in here and satisfy yourself I ain't runnin' no sandy," he

invited, leering.

Kent stepped close to the door and peered inside. By the dim light of an oil lamp, he made out the figure of Lorna Raleigh, spread-eagled on a bed beneath the blanketed window, a neckscarf painfully spreading her leeches lips. Kent stiffened.

"Untie that gag, Lasker, or the deal's off!"

Lasker flushed angrily. "Who the hell's givin' orders around here, you or me?" But he moved close to the bed and removed the gag. Then he whirled and strode back to Kent's side.

"Now you'll get your orders," he barked. "And you'll carry 'em out to the letter, or you and the gal will both die! Do you understand that?"

Kent eyed him stonily, an inscrutable light in his ice-blue eyes.

Lasker chuckled horribly. "Take them bracelets off him, Belcher. Then set him down at the table. He's writin' a note to old Tom Raleigh, offerin' him five thousand cash for the Rollin' R! Damn, I bet that note'll bring old Tom right up oughta that wheel chair—but it'll also bring a deed to the Rollin' R! Move, Belcher, what yuh waitin' on?"

Kent Colter stood there, numbed and speechless, as the full import of Lasker's words struck him like a blow in the face. He realized, as well as Lasker, what the writing of that note would mean. Crippled, helpless old Tom Raleigh would deed him a spread for which he'd refused thirty thousand for a paltry five thousand and, in turn, he—Kent Colter—would be forced to deed the Rolling R to Ike Lasker. Otherwise—

"Get over to the table and start writin', Colter," Lasker ordered harshly. "I'll tell yuh what to say."

He was suddenly conscious that his hands were free, but Kent Colter didn't move; because he couldn't move. His mind was reeling crazily. Then, suddenly, it steadied on a picture. The pic-

ture of Lorna Raleigh in the ruthless hands of Ike Lasker. He could see the girl writhing in torture. He could hear her throaty voice, crying out for mercy with none who cared to hear. . . .

"Do what he says, Kent." The words came from Lorna in an agonized whisper. "It's the only way out."

SLOWLY, like a man in a dream, Kent turned toward the rude table. He couldn't analyze his feelings; he couldn't seem to realize that his plans and hopes for irrigation didn't matter at all, now. Nothing seemed to matter, except the safety of Lorna Raleigh!

"Let me have the pencil and paper," he muttered. "I'm ready to write."

With a sneering laugh which echoed queerly in the sudden silence, Lasker clumped close to the table, his feet bringing grinding echoes from the rough puncheon floor. He poised there a moment, his tongue grazing his greedy lips. Then, "Write what I tell yuh," he rasped.

Kent picked up the stub of pencil and, by the light of the guttering lamp, wrote as Lasker monotoned hoarsely:

"Raleigh:

Take the \$5,000 I'm sending by bearer and deed the Rolling R to me. Refuse, and you'll never see Lorna alive again.

Kent Colter."

Lasker snatched at the note, laughed exultantly, and said, "Bigod, boys—this calls for a drink!"

He jerked a full pint of whiskey from the pocket of his leather jacket, took the first swig and passed the bottle to Windy Belcher.

Sight of the cuffs held in Belcher's left hand sent the glimmer of an idea leaping into Kent's mind. Ike Lasker was no dumb cowprod. He could think, could devise an ingenious plot and execute it with masterful skill and painstaking thoroughness.

But there's a chance—just a ghost of a chance—that I can beat him, Kent thought tensely, as the idea began to take form. He scarcely heard Lasker's taunting voice.

"Drink hearty, Belcher, then me and Hooket are leavin' for the Rollin' R. Don't forget to put them cuffs back on Colter. He's tricky as a snake."

Belcher drank noisily, passed the bottle back to Lasker and wiped his sneering mouth on the sleeve of his mackinaw. "Don't worry, Ike. I'll guard 'im plenty careful."

Lasker nodded and turned toward the door, with the undertaker at his heels. Watching them, Kent carefully worked the cuffs of his thick flannel shirt down over his wrists, even as he thanked his God that his hands were small. At the door, Lasker looked back, and his voice rose tauntingly.

"This has been easier than I figgered, Colter. When we get back, we'll show our gratitude. Mebbe we can find a hole deep and wide enough to hold both you and the gal!"

Then the door jerked open and a gust of wind-swept snow threatened to extinguish the lamp. Cursing luridly, Belcher put his bulk between the door and the lamp. Then the panel slammed shut. Seconds later, Kent heard the clattering of hoofs.

"Turn around, clodhopper!" Belcher said harshly. "I'll cuff them hands behind yuh, just in case."

KENT COLTER turned so that his right shoulder was between Belcher and the light, and a small, humorless smile played around the corners of his mouth as the cuffs clicked shut—over the cuffs of his shirt.

Suspicion clouded Belcher's brutal, ferret-like face as he moved around in front of Kent and caught the expression in the ice-blue eyes.

"Try somethin'," he invited grimly,

his beefy shape going taut, his right hand dropping to the handle of his gun. "I'd plug yuh—"

That was as far as he got. Kent's left hand came free, and his right snaked out, smashed hard against Belcher's jaw. Surprise slowed Belcher's draw as he rocked back on his heels. Even so, it was a miracle in gun-swift. Fast as it had been, however, Kent moved faster.

Smack!

Kent's right lanced out again as he followed in, and the dangling handcuff crashed full against the side of Belcher's head. The renegade went down with a jarring thud, his six-gun coughing its impotent charge into the smoke-blackened ceiling.

Even as the thunderous detonation rocked the cabin, Kent was yanking the gun from Belcher's unresisting fingers, was charging into the adjoining room. In less than a minute Lorna was free, standing on her feet, swaying. She caught her breath with a rasping sob. "Now they *will* kill you, Kent!"

He led her gently from the room. "Belcher won't," he said, grinning. "He'll be some time comin' to. He never even knew what hit him." He knelt beside the unconscious renegade, found a key ring in his mackinaw pocket and transferred the cuffs to the thick, hairy wrists. Then he shot a command over his shoulder. "Get your horse and ride to Trailway where you'll be safe, Lorna. Me, I'm ridin' to the Rollin' R!"

Lorna Raleigh steadied herself with a visible effort. Her face was still bloodless, but she forced a fixed smile to her lips. A tender, brooding light came into her eyes as she stood there looking down into Kent's set face. Then her shoulders suddenly sagged.

"It's no use, Kent," she told him. "Your going to the Rolling R, I mean. It won't do Lasker any good, either.

I sent Dad in to Trailway in the buckboard, this afternoon."

For a long moment, the only sounds were the wail of the wind, the hoarse breathing of the still unconscious Belcher. Yet in the stillness they both seemed to hear tender words—words that drew them together with the force of a powerful magnet.

And thus it was that Kent Colter held her close and heard her say, "You forgive me for what I said today—when you were forced to kill the Apache Kid? Oh, my dear, my dear, I didn't understand." She stiffened in his arms, then slumped despondently. "It's all so—so hopeless, Kent. Even though you won tonight. Ike Lasker bragged he'd get you; if not tonight, then tomorrow. He's sent for Idaho Harse, Kent! Idaho Harse, the worst killer in the Southwest. And Harse is expecting you to meet him in front of the DEUCES WILD, at ten o'clock in the morning!"

There was no beseeching him to swerve from the purpose that was so clearly written in his stern young face—no railing at an unkind fate. It was as if she understood that his unbreakable will would spur him on to meet this last deadly obstacle. And, understanding, she had already given him up. . . .

THEY found the horses tied in the brush, and for the second time that day, Kent lashed an enemy face-down across his own saddle. This time, it was the renegade Belcher.

"I'll take him in to the sheriff," Kent explained, as they mounted and rode toward the trail. "I'll leave you in town, Lorna, but I'll be back. At ten in the morning. . . ."

Trailway's huddled sprawl showed brazenly beneath the glare of the mid-morning sun. At the north end of its single street, Kent checked his paint

and proceeded cautiously. In front of the feed store, a hundred yards to the north of the DEUCES WILD, he climbed stiffly from the saddle and tied his horse.

As though his action had been a signal, a small sound cut across the uncanny stillness of the street from the saloon. Then it rose sharply and became the clumping monotone of booted feet.

Kent, breathing shallowly, stood there and watched Sheriff Hank Patton's deliberate approach, looked beyond the lawman to where three horses were tied in front of the DEUCES WILD. Ten paces distant now, the sheriff was speaking.

"It's suicide, Colter. Lasker's waitin' on yuh in the saloon, and he's got three gun-snakes with 'im! One of 'em is *Idaho Harse!* Climb back into that hull and ride, you fool! I'll try to cover your back!"

A sudden commotion from the opposite side of the street stifled Kent's reply. Lorna Raleigh's cry for warning knifed through the stillness. "Look out, Kent! *Idaho Harse!*"

Kent's muscles went rigid and the blood hammered in his brain. Abruptly, he whirled and stepped into the street. Clearly, then, in the bright glare of sunlight, the lean, wedge-shaped figure of Lasker's hired killer loomed a hundred yards ahead. Kent's eyes shifted to where Lasker, Gil Ingle and Hooket stood tensely near the hitch-rack, then swung back to Idaho Harse.

What happened during the next two minutes was never very clear to Kent Colter. He felt himself moving forward, like an automaton, muscles coiled, tense, an icy finger racing along his spine. His set face, his measured, deadly stride were matched by Idaho Harse. Fifty feet separated them now, and the tall, wedge-shaped Harse

halted, narrowed eyes fixed questioningly on Kent, who continued deliberately toward him.

The silence of death had gripped the town. And through that hush came the wedge-shaped Harse's startled ejaculation: "Damn! Are you Kent Colter?"

Recognition flickered in Kent's steel-blue eyes. He paused in mid-stride, arms dangling loosely. "I'm Colter," he acknowledged. "Two years since we met at Whiskey Flat, Harse."

Idaho Harse grinned thinly. "I been keepin' you in mind, Colter. What you wantin' me to do—even the odds?"

A sudden, fierce thrill of shrill relief poured through Kent Colter. He said, "Just keep out of it, Idaho. Three to one's heavy odds, but—"

IDAHO HARSE'S face twisted and taunted. "Too damned heavy!" he rasped. "I don't like 'em!" Then, even as Kent's hands slapped leather, he pivoted and his voice rose stridently: "Deal's off, Lasker! Fill your hands, you three—or crawl on your bellies!"

But Lasker was drawing as Harse's hand was streaking to his gun. And both Ingle and Hooket were dragging their irons. Kent braced himself as he drew. This was the supreme test; he had to make it good.

Lasker's gun was flashing out, his hate-crazed eyes burning into Kent's. And Kent whipped up his gun and fired. A crashing blast of gun-fire was thundering through Trailway. And, through the acrid smoke-fog, Ike Lasker was down in the blood-stained snow; down and dying. His renegades, caught between two fires, were cursing, firing, and falling. . . .

The crashing hell was stilled. Idaho Harse finished shuttling bullets into his guns, looked up and grinned at Kent.

"Now we can start over again, even up, Colter. *Adios!*"

He turned and started for the hitch-rack. Kent started. "Hey, wait! You can't leave like this, Idaho! I got to see you!"

Idaho Harse grinned back over his shoulder. "The hell I can't," he murmured. "Anyhow, it ain't me you're wantin'; it's—"

A feminine voice cut through his words; the voice of Lorna Raleigh, vibrant with new-found hope and gratitude.

"Goodbye, Idaho Harse," she was calling. "We'll be keeping you in mind."

And Kent Colter, striding toward her, looked at the grinning gunman and husked:

"Yeah, we will be, Idaho . . ."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Two-Gun Western Novels Magazine, published Bi-Monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1941.
State of New York, ss.
County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Abraham Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Two-Gun Western Novels Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Martin Goodman, 330 West 42nd Street, N. Y. City, N. Y.; Editor, Martin Goodman, 330 West 42nd Street, N. Y. City, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Martin Goodman, 330 West 42nd Street, N. Y. City, N. Y.; Business Manager, Abraham Goodman, 330 West 42nd Street, N. Y. City, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

Western Fiction Publishing Co., Inc., 330 W. 42nd St., N. Y. City, N. Y.; Martin Goodman, 330 W. 42nd St., N. Y. City, N. Y.; Jean Davis Goodman, 330 W. 42nd St., New York City, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

ABRAHAM GOODMAN, Business Manager.
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1941.
BERNARD AREITAL.

(My commission expires March 30, 1943.)
Kings Co. Clerk No. 212, New York Co. Clerk No. 27.

Satan's Sixgun Slaughterhouse

By T. K. HAWLEY

Bushwhacked by road-agents unknown, would be that guntown's verdict, and Bill Coultras could have headed down the dim trails unmolested. But even an owlhoot orphan had his honor, and no hankering for too much rustling and murder!



Winchesters bristled in their hands, murder glinted in their eyes!

CHAPTER I

BILL COULTRAS stepped from the oil-lamp glare of Jake's Joint into the star-illuminated main street of Saddleup and strode east along the broad sidewalk, the holster of his .45 whispering against his leather-clad right leg. A hundred yards or so from the doorway of Jake's he made out the

dim shapes of a man and horse at the edge of the boardwalk.

"It's me, friend," the man beside the horse called softly. "Best get your pony an' meet me out o' town a ways. Don't want to run chances of us bein' seen together, or anybody listenin' in."

"All right," replied Coultras in an equally guarded tone, and wheeled abruptly, heading back toward the hitch rack fronting Jake's place.

It was all a mysterious business. This stranger, white-bearded, leather-faced and ludicrously bow-legged, had paused beside him as he stood apart from the crowd in Jake's, and while engaged in lighting a pipe, addressed Coultras out of the corner of his mouth: "Like to talk to you. Foller after me in five min-its an' walk east. Be waitin'." And at Coultras' barely perceptible nod the old man had passed on, puffing vigorously, and quit the saloon. Even had eyes been directed their way, it would not have been guessed that anything had passed between them.

BILL untied his buckskin and rode back. The stranger had already started and was a dim figure down-street. Coultras caught up with him shortly after they debouched on the brush-clump, shadowed plain that began where the town ended.

"Safe enough now," said the white-bearded one as Coultras spurred along-side. "S'pose you're thinkin' this is a queer shake all round, podner, but I'll shoot you an explanation quick, seein' you're so game an' accomodatin' an' askin' no questions. See you dunno me, but, 'nless I'm much mistaken you're Toby Lane, that used to train with 'Rawhide' Kelly's waddy outfit down on the Rio? Right?"

"Wrong!" barked Coultras instantly, and facing his companion squarely while their horses pushed into the interminable night. "If you're some Smart Aleck sheriff, hidin' your star an' tryin'—"

"Me'n sheriffs ain't got the same viewpoint on law a-tall, special regardin' other folks' cows," interposed the other easily. "You're a dead ringer for Lane as I remember him, though we never was what you'd call reg'larly acquainted."

"Well, I ain't Lane; never ranged on the Rio," said Bill, less harshly, "but mebbe we can get together anyway. Ad-

mitten' as much as you have about your line o' business, reckon it's safe for me to say I've burnt a brand or two myself. Name of Coultras."

"Glad as blazes, Coultras. Kilgore's mine." Ensued a rather lengthy pause. The old man, his head bowed, seemed deep in thought. The horses' hoofs clicked sharply on flinty soil. They were entering a region of "bad lands," and on either hand, in the semi-gloom, rocks upreared in shapes of bizarre illusion. "Are you foot-loose?" Coultras' companion asked as he lifted his head suddenly.

"Ridin' for the Adams outfit, Lazy A. Signed up just a week ago," Bill informed. "But," he added, "that won't prevent me from workin' a side line, eh?"

"No," said Kilgore. "All the better, I'd say. Well, Coultras, I'm ridin' with a bunch o' boys who're makin' easy money an' plenty of it off these Rollin' River ranchers. Got a vacancy just now for a runnin'-iron expert, an' knowin' Toby Lane was one, reckoned I'd found the right man when I lamped you in Jake's. At that, mebbe you're as good or better'n Lane. How'd you like to join up?"

"Like it fine," replied Coultras, promptly. "Headin' for your rendyvoo now? I ain't due at the ranch till sun-up—"

Kilgore's horse at that instant stumbled and almost went to its knees: It happened with such suddenness that Coultras had gone several feet in advance of Kilgore before he could pull up. As he yanked the reins and turned, a tongue of flame leaped toward him, a roar seemed to split his eardrums, and darkness smote him swiftly and completely. He fell very hard against the saddle-horn and as his buckskin reared, slid limply to the trail. The descending hoofs of the horse narrowly missed him.

KILGORE got off his horse and stalked to the motionless form, his six-shooter half-lifted for a quick throw-down.

"No doubt about that shot, I reckon," mumbled Kilgore. "Mr. Coultras, you was smart, but not quite the equal o' Larz Kilgore." He prodded Coultras with his foot, then stooped, pulling off the fallen man's Stetson. The starlight being insufficient for his purpose, he scraped a match on his chaps, and holding it in cupped hand, bent to a swift examination. A glance at the wound in Coultras' head, from which a dark, thin stream was coursing down his face, and Kilgore nodded grimly.

Hoofbeats adown the trail over which he and Coultras had come caused him to snap the match away and rise, tense and alert, his eyes, in the semi-dark, narrowing to slits. As yet a shoulder of rock hid the horseman from him, and he bent energetically to the task of dragging Coultras' body into the growth of brush a few yards off-trail. The buckskin belonging to Coultras had run away and was somewhere among the low buttes eastward. Kilgore stepped quickly to his own horse and threw leg across the saddle just as the newcomer surged past the shouldering rock. He came straight on with an assurance that caused Kilgore to lower the hammer of his gun and lean forward.

"That you, kid?" Larz called sharply.

"Yeh, Uncle Larz," the advancing rider instantly answered. "Get him?"

"You betche!" affirmed Larz Kilgore. "But why did you foller?"

"Just curious," admitted "kid," drawing rein. "Pokin' along in your dust since the two of you quit town, but hustled up when I head the shot, figurin' it was all over."

"Yep, an' not a nick on me. Took the bait neat, Mr. Coultras did. Layin' in the brush yonder with a hole in his cabeza. Tolloed him along with bunk till

we hit this bad lands stretch, where an Injun couldn't pick up a wagon-track an' when I sprung my real game I took no chances o' fumblin'. Nobody saw me speak to him in Jake's an' we left Saddleup separate, tharfore your Uncle Larz won't even be thought of when Mr. Coultras's carkiss is found. I dunno how slick he was, but you done a genuwine service for me'n the bunch, kid. You're a chip off the old block an' that's a heap o' compliment, lemme tell you."

"Thanks, unk. Mighty glad. Where's Coultras's hoss?"

"Dusted out. Don't make no differ. Hoss can't talk. 'Killed by parties unknown' will be Rollin' River's verdict, an' we'uns will be safe as ever. I'm meetin' the bunch later on. Want to come?"

"Not tonight. Well, I'm a heap relieved. So long, unk."

"So long, kid."

CHAPTER II

"IT'S sure kind of you, ma'am, to go to all this trouble—" began Bill Coultras.

"Don't speak of trouble," Miss Della Adams, daughter of the Lazy A owner, reproved him, her fingers deftly busy with the white bandage which was replacing the bandana Coultras had tied about his head. "You can consider yourself very lucky, Mr. Coultras. Had the bullet furrowed just a little deeper you wouldn't be talking to me now."

"That's me, Miss Adams—lucky. Always been thataway. Me'n Ol' Buck there, we've seen times an' are here yet, right side up. Ol' Buck's a pal to tie to." The buckskin, standing at the edge of the ranch-house porch, swung up his head at the sound of his name, and Coultras, grinning, called: "Wouldn't desert the boss when he was down an'

out, eh, Buck? Yep, ma'am, Miss Adams, there's sure hosses an hosses, an' Buck's top hoss."

From the time she was fourteen months old, when her mother died, until a year ago—a period of over twenty years—Miss Adams had lived with a maiden aunt in New Hampshire, but she fully appreciated the fineness of this binding affection between man and horse. It was something to be encountered only on the ranges, where a horse was man's best friend.

Rising earlier than usual, Della had been on the porch when, shortly before dawn, the gory-visaged Coultras rode into the ranch yard, and horrified by the spectacle he presented, she commanded him to dismount and let her examine the wound. After which she pushed him down in a porch chair and hurried indoors for clean bandages, a basin of water and a bottle of peroxide. Regarding the cause of his condition he told her only what he wished her to know, and it was little enough.

"Some of those awful rustlers, who recognized you as a Lazy A rider, I suppose," Della had said. "I do wish the marshal of this district would hurry and send down that special deputy he mentioned to daddy. There'll be no peace in Rolling River Valley until the villains are behind bars."

"Or lookin' up trees," Coultras had smiled, quickly explaining at her blank stare, by saying: "That was the old way an' it kept the ranks o' the bad hombres pretty thin."

The bandage tied securely, Miss Adams went gently smoothing out certain irregularities so that Bill's hat would fit without disarranging it, when a voice spoke harshly from the doorway:

"What's wrong, Coultras?"

Coultras got out of his chair and turned, a slow grin on his homely, rugged face. Della Adams whirled, color-

ing at the tone. Her brother, Calvin, whom she had seen for the first time on returning to her birthplace, the Lazy A, was leaning against the door-jamb, thumbs hooked in the arm-holes of his vest. Cal was a strapping youth and possessed of bold good-looks, in marked contrast to his sister's refined fairness.

"Why," Coultras replied to young Adams' brusque interrogation, "some sport with poor night eyes took my back for a target in the dark. Most cashed me, but a miss is good as a mile. Thank you for askin'." He turned abruptly back to Dell Adams and bowed with a quaint grace. "I'm sure 'bliged more'n I can put tongue to, ma'am. This head o' mine will mend right fast, seein' you was the doc, Miss Adams."

SHE dazzled him with her smile and put out her hand. Behind them, Cal's dark eyes took on an insane glare. "You must come and let me look at it later in the day, or tomorrow morning at least."

As Bill went down the steps and caught up Buck's trailing reins, he heard Cal say to his sister in a husky undertone:

"You'll be stuck on him next, the hossfaced—"

"Cal!" Della interrupted him commandingly, her voice lower-pitched than her brother's, yet reaching Coultras. "Be still! He'll hear you!" A slight pause, then: "He may not be handsome, but he looks like a real man!"

An angry snort from Cal.

"I never heard of a brother acting the way you do," went on the girl's voice. "I don't pretend to understand your queer moods. Jealous of every—"

The unintentional eavesdropper, leading old Buck, passed out of earshot, but he had heard enough to amply feed a reflective mood.

And her words, "he looks like a real man," would occupy far from last place.

When he had attended to Old Buck's needs and slapped him into the corral, sharp hunger drove Coultras to the cookshack. The Lazy A foreman, Jack Lerrigo, was the only occupant of the long table, and Jack's bushy brows lifted in surprise at Bill's appearance. While the cook rustled his grub, Coultras told the foreman the same brief, vague tale he had recounted to Dell and her brother, of a shot from behind while riding a dark trail.

"Wasn't drunk by any chance, eh, Coultras?" said Lerrigo, a twinkle in his eye. "I happen to know Jake, on the sly, peddles stuff that'll hand you a jolt."

"No," replied Bill. "One drink, an' that hadn't no more kick than a shot o' lemonade. Feller tried to gun me 'cause I'm workin' for the Lazy A, I reckon, like Miss Dell suggested awhile back. The waddies don't cotton much to Lazy A men, do they?"

"No. Yet they don't pick on the Lazy A alone, not by no means. It's months now that all Rollin' River Valley ranchers have been losin' stock, losin' heavy, an' there's been several killin's. The situation is serious, Coultras. Traillin' has plumb failed. Rustlers hit out for the bad lands country, where all tracks disappear, the minute they've cut out a bunch of beef. If your head's bad, Coultras, you can take the day off. Mebbe you've had enough o' ridin' for an outfit that draws shots in the back an' would like to quit?"

"Quit," said Bill, with his slow smile, "is a word I don't spell. Then waddies have started a feud with me personal," touching fingertips to bandage, "an' I'm in the game to a fare-thee-well. An' thankin' you just the same, Lerrigo, I can make out to ride. I'll get me a fresh hoss, though."

"That's the talk!" approved the foreman, shoving his hand across the table. "I'm glad you don't pull leather."

WHEN he quit the cook-shack, feeling better, Coultras turned his steps to the bunk-house, usually deserted at this time of day, to get a new neck-cloth. He dragged his war-sack from under his bunk, secured the bandana, then be-thought himself of a certain article he had secreted at the bottom of the bag when he hired out to the Lazy A. A swift but careful search failed to bring it to light. Not particularly surprised, in view of recent events, he rocked on his heels and frowned thoughtfully.

"Stole!" he muttered. "An' what was the sense doin' that? I might be gone, but I'd not be forgotten. Kinda struck me that young Cal shorthorn acted like he'd been caught sheep-liftin' when I come in here unexpected yesterday mornin', but bein' who he was sidetracked my suspicions. I'm beginnin' to see the light in last night's business—an' it's a damn freak deal all-around!"

CHAPTER III

COULTRAS, after some rapid and decisive thinking, hastened to the saddle-stock corral. The big pinto usually ridden by Cal Adams was still there, proof that its owner had not yet quit the ranch for the range; and Coultras lost no time in roping and saddling Old Buck. He had intended to ride one of the ranch string and let the buckskin rest, until the discovery of the theft of his deputy marshal's badge had furnished him with a definite clue. If the clue developed as it should and he met the enemy, Bill would have need of Old Buck's oft-tested sagacity and speed, and no strange horse would do.

"Must be shakin' a hoof outa here, boy," he told the buckskin as he

strained at the cinches. "Young Adams is most sure to carry word to Kilgore that I'm alive, so's the ol' bushwackin' waddy will ride wide o' Saddleup. The news'll be welcome an' put Mr. Kilgore plumb at his ease—not! He banked so much on reducin' me to buzzard meat he didn't mind givin' hisself away entire. Right now the only folks I don't suspect o' bein' mixed in this rustlin' are Miss Dell an' myself an' you, Buck. She sure ain't wise none. Tough for her."

In a brief range of hills, half a mile from the Lazy A, Coultras hid Buck in a brush-clump, ascended one of the eminences, which commanded a view of the ranch unobstructed, and lay down to watch. Perhaps twenty minutes later the big pinto, doubtless with Cal aboard, steered forth from the vicinity of the ranch buildings and pointed along the trail Bill had taken when he rode for the hills. If Cal kept straight on he would pass the very hill on which Coultras was ensconced. And he did, unaware of the watcher.

For over an hour, at a discreet distance, Bill Coultras trailed the rider of the pinto. They short-cut across the Lazy A range, finally left the Valley of Rolling River altogether and struck into a country of endless ridges and ravines. Cal Adams' route was so carefully picked that trailed and trailer encountered not a single rider.

Threading a brush- and - boulder choked ravine after his quarry, Bill heard a voice hail Cal as the pinto scrambled over the rim, far in the lead. Instantly Bill checked Buck and slipped from the saddle. Evidently some kind of a rendezvous had been reached, and to avoid discovery it were safer now for the deputy marshal to proceed afoot. Up the steep trail out of the defile toiled Coultras, finding it well beaten from the passing of many hoofs. Not cattle, but horse tracks.

To the left, at the top of the trail, a pine thicket offered temporary cover and into this Coultras, Indian-wise, snaked his long body; then, hat off, slowly straightened to take stock of his surroundings. Fifty yards from the edge of the thicket was a shack. Doorless, and with part of the roof fallen in, evidently a long-abandoned line-camp, it was now occupied, for three horses, reins down, stood in front of it, one of them the big pinto. Inside one man was talking—Cal—but try as he might Coultras could not distinguish the words.

THIS broken-down shack, of course, could not be the headquarters of the waddy organization slowly throttling the cattle trade of Rolling River Valley, but was probably a way-station between the main hideout and the Mexican border. Three of the gang were within Colt-shot of the marshal, but behind walls. Those walls constituted a problem to be thought out, and quickly.

"While they're inside they've got a sight more advantage of me than just numbers," Bill reflected. "Couldn't make that fifty yards in the open without 'em spottin' me from door or winder, not if I was an Injun, which I ain't. Them holes in the wall is big enough to see through, too. Could wait till they're done palaverin', but then mebbe only one or two would come out, an' *one* inside'd be enough to copper my game. Thing is to draw 'em all outside together without tippin' my hand, an' there must be a way—"

His rambling gaze rested once again on the three mounts, and that instant his problem was solved. He picked up a stone and hurled it at the near horse. Struck on the hip, the animal reared, snorting, and coming to earth again, broke into a fast lope. Its startled mates trailed after.

Immediately, inside the shack, Cal's voice ceased, then the voices of the three were raised in chorus on a note of consternation. Coultras clearly caught the word "hosses." There was a quick, jingling thud of boots on the floor-boards, and then Cal Adams sprang through the doorless aperture, two hard-faced citizens in puncher garb crowding his heels. A short distance from the shack the three runaways had stopped and were looking back with ears pricked forward.

"What the hell started them runnin'?" Cal demanded irately of his companions, as if they were responsible. "Must be a painter snoopin' around—"

A voice from the thicket checked him, a voice he knew well, and the three men whirled as one, eyes a-pop, hands involuntarily streaking holsterward. His Colt leveled from the waist—and wishing he were a two-gun man that moment—Bill Coultras was rapidly cutting down the fifty yards that separated them.

"You heard me the first time—reach for the sky!" Bill repeated. His quarry looked ready to take any kind of a desperate chance, especially Cal. Nervously the gun-hands of the trio clenched and opened, poised above holstered weapons. None wanted to be the first to draw the enemy's fire.

"I'll get two o' you anyway, likely all!" rapped Coultras. From their attitudes he foresaw naught but a climax of guns roaring redly, until suddenly and concertedly their glances shifted from his face and focused beyond. The transformation of their faces, from desperation to relief, apprised Bill of danger rearward, but he was powerless to help himself in that direction.

"Leggo that gun an' hands up yourself, feller!" the unseen directed Coultras. "Got you lined with a Winchester an' she sure sings a funeral tune! I

come on his hoss down in the ravine," enlightened the rescuer, addressing the three, "an' sort o' Injuned up to see what was comin' off."

C Coultras, caught foul, and thereafter deeply chagrined, allowed his gun to slip from his fingers and slowly raised his arms. Cal Adams, his eyes narrowed to slits of flame, strode forward instantly. Hatred of Coultras consumed him, standing forth naked in his eyes, dominating his whole expression—a venomous and deep-rooted hatred not at all inspired by the fact that Coultras was an officer of the law and had surprised him fraternizing with outlaws. Jealousy had stirred that evil passion in him, white-heat. Della had been taken with the rugged masculinity of the deputy. She had said so plainly.

"Trailed me, huh, you hoss-faced skunk?" snarled Cal, kicking Bill's gun to one side and pausing in front of him. Bill mentally likened young Adam's expression to that of a bayed timber wolf, and wondered a bit at its virulence.

"Sure I trailed you," Coultras admitted, easily, "an' you're mighty headshy not to figger I would. Findin' my star gone this mornin', I pieced things together easy, rememberin' I'd caught you cat-footin' around the bunk-house yesterday mornin' when I come after my buckskins. Bein' guilty as hell an' knowin', I reckon, that Marshal Hyatt was sendin' a man, you was suspicious o' me, a stranger, an' went through my plunder to make sure. Then you quick wised up your rustler friends an' that banty-legged ol' rawhide Kilgore undertook to bump me off. Clever, mighty, but—me comin' back from the dead, as you might say, must've been some of a shock to your delicate nerves. Well, I figgered you'd be takin' a warnin' instanter to the gang that I didn't go under—"

"An' by follerin' me you'd locate where they holed up," interrupted Cal. "Fooled yourself. This ain't the hang-out. Smarter'n hell you are!"

"Thanks. Always was. Brains an' luck—the combination can't be beat," Coultras drawled. "Sorry I can't return the compliment in full. Overplayed your hand when you swiped my badge. But for that li'l slip I'd be in the dark yet."

"Slip or not, don't make no difference now!" gritted young Adams. "My—Kilgore bungled the job, but I won't! Here, you might's well be wearin' your tin star when you peg out!"

He extracted the missing badge from a chap-pocket as he spoke and pinned it on Coultras' breast.

"Thanks agin. I feel more official-like now," nodded Bill, grimly.

The man with the Winchester had saddled around from behind Coultras and stood off at one side, holding a rather careless bead on the deputy—for what could one man, unarmed, do against four, fully "heeled"? The other two rustlers were some distance back of Cal, giving attentive ear to the dialogue. Out of the corner of his eye Bill noted the relative positions of his enemies and his mind was working keenly. Playing for time, that he might invent a means of reversing the situation, he drawled:

"Daddy Adams know you're such a bad un, Calvin? Or is pap hisself one o' the gang?"

"You'll not live to find out, that's sure," declared Cal, hardily. "Crowley an' Bendig, here, they've always claimed to be better shots than me. Now's a good time to settle it once and for all. We'll try some fancy shootin' with you as the target, trimmin' your hair, frillin' your ears an' the like, an' then—one dead center between the eyes! Tie your hands an' stand you against the shack wall, an' I'll not bother with no blind-foldin'."

Young Adams' fingers had no more than closed on the neck-cloth when Bill's lifted arms dropped around him, the right one, like a band of steel, encircling his waist and hugging him close, the left hand closing on Cal's Colt-butt. A quick, sidewise heave, as if Cal were an infant instead of a man nearly the height and weight of the marshal, and the bewildered rifleman found himself covering young Adams' back. Cal's own gun was boring into his side and Coultras was vowing, as their heads touched:

"I'll sure as hell blow you apart, you young wolf, if you fight a mite! Sky them hands! That's sense," as Cal, stringing oaths, but perceiving no loophole, obeyed. "You with the rifle," Coultras went on, "drop it, 'nless you want to use it on Cal's back. He's under arrest an' I'm takin' him to Saddleup, dead or alive."

"Can't be bothered with the rest o' you cow crooks, under the circumstances," Bill flung at the three wolf-eyed waddies uneasily shifting their feet beyond the close-locked pair, "but gettin' Cal is a fine start. Bring a hoss here, one o' you, any hoss but the big paint, which may've been taught tricks by his boss. Cal an' me are ridin' double an' I don't want no trick hoss under me while I've got a slippery prisoner to watch. Hurry up now! I ain't particular whether Cal goes in head up or toes up."

Coultras would have preferred backing Old Buck, of course, but to order him brought from the ravine would remove one of the enemy from range of eye and gun—which might be tempting fate too far. He must chance it that he would recover the buckskin later.

"How about it, Cal?" the rustler, Crowley, called out, ensuing an exchange of questioning glances with his companions and much shuffling of hesitant feet.

"Get a hoss! He'll never take me to

Saddleup!" snarled the die-hard Cal.

Crowley wheeled and slowly approached the three horses bunched up the trail beyond the shack. The rustlers were groping desperately in their minds for an expedient to extricate Cal Adams from his predicament, and well Coultras knew it and was alert accordingly. Crowley led up his own horse, a sorrel, and reluctantly retired when sharply admonished to "back away."

"You others keep your distance, too," Bill Coultras added, observing that Bendig and the rifle-toter had advanced a cautious step or two. "I'm pluggin' Cal for any cat moves from you galoots same's if he makes 'em hisself. Fair warnin'."

It was the crucial moment. A task not easy of accomplishment to divide one's attention among four dangerous men. And that his captor was thus handicapped by having but one pair of eyes was a fact upon which Cal's wily mind dwelt. Desperate as a bayed and wounded cougar, with good reason, no chance was too big for him to take.

SLIDING his right arm from Cal's waist, Bill transferred the Colt to that hand, and stretched his left to grasp the sorrel's dangling reins.

Just the toe of Cal's left foot touched the box-stirrup and he swung upward, throwing his right leg across—and kept going, in a rapid, continuous movement. Slid completely around to the other side of the horse and struck the earth asprawl, backward. A fraction too late the deputy, letting go the bridle, made a grab for Cal's left leg, the last part of his anatomy to go over the saddle.

He had lost out, no use to attempt recapture, Coultras realized instantly. Unconfused by the sudden turn of events, he knew there was but one thing to do—and did it, acting as swiftly as had Cal. The roaring applause of Adams' friends checked in mid-utter-

ance as Bill Coultras took the saddle in a flying mount and bending low, hung his spurs into sorrel. A shot, two, three, blazed from Bill's outflung hand toward the three standing rustlers as six-guns and rifle swung to aim, and almost trampling the scrambling Cal, the sorrel streaked, wild-eyed and snorting, backward, and whisked around one end of it. A rifle bullet burned Coultras' forearm, lead from a Colt gouged a white streak in the corner of the shack, before he vanished. Had he looked back he would have seen Bendig stretched out, face in the dirt. One of Coultras' random shots had not sped wild.

CHAPTER IV

NEAR high noon Coultras on a foam-speckled horse and clinging to the saddle-horn, crossed the southern boundary of the Lazy A range. He checked the sorrel and turned to survey the back trail, his sight blurring. The three men who had been pushing him relentlessly had dropped from view. Just how far back they had quit his trail Coultras was unable to tell, for in the last ten or fifteen minutes there had been brief periods when he was only half-conscious. His violent activity at the old line-camp and the ensuing hard riding had re-opened the wound in his head, and loss of blood had so weakened him that several times he nearly toppled from the saddle. Sheer grit kept him in it, he wouldn't allow himself to fall. But for his condition he would have sought good standing-ground early in the chase and finished the affair in smoke.

"Hopin' I could draw 'em after me clear onto the Lazy A range," he muttered, facing front again and lifting the reins, "but they was feared o' meetin' up with riders. I banked on that same

myself. Crowley on Ol' Buck sure would've run me down if the race'd lasted much longer. Ol' Buck doin' his damndest," a shadow of the characteristic grin appeared on his blood-streaked visage, "to tote trouble to his boss—not knowin'."

Topping the next rise of ground, Coultras saw below, where a tiny creek twisted snake-fashion across the broad slope, a white-hooded wagon drawn up, and grouped nearby several men and horses. Thin smoke lifting above the wagon-cover advertised the cook's fire alight on the far side of the vehicle. Some of the Lazy A outfit nooning, of course, and Coultras steered his "borrowed" mount down.

"Man, what's up!" exclaimed Jack Lerrigo, the Lazy A foreman, rising from cross-legged posture as the deputy marshal rode in. "Your face is a mess o' blood! New wound, or the old one broke out? Been fightin', sure!"

He hurried over as Bill unsteadily dismounted. Every puncher was on his feet, and the star flashing on Coultras' shirt held every eye.

"Not fightin'—runnin'," answered Bill, putting a hand on Lerrigo's shoulder to steady himself. "Jumped up some o' the waddies an' couldn't finish proper what I'd started, 'count o' this hurt head. Lemme sit down—an' gimme 'bout a quart o' black coffee, no sugar. Then I'll talk. Kinda dizzy. Tie the hoss. Ain't mine, nor yet one o' yours. Borrowed."

ONE of the punchers pressed forward to take the sorrel in charge and staked it out near the other horses, while Lerrigo assisted Coultras over to the chuck wagon. Bill sank to the ground, with his back against a front wheel, and for a moment closed his eyes. Gently Lerrigo removed the deputy's Stetson and scrutinized the bloody bandage.

"Bleedin' seems to've stopped," the foreman stated as Bill's eyes opened again. "An' anyways, I ain't enough of a sawbones to fool with that bandage."

"No, leave the bandage be." Coultras smiled faintly. "Miss Della done put that on, an' no hand but hers is takin' it off."

"So that's the way the shot lays! Peel your optics for young Cal, then—he don't like no body takin' a shine to his sister," laughed Lerrigo, and there was a round of chuckles from the punchers grouped behind him. "Water an' a rag, Sam," he continued, taking a tin of steaming coffee from the outthrust hand of the outfit cook. "He'll want to wash his face, anyways."

Coultras drank the coffee, removed the bloodstains when the cook lugged up a pail of water and a towel, and declared he felt better already—and hungry.

"Knew the U. S. marshal o' this district was sendin' a man to help us spot the rustlers," remarked Lerrigo, squatting on his heels beside Coultras while the latter ate, "but I never suspected you was him. None o' the outfit did, I'm sure."

Coultras merely nodded. He had forgotten to unpin his star before entering the noon camp, but the manner of his reception by the men, in true guise, dispelled most of the doubt he had entertained regarding the Lazy A outfit. He was competent to disagree with the foreman that nobody had suspected his real character and mission, and discerned that Lerrigo was not dissembling in asserting negatively, but, out of consideration for the sister of the lawless youth, no mention of Cal Adams did Coultras make, then, or later, when he recounted to absorbed listeners his run-in with the cattle thieves. It was a much deleted narration. His audience gathered that he

had come across the deserted line-camp by accident, surprising a meeting of the rustlers, and failing in the attempt to take them, had got away on one of the waddies' mounts, as they had cut him off from his own. None of the heroic details, which breed of men like the Lazy A riders could fully appreciate.

"Runnin'-iron tied under the saddle skirt, didja notice?" put in the cowboy who had taken out the sorrel.

COULTRAS nodded. "Sure. Expect to find such a tool on a waddy's cayuse, wouldn't you? Well, boys, to finish up, they chased me an' here I am. If I'd been in shape I'd done a heap less runnin', believe me. If only they'd hung on till we reached that rise yonder! One o' my shots, when I broke away on the sorrel, must've gone home, for only three was after me."

"Tally one for law an' order!" exulted Lerrigo. "Now, Marshal, I savvy where that shack's at—was a line-camp years back, owner of the outfit went bust—an' wouldn't it be the stunt for me'n the boys to sashay right out—"

"You'd find nobody there, now nor never," interrupted Coultras. "Since I've discovered the place, which was only a sort o' way-station, I reckon, those crooks are crafty enough not to use it agin."

"But we could pick up their trail an'—"

"Lose it before you'd got far. You know what the country's like down that way, rocky an' broke up. So much mountains hemmin' in these Rollin' River ranges it gives the waddies all the advantage."

Lerrigo bobbed assent. "You're plumb c'rect. Otherwise we'd have trailed 'em home long ago."

"You gimme time to think an' I'll find a way to get at 'em," stated Coultras, with pardonable confidence. "Don't admire braggin', but I've never fell

down yet—in the finals. An' don't you be sore none that I hid my identity when I signed up on the Lazy A payroll. In my job I suspect everybody at the go-off."

They left him then, at ease against the wagon wheel, and swinging aborse, hit out for the skyline. It was not round-up time, but with the rustlers growing every day bolder, the cowboys sometimes did not see the home ranch for a week or more at a stretch, hence the presence of the trail-wagon, which trundled from point to point as the men patrolled the range. It had left the ranch that morning, new-loaded with supplies. All Rolling River outfits were following this procedure.

Bill Coultras was mechanically manufacturing his third cigarette when the actions of Crowley's horse roused him from his brown study and drew his close attention. The animal was restlessly pulling at its picket-pin, backing away the length of the rope, and walking first to one side, then the other, when the line tauted. Coultras came as near being excited as he ever was when the full meaning of the sorrel's restiveness, with the possibilities for turning it to account, occurred to him suddenly.

"That's it, eh? Know you're in a strange camp an' want to go home," said the deputy marshal, speaking his thoughts aloud to the cayuse, which paid no heed to the sound of his voice, continuing to brace back on the picket-rope. "Damned if you're not pointin' a plain, straight trail to me, you thief's pony!"

"What you sayin'?" the cook, Sam, suspended his labors to inquire—but got no reply. Bill full of his new idea, heaved to his feet and approaching the sorrel, put forth a hand to stroke the velvet muzzle, but the horse would not permit the caress, flinging up its head and sidestepping.

"One-man hoss, eh?—an' I'm not the man," muttered Bill, delightedly. "Better yet. Your boss is a waddy, but he's good to you. Listen, boy you be-have awhile an' I'll let you go home back to the boss. An' as I'd like to meet your boss agin, him an' his com-padres, I'll tag along."

CULTRAS wheeled abruptly toward the chuck wagons and called to Sam, who was watching him curiously, "Know where Lerrigo an' the rest went? Can you find 'em quick?"

"Reckon," replied Sam. "They was aimin' to ride the draws beyond the west pastures, where a lotta stock's been lost."

"Got a saddle," Coultras began.

"Blanket an' hackamore'll do me," interposed Sam. "Can ride 'em slick if necessary, even if I do have a leanin' t'wards mixin' sour-dough an' jugglin' airtights."

"Good. I want to save myself an' this pony for rough-goin' s'afternoon or I'd go. Reckon you can find 'em quicker, at that. Sam, you bring 'em, many men as you can, an' 'nless it's a hell of a long ways, before sundown we'll be knockin' at the door o' the rustlin' gang's hideout!"

Sam was mightily curious but had the common sense not to stop then and question. He tossed his apron into the wagon, dragged forth a blanket and hurried to his grazing team. Shortly he was raising dust into the west.

Forty minutes later Coultras lifted from his seat beside the chuck wagon to flap his Stetson at the body of horse-men moving creekward at a slashing gait.

"See you picked up four more than was here at noontime," Coultras greeted Lerrigo as the foreman arrived first and dismounted. "That makes eleven, countin' me an' leavin' out the cook. Enough, I reckon, seein' most are

packin' rifles as well as sixes. You look like walkin' arsenals."

"Been doin' that since rustlin' got so bad," said Lerrigo. "Sam said you'd figgered out a plan—"

"Yeh. Here 'tis," and Coultras briefly explained. Listening, the foreman was amazed and shared Bill's enthusiasm; no less the punchers surrounding them, a horse.

"The king-pin idear!" Lerrigo exploded. "A long head you've got, Marshal. But say, you ain't in no shape for hard saddlework—"

"Ain't!" the indomitable Coultras flashed. "Don't you think so for a minit. I'm whalebone an' rawhide, Jack, an' lemme tell you I'd go if I had to ride in the chuck wagon. An' as to the shape o' my head, 'tain't different from any other feller's—be thankin' my doggone good luck! Any man who understands hosses could read what's in that bronc's mind. Know hosses if I know anything—had to do with 'em all my life—an' like dogs they can find their way home. He'll take us where he's used to carryin' his waddy rider."

CHAPTER V

STRIPPED of all riding-gear—which equipment had been transferred to the cook's horse, appropriated by Coultras—Crowley's sorrel headed south the instant it was turned loose. The eleven riders got in motion, settling themselves for long, arduous saddlework, with a probable brisk battle at the end of the trail.

For two hours the grim cavalcade kept in sight, through draw and arroyo, over ridge and flat, foothills and higher range, that whisking pony guide. Deep into the Rolling River Mountains it led them, under the shadows of the cloud-piercing peaks, over a route none but

range-bred horses could have followed, at the pace set by the four-footed traitor. Only once or twice did the equine conductor appear to lose its bearings, and then quickly recovered them, and the further they penetrated the mountains the surer became its lead. Small wonder that the outraged cattlemen down in the valley were unable to retrieve stock once it had been driven into this mountain maze.

Bill Coultras was standing the rough ride well, and finding the cook's horse worthy of Sam's praise at parting: "easy-gaited, but no slouch traveler." Since entering the mountains, the waddy-hunters had reduced the original lead of their pony guide by half, which proved now to have been a wise precaution. Paired off with Jack Lerrigo in the van of the riders, and seeing the saddleless horse suddenly quicken his pace, heading apparently for the mouth of a gully in their path, Bill exclaimed:

"Rope the critter, Jack! End of trail, I reckon, an' we want to spring a surprise if it's in the wood."

But quick as Lerrigo unstrapped his rope and surged ahead, one of the cowpunchers, Hogan, was quicker. He shot past the foreman, rowelling his mount, his lariat swinging. The rope darted out under the impetus of a back-hand flip, the noose fell true, Hogan's pony slid with forelegs stiffened and the sorrel was jerked down.

"Hold him," Coultras addressed Hogan as he passed the cowboy, who was loping toward the fallen sorrel and coiling up his rope as he went. "I'm scoutin' ahead for a look-see into that gully."

The gully, Coultras found, was not over a hundred yards deep and terminated in a towering wall of rock with a narrow, irregular gash in its face. After a thorough long-range survey, the deputy returned to the men grouped down the trail. His report was given

earnest attention.

"Valley behind that wall, I reckon," he added, "where the rustlers live an' hold run-off cattle till they can be marketed across the border."

"Goin' right through, ain't you?" Thus young Hogan, his hard, keen eyes glinting with battle light. The face of all reflected similar eagerness to be "doing" without delay.

"I should reckon not!" Coultras replied, emphatically. "You're locoed, cowboy! That gash is so narrow we'd have to enter Injun file, an' with the waddies—we can't even guess how many—inside, you can figger what our chances'd be. I'd be willin' to bet—well, anything you like—that all the men in Brander County couldn't reach the waddies by goin' through that hole. Same reason the Hole in the Wall up Wyoming way was so long a safe hide-out for outlaws."

"Marshal's right," quoth Lerrigo, who, more readily than the rest, had visualized the lay of the land from Coultras' description.

"Any ideas?" the deputy asked, glancing hopefully around; but heads were shaken. "Must be some way o' reachin' the top o' that wall without bein' seen," Bill went on, after some minutes of dead silence. "From the rim we could look down into the waddy camp an mebbe see our way clear to rout 'em out. We can't get in by the front door. Lerrigo an' Hogan will trail along o' me, an' you others stay here out o' sight till you hear from us."

THE three men left the vicinity of the gully, circling wide in search of an ascent to the rocky heights enclosing the supposed hidden valley. A steep slope, rising so nearly perpendicular that they had to leave their horses at the bottom and dig hand-and-toe holds in the gravelly surface as they climbed, was the only upward route they could

discover. But the view they obtained of the rustlers' retreat from the rim of the wall amply rewarded their struggle up the slope. The exertion caused Coultras' head to bleed afresh and several times he found it necessary to pause, clinging precariously, and fight dizziness and slight nausea. But he refused the proffered assistance of the others steadily, firmly. He had iron in his blood; an abundance.

Stretched at the cliff's edge, sans sombreros so they could peer over with small chance of being detected, even should any of the cattle thieves happen to glance up, the trio looked their fill and exulted silently. In the bowl-shaped, cliff-walled valley below them, not far from the narrow inlet from the gully, ten or a dozen men stood about a blanket-shrouded form on the ground—Bendig.

"Stiff must be the feller that stopped my lead at the ol' line-camp," spoke Coultras to the men on either side of him. "Ones that chased me are down there, though I can't recognize 'em so far away." His eyes quitting the group of rustlers and traveling along the right-hand side of the valley, came to rest on three saddled horses. "There's Ol' Buck! Aimin' to get him back, you betche!"

He looked in vain for Cal Adams' big pinto, but made no comment at the time. Its absence seemed to indicate that Cal had not come to the hideout. Where, then, was he? Since Coultras had "put the sign on him" he dare not show his face again on the home range.

Up the valley a short distance from the three saddled horses was a rope corral, holding the saddle stock of the rustlers. A small stream, branch of the Rolling River, which had its source in these mountains, watered the valley, and because of it, bunch-grass flourished. On this pasturage, on the far side of the hideout, about two hundred

head of lost shorthorns and grade long-horns were grazing as contentedly as if they belonged there.

"Fine layout," remarked Bill, when he had taken in all there was to see. "Now, what's the best move? Likely we could pick 'em all off from the rim here with Winchesters, but I want to take alive as many as possible—got to, as an officer o' the law." He drew back from the cliff's edge and sat up, the others imitating him. "How'll we drive 'em into the open? Think! you fellers."

"Us'ally I shoot first an' think afterwards, marshal." Thus, drily, Lerrigo.

"No hand for idears, me," declared Hogan. "I come to fight"; and then, irrelevantly, "Some uh our cows down there, I reckon. We want to take 'em back when we go."

BUT by this remark, which had no bearing on the real question, he unconsciously furnished the deputy marshal with the needed inspiration.

"The cows; Hell's bells, Hogan, you've figgered it out an' not knowin' it!" Bill exclaimed. "We'll let the cattle drive the waddies from their hole!"

"How?" Thus Lerrigo and Hogan together, jaws agape.

"Stampede! An' the way we'll start it the waddies won't wise up till the herd's high-tailin' for 'em—you can gamble they'll quit the valley soon's the Lord an' hossflesh will let 'em *then*! Hogan, you slide down an' get your rope an' Jack's, an' two o' the saddle blankets."

Hogan "slid." He came up again, panting, with a coiled rope over each arm and the blankets around his shoulders.

"Now, Hogan," said the marshal, as the cowboy shed the articles from his person, "you slide back to the boys an' tell 'em to be ready to stop the rustlers as they come out into the gully. Needn't come up here again. Jack an'

me can work the stampede an' we'll join you below soon's we've got all, men, hosses an' cows, peltin' for the exit. Give you fifteen minits to reach the bunch before we cut loose."

"Make 'em in less," declared Hogan, and turning, went down the slope a deal faster than was safe, flung astride his cayuse bareback at the base, and spurred from sight.

"At m' heels, Jack," said Bill, then, and began to crawl forward, dragging a rope and a blanket. They crept along the heights until the grazing cattle were directly beneath them.

"Watch me an' do the same," directed Coultras, squatting Turk-legged, well back from the edge of the wall and spreading his blanket, one corner of which he tied securely to the lariat. "Sixty feet o' hemp will do it. Dancin' dolls for the cows!"

"Purty slick," grinned Lerrigo, catching on. "You've punched beef in your time an' know anything strange sets 'em crazy."

Coultras nodded; and shortly announced:

"Time's up. We'll lower 'em together. Jig 'em lively when the cows can see 'em!"

Down the face of the sheer wall descended the blankets, hanging in irregular folds and quiescent until on a level with the cattle, when, manipulated puppet-fashion by hands on rope-ends above, they began to flap and dance grotesquely. Nervousness was immediately apparent among the cows nearest the strange jiggling things against the wall. That nervousness soon would spread, increase to frenzied fright. Jerking hard on his rope, unmindful of the blood trickling down one cheek, Coultras managed to whip his blanket into the face of a big longhorn. The animal, bellowing, changed ends with itself and prodded into the midst of its fellows. Its clamor and wild charge

decided those wavering in indecision that there was something to be afraid of. Panic-stricken, all at once, the herd bolted.

The rustlers, whose attention had been drawn to the farther side of the valley by the commotion among the cows, saw them coming in a mad, thunderous wave. Forgotten instantly were the two man-shapes described by the waddies atop the far wall in this sudden, terrible menace.

AS one man, and cursing wildly, they rushed for mounts. Three of the fleetest got a head start of their comrades by appropriating the saddled horses. The rest raced on toward the rope-coral and piled inside, each man vaulting upon the first horse he could catch and clinging burr-like to the bare back. Desperation spurring them, in an incredibly short time the rope-coral was empty and the whole band lining for the gash, which was entrance and exit both. As but a single horseman at a time could pass out, the air smoked with profanity as those behind urged comrades ahead to hurry. The front of the stampede was rolling appallingly near. The rustlers who, by force of circumstance, were last in line, began popping away with their Colts at the rushing, red-eyed steer leaders cursing frenziedly the while.

But none were caught, for all their panic. The last waddy had flicked through the gash before the stampede rolled against it. Because of the narrowness of the exit, the cattle jammed in a frantic, struggling mass, all trying to get out at once. Many nearest the outlet were crushed by the killing pressure from behind, and some forced into the passage, limping or lunging, as their condition permitted, for the gully.

Coultras and Lerrigo, meanwhile, were descending the slope to their horses. With the herd hammering for

the other side of the valley, preceded at top speed by the cattle thieves, their work on the cliffs was done—and well done. Coultras made painfully slow progress. Lerrigo, going first, was prepared to stop the deputy if he lost his balance, realizing Coultras' weakness and mentally placing him above all men he had ever known for "sand" and "savvy." Before they were in the saddle, the crash of gunfire announced that the two parties had met in the gully or nearby. Coultras holding to his saddle-horn and grimly game, they pointed for the scene of action. But ere they arrived, the shooting had ceased. Just outside the gully the rustlers were herded together, facing sullenly, with hands lifted, a ring of rifles and six-guns. Some had only one arm raised, the other hanging shattered; two horses were riderless.

"Good work, boys!" called out Coultras, as he and Lerrigo galloped in. "Start tyin' 'em. Not long till sundown now."

The gully was filling with the cattle dribbling out of the gash, and noting it and not wishing them to scatter, Lerrigo turned to Bill:

"Some o' the boys best be corralin' that stock. Halfta hold it here till mornin'. Never could drift 'em over the rough trail we come by, in the dark."

COULTRAS nodded. "Righto. An' them that's left to guard won't go hungry with nigh two hundred head o' beef around. Sorry some had to get killed in that stampede, but they're the last the Rolling River ranchmen will lose by these raw birds. I'm lookin' for my buckskin hoss. See him?"

Old Buck was easily singled out, and who should be forking him but the bow-legged shooter-in-the-back, Larz Kilgore! Old Larz met Coultras' grim gaze with defiant eyes.

"One minit, podner," said Coultras to

the cowboy who was preparing to lash Kilgore's feet beneath Buck's belly. "That's my hoss. Put the banty-legged ol' Injun on this'n," and he dismounted from the cook's horse.

"Well, Kilgore," said Bill turning to look up at the old range wolf, "shootin' from behind didn't save you, did it? Never works in the end, a underhand play like that. Got all your gang but one—where is he?"

Silence on Kilgore's part.

"You know who I mean," Bill persisted. "Cal Adams, the handy boy that first wised up to me bein' a U. S. deputy marshal."

"Dunno nothin' about Cal Adams!" snarled Kilgore. He was silent a moment, then blurted, "I'd admire a heap to know how you found this place."

Coultras enlightened him.

"Hell!" was all the amazed Kilgore said, but he uttered it forcibly and disgustedly.

"What's that you're sayin' about Cal Adams? Is he one o' them?" came the surprised voice of Jack Lerrigo at Coultras' elbow. He had been within ear-shot when Cal's name was mentioned, and ridden up.

"Yep," replied Bill, quietly, "he's one o' them, Jack, an' I'll get him, though mighty sorry I gotta account o' that doggone fine sister o' his."

Neither Coultras nor Lerrigo observed that Kilgore's bearded lips twisted in a crooked smile as the deputy spoke.

CHAPTER VI

OLD ASA ADAMS' great bulk was sprawled out in his favorite chair in the Lazy A living-room. The lamp-light fell upon his slightly bowed head so as to trace in bold, black lines the seams and furrows carved in

his broad face by the elements—and the years.

"Feel a mite trembly in my legs," declared Bill Coultras, who, standing in front of the ranchman, had been talking steadily for some minutes, "an' a chair looks better to me right now than my ol' hull."

"Sure, sure. Excuse my manners, Mr. Coultras. You, too, Jack," the Lazy A owner addressed his foreman, also present, leaning against the wall. "Squat both o' you. It's a kind o' shock to learn about Cal, but," the old cattleman sat up suddenly, bracing his wide shoulders, "it ain't so much of a shock as if the boy was my own son!"

"If he was!" chorused Coultras and Lerrigo, staring, as they took chairs.

"He ain't an' that's a fact," averred Asa Adams, in a tone of mingled regret and relief. "'Tain't such a long story. I was a pioneer in this here valley, first to run a brand, an' I'd just begun to make it pay when rustlers showed up. They bothered me plenty, but final me'n my riders bayed 'em, an' bein' ourselves the only law in the valley them days, we strung 'em up—all but one, who had a faster hoss than the rest. Jim Kilgore, Cal's daddy, was leader o' the gang. We found the baby Cal in Kilgore's shack an' 'fore we danced the old man on air, I promised Kil I'd take the kid an' look after him.

"I sure kept my promise to that rustler, adoptin' the boy all reg'lar an' givin' him a straight name. Cal hisself never knowed he wasn't my son till a few months ago, about the time the waddies got to pesterin' so bad. He come to me one day, sayin' he'd found out his real name was Kilgore an' all about his daddy bein' stretched by me, years back. Admittin' it was true, I asked who'd told him, but he wouldn't say. He didn't seem to hold the hangin' against me, kind o' pleased instead—that is, to know he wasn't no relation to

me, tharfore no relation to Della. For, as I could see with half a eye, he'd been in love with Dell, my darter, ever since she come back to the ranch from Noo Hampshire.

"Well, gen'lemen, he up an' declared his love that day. Wanted me to tell Dell the real facts, so's he could start a-courtin' proper right off. Crazy about her. But I wouldn't hear of it, not for a minit. I knew she didn't like him an' never could, 'cause she'd told me, wonderin' at the same time why. An' besides, in boyhood an' since he's a young man, I caught him bein' dishonest different ways—the inherited thief streak croppin' out. Can't blame me then, can you, for turnin' him down? That turn-down, I reckon, made him go all to the bad. I never thought, though, that he'd be so low-thrown as to fling in with thieves an' steal from me who's been a real father to him an' tried to bring him up square. Take him, marshal, wherever you find him. Ain't seen the boy myself since yesterday mornin'."

"I will, bein' mighty sorry for you, an' at the same time glad for your sake an' your darter's that he ain't an Adams," replied Coultras. "This Kilgore maverick I was speakin' about, that the boys are holdin' outside, must be Cal's uncle then, the man who got away from your outfit time o' the lynchin'."

"Sure. It was a Kilgore that sloped, Larz," Adams' great head bobbed slowly. "They must've met in town or some'eres by chance, an' as Cal, growed up, favors his old man a heap as I remember Jim K., Larz recognized him right off. Funny, after so many years, that Larz should drift back—"

A WOMAN'S cry, high and piercing, and coming from outside, startled the three men gathered in the living-room. All sprang up, but Bill Coultras was first out of the door. The voice was Dell Adams' and it drew him like a mag-

net, flayed his exhausted body to a final, heroic effort. He thudded across the porch, deaf to the excited calls of the punchers guarding the prisoners out by the front gate. Again, as he leaped off the porch and lunged around the corner of the ranch-house, that terrified scream alarmed the night, and he headed for the corrals. A full moon, riding high, revealed objects in the ranch yard as clearly almost as by daylight. Beside the horse-corral Bill saw struggling figures, a man and a girl, and beyond them two ponies standing, reins down.

"Coultras!" pealed the girl's cry as she twisted valiantly in the man's grasp, and at the utterance of the deputy's name the man flung her against the horses and wheeled to see Bill charging. The face under the rakish-angled Stetson brim was Cal's demonized, and in his raised hand a six-gun gleamed dully. Simultaneously, it seemed, the gun roared and the running Coultras pitched headlong, twenty yards from the corral. Dell Adams screamed once again.

Jack Lerrigo, not far behind Coultras as he fell, and closely followed by the Lazy A owner and several men of the waddy-guard, threw his gun on Cal Adams as the latter, back to the corral-fence, fired a second time. Cal whirled half-around, swayed and fell. Lerrigo dropped to his knees at Coultras' side.

Dell, gathered to her father's broad breast a moment later, trembled violently and sobbed. "He—he called me out here—threw a stone at my window—said he wanted to—to tell me something. Put his hand over my mouth, choked me. I—when I came to he had gagged me with his bandana. Tried to tie my hands and I fought him—hard. Said he wasn't my brother, loved me desperately—was a thief and the game was up—and—and he was taking me to Mexico to marry me. I slipped off the gag by drawing in my chin and screamed—"

"There, honey, there," Asa interrupted, frantically patting her with one huge hand. "All over, all over but a leetle explainin'. He sure wasn't your brother nor my son—an' be glad. How's Coultras?" turning his head toward Lerrigo.

"O. K.," Lerrigo surprised him by replying. "Not a scratch. Fainted. Must've gone out a second before Cal shot an' so saved hisself a drillin'. The luck he's always talkin' about sure held. By golly, if he hadn't the guts an' strength o' ten men he'd have fainted more'n once to-day, with that head o' his."

C CoulTRAS slowly opened his eyes. "Say," he demanded, in a far-away voice, "who put me to bed? I ain't no sick baby an'—"

Della Adams moved swiftly toward the bed, sat down on its edge and with gentle but firm hands sought to make him lie back.

"No, indeed, you're not a sick baby, Mr. Coultras," she declared, vibrantly, "but you're a sick *man*, and you're going to stay in this bed until you are well—well, you understand? In the morning we will have the doctor for you."

Coultras was about to remonstrate when something in her face, her eyes, deterred him. His gaze held hers so steadily that she flushed.

"Will you stick by me till I'm well?" he asked suddenly, and her father and Lerrigo, posed in the background, nudged each other and dropped significant eyelids.

"I will," assured Dell.

"I'll behave then." Coultras returned his head to the pillow and closed his eyes. "Doggone if I ain't fagged a few." His eyes came open again quite suddenly, to find her gaze still fixed upon him. "One favor, Miss Dell—call me Bill."

Longrider's Cutbank Creed

By MARK LISH

Bucky Mallerson was one battle-cub who savvied the longrider's creed—not to be taken while able to fill his hand and pull a trigger!



He was spacing his shots deliberately now, making each count!

BUCKY MALLERSON'S mount swapped ends at the sudden thunderous rising of a sage hen from almost under his feet, and Bucky landed headfirst in the same sagebrush the hen had left. He sat up swearing, a wooden stirrup still fitted over his right instep like a loose collar. Spike Malloy caught the snorting horse and came riding over to grin down at his disgruntled friend.

"'Smatter Pop?" he wanted to know. "Horsey too rough?"

"Aw, my dang old saddle come apart again," grumbled Bucky. "Stirrup

leather busted when my weight hit it."

"Funny world," mused the facetious Malloy. "Here's you, one end of a long string of saddle-makers and the owner of a fancy prize saddle, a saddle-maker y'self and halfowner of a saddle shop, tourin' the world in a saddle that—"

"If you say 'saddle' just once more I'll shoot a big hole in ya, right above the belt buckle," Bucky promised grimly, reaching to lift the stirrup off his instep.

"Well, I been explainin' all day how we oughta swing over to Gourd and pick up that fancy—er—cac you been

braggin' so about winnin' at the rodeo," persisted Spike, eyeing the stirrup warily, all set to dodge.

"Yeah—and have every 'wanted' notice in the country sprout a description of that same saddle, soon as *one* feller that's heard of the Limpin' Kid sees me walk away from it," retorted Bucky. "And about that time somebody in Gourd 'ld notice it gone off the shop wall, and right there Bucky Mallerson 'ld be hooked up with the Limpin' Kid. And my old dad's heart would finish bustin'—" Bucky broke off to rise and limp to his horse.

"Besides," he added, "them silver doodads winkin' back at the sun would show for miles, and a posse—"

"I thought them doodads was *gold*," Spike heckled.

"Horn's gold-plated, and the conchas, but there's plenty silver on it too," Bucky explained sourly, cutting the last self-rotten saddlestring from his decrepit cac and setting about a make-shift but expert splice of the broken stirrup leather. Finished, he mounted wordlessly and set off through sparse timber at a trot, Malloy at his elbow.

An hour later they halted in a fringe of denser timber at the high-flung end of a ridge, overlooking a great valley. A beautiful valley, the flats along a meandering stream clothed in dark green alfalfa, the slopes on all sides brushy and wild; too rough for dry farmers to edge in on with grass-destroying plows. Cattle country.

"Promise Valley," Bucky told his friend. "That's Gourd, yonder among the cottonwoods."

His tone was wistful; Spike shot a sidewise glance at the sober features and for once forbore heckling mention of the Gourd saddle shop in which Bucky still shared ownership with his father, old Dad Mallerson. Behind his shell of facetiousness, Spike was an understanding friend, and the only man

who knew that Bucky Mallerson and the notorious Limpin' Kid were one and the same.

"We camp right here till dark," Bucky went on presently, giving his broad shoulders a shake as if to rid them of a load. "We got to cross the valley right on the main trail, and 'most anybody we'd meet in daylight would likely remember me. The's a little spring close here—or useta be."

A peaceful scene enough, and they found in it peace of their own; though tempered by knowledge that long-rider status forever barred them from its full enjoyment. A wave of homesickness swept over Bucky Mallerson as his keen eyes picked out here and there spots full of memories from his carefree boyhood. His brooding revery was broken by the sudden stiffening of Spike Malloy at his side, and his ears caught the sound of rapid hoof-beats coming up the ridge along their own back trail. Several horses, their approach too swiftly and direct for the mounts of cowboys looking after stock.

They exchanged quick startled glances, and across both youthful countenances spread the hard and bitter determination of their kind. The long-rider's creed; not to be taken while able to fill his hand and pull a trigger. Silently they drew back into denser undergrowth, and Bucky expressed the thought in both minds with words that contained at once hope and prayer and ultimatum:

"It may not be that posse—thought we'd ditched 'em. But . . ."

With forethought bred of experience they had been careful to leave no sign of their presence here, even guiding their horses from the trail in such manner that their tracks would leave to any casual eye the impression that a couple of cowboys had merely branched off to look over a few head of stock. Chance riders would pass right on; man-

hunters only would follow those tracks—and be met by all the lead the pair they sought could throw. Until now Bucky Mallerson had never actually killed a man, maintaining his freedom by a clean pair of heels rather than gunpowder. But—well, Glory Bob Dow would be leading *this* posse, and Glory Bob it was who'd cast the spotlight on the Limpin' Kid and kept it there and made the Kid's limp famous.

The hoofbeats loudened, and in a moment three riders trotted into view. A hardbitten trio, well-mounted, one man's saddle covered stem to stern with slicker roll and tied-on spare clothing. They passed on over the drop-off at the ridge's end with hardly a sideward glance, and down the steep slope below the fringe of timber. The two young men breathed deep relief, and moved back on the rim again to watch.

"Know 'em?" Spike muttered aside, eyes still following the riders below.

"No. You?"

"One. Griz Menafee." Spike's tone carried disapproval. "Saw him once at the Coon River hideout."

Bucky was silent. Griz Menafee, brute beast of the owl-hoot trails, so careless of other men's lives that even fellow long-riders avoided him for the most part. Riding down into Promise Valley with a pair of others like him, intent upon the "business" of their kind. It was Spike who voiced the thought that to Bucky was pure torture.

"Wonder what they're up to? Anything Griz is connected with has usually got a couple of killings in it some place."

"A couple of killings in it some place!" Bucky repeated absently, forcing the words past a sudden lump in his throat. A couple of killings; ordinary citizens shot down because they got in the way of one of Griz Menafee's coups. In this case, in Promise Valley, perhaps a couple of Bucky's boy-

hood playmates. Or even—the thought was chilling—old Dad Mallerson, rushing out on ancient legs to do his part in home defense.

"Somebody from the valley comin' this way," Spike murmured. "Looks like he'd likely meet them three."

"Limps, that feller—just like you do," commented Spike Malloy. "Same leg, too. . . . Say, how'd you git that limp? Y' never did say, that I know of. Gunfight?"

"No-o," Bucky answered slowly. "Had a gunfight all right, just after the rodeo when I won the saddle. Five—six miles from Gourd—I'd been taking some rodeo stock to pasture. But it was the other fella went down; Ace McKrieg. I thought then he was just mad over me nosin' him out at the rodeo—went to shootin' the minute he sighted me. Had a bunch of cronies with him; after Ace went down they shot me up a-plenty, though none uh my legs was hurt—then."

He paused, eyes fixed vaguely in distance, for the moment forgetting the scene below in the pain of memories.

"An' then?" Spike prompted. "'Djever git back to have it out with 'em?"

"No. They left me for dead, I guess. But an old prospector found me and pulled me through. When I got able to set up and take notice, so's he could leave me a day or two, he made a trip down to Gourd after grub. Come back with news that there was a warrant out for me, but that everybody was kinda undecided whether I hadn't just crawled to a hidey-hole some place and died of them bullets. So there'd been no big law-hunt for me." He paused again, eyes on the low hill where the lone man ceased his nervous pacing as the long-rider trio neared him.

"The feller you'd shot, he died, hunh?" Spike guessed.

"No, he was still on crutches but gettin' well fast. But there'd been a robbery that day, and most of the rodeo gate receipts lifted. McKrieg and his cronies claimed how I'd commenced shootin' at sight, and that they'd trailed me from where the robbery was pulled. Of course I headed for town soon as I was able to ride, hopin' to get the matter straightened out. But as luck would have it I run smack into half-a-dozen damn fools that had been drinkin' some and started shootin' at me. I had to take to the hills, knockin' three of their horses out from under 'em, gettin' farther from Gourd all the time. And as luck would have it, my horse stumbled off a cut bank that night and broke this leg. Teton Charley and his bunch found me, took me to their hideout and set the leg—crooked, like it is now. About the time I begun walkin' Glory Bob found the hideout and tackled us. Naturally, I helped fight 'em off, and—well, you know the rest."

"Yeah, I know." For once Spike was sober, his tone altogether without its heckling note. "That limp tagged you, an' you hadda trail with the wild bunch ever since. . . . They're changin' saddles, looks like—Griz and that lone feller."

THE change was made with that deft speed of range men, used to saddling in a hurry, the bulky Menafee transferring his slicker roll and spare jacket. The lone man's horse fidgeted nervously at Menafee's nearness, and sharp sunlight set his new equipment glowing. Bucky Mallerson reached to grip his companion's arm.

"Spike!" he exclaimed. "That saddle—did you—"

"Yeah. Decorated plenty — Griz must be gittin' plenty boot in that trade. Gold an' silver sassin' back at the sun—"

"And a sort of reddish gleam mixed in, like rubies. . . . Spike, that's *my* saddle!"

"Aw, there's plenty cacs with gold an' silver smeared on 'em," Spike demurred. "Rubies, too—or colored glass to look like 'em."

"I reckon—hadn't thought uh that. Excited, I guess." Bucky relaxed, bending his gaze to the valley again, watching the four men ride away together. The lone man was leading, as if this terrain was familiar to him. A local man, likely. Griz Menafee riding down on Promise Valley, sponsored by a native. . . . A couple of killings—suddenly Bucky Mallerson knew what must be done.

"You'll get to see *my* fancy cac after all, if you want," he told Spike. "We'll slip into Gourd after dark tonight and visit Dad. See what's goin' on."

Dad Mallerson lived in a pair of rooms behind the saddle shop. At Bucky's cautious knock he came to the door, lamp light framing his tousled, thick grey hair; filtering through its ends to resemble a halo.

"Hello, Dad," Bucky murmured. "Let us in, will you?"

"You haven't changed a bit, Dad," he said at last, and turned to introduce Spike Malloy.

The old man greeted Spike absently, turned again to his son. "Bucky, you—you limped," he blurted. "It's true, then—you're this Limpin' Kid we hear so much about?"

Bucky could only stand miserable, at a loss for words. But Spike was under no handicap. "Aw, he only got that limp day-'fore-yesterday," the latter explained glibly. "Horse fell with 'im. It'll be all right in a day or two."

The old man's shoulders straightened visibly as a load of trouble rolled off them. "I—I knew it couldn't be true, Son," he stammered apologetically. "I knew you could never shoot

a man down cold, the way that Limpin' Kid did three weeks ago when his gang held up the Golden Girl mine office. But—they said—and that limp—for a minute I—"

"It's all right, Dad. Naturally you couldn't help but wonder, if there's been that kind of talk," Bucky soothed. He exchanged glances with Spike; this Golden Girl affair was something new to them.

"I reckon you got your saddle all right, Son?" the old man was saying. "I expressed it to Globe, like you asked, next day after I got your letter. Drove over to Harrisberg with it—what's the matter?"

BUCKY was staring blankly. "Letter? What letter?" he demanded. "I haven't written you since—"

In dumbfounded silence Bucky perused the brief note which, in handwriting much like his own, requested that Dad Mallerson express "my prize saddle" to Globe in the name of one Thomas Gregg.

"Have I been made a fool of, Son?" the old man was inquiring anxiously. "I sent the saddle a week ago today. If you didn't write that letter—"

"I didn't—nor I didn't get the saddle," Bucky told him, hardly realizing the curtness of his tone. Bucky's mind was racing, piecing together certain stray bits of knowledge. Griz Menafée riding into Promise Valley astride a fancy saddle—the Promise Valley man riding out to meet him—changing saddles there in the hills . . . the Limpin' Kid was famous, thanks to Glory Bob, and there might be those who'd linked him up already with outlawed Bucky Mallerson—who might wish that others link him so.

"Dad!" said Bucky suddenly. "Ace McKrieg—does he still hate me like he did?"

"He does, Son—worse, I think, with

every day that passes." The old man was remembering how, in his efforts to clear Bucky's name here at home, he'd come in contact at every turn with Ace McKrieg blocking every move. "You see, you're the only one that ever beat Ace at anything—that ever took away a thing he wanted. First, there's Bess Delaney; Ace wants her more than all the world, but you still stand in his way even though she hasn't seen you for a year. And then—well, you beat him at the rodeo and won the prize saddle he'd set his heart on, and one of your bullets left him with a limp he'll carry to the grave. He—"

Bucky was preoccupied with the torture of his thoughts; of Bess Delaney, and that long-ago time when all the world had seemed to be his for the asking. But Spike Malloy grasped first of all the old man's final sentence.

"Limps, huh?" cried Spike. "Why, that's the gent we seen today, I bet!"

"I *thought* that fella seemed familiar, even a mile away," Bucky agreed wearily. "So it all hooks up together. Ace wrote that saddle-letter, and the Limpin' Kid—"

"Yeh — bet he's the Limpin' Kid, too," Spike hurriedly headed Bucky off. "Throwin' in with Griz—"

"No, Ace is not the Limpin' Kid," Dad Mallerson put in a bit regretfully. "Some of us thought that, at first—I guess I—I kind of *hoped* it, when the rumors about Bucky began to come in. But the Limpin' Kid was seen two hundred miles away when everybody knew that Ace was here in town."

"Just the same," Spike persisted stubbornly, "I bet—"

The sharp sounds of a scuffle cut him off, coming from the sidewalk just outside the saddle shop's front door. A voice cried "Damn you, I *won't*—" and the sound of a dull hard blow carried through the narrow building, fol-

lowed by a throaty chuckle and another voice: "I bet he *will*—when he comes to." Then a shrill whinny from Spike's horse tied in the alley behind, answered by another at the alley's distant end, back of the corner where stood Gourd's only bank.

"Dang that horse uh mine, he'll give us plumb away," Spike muttered, and hurried out the rear door. Other footsteps, and scraping sounds as if one man were being half-carried and half-dragged, came from the sidewalk out in front.

"Bucky!" Dad Mallerson cried. "That 'damn you' sounded like Ed Mathews' voice—cashier in the bank. D'you suppose—"

"I don't 'suppose', Dad," Bucky told him wearily. "I reckon I *know* what this is all about. And I reckon the Limpin' Kid has got to face the music, or—" he left that sentence unfinished as he followed Spike outside.

"Bucky!" the latter's voice cut through the darkness. "The's four-five horses held by a rider yonder—and looky!"

BUCKY strained his eyes the alley's length, and even under faint starlight made out a dull red shine and the gleam of gold-and-silver mounting.

"I can run or fight, but either way the Limpin' Kid is done for and so is Bucky Mallerson," he muttered, and added in louder tones: "Spike, I got to butt in this—you better go to makin' tracks. You see the play, I reckon?—and how it puts the thing right up to me?"

"Sure—Bucky Mallerson's saddle, and a limpin' robber, seen no doubt by two or three to spread the news," Spike returned. He added heatedly: "But where you get that—me makin' tracks? You think you're gonna *ditch* me?"

"O-K, Spike. But you know dang well we're losers either way—if Griz

and his boys don't finish saltin' us down, the law will get 'er done. . . . That was the bank cashier out front; they're takin' him along to open the vault, I reckon."

From the doorway Dad Mallerson voiced husky whispered queries, but Bucky answered only "So-Long, Dad. You go back inside! we'll take care of this."

Few men ever strode an alley's length carrying such a load as Bucky Mallerson's; knowing that whatever the outcome of this night's battle, the Limpin' Kid must in the end be exposed to all Gourd as Bucky Mallerson—the thing he dreaded more than death. Bess Delaney—she who'd kept her faith and refused to believe all other tales; by morning she must *know*. There'd be little chance for explanations, with the law gathering in a badly-shot-up, helpless Limpin' Kid. For Bucky had no least illusions; these were *gun* men he and Spike were going up against, and the chance of either riding out of town again was slim. Unless they traveled now—and something deep in Bucky would not let him ride away and leave the field to double-dealing Ace McKrieg.

"We better let 'em get right into the bank," he muttered to Spike. "Make 'em easier handled, and leave more sign for the law to read when it gets here."

The footfalls came on down the board sidewalk, around the bank's corner and back to the alley-mouth. Rage shook Bucky; one masked captor limped directly ahead of Mathews, and the horse-holder was deliberately forcing the animal bearing the fancy saddle into plainest view. Though still groggy now from that blow on the head, tomorrow Ed Mathews could be expected to remember and piece the thing together. By noon all Gourd and Bess Delaney would know that the Limpin' Kid rode Bucky Mallerson's saddle. And

Dad . . .

It was too much for self-control; the last man hadn't stepped inside the bank's back door when Bucky voiced his challenge.

"Ball's open, Griz," he called clearly, and sent a bullet against the further door jamb.

Few men had ever liked Griz Menafee, but none at all had ever doubted his courage. He came back out that doorway now like a grizzly smelling blood, and the pair of guns in his hairy hands pumped a hailstorm down the alley. Bucky Mallerson stood in the open and sent back shot for shot; the more practical Spike ducked behind a barrel of ashes but kept his Colt-gun working. A second man joined Menafee; from inside the door came curses and a thud, and the third was back in the alley after slugging poor Ed Mathews. The horse-holder moved his charges out of the alley-mouth and raised his voice in a whooping signal.

"More comin', boys—git mounted," Griz Menafee's rumble filled the alley in spite of barking guns. "I reckon it's a trap—we'll come back an' bust their damn' bank later." He was backing down the alley as he spoke, spacing his shots more deliberately now from guns he knew were running dry. One man kept pace with him, shoulder to shoulder; the third broke and bolted for the alley-mouth, limping as he ran.

BUCKY MALLERSON was walking too, following. Shooting with his left hand now; the other arm hung limp and shattered. Terribly damaged; dum-dum bullets were part of the reason men didn't like Griz Menafee. Another mighty blow swept away his crippled leg, and the Limpin' Kid was crawling, but still coming.

From beyond the alley-mouth other guns were blasting now; the horse-holder came back into sight, reckless

now of bullets sweeping up the alley. He still had all the horses, but even as the man who'd bolted reached for a pair of reins the horse-holder screamed and slumped and slid scratchily out of his saddle. Then the man who'd run was in his place, and wheeling the horse under bit and spur.

Over his shoulder Griz Menafee saw, and whirled to shout: "Hold 'er, you—wait fer us an' hold them horses!"

But the fleeing man was looking out for Number One; he cast loose the frightened plunging extra mounts and started on his way. Started only; Griz Menafee dropped the horse with his last bullet and, cursing, slid one gun to its holster to begin reloading the other. But the alley-mouth was choked now with charging, shooting men, one raucous voice shouting commands. Griz Menafee went down beneath an overload of lead, still fighting, cursing savagely the man with the raucous voice.

"You come git me, damn you Glory Bob," he challenegd. "I may be down but I ain't out, an' I got a bullet here with yore name on it."

And Glory Bob came striding down the alley with a bucking gun in either hand; a bounty-hunting devil who gave no quarter unless the reward-notice said "alive," but who had the saving grace of asking none for himself. This night his ending wasn't in the cards; Griz Menafee's guns ran dry first, and Glory Bob stood over him and picked them both away.

"Six thousand iron men!" Glory Bob grinned down. "An' us a-chasin' a feller that only carried one thousand! How's that fer luck, Griz?"

Bucky Mallerson had dropped the pardner of Menafee and found his own gun dry, and with his shattered arm it was hard to load again. But Spike Malloy came staggering under a bullet or two of his own, and stood there waiting for Glory Bob to come farther down

the alley. "I reckon we'll take the rest our dose right here, hunh?" he muttered, and Bucky grunted agreement as he fumbled a loading gate.

But Glory Bob only made sure that Griz was unarmed and his pardner dead, and turned back to check on other matters. The horse-holder was down, disarmed and dying. The man who'd bolted was still on his feet, and one of Glory Bob's was fetching him into the alley with an inch of gun-barrel twisted into his shirt-tail. He limped, though striding strongly, and Glory Bob chuckled cruelly.

"A good night's work," said he. "A thousand berries on the Limpin' Kid, an' six altogether on Griz Menafee. . . . Take'er easy, Kid—*yourn* reads dead or alive, an' yo're easier handled dead."

Dad Mallerson came running with a lantern, and some one brought another from the street, lighting clearly the narrow alley. And the limping, captured man's eyes met Bucky Mallerson's, each knowing the other instantly.

"*There's* yore thousand-dollar Limpin' Kid," snapped Ace McKrieg. "Me, I only tried to head 'em off an' save the bank!"

GLORY BOB turned to regard the two young men behind him, and recognition glimmered in his gaze. He'd had one clear look at the Limpin' Kid by the side of Teton Charley, and Glory Bob never forgot a face that carried rewards. Bucky Mallerson tried to sit up straight, his bullet-shattered leg thrust out before him, his half-loaded Colt rising slowly in his one good hand. Beside him Spike Malloy stood tense and ready as Glory Bob strode toward them for a better look.

But Griz Menafee sat up and snarled an oath. Griz was shot to doll rags and his time was very short, but his bull voice rumbled strong and clear. "The hell an' you ain't the Limpin' Kid," he

roared at Ace McKrieg. "Though the Runout Kid 'd fit yuh better. You Glory Bob; you'll find his share uh the Golden Girl hid somewheres on that ranch uh his—the cowardly runaway pup. Still in bars with their stamp on—he's had no chance to melt it up. 'Might find other sign, too—he's been in on five plays since we lifted this burg's rodeo money a year an' a half ago." Glory Bob was looking down at Bucky Mallerson's shattered leg.

"If you ever had a limp, she's plumb been shot away," he said. "I reckon you'll be lucky if you *got* a leg when the docs git done with that."

He looked at Bucky's tense drawn face, and Spike Malloy's, and again at Ace McKrieg. He spoke again, absently, like a man trying to clarify his own thoughts by putting them into words.

"I reckon the Limpin' Kid got caught in the act, this time. Kinda wondered, a time or two, how he covered so dang much country with me right on his tail. Seemed like the' must be one a-runnin' and one a-robbin'. But acourse the' can't be *two* of 'em—the's only one reward—so fur as I'm concerned this Ace McKrieg is *It*." He glanced again at Spike Malloy. "Might inter'st *you* to know that Harry Kane—the lad you shot up—has about got well. Refused to prosecute, admittin' he was the one to blame. Made his dad pull down the reward an' withdraw all charges. Lucky thing f'r you the law's got nothin' else agin you."

"But—but I can't—" Bucky Mallerson stammered, his eyes on the stricken Ace McKrieg.

"Fergit it, kid; you don't owe *him* a thing but dirt," Glory Bob cut him off, and grinned a bit as he added: "Any-way, I doubt if you could even *prove* what you got in mind—with me an' these other boys swearin' differ'nt."

Colt-Wise—or Plumb Loco?

By RALPH BERARD

The button must have been gun-famous or just plumb loco, throwing down with two blazing Colts on Harn Grimrod's whole rustler horde!



His gun came up, leveled, and spat red flame!

RECKLESS. That's what it was; nineteen year old George Barns being out here alone after midnight with two blazing six-guns trying to throw a scare into Harn Grimrod's band of rustlers that would keep them off his mother's Circle X spread.

Black storm clouds blotted moon and stars so effectively it was like he was riding in ink. Big rain drops began to spatter on his horse's neck.

Only the occasional sound of rifles somewhere ahead told the red-headed young rancher Grimrod's men were retreating. They likely thought there was a whole posse after them with Sheriff Matt Stanlick leading it. George grinned at the thought and emptied another cylinder of lead in the general direction of the fleeing riders, spurring his horse at right angles so it would seem the shots were coming from sev-

eral guns.

Then there was a shot George didn't hear. The lead traveled faster than sound through the lightning-torn darkness. It clipped a tuft of his red hair, creased his scalp, knocked him out of the saddle. He lay on the prairie, a crumpled heap, the increasing rain beating down on his unconscious form.

Maybe it was the rain that finally revived him. He sat dizzily up, touched his hand to his blood-matted hair, grinned foolishly at the smooth red stickiness on his fingers that it was too dark to see. For a moment he was loco. He thought he was one of Grimrod's rustlers, stealing cattle off the Circle X instead of defending it. Then he heard hoofbeats.

George got to his feet, listened. It wasn't likely the approaching rider would find him in the dark. He found his guns, though, and got them ready. The storm was passing. A dull before-dawn moon threw a little light and in it George saw the form of his own horse where it had come to a stand a few yards distant. He walked toward it.

A moment later George's brother, Fred, flung himself from his mount. "You damn little fool," Fred intoned angrily. "So The Infant Son is trying t' get himself killed again, huh?"

George's fingers tightened on the gun in his hand and he half raised it. Then he remembered this was his brother. He was too mad to say anything right away, though. Fred was eight years older. He was a big well-proportioned fellow with hair that was brown and not red like George's. Fred couldn't seem to understand that George was a man now. He kept treating him like a kid and calling him The Infant Son which was a hang over from George's childhood, a nickname which he hated.

He stepped up into the saddle and sided his horse close to Fred's. "Dad

died," he gritted through hard-set lips, "trying to save the Circle X for ma and us kids. Harn Grimrod or one of his thieving rustling gang shot him down less than a quarter mile from right where we're standing on just such a night as this." George's cold tone made him sound like an older man speaking. "What've you ever done about that, Fred, except trying to keep me from goin' after Grimrod myself?"

"We hadn't any proof," Fred defended. "And it wouldn't help Ma and Sis any for one or both of us to get ourselves killed fighting a hopeless fight with Grimrod." Fred's voice held the reprimanding tone that a man uses toward a child. "You had no business coming out here tonight, George. When Sis told me you hadn't been in I guessed you'd be out here and had to come after you before you maybe got yourself shot."

George raised his hand to the wound in his head, then held it close in front of Fred's face so he could see the blood even in the bad light. "I did get myself shot," he said bitterly, then added, "and I'm proud o' that blood, Fred. It shows I ain't no coward anyway."

Fred was startled when he saw the blood. "You bad hurt, kid?"

"Just creased," George said nonchalantly. "Just hit hard enough to make me damn mad and damn glad I ain't a coward like you've always been where Harn Grimrod was always concerned."

FRED'S lips tightened. His face seemed to grow even whiter than the chalky glow the pale morning moon had been giving it. George went on angrily, "You ain't goin' to stop me this time, Fred. I'm going to ride straight to Harn Grimrod's Triple Bar Spread. His men drove off at least a half dozen of our best steers this night

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and he'll be blottin' the brands come daylight. I'm going out there and get the proof that you and Sheriff Stanlick just talk about gettin'." George tightened his reins, jerked the sorrel cowpony's head around.

"Wait," Fred commanded in a tense emotional voice. "You'll get yourself killed."

But George did not wait. His spurs raked the horse. Fred's arm reached out and he grabbed at George's bridle but missed. "Don't go off like this," he pleaded hurriedly. "Grimrod's bad; he's got a dozen gunmen to back him up . . . he'll . . ."

George didn't hear the rest. It was lost in the dawn breeze that was already fanning his cheeks from the speed of his mount. He glanced back over his shoulder, saw Fred urge his horse for a moment as if he would follow. But his brother stopped again, stood there watching George ride away into trouble.

George stopped the horse, raised in the stirrups and watched his brother out of sight. Then he grinned with determination. He drew his guns, one at a time, refilled each completely with cartridges from the broad belt at his waist. The quickly increasing daylight made him hurry. He fed spurs to the pony and headed at a fast gallop toward Harn Grimrod's rustling headquarters.

He didn't know the lay of Grimrod's Triple Bar. It was almost full daylight when he came in sight of the buildings. He slid down and ground-tied his horse. Taking advantage of the rolling waves of the prairie he sneaked forward toward the cattle corrals and big hay barn that stood a hundred yards or so from Grimrod's big ill-kept frame ranchhouse.

A small stream crossed Grimrod's spread. It angled southward from between the ranch buildings to within a few hundred feet of where George

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crouched. George crept toward it. There was an activity around the Triple Bar Corrals. A few scattered cottonwoods lined the creek. Taking advantage of their shelter he crept forward until he could make out a number of men and several cattle in one of the corrals.

He worked his way up the creek until the big frame barn was between the corrals and himself. Half crawling, half running, he reached the big building and slid closely along it until he could lay on his stomach and look around the corner from near the ground.

Less than fifty feet from where George crouched eight Circle X steers had been rounded into a small group. Three of Grimrod's ugly-looking riders kept worrying them into proper position. Two other men had started a small fire. Harn Grimrod, himself, stepped suddenly into view from a side door of the very building George was hiding behind. He had two branding irons, one in each hand, and he was so close George could see the design. The irons had evidently been specially made to blot Circle X into Three Bar.

GEORGE'S gun came up impulsively and half leveled. Then he checked himself, controlling his anger with determined effort. Grimrod walked forward, climbed through the horizontal bars of the branding pen and handed the irons to the men at the fire. "Let's get it done quickly," he ordered. George could hear his words plainly. "Somebody might ride out here t' check up."

George forced himself to take in the scene carefully, to plan his strategy well. Grimrod had seven men visible beside himself, all heavily armed. Behind the corral, the ranchhouse stood perhaps two hundred feet away. Everything looked dead there. These

eight men, George reasoned, likely constituted the entire band. "One against eight," he grinned seriously to himself, "just about even." He shifted back from the corner of the barn and crept to the farther corner. From there he could see back almost to where he had left his horse. "Yeah, just about even," he repeated under his breath, "but I could use that too-careful brother o' mine and maybe even the sheriff and a few deputies." His eyes swept the prairie for a long moment, then he crept back along the barn to watch the branding proceed.

Reckless! Worse than that; it was foolhardy, for George Barns to come out openly and face these eight armed men. But George surveyed everything closely before he moved. A saddle had been thrown loosely over the top rail of the branding corral and it leaned at a slant against one of the corral posts about fifteen feet from where he crouched. The corral itself was perhaps fifty feet square. Behind it the big ram-shamble ranchhouse stood perhaps a hundred feet away.

George observed the dust closely. The wind whipped it in, circling and twisting, toward the far side of Grimrod's ranch house.

George stood up. He held a gun in each hand. He walked forward, that same cruel, determined expression on his face that was like a smile.

The rustler was perhaps forty feet away, beyond and to the right of the corral post where the saddle hung. "The first man who moves eats lead," George advised with calm, cold hate in his voice. "Drop them branding irons and all of you keep yer hands away from guns. I need them irons fer evidence."

The expression on Grimrod's face was hard to read at that distance. His lips were a thin, tight line, though, and his black eyes narrowed cruelly. He stood still, making a decision, while George

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Barns walked forward several steps. Then the rustler's hands streaked for his guns. Every single one of his seven men went for a weapon at the same instant.

George leaped forward as Grimrod's gun came up, leveled and spat red flame. He reached the partial shelter of the corral post and the saddle atop it. Grimrod's bullet whistled close. Another followed it. Other outlaw guns blazed. Lead filled the air. Bullets plopped into the leather of the saddle and splintered the corral post. But George's strategy had been good. His thin body turned sideways found almost complete shelter behind the post. The saddle shielded his head and shoulders. He leveled the gun in his right hand, sighted carefully, exposing no more than an inch of his own body. He triggered the weapon. Grimrod's hand clutched forward in front and below his left shoulder, then raised skyward. The gun he had held tipped in a slow arc upward and back. The rustler slumped down dead.

NEW gunfire came from the corners of the ranchhouse. Two of the outlaws fell wounded. George triggered both his weapons rapidly now. The rustlers caught in the open by fire from both sides were bewildered. The four who could stand tossed down their arms and surrendered.

Fred Barns came rushing out from the ranchhouse. Sheriff Matt Stanlick was beside him. Three deputies followed. While the sheriff and his men handcuffed Grimrod's men, Fred rushed up to George. "You damn fool," he bellowed, "trying t' get yourself killed again, huh?" Fred could hardly control his anger.

George didn't answer. He stood there looking at his brother, grinning. He glanced sideways at a smear of blood on his shoulder where a bullet had

nicked him. "That's twice Grimrod's crew creased me in one day," he taunted his brother. He turned to the sheriff. "Guess you got all the evidence you need now. Take a look at them branding irons."

The sheriff was examining them. "You did good work, son," he said finally, "but it was a terribly dangerous, reckless thing t' do."

Fred was calming down. He seemed to be realizing that this day's work would end the rustling, that his brother had really made their Circle X spread safe from Grimrod's depredations. In a calmer voice he repeated, "It was a reckless thing to do, George."

George grinned, then. "You never let The Infant Son down yet, Fred. This morning when I saw you riding toward Cattle Center I knew you were headin' for the sheriff. You always came after me when I started into trouble. So I figured this time I'd just lead you and the law right into this evidence." He shrugged. "Sure, I might o' been killed. But I had a pretty good chance with that post and that saddle to protect me."

George stood smiling a moment, letting them figure it out. Turning to the sheriff, he said, "You ought to ride a little lower down the far side of a hill, Sheriff, if you don't want the dust to give you away. I knew just where you were all the time. But luckily Grimrod wasn't suspecting anything. When I attacked him in front, I reckon it gave you the chance you needed to run up behind the ranchhouse. Then, them rustlers didn't have a chance."

Fred stepped up closer. He began to smile. He stuck out his hand and laughed. "The Infant Son, no more," he said. "My grown-up brother."

George took his hand. He felt a warm impulse of brotherly affection pulse through him. "I figured that some day you'd realize I was a man," he said.

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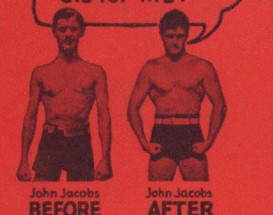
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