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44 Western

MAGAZINE

APRIL



**WHEN IT'S HANGNOOSE
TIME IN HELL**

*ROARING NOVEL OF THE
WILD FRONTIER*

by **CLIFFORD D. SIMAK**

**FRISCO BREEN'S
BULLET ANTE**

by **LEE E. WELLS**

**JOSELYN • CHADWICK
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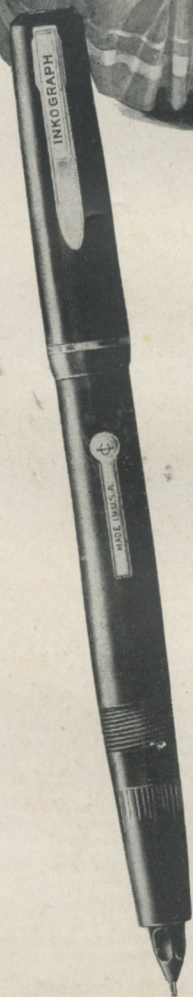
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.44 Western

MAGAZINE

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Vol. 14

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that I haven't got?"**

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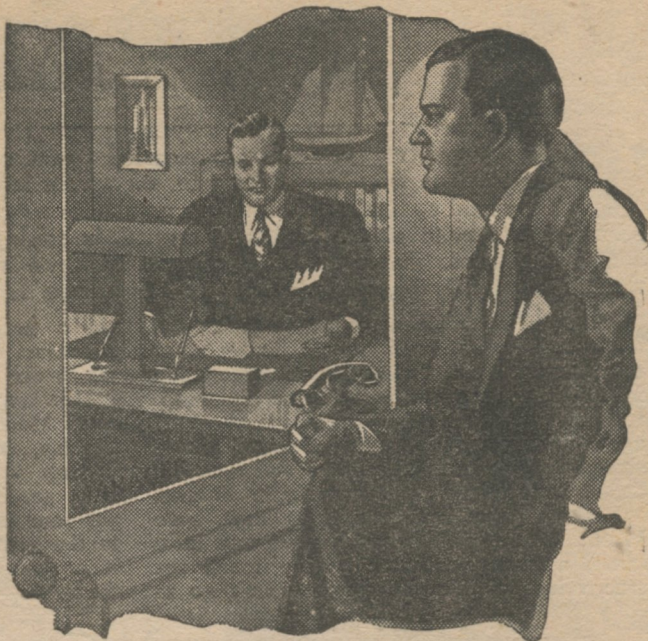
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★ .44 TALK ★

THE newspapers, the other day, carried a yarn concerning a couple of seventeen-year-old kids who "found" a gun, then went looking for presents for their girls. They held up one gent and took a few bucks away from him. They were successful in their second attempt, soon afterward, in raising some more folding money via the same routine. Came the third experiment a few minutes later. This time the victim let out a yell, the kids ran like hell—right into the arms of the local sheriff!

This type of crime, according to police and court authorities, who should know what they're talking about, rises sharply during and following a great war such as the nightmare recently concluded. The big cities of the East are especially appalled at the sight of youngsters throwing over the traces and shooting and strangling one another and elder citizens.

Perhaps more folks ought to have gone West! There, on the vast ranges and farm lands, a youngster more readily found the true values of life. Maybe he didn't go to

economic proposition to attempt a Westward migration of even a few who need, shall we say, a new slant on life.

However, it's nice to look back to the time when Monday was wash day, Tuesday, cleaning day, etc., on through the week to Sunday. Sunday was the time to scrub behind the ears, get into your best rig, go to church, put your two pennies in the basket and listen to the gent in the pulpit whether you liked it or not. "God, home and country," was the motto—and it still isn't a bad one.



school, but he learned right from wrong or wound up his string with a bullwhip being laid lustily across the spot where his britches should have been.

Kids from that part of America where there's clean air to breathe didn't have time to let their minds wander into forbidden realms. Their parents, reared to gruelling labor, saw to it that a growing boy had something to do from before sun-up to dusk. His body grew and toughened and his mind, usually, was clean and square, because the frontier was no place for crooks, thieves and killers to flourish, not for very long, when ropes, cottonwoods—or even up-ended wagon-tongues—were handy!

If more of these city buckaroos could spend a couple of growing years on a Western spread digging post-holes, shoveling manure and getting their ears beaten down when they spoke out of turn, the nation would profit.

If, instead of becoming candy and drug-store cowboys, these same youngsters were set to breaking a few wild horses and the like, many of them might not wind up with their fingerprints in the police station.

Of course, it would be a pretty tough eco-

Yeah, the Old West had its share of knife-fighters, owlhooters, tinhorns and kingpin robbers. But, it seems, these men are a far—and braver and cleaner—cry, from the youthful scum that today murders from tenement doors and in vacant lots. And who do not carry their challenge to equally well-armed adversaries but instead fight women, girls and old ladies.

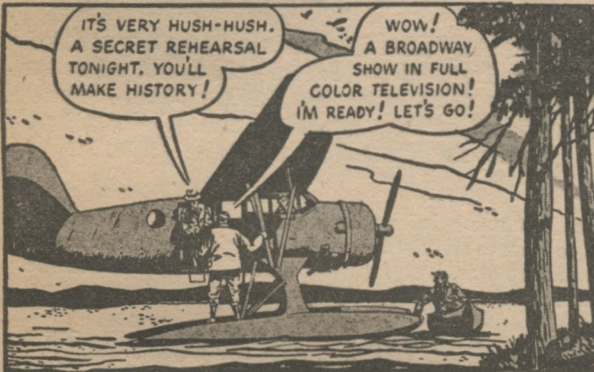
Sure, the war is over, these youngsters figure, so what the hell! We're too damn young to get into the army, and the politicians will probably fix it soon so that they won't get us when we're eighteen. We're sort of relaxing on account of they didn't get us for the last big slaughter, so we're celebrating by doing a little mugging and knifing of our own on a small scale.

Wild Bill Hickok was shot in the back in Deadwood. Tom Smith was murdered with an axe. Billy the Kid fell in his twenty-first year before the gun of Pat Garrett. Garrett, himself, died in a brawl with Wayne Brazel, a young stockman.

These old-timers were not angels—but at least they fought like men.

—THE EDITOR.

Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...





The Man Who Beat Hardin

By
Raymond Schuessler

John Wesley Hardin was a tough-gunnin' hombre, but Slats Mioduck beat him to the draw that day in Galeyville—when the redoubtable gun-king swapped a hot bunk in Hell for a steel pipe!

RANGE gossip and western lore never left much information on Slats Mioduck, except for the warning that it was better to throw on him before he got his long meat hooks within reach. The story of his death, however, is so fantastic that his name will become immortal whenever tales of the old West are recounted.

However, Mioduck took a back seat to none of the gunslingers of that era. His gun fight against Wes Hardin proved his ability as a gun artist and but for an incredible stroke of luck might have Hardin.

Although it is impossible to trace the complete life story of this outlaw, it is known that he rode the Panhandle plains for some years and lingered for a while at Galeyville and Charlestown in Arizona.

Slats never avoided a fight. He was the type who placed greater value on reputation than on life. So, when Wes Hardin, the leading gunman of the West, whose murderous gun record stood at thirty-five or more killings, came to Galeyville in 1874 it was inevitable that a battle should take place.

Hardin stalked into the Casino, ordered a drink and carefully looked over the habitués. A short while later Slats' towering frame appeared in the doorway. Hardin's gaze moved to the tall intruder. Slats glared back in hostile challenge and sauntered to the extreme end of the bar while Hardin kept his eyes glued on the tall outlaw. Many old-timers maintained that Wes came to Galeyville specifically to gun Mioduck, but this theory remains just a supposition.

"Hey Slats," the barkeep asked, "how's Boley. Is he badly hurt?"

"He's dead," Slats replied quietly.

"Shoot him in front?" Hardin sneered from the other end of the bar.

Slats finished his drink and moved away from the bar. "Lookin' for trouble, mister?"

Hardin needed no more invitation. Like coiled rattlers both men went into action as they drew in unison. The roar of their guns blasted the tense atmosphere.

Incredible as it may seem to the worshippers of Hardin, Slats actually beat Wes to the draw. His bullet grazed the under part of Hardin's right forearm and tore through his side. The shock of the bullet hitting his gun arm caused Hardin's shot to hit the ceiling.

There were no more shots fired but Mioduck slumped to the floor. When they turned him over he was dead, a gaping bullet hole at the base of his neck. Hardin, only slightly wounded, was amazed, as was everyone else. At first it was thought that Mioduck had been ambushed, but the astonishing enigma was explained when they looked for the bullet hole in the ceiling. All they could find was a jagged nick in a heavy steel pipe that ran across the ceiling.

The bullet from Hardin's gun apparently had hit the ceiling and ricocheted, striking Slats in the neck and penetrating his heart only a split second before Mioduck could send a second shot through the helpless Texan. By the grace of Satan, Hardin had been spared to continue his murderous career and Mioduck, who might have inherited the infamous crown of the gun-king, met an unfortunate and pitiful death.



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"July 17, H. Jackson killed by Nelson . . . Old Henry Dide . . . July 18, Stover killed stranger, got 500 dolar. . . ." So read the ragged cripple's "Who's Who in Hell" of Gun Gulch town. And when square-shooting tinhorn Grant Culver, on the trail of his bushwhacked pardner, read those lines, he knew his own rendezvous with deadly gunflame was only seconds away. . . .

Time In Hell

By Clifford D. Simak



Another sound brought
Culver spinning around.

CHAPTER ONE

Death Pays for an Insult

GRANT CULVER was walking along, minding his own business and thinking of Nancy Atwood, when the man bumped into him and sent him staggering off the sidewalk into mud that was Gun Gulch's main street.

Culver lit flat on his back. His hat flew off and was ground beneath the wheels of a passing wagon. His carpetbag slipped out of his hand and splashed into a water-hole a good six feet away. On the porch of the Crystal Bar a crowd of loafers laughed uproariously, bent over, slapping one another on the back.

Culver sat up, the cold ooze seeping through his clothing, and eyed the laughing crowd. Sort of an initiation, he figured. A joke they played on tenderfeet.

He rose to his feet and singled out the man who had pushed him, a bear of a man who was roaring with laughter.

Culver waded to the boardwalk, mud and water dripping from his clothes. He gained the walk and stood wiping his hands on the front of his coat. The laughter quieted and the man who had bumped him turned around and faced him. Culver studied him, saw the sneer on his face.

"I presume," Culver said, "that it was an accident."

The man took his time in answering, his little pig-eyes small and red and watchful.

"Hell, no," he said. "I done it on purpose."

Deliberately, Culver wiped the back of his right hand against his coat and as the hand traveled down the fabric it became a fist, a fist that struck with savage, blistering speed.

It came so fast the man didn't even duck. It smacked against his chin with a hollow, thudding sound to lift him from his feet and slam him back. He landed in the mud with a splash that sent yellow water geysering high into the air.

Culver snapped a quick look over his shoulder at the jaspers on the porch, but they had not moved. They stood like frozen men, waiting for the earth to open underneath their feet.

Out in the street Culver's antagonist had lumbered upright, was heaving himself back onto the boardwalk. He stood there, shaking his hands to rid them of the clinging mud and on the porch back of Culver the silence was deep.

"You win, mister," Culver told the muddy man. "You made a bigger splash than I did."

The man lumbered forward a step or two, pig-eyes glaring from above the bushy beard. Then his arm was moving, coming up and crooking, pistoning down for the gun butt at his side.

Culver's fingers snapped around his six-gun's grip and spun it free of leather. His wrist jerked to the impact of the recoil.

Out on the sidewalk the bear-like man

straightened out of his gunning crouch, straightened until it seemed that he was standing on his tiptoes, while a tiny stream of red came out of his forehead.

He tottered, the gun dropped from his fingers, then he fell, like a tree would fall, stiff and straight. His head and shoulders splashed into the mud, but his boots stayed on the sidewalk.

Culver turned to face the porch. Slowly he lifted his six and blew across the muzzle to clear away the smoke.

"Perhaps" he suggested softly, "one of you gentlemen wouldn't mind stepping out into the street to get my carpetbag."

They stood still and silent, watching him with steady cold eyes, but he noticed that their hands were very careful not to move toward their belts.

Culver sighed. "I should hate to insist," he told them.

One of them moved out of the crowd and started down the stairs, hobbling on the wooden peg that served him for a right leg. The peg tapped loudly in the silence as the man inched slowly down the steps.

"Wait a second," Culver said sharply. "You aren't the one to do it. You didn't laugh half loud enough when I was lying out there."

He singled out a man with his sixgun barrel. "Now, that gent there," he told the crowd, "was fair beside himself. I never saw a man get so much entertainment out of such a simple thing. . . ."

"If you think I'm going out to get your bag," the man roared at him, "you're loco."

Culver shrugged one shoulder. "I suppose you have a gun," he said.

He saw the man's face go white and drawn.

He blustered. "If you think"

"Shoot or wade," Culver told him, almost indifferently.

Another man spoke quietly, sharply. "For God's sake, Perkins, go and get it. You wouldn't have a chance."

Perkins looked around, searching the faces that ringed him in.

His shoulders drooped. "All right," he said.

HE CAME slowly down the steps, crossed the sidewalk, stepped gingerly out into the mud. The mud was to his

knees when he reached the bag, tugged it out of the grip of the clinging gumbo and brought it back. Carefully he set it on the sidewalk, climbed the stairs again.

Culver searched the faces on the porch. "Satisfied?" he asked.

One or two heads nodded.

"Just want to be sure no one feels he's been slighted," Culver told them.

No one seemed to be. He holstered the sixgun, picked up the carpetbag.

"One thing you fellows have to remember," he told them. "It's damn bad manners to push strangers into mud-holes."

He turned and headed down the sidewalk, but behind him came a tapping and a hailing voice. "Just a minute, mister." He swung around and saw the peg-legged gent hurrying after him. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

Peg-leg fished a notebook from his pocket, flipped the pages, took a pencil stub from behind his ear and wet it on his tongue.

"I wonder if I could have your name," he said.

Culver started at the question. "Why, I suppose you can, Culver. Grant Culver."

The man wrote with cramped and laboring fingers.

"From where?" he asked.

"From the Mississippi," Culver told him. "Sometimes the Missouri."

"The jasper you smoked out," said Peg-leg, "was Stover. He had a big time pushing people in the mud. Thought it was a joke."

He closed the notebook and put it in his pocket, stuck the pencil stub behind his ear. "Thank you very much," he said and started to turn away.

"Say, wait a second," Culver told him. "What's all this about?"

"Vital statistics," Peg-leg said.

"You mean you get the names of everyone who comes to town?"

"Most of them," Peg-leg said. "Once in a while I miss a few."

"Have you got a Nancy and Robert Atwood?" They should have come in yesterday."

Peg-leg got out his notebook, thumbed it through. "Yep, here they are. Got in yesterday. Staying at the Antlers Hotel just down the street. Gal's a looker. Brother's an engineer and damn poor poker player."

He snapped the book shut, put it in his pocket. "That will be a buck," he said.

"A what?"

"A buck. A dollar. A cartwheel. For information. I don't give out information free of charge."

Culver gasped. "Oh, I see," he said. He took a dollar from his pocket, handed it to the man. He took it, touched his ragged hat by way of thanks.

"Anytime you want to know something just come to me," he said. "If I don't know, I'll find out."

"I wonder—" Culver began.

"Yes. What is it? Want to know something else?" Peg-leg's hand was dipping in his pocket for the book.

Culver shook his head. "Nope. Just skip it. Some other time, perhaps."

"Okay," Peg-leg said cheerfully. He turned around and hobbled down the street.

Culver stared after him, scrubbing his chin thoughtfully with his hand. Then he picked up his bag and headed down the street toward the Antlers Hotel.

GUN GULCH was a seething brew of humanity turned mad by the gold-germ running in its veins. Its one main street was churned to a strip of paste-like, sucking mud by chugging wagon wheels, by the pounding, straining hoofs of horses bringing in the freight that built the false-front stores and stocked them with the needs of the frontier brood.

Back in Antelope town, Culver had been told in way of warning:

"Gun Gulch is a tough town. You walk in the middle of the street and you mind your business."

And that, he thought, standing at the window of his room, was right. Walk in the middle of the street, unless you got pushed off. Deliberately, by a man with a black beard and pig-eyes that watched every move you made.

The name of the place had been the Crystal Bar. That would be Hamilton's place. Hamilton might have heard of Farson, might be able to tell him something of him. Certainly, if Farson passed through Gun Gulch, Hamilton would have known it.

Culver frowned, thinking back on his past associations with Hamilton. A man that made a little shiver run up your shoulder-blades. A man whose handshake was

like grabbing a flabby fish that was sweating just a little. And the worst of it was that if Hamilton had no word of Farson, he would have to ask the man for a job. That dollar he had given Peg-leg had been almost his last.

Maybe Peg-leg had Farson in his notebook. He had almost asked him and then had decided against it. Hamilton would keep his mouth shut and Peg-leg probably wouldn't. Culver grinned, remembering the little man tapping along on his wooden peg.

The first lamps of evening were blooming out of the windows along the street, throwing splashes of orange and yellow light across the crowded sidewalks and out into the muddy road. A wagon went past, piled high with freight. From where he stood, Culver could hear the high, shrill profanity of the teamster above the babble of the street.

Letting himself out the door, he headed for the stairs, had almost reached them when a voice called from the hall behind him. He swung around and saw Nancy Atwood, standing in front of an open door almost opposite his own.

"Grant Culver," she said, "will you come and say hello to me."

He walked toward her, smiling. "I was wondering when I'd see you. A man with a wooden leg told me you had put up here."

"I do declare," she told him, "after you'd traveled all the way with us I'd thought you could have kept on until we got to Gun Gulch."

He shook his head. "I had to stop at Antelope to ask about a man."

"A friend of yours?" Nancy asked.

"I don't rightly know. He used to be."

Pretty, he thought, looking at her. Pretty as a picture with her raven hair piled atop her head. She was wearing a flame-colored dress that left her shoulders bare.

"You're going out, Grant?" she asked.

"I thought I would. If—"

She silenced him with a gesture of her hand. "You might watch for Bob," she said then. "I'm just a little—well, a little bit afraid."

He laughed at her easily. "Gun Gulch may be tough, Nancy, but not as bad as that. Your brother can take care of himself."

Her voice choked a little. "He's been gambling," she said. "He denies it, but I know he has. And he's so poor at it and we have so little money."

"And you want me to break up the game?"

"Well, not exactly that. You might see what you can do to get him out of it as tactfully as possible."

He frowned. "Your brother has a job here?"

She nodded. "Yes, he has. But the man he has to see is out at some diggings somewhere and Bob has to wait until he comes back to town."

"I'll see if I can spot him," he told her.

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Grant," she said. "Good night."

He watched until she shut the door, then moved on down the hall and out onto the street of Gun Gulch.

CHAPTER TWO

The Man Named Hamilton

THE Crystal Bar was a smoke-blurred din, a place of lights and music, talk and tinkle, with the undertone of feet shuffling on sawdust. For a moment, Culver stood in the door, staring out over the milling crowd that filled the place. The lights blazed from the ceiling, their brilliance softened by the trails of cigar smoke that snaked up in bluish ribbons. Glassware flashed and scintillated on the back bar and the barkeepers moved about almost like dancing men.

Culver moved down the room, going slowly, shouldering his way through the press of humanity. Foot by foot he worked his way toward the bar.

A bartender growled at him: "What's yours?"

"Nothing right now," Culver told him. "Where can I find Hamilton?"

"What the hell!" The barkeep stopped in mid-sentence, stared at him. His manner changed and he almost fawned.

"The boss said you were to see him just as soon as you come in."

"Thanks," Culver said.

The bartender leaned across the bar. "Have one on the house before you go." He grasped a bottle by the neck, seized a glass.

Culver shook his head.

"Mister," said the barkeep, "you may not know it, but you're the talk of the town."

"How come?" Culver asked.

"Stover was the fastest gunslick this place had ever seen," the barkeep told him.

Culver shook his head. "Slow," he said. "Terrible, awful slow."

He swung around, pushed his way toward the center of the room.

The shot came like a thunderclap that split across the talk, a burst of blasting noise that drowned out all sound and set the ceiling lamps to swaying on their chains.

The crowd surged back and left a cleared space in the center of the room, a place of scuffed-up sawdust and green tables and smoke-filtered light.

Culver stood stock still, staring at the figure on the floor.

Bob Atwood!

Bob Atwood, who had ridden in the stagecoach with him all the way from St. Louis. Nancy Atwood's brother.

Culver lifted his eyes and stared at the man who stood behind the table, a man with his hat tilted on the back of his head, teeth showing in a firm, white line beneath the jaunty mustache, and with a smoking gun clutched tightly in his hand.

The man was looking at Culver and from where he stood Culver could see the crinkles deepen at the corners of his eyes.

"So," said the man.

Culver felt his muscles tightening, fought to relax them.

The man across the table was Perkins, he who had waded out into the street to get his carpetbag.

The gun was coming up, slowly, surely, and there was no chance to beat it.

"Perkins," Culver said, "you're a lousy shot. You just winged your man."

Perkins' eyes flickered for a moment toward Bob Atwood on the floor and as they did Culver's arm moved swiftly, arm and wrist and fingers a sudden chain of strength and speed that brought the sixgun spinning from its holster.

Perkins' hand jerked nervously and his gun belched smoke and fire. Culver felt the whining bullet spin past his head, heard the crash of glass as it slammed into the back bar mirror.

"You had your shot," Culver told him,

bleakly. "Now, by God, it's my turn."

Perkins stood rigid before him, face a deadly white, gun grasped in his hand and tilted toward the ceiling. Slowly, deliberately, Culver's thumb pulled back the hammer and the click of the sixgun's mechanism was a harsh and startling sound. Perkins whimpered. His hand suddenly was shaking and the gun dropped from it.

Without a word, Culver holstered his own gun, turned to the man upon the floor. Atwood was sitting up, hand clutching his shoulder, staring at Culver.

Culver crossed to him. "Can you get up?" he asked.

Atwood nodded. "He dealt from the bottom of the deck," he said. "I caught him at it."

CHAPTER THREE

Wanted—A Spy!

HAMILTON reached into the bottom drawer of the battered desk, came up with a box of cigars. "Light up, Culver."

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Chewing the end off the smoke, Culver studied the man. About the same as ever, he decided. A little harder, a bit more vicious, slightly older than he'd been back on the river. But he was the same Calvin Hamilton.

"Sorry about your friend," Hamilton said. "Hope he will be all right."

Culver struck a match. "Got him back to the hotel and put him to bed. Got a doctor for him right away."

Culver ran the match back and forth across the tip of the cigar, eyes taking in the room. An old iron safe behind the desk, a couple of chairs, carpet on the floor, framed sporting prints scattered on the walls.

Hamilton leaned back in the creaking armchair, inserted his thumbs in the armholes of his vest.

"Surprised to see you here," he said. "River dry up?"

Culver shook his head. "Out looking for a man. Supposed to have come here. Name of Mark Farson. Maybe you heard of him."

Hamilton rocked slowly in the chair, brow furrowed. "Can't say I did," he declared. "But I might have missed him. There are so many people. Someone I should know?"

"Guess you wouldn't," Culver told him. "Came after you had left. Got to be pretty friendly with him."

Culver snapped the match stick in two, flipped it from him with his thumb. "Figured he was about my best friend, I guess. Would have gone through hell barefooted for that kid."

Back of the desk, Hamilton's eyes squinted shrewdly. "Loan him some money?"

"Worse than that," said Culver. "Heard of Gun Gulch, you see. Heard it was a good town. So we pooled our killings and he came out here ahead to sort of look it over. He was to let me know if it was worth investing."

Culver blew smoke toward the ceiling, vaguely wished he had the money to buy cigars like the fine weed between his fingers.

"Didn't hear a word of him," he said. "Not a single word since he left. So I came along to check up. Figured something might have happened to the kid."

"Run out on you," Hamilton said, flatly.

Culver looked at him, but the face was a smooth, white mask. "Beginning to think that very thing myself."

There was a long silence while Culver smoked and Hamilton teetered in the chair.

"Now what?" Hamilton finally asked.

"Nothing, I guess," said Culver. "No trace of him. Can't even be sure that he came here. I asked all along the line, but there was nothing doing. Doesn't prove he didn't come, of course, but I have no proof that he did."

"Want to stick around for a few days before you go back," Hamilton told him, easily. "Interesting town."

Culver shook his head. "Can't go back. I'm next door to dead broke."

He waited but the man across the desk kept silent.

Finally Culver said, "Thought you might have a job for me. I still can handle a deck all right and I know my players."

Hamilton eyed him closely, cunning in his face. "Figure you could do a trick or two?"

"Not a chance," Culver told him, curtly. "I always played them straight. No funny business. I won because I was a better player than the other fellow. Stands to reason I would have been. It was my business, but just his way of having fun."

"Can't do it that way here," Hamilton declared. "This is a short shot proposition. Mines may peter out any day. Got to clean up when you can. Got a lot of cash invested. Have to get it back."

He tilted forward in the chair, took his thumbs out of the armholes of the vest. "How about a loan?" he asked.

Culver shook his head. "I'll look around a bit."

"Come to think of it," said Hamilton, "I might be able to give you a job."

"Swamping out, maybe," Culver said, bitterly.

"Nope, a good job. There's a place across the street, see. Goes by the name of Golden Slipper. Given me a lot of trouble. Hombre by the name of Brown runs it. Barney Brown. Things going on over there I'd like to know about."

Culver hurled the half smoked cigar into the spittoon angrily. "I'm no spy," he said, shortly.

"Let's talk sense." Hamilton spoke

easily. "You're the only man I can trust. Maybe we don't like one another, but I can trust you and that's more than I can say for anyone else around here. All you've got to do is go over and see Brown. He will grab you in a minute. Cripes, after you killing one of my men and all, he'll—"

Culver sat bolt upright in the chair. "One of your men!"

Hamilton laughed at him shortly. "Sure, Stover. I thought you knew."

"Hell, no," said Culver. "He was just someone that got in my hair. Wouldn't have nothing come of it if he hadn't gone for his gun. Then, naturally, I had to. . ."

"Certainly," Hamilton told him. "Certainly. No need to make excuses."

"Perkins one of your men, too, I suppose."

Hamilton nodded.

"Lord, what a mangy lot."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," said Hamilton. "Hard to get good men. That's why I need you."

Culver rose. "The answer is no, Hamilton. I'm not doing any spying for you or any other man."

Hamilton leaned back again and inserted his thumbs into his vest, rocked gently.

"If I were you, Culver, I'd walk sort of easy. Stover had some friends, you know."

"I suppose that's a threat," said Culver.

"Frankly," Hamilton told him, "that's just exactly what it is."

THE street had quieted somewhat, but men still moved along the sidewalks and shrieks of drunken laughter came from the open windows. Across the street was the Golden Slipper and next to it a print shop. GUN GULCH GAZETTE said the uneven sign scrawled across the window in black paint. Behind the window a man perched on a stool at a type cabinet, shoulders bent above his work.

A hand tugged at Culver's sleeve and he turned around. The man with the peg-leg stood beside him.

"Good evening," said Peg-leg. He pulled the notebook from his pocket, took the pencil stub from behind his ear. "Wonder if you would tell me how to spell Atwood's name. Afraid I got it wrong. Don't mind about the other words, but I like to get the names right."

"I thought you had his name once!"

"Did," said Peg-leg. "But I got to put it down again. He got shot, you know."

"You mean you put down all the shootings?"

"Most of them," said Peg-leg, proudly. "Maybe I miss a few of the piddling ones, but I catch the main ones."

Culver grinned. "You should be a newspaper reporter."

Peg-leg scratched his ear. "Am, sort of. Jake, over there at the *Gazette*, gets lots of his stuff from me. Folks pay me to get things in the paper about them and Jake gives me a drink or buys me a dinner for bringing him the stuff, so it works out all right both ways."

"By the way," asked Culver, "what's your name?"

"It's Harvey," said the man, "but they mostly call me Crip."

He poised the pencil above the notebook. "Now, if you will tell me how to spell Atwood?"

Culver told him, then asked a question: "How do I get across the street? Have to wade?"

The peg-legged man chuckled. "Feller up the street has a plank thrown across the mud. He charges you a buck."

Across the street and his dollar paid, Culver stood for a moment in front of the Golden Slipper, listening to the sound of revelry that came from behind the door.

"Brown will snap you up," Hamilton had said.

Culver shrugged. If the worst came to the worst, he would have to do it, but not yet.

He went on past the place, turned in at the printshop door.

The man sitting on the stool looked up as he came in.

"You're Jake, I suppose?" said Culver.

The man put aside the type stick, slid off the stool and came toward him.

"That's it, stranger. Jake Palmer is the handle."

"Mine is Culver." Culver put out his hand and the man took it in his bony, ink-stained paw.

"You must be the gent that plumb perforated Stover."

Culver nodded.

"What can I do for you, stranger?" Jake asked. "Any hombre that removes a skunk like Stover is a friend of mine."

"Thought maybe you could help me," Culver told him. "I'm looking for a friend by the name of Farson. Mark Farson. Thought maybe you had heard of him."

Jake put up one hand and scratched his hair-thin head. "Seems as how there was a gent by that name around a while back. But I can't rightly remember. Didn't hang around long, seems to me."

He showed snagged, tobacco-stained teeth in an apologetic grin. "Sorry I can't be no more help than that."

"Crip told me about you," said Culver. "I figured maybe you might know."

Jake shook his head. "That Crip gets me into more trouble. Goes around claiming he's collecting news for me. If it wasn't that he was cracked he'd been buzzard meat long ago. Got enough stuff in that danged notebook of his to convict half the town if it could be proved."

"He seemed all right to me," said Culver.

"He ain't," insisted Jake. "He's crazy as a coot and everybody knows it. That's why they don't pay attention to him. If they did, he'd be so full of holes he down-right wouldn't hold whiskey."

"Seems like a lively place," declared Culver. "Crip probably finds plenty to write down."

"Mister," Jake declared, solemnly, "this town ain't seen nothing yet. Hell is bound to pop one of these days and when it does you'll walk up to your ankles in blood out there in the street. Hamilton and Brown are getting all squared off. . . ."

"Hamilton?"

"Bet your boots. Him and Brown, you see, have got the only two big places here. The little ones don't count. Don't amount to shucks to them palaces of sin run by Hamilton and Brown. Both of them making money hand over fist and they still ain't satisfied. Each one of them wants to run the other out. Been importing gunslicks and one of these days there's going to be a showdown."

From the back of the shop came a high, shrill voice:

"Pa, you worked long enough. Quit your jawing and close up. Land sakes, you work all the time."

Jake grinned lop-sidedly. "That's my wife," he said. "Guess you better go, mister. Thanks for dropping in."

It was almost as if a weight had been lifted from Culver. For long miles on the way from St. Louis, he had thought of Farson, had argued with himself, blamed himself for the black suspicion that hovered in his brain. Mark hadn't run away, he told himself, exultantly. He hadn't run away.

When Culver got back to where the plank had been the plank and man were gone. Gazing ruefully at the muddy street, he sat down on the step of a harness shop and rolled up both pants legs. If he had to wade that muck out there, there was no sense getting his pants muddy as well as his boots.

From up the street came a tapping sound, a broken, hobbling sound. He listened for a moment, puzzled, then it came to him. It was Crip stumping down the walk. He rose from the step, walked to the edge of the sidewalk and stepped into the mud.

Suddenly the tapping ceased, then began again, faster, hurried, as if the man were running, dodging and ducking as he ran. Boots thumped heavily and there was the sound of scuffling.

A gasping voice cried: "No! No!"

Spinning around, Culver leaped back to the sidewalk, sprinted up the street toward the noise that suddenly was silent. And as he ran his hand snapped back and snatched the sixgun from its holster.

Ahead of him orange flame blossomed in the night and even as it did a howling thing went past him and smashed into the window of a building. Glass crashed and tinkled and the bright orange flame flared again.

Culver brought up his gun, worked the trigger swiftly, ducking sideways as he fired, heading for the pitch-dark mouth of an alleyway between two buildings.

Out ahead of him the sixgun yammered, its blasting reverberating between the buildings, and Culver heard the sodden chunking of the bullets slamming into the clapboards by his side. Then he was in the alleyway, backing on cat-like feet, sixgun ready.

Something caught the back of his ankles and tripped him. He tried to catch himself, but failed, flung back his left hand to break the fall, felt the harshness of coarse fabric underneath his fingers. He hit a yielding, rounded object and rolled to one side, put out an exploring hand, stiffened with horror at the thing he found. It was Crip.

In the darkness, Culver slid his fingers along the dead man's back, found the sticky place that surrounded the horn hilt of a knife. Crouched in the darkness between the two buildings, Culver's mind clicked rapidly.

The peg-legged man had been knifed out there on the street, had crawled into the alleyway before death had overtaken him. Killed by someone who had used a knife for silence, but someone who had been desperate enough to use a gun when he faced detection.

Crazy, Jake had said back there in the printshop, crazy as a coot. Dead long ago if he hadn't been. And now he was dead. Even craziness couldn't hold off death.

Tensed above the body, Culver found the dead man's pocket, slid his hand swiftly into it. His fingers touched the notebook and closed about it, pulled it free.

Then, on his feet again, he was racing down the alleyway, ears strained for the sound of running boots that did not come.

BACK in his hotel room, Culver closed and locked the door behind him, stood for a moment listening for the slightest stir to come out of the blackness of the room. But the room was dead. He found the lamp and lighted it, strode to the window and pulled down the blind.

Pulling a chair close to the lamp table, he took the notebook from his pocket, leafed swiftly through the pages. Items caught his eyes and he stopped to read:

Black Jack rolled for 100 dollars at Golden Slipper. Jim done it.

July 16—Col. Newhouse came to town. Frank Smith found gold. Geo. Johnson lose 80 dollars playing poker with Big Steve.

July 17—H. Jackson kiled by Nelson. Old Henry dide.

July 18—Stover kiled stranger, got 500 dolar. No one nos this.

Stover, thought Culver. Stover had been the man out on the walk, the man with the bushy beard and the pig-like eyes. So Stover had robbed a stranger of \$500 and no one, said Crip's crabbed scrawl, knew about it. No one but Crip, who had written it down. Crip, who wasn't so good at other spelling, but liked to get the names right. A gossip book, things that Gun Gulch knew and things it didn't know. Things that a man would know only if he hung around and listened and put two and two together . . . a man who was a little cracked or he'd been dead long ago.

The book slipped in his fingers and he lost the page. He bent his head and opened it again, searching for a date. May. June. And suddenly, there it was.

June 9—Perkins kiled Farson for money belt. Hamilton had him do it. No one nos this. Buried him at nite.

Culver stiffened in his chair, his hand tightening into a fist that crushed and wrinkled the book in its savage grasp.

June 9—Perkins kiled Farson. . . .

And now Crip himself was dead. Dead, more than likely because of that very entry in the book. Killed because Hamilton was afraid that it might be there, because he knew that Crip had many things in the book that no other man should know. That especially a man named Culver should not know.

Culver rose from the chair, blew out the light and let himself into the hall.

Downstairs he stopped and tossed the book onto the desk.



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"Will you put this in your safe?" he asked.

The clerk picked up the book and stared at it nervously.

"Know it?" asked Culver.

The clerk gulped and nodded.

"Someone killed Crip to get that book," said Culver. "Only I got there first."

"But . . . but . . . where are you going, sir?"

"I'm going out to collect a debt," said Culver.

CHAPTER FOUR

When a Hero Fails

HAMILTON glanced up swiftly from his desk at the sound of the footstep, froze at the sight of the gun in Culver's hand.

Culver chuckled softly. "How are you, Cal?" he asked.

Hamilton's lips moved drily in his face. "How did you get in?"

"Through the basement window," said Culver. "All the others were locked. The place was dark but I saw the light in your window here."

One of Hamilton's hands slid along the desk top and Culver snapped at him: "Keep those paws where they are. Don't go reaching for a drawer!"

Hamilton slid his hand back again and Culver moved into the room, closed the door behind him. Piles of bills and heaps of silver coin were piled upon the desk top and in front of Hamilton was a heavy ledger.

"Counting up the profits?" asked Culver.

Hamilton didn't answer and he went on. "I been wondering what you do when you make a windfall. Ten thousand dollars, say. Put it in the book, all regular-like and neat?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hamilton said.

"Suppose you kill a man," said Culver. "Or have someone kill him for you. Suppose he has a money belt with ten thousand dollars in it. What do you do with that?"

"I wouldn't know," said Hamilton. "It's never happened. I never thought about it."

"I'd hate to have a memory like yours," Culver told him, softly. "Bad for business.

Imagine going around and forgetting a wad of cash like that."

"Look," said Hamilton, "I'm busy!"

Culver snarled savagely. "Don't try to high-hat me, Cal. You can't run a sandy on me because I know you from the bottom up. In case you've forgotten, I'm talking about Farson."

"Farson?"

"Yes, Farson. The man you had Perkins kill."

Hamilton shrugged. "Perkins probably has killed a lot of men I don't know about."

"Not Farson," said Culver, evenly. "You knew about him, all right."

"You haven't any proof," Hamilton pointed out.

"A book," said Culver.

Hamilton snickered. "Crip's book. It would never stand in law."

"I'm not talking about the law, Hamilton. I'm talking about a debt."

"A debt?"

"That's right. Ten thousand bucks. That money Farson had belonged to me."

"You mean—"

"I mean I want the money back."

"That's all?"

"All for right now," Culver told him.

"After I get the cash I'm going out and find Perkins and when I'm done with him I'll come back for you. I'll give you that much chance, Cal. I'll give you time to run if you want to run."

"And if I don't?"

"I sure hope you don't," said Culver.

One of Hamilton's hands twitched nervously. "Look, Culver, we're old friends. We knew one another back there on the river."

Culver grinned wryly. "You're stretching the truth some when you say that we were friends. How about starting to count out the money."

"I haven't got it here," said Hamilton. "I'd have to get into the safe."

"Okay," said Culver. "Start getting into it."

He moved around the desk, gun held ready. "One wrong move," he warned, "and you'll never finish what you're doing."

HAMILTON swiveled the chair around, got out of it and knelt before the safe. His fingers went out to the dial and turned it, fumbling as they worked.

"You gave in pretty easy," Culver told him. "If you got any aces up your sleeve don't try to pull them out."

The dial clicked and Hamilton pulled the handle of the safe. In the silence of the room, Culver heard the bolts shoot back. The hinges squealed a little as the door came open.

Another sound, a noise that was scarcely heard, brought Culver spinning around, away from the kneeling man to face the door. Perkins stood in the doorway, one hand on the doorknob, the other clutching a sixgun.

Culver jerked his own gun up, finger already tightening on the trigger. Perkins' gun coughed harshly, like a rasping throat, and burning fire sliced its way across the knuckles of Culver's gun hand. He felt his fingers loosen and the gun jumped from them as it fired, bouncing high into the air, then spinning to the floor.

Perkins' gun was leveling again and behind it the man's face was a mask of hate. Culver backed toward the wall, step by slow step.

Hamilton had swung away from the safe, was still squatting on his heels, but he also held a gun. That's why he gave in so easy, Culver told himself. He had the gun in there and he gambled on it. But he never would have made it if it hadn't been for Perkins. He'd never had a chance to reach for it.

Culver felt the wall at his back and stood rigid, watching Perkins pace toward him, gun leveled, face twisted into livid hatefulness.

Hamilton's voice cut through the tenseness of the silence. "Perkins! Perkins, don't shoot!"

Perkins' eyes did not waver from Culver. He asked: "Why not?"

"He's got the book!" Hamilton yelled. "He's got Crip's book. He's the one that scared you off and took the book."

"Hell, all we have to do," snarled Perkins, "is to cut him down and take it."

"You fool!" Hamilton screamed. "You don't think he has it on him? He's too smart to have it on him."

"You're right, Cal," Culver said. "I haven't got it on me."

Perkins moved closer. "Where is it?" he asked.

Culver shook his head.

"Don't push your luck too far," Perkins

told him, fiercely. "I got a thing or two to settle with you and I might forget myself."

"We might make a deal," said Culver.

"I'm not dealing," snapped Perkins. "Not with a man who hasn't any chips."

His right hand slammed the gun muzzle into Culver's stomach, his left came up and struck, a savage open-handed blow that rocked Culver's head.

"Next time," snarled Perkins, "I will use my fist. I'll knock every tooth you have down your dirty throat."

Culver surged away from the wall, arms half lifted, but the gun barrel boring into his stomach drove him back.

"Gut-shot men die slow and hard," said Perkins grimly, "but they always die. Try that once again and I'll let you have it."

Culver saw Perkins' fist coming and he tried to duck, but it caught him alongside the jaw and drove his head back against the wall. The fist came up again and pain exploded in his brain. He felt himself falling and a shock went through him as he hit the floor. A heavy boot slammed into his ribs and knocked him over, flat upon his back.

Through the hazy grayness that filled the room, he heard Hamilton's bawling voice.

"Perkins! Lay off for a minute. Give him a chance to talk."

He was on his hands and knees now, head hanging toward the floor, and he wondered how he got there. The last he had remembered was lying on his back.

He shook his head and saw the dark drops that sprayed upon the floor. He lifted an unsteady hand and wiped his chin and his hand was red.

Eyes clearing, he stared along the worn pattern of the carpeting that covered the floor, and sucked in his breath. There, not more than five feet in front of him, was the gun that he had dropped. One chance; that was all that he would have.

He gathered his knees beneath him, tensed, then leaped. Pain wracked his body at the effort and his fumbling hand felt the touch of metal. His fingers tightened on the grip.

A boot crashed into his stomach and half lifted him, sent a wave of nausea through him, turned him into a watery mass of retching sickness. He felt the gun slipping

from his fingers, groped for it in the blackness that rolled along the floor.

A hand reached out and grabbed the nape of his neck in steel-trap fingers, hauled him up.

In front of him he saw a face of twisted rage and a working mouth that screamed profanity. His bleary eyes caught the glint of a slashing sixgun barrel and then the barrel came down and his brain exploded.

FOR a long moment he lay in a torpor that was merciful, then slowly, bit by bit, he became aware of his battered body. His stomach was a piece of lead that held him down and behind his back his hands and wrists were a sharp, red ache.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, careful so that the lancing light would not hit them again. But there was no light. He lay still, eyes moving slowly to try to pick up something substantial in the darkness. One by one, he made out the dark, crouched presence of furniture. The posters of the brass bed on which he lay, catching the slight glimmer of stars through the window at his back. The table that stood beside the bed with the lamp upon it.

He moved an arm to reach out and touch the table at his side, and his arm moved an inch or two and would move no more. Sharp pain lanced from wrist to elbow.

Methodically, mechanically, he narrowed down his mind to consider his hands and his brain traced out the tortured lines of bloody rawness where the ropes bit into yielding flesh. His feet, too, lashed together at the ankles.

They would be coming back. Hamilton with his cold ruthlessness, Perkins with his twisted hate. They would come back to make him talk. And when he talked, they'd kill him.

He had to get out before the two came back. Somehow he had to escape this room. And the window was the only way. A man could break a window with his shoulder, heave his body through. He shuddered at the thought of jagged broken glass, but it was the only way.

Carefully, noiselessly, he swung his feet off the bed, pulled them around until he could stand up. Coldness seeped into him as he stood there in the dark, coldness and a terrible sense of helplessness. He hopped, slowly, carefully, inch by inch. One hop,

then another, would take him to the window.

Something tugged at his wrists and he halted, stood with cold sweat breaking out on him. His wrists not only were tied together, but were secured to the bed!

He pivoted cautiously and stared at the table with the lamp upon it. A lamp meant that there would be matches. He bent forward from the waist to bring his eyes closer to the table top, and there the matches were, a water tumbler full of them, sitting near the edge.

Cautiously, he hopped backwards, waggling fingers searching for the table's edge. He found it and halted, forced his arms backward to carry the fingers to the water tumbler.

Awkwardly one finger caught the tumbler's top, tipped it over so that the matches spilled on the table top. Scraping, fumbling, his fingers pulled the matches in a pile, then groped to find the rope that bound him to the bed.

Carefully, fumbling time after time, he piled the slack in the rope atop the matches, then stood rigid for a moment, gasping for breath.

What he had to do next would take steadiness, sureness. He could not flinch or fumble. If he knocked the matches on the floor, if he . . .

He managed to get a single match between two fingers, pressed the head against the table's edge, then swiftly flipped it up. Light flared in the room and dancing shadows jiggled along the wall.

He held his breath, kept the fingers closed tight upon the flaming stick, carried it back until another finger touched the pile of matches and the rope, then dropped it.

For a moment nothing happened, then another match caught with a sputter and a second, then at least a dozen, with a sudden flare of flame and the smell of burning sulphur.

Sudden flaring heat bit into his hands and the matches flared again with a sudden puff, lighting the room with a ghastly yellow glare. Another odor came through the smell of sulphur, the stench of burning rope.

He waited and the flame of the burning match-heap bit into his hands. He waited while the shadows danced and died

upon the wall, then suddenly heaved himself forward. The rope caught, held for a single instant, then snapped and hurled him forward, flat upon his face. He rolled onto his side, jack-knifed with his feet, heard the crash of the falling table as his boots slammed into it.

Sitting on the floor, he stared in horror at the flame that ate into the bedding. His thrashing feet had knocked the table over, dumped the burning matches squarely on the bed.

HE HEAVED himself upright with a single motion, hopped desperately toward the window. Behind him the flames crackled angrily as they worked into the corn-husks. In a minute, he knew, the room would be an inferno, a roaring sheet of fire. Scant seconds were left to reach the window.

He stumbled and went to his knees, surged up again. The hot breath of the fire lapped against his back. Feet were running on the stairs and voices shouted. Someone had heard the table crash.

The window was before him and he

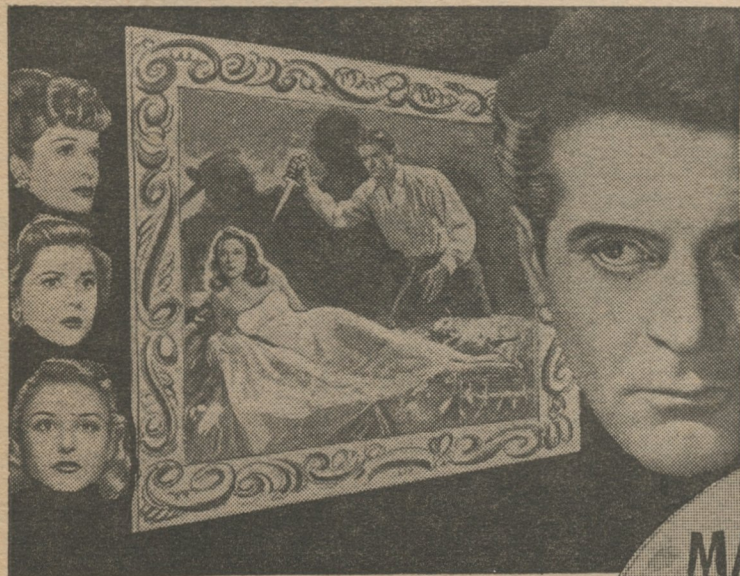
gave one last hop. He stumbled and his body hit the wall and held. Desperately, he dragged his feet beneath him, lowered his shoulder to press against the window.

The boots were running across the floor just outside the door. There was no time to lose. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a sheet of flame curl toward the ceiling, leave the papered wall black and flecked with glowing ash.

The sash buckled beneath his straining shoulder and the window popped like the explosion of a gun. Glass tinkled on the floor and the sash crashed outward. A blast of air swept into the room and the flames leaped high, mushrooming on the ceiling.

Culver thrust his head and chest through the broken window, saw the sloping roof of a shed beneath him. Lucky, said his brain. Lucky that it's there to break your fall.

He shoved with all the power that was in his feet, felt his body sliding out the window. A knife-like piece of broken glass slashed through his trousers and gouged into his thigh. Then he was falling. He hit



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the slant roof and rolled, then fell again.

The ground came up and smacked him, drove the breath from out of his lungs. He rolled and kept on rolling, out of the mud and into a patch of weeds.

Crouched in the weed patch, he tried to orient himself. There was the livery barn and a vacant lot and beyond that the Antlers Hotel. The hotel, he told himself, was the place to go.

He surged to his feet and hopped, hopped with every ounce of strength that was in his body. Grass caught at his feet and tripped him and he got up again, hopped on, in a desperate race with time.

Men were yelling on the street, feet were pounding on the sidewalks. Someone was shouting in a bull-like voice, over and over again: "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

He wasted precious seconds to glance over his shoulder, saw that the Crystal Bar was a mass of twisting flame all along its second story. He glanced around again, stared upward at the hotel windows, suddenly shouted at a figure standing in one lighted square.

"Nancy! Nancy! It's Culver."

He stumbled to his knees, fought his way upright again.

Nancy Atwood had opened her window, was leaning out.

"Nancy!" he shouted.

His feet caught on a discarded wooden box and he went down again into a tangled, beaten heap.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fist Fight in Hell

THE ground was soft and cool beneath him and the shouting of the men out in the street was a muted sound, as if from far away. Culver lay face down and waited. His mind was, for the moment, blank, resting too from the horror of the fire, from the unreasoning fear of an animal that is trapped and cornered.

Beating hoofs went by and roused him, twisted him upward from the ground. A horse went past, mane flying in the garish light of the burning building, feet pounding in terror. Someone had gotten into the livery barn and was turning loose the horses before the fire could spread from the flaming barroom.

He struggled to his knees, tried to rise to his feet, sank back again when his tortured ankles screamed in pain. Other horses galloped past, wild eyes gleaming in the light. Above the yelling of the men out in the street came the clank of buckets. A fire-fighting line was being formed, passing buckets filled with water from man to man, probably to wet down the livery barn. For there could be no hope of saving the Crystal Bar. The place was a torch that towered into the night, a pillar of curling fire topped by dense black smoke, seen faintly in the first grayness of the coming dawn.

"Grant!"

Culver twisted around, saw the girl running toward him, coat wrapped tight about her, hair flying across her shoulders.

"Nancy!" he shouted. "Over here, Nancy."

He struggled to his feet as she came up.

She stopped before him, for a moment said no word, staring at him, face flushed by the flaring fire.

"What happened?" she asked.

"There's a knife in my vest pocket," he told her. "That is, if it hasn't fallen out. No, the lower one on the right."

Her fingers found it, brought it out.

"It was because of Bob," she sobbed.

"You got into all this trouble because of what you did for him. He told me."

He shook his head. "It was something else," he said.

She hacked at the rope that bound his wrists and he felt it loosen and fall away. His arms fell to his side and he lifted them in front of him. The wrists looked like so much raw meat and the hands were streaked with blood.

"Now your feet," said Nancy. "Sit down so I can get at them."

"Let me," he said.

He reached out his hand and she gave him the knife. Seated, he hacked at the cords savagely.

"But what's it all about?" she asked. "The fire and you out here like this."

"Plenty," he told her. "You see, I set the fire."

He snapped the blade of the knife, returned it to his pocket.

"That man you were asking about all the way out," said Nancy. "You found him?"

Culver shook his head. "No, I didn't find him, but I found what happened to him. And this is just a start."

He reeled to his feet, stamped to bring back the circulation.

"You better get back inside," he said. "It's no place for you out here. Thanks for coming down."

Above the crackle of the fire and the shouting in the street, he heard the rush of feet behind him, swung around. With a yell of warning, he thrust out a hand at Nancy, sent her reeling back.

Perkins was running forward through the flame-streaked darkness. The gun in his hand glittered.

Culver ducked swiftly, heard the angry hum of the bullet above his shoulder. His fingers scooped along the ground and clutched the edge of the wooden box that had tripped him. Straightening quickly, he hurled it in an overhanded throw at the charging man.

The sixgun barked again. Then the box crunched into Perkins, sent him reeling sidewise, staggering.

Culver leaped forward savagely and felt the heat of the muzzle flare as the gun coughed. Then his hand chopped down with a savage blow that caught the wrist behind the gun. And even as he struck, he swung again, a looping right that started at his belt and came up in a jarring smash against Perkins' jaw. Perkins dropped the gun.

Culver stepped in close with punching fists that worked like driving pistons. Perkins gave ground slowly, stubbornly, covering up.

Culver's foot caught in a tangled clump of grass, threw him off balance, gave Perkins the chance that he had been awaiting. Culver sensed the smashing fist rather than saw it, got his elbow up, but only partially blocked it. It skidded along his forearm and exploded on his jaw.

Perkins' right was coming in again and he ducked against it, slammed up blindly with his left. He felt his fist strike yielding flesh and sink into it with a hollow thud. Then Perkins' blow connected and jarred him to his toes. Culver's right worked automatically, lashing out with a desperate strength.

Perkins' head was a punching bag swaying in the mist . . . a head that bobbed and

tossed. Culver stepped close and swung his left and the head snapped over, rocking on the neck. Culver's right came up, a blow that started from boot-top level, that gained speed as it came, that had the hunched, pivoting power of 180 pounds of bone and muscle behind it.

The head was gone and Culver did not know where he was, for the head had been all that he had to go by. He raised one of his hands and ran it across his eyes, stared at the flaming wreckage of the Crystal Bar. Perkins was a dark shape on the ground, a twisted, battered shape.

Culver felt a hand upon his arm and turned around. It was Nancy Atwood. He lifted a hand and ran it across his mouth, wiping off the blood that trickled from a battered lip.

"Here," she said and he saw that she was holding a sixgun.

Numbly he reached out and took it, thrust it in the waistband of his trousers.

"Where did you get it?" he demanded.

"I picked it up," said Nancy. "It was the one he dropped when you hit him. I was trying to—"

He gasped. "You mean you were trying to shoot Perkins?"

She nodded, half sobbing. "But you were always in the way. I was afraid of hitting you."

He lifted an awkward arm around her shoulder, drew her close. "You're all right," he said, thickly.

She looked up into his face. "What's it all about, Grant?"

He told her briefly, quickly. "They killed Mark for his money. My money. The money he had in his belt. Killed him and buried him at night, somewhere in the hills. And it's not the only case. There have been others like it. Men killed, men robbed and cheated.

"The river was dying," he said. "Fewer boats were traveling and the passenger lists were thinner. Mark and I figured we ought to move to fresher fields and so he came out ahead to look them over. Headed for here first because we'd heard Gun Gulch was a good town."

He shivered in the rising wind of dawn.

"Let's go back to the hotel," said the girl. "Bob will be wondering what it's all about and a little soap and water wouldn't hurt your face."

Side by side they walked across the vacant lot toward the sidewalk.

THE fire in the Crystal Bar had almost burned itself out, but the street still rang with turmoil. Horses, freed from the livery stable, moved like ghosts in the first gray light of dawn. Culver stared over his shoulder at the smoldering ruins of the Crystal Bar and a faint, grim smile tugged at his lips. I didn't do it deliberately, he told himself, but I sure paid Hamilton off for a part of what he did.

Nancy stopped short, clutching Culver's arm. "Look, Grant. That man out there. What are they doing to him?"

Culver stared at the circle of men standing in the muddy street, shouting at the man they had thrust onto a wagon box. Even from where he stood, he could see the rope around the man's neck and the deathly, twisted pallor that sat upon his face.

"You get back to the hotel, quick," he snapped at the girl.

With swift strides he crossed the vacant lot, stepped onto the sidewalk. From the opposite side of the street a bull voice belted. "Somebody start getting them horses. We ain't got all night to waste."

Another voice laughed. "Hold onto your shirt, Mike. It's almost morning now."

Culver reached out and tapped the shoulder of the man who stood in front of him. "What's going on?" he asked.

The man turned around and Culver saw that it was Jake, the printer.

Jake spat deliberately into the mud before he answered. "We're going to hang the lousy son," he said. "Just as soon as we round up some horses to take him out where we can find a tree, we're going to string him up. Got to do something to convince folks around here it ain't healthy to go out and burn down other people's property."

He spat in the mud again. "Course, no one gives a damn about the Crystal Bar, but it's a menace, that's what it is. That fire might of spread to the livery barn. Might have burned down half the town. The boys worked hard to save it and they ain't in no mood for shilly-shallying."

Culver sucked his breath in sharply. "You mean you figure that fellow set the fire?"

"Set it or had someone set it," said Jake. "Logical man to do it. Hated Hamilton's guts, he did. Feller I was telling you about. Barney Brown, over at the Golden Slipper."

"But you aren't giving him a chance," protested Culver. "You should have a trial. Let him have a say about this hanging business."

"Hell," Jake said, disgustedly, "he'd deny he done it. Stands to reason he would. Him and Hamilton was fixing for a show-down and Barney got the jump on Hamilton, that's all. Other way around, if the Golden Slipper had burned down, we'd hang Hamilton."

Culver lifted his head, stared at Barney Brown. The man was scared clean through. Standing there in the wagonbox with the rope around his neck he suddenly was pitiful. His waistcoat was unbuttoned and his cravat fluttered in the wind. His hand came up nervously and clutched the rope that hung around his shoulders, then jerked away as if his fingers had touched a red-hot iron.

The crowd roared with laughter and the bull-like voice jeered:

"Don't like the feel of it, Barney? Just wait until we tighten it a little."

Someone yelled, "Where are those damn horses."

"Let's grab hold of that wagon and take it out ourselves," shouted someone else. "We got enough men here. We can do it easy."

Culver felt revulsion twisting at his vitals. A pack of cowards, he told himself. A pack of wolves. Big and smart and loud-mouthed because there were a lot of them, because they could do whatever they wanted to do with Barney Brown and no one would hurt them.

He raised his voice. "You gents got the wrong man," he shouted at them.

Silence fell, a shocked and restless silence. Heads turned to stare at him.

A growl came from the crowd, a fierce, angry sound. The voice of the pack that is being robbed of the deer it has pulled down.

Beyond the wagon a huge man was moving forward, lumbering through the sea of faces, and the crowd parted quickly to let him pass.

Motionless on the sidewalk, Culver stood

and watched him come. Huge and hairy, massive of shoulder, with a bushy beard and hair that hung down his neck and curled upward in a drake's tail above the collar of his heavy woolen shirt.

It was the man with the bull voice, he knew. The man who had shouted the loudest and angriest, who had jeered at Brown . . . the man the men called Mike.

Six feet away Mike stopped, stood with arms akimbo, staring up at Culver.

"You said something, stranger?" he asked and his voice was like a drum beating in the street.

"I said you had the wrong man," said Culver. "I'm the one who set that fire."

A murmur ran through the crowd and it stirred suddenly, then settled back again, like a pack of wolves.

"All right," said Mike, "we'll hang you instead of Brown."

HE TOOK a slow step forward and the crowd surged into life. Angry voices spat screaming words at Culver and through the words he heard the splashing, sucking sound of feet moving through the mud.

From behind him, a cyclonic figure flung itself at Culver, coat flying in the wind. A hand reached out and snatched the six-gun from his waistband, brought it up. Culver's hand flashed out to grasp the gun and the flare of the muzzle blast was a hot breath against his palm.

Out in the muddy street, Mike reeled back, bull voice bellowing, hand clapped to his right forearm.

The crowd stopped, stood stock-still, the angry words frozen in their mouths, boots rooted in the mud.

Culver's fingers closed upon the gun, wrenched it away from Nancy Atwood.

"I thought I told you—" he began, but she interrupted him in a rush of tumbling words.

"You big lummo, you'd stand there and never stir, even when you had a gun. Can't you see what would happen to you if you didn't stop them?"

Her voice caught and broke and she stood on the sidewalk, huddled against the terror of the moment, hands pulling the coat tight around her body.

Culver hefted the sixgun in his hand, looked out over the crowd.

"You boys still want to hang me?" he asked, softly.

They did not stir or move.

Culver looked at Mike. The man looked back, hand still clutching his forearm, blood oozing out between his fingers.

"How about it, Mike?" asked Grant Culver.

The big man shifted his footing. "Maybe we were a bit worked up," he said. "Maybe we should of asked if you had a reason for starting that fire."

Culver grinned. "That's more like it. You can't hang a man legal without having a trial. I'm plumb ready to stand trial any time."

A buzzing thing snarled past his ear and from the vacant lot came the coughing *spang* of a high-powered rifle.

Gun still in hand, Culver whirled around. The rifle coughed again and he felt the searing burn of the bullet as it spun across his ribs.

Out in the vacant lot Calvin Hamilton was running in great leaps toward a saddled horse by the hotel corner. Culver



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sprang forward, sixgun talking as he ran. Hamilton stumbled once, but regained his feet, ran on. With a yell, he vaulted into the saddle and the horse hammered out of sight behind the building.

Breath gasping in his throat, Culver rounded the hotel corner. From somewhere ahead a rifle hammered and he heard the whine of a heavy bullet passing overhead.

In the space between the hotel and barber shop swift hoofs pounded and a startled horse leaped out into the open.

"Whoa, boy!" Culver yelled.

Moving swiftly forward as the animal wheeled to run, Culver leaped desperately, caught the flying mane in a steel-trap grasp. His toes dragged for a moment as the horse sidled, then he sprang and the horse rose on its hind legs, fighting. Culver clung desperately, digging in his heels.

Then the horse was down again and running . . . running in the right direction. In the direction that Hamilton had taken.

CHAPTER SIX

Trail's End

NO SADDLE, no bridle, just a horse. One of the horses that had been turned out of the livery barn when it had been feared that it might catch fire.

No bridle, but the horse was going in the right direction, angling from behind the buildings to come into the street, striking the trail that led out of town, running with driving legs spurred by surprise and fear.

Far up the trail, Culver could see Hamilton and his mount, hazy figures in the gray dawn light. Culver bent low along the horse's neck, spoke soothing words aimed at the laid-back ears. If the horse only would keep going, perhaps he could handle him even without a bridle. Cuff his head to turn him in the right direction, kick him in the ribs in lieu of spurs.

He rode bent forward, the whistle of the wind a roaring in his ears punctuated by the pounding hoofbeats of the working legs beneath him.

Hamilton had disappeared in a dip in the trail, but he reappeared again. Culver strained his eyes. The man seemed closer than he had before. Hope rose in him.

"Maybe we can overhaul him, hoss,"

he said. "Maybe you and I can do it."

He reached for the waistband of his trousers, hauled out the sixgun. And even as he did it, a sudden thought struck him with paralyzing force. Perkins had fired the gun twice. Nancy had used it once. That had left three cartridges. Culver's heart sank at the thought that came. How many times had he, himself, pulled the trigger when he ran across the vacant lot in pursuit of Hamilton?

With fumbling fingers, he spun the cylinder, gulped in relief. There was one live shell. He'd only used two shots back there in the vacant lot. But one shell! One bullet! One bullet against the bullets that Hamilton must carry in the heavy rifle!

The trail was rising into higher land, was becoming ever more twisted and tortuous than it had been before. To the left the land sloped up in jagged cliffs and rocky talus slides, with scrawny pines struggling for footholds, while to the right the ground plunged down in frozen anguish.

He was gaining on Hamilton, Culver knew. Each time the man reappeared after being hidden by an angle in the trail, he had lost ground. Once he swivelled in his saddle and raised the gun to his shoulder, but brought it down again without pulling the trigger.

Culver leaned downward, patted the horse's neck. "Keep going," he told him. "Keep on going."

Up ahead a rifle roared and even as it did, Culver heard the *spat* of the heavy bullet hitting flesh. Beneath him the horse broke its gait and stumbled, front knees folding in mid-stride. The outstretched head pitched forward and Culver felt himself spin into the air.

On hands and knees, Culver dived for the side of the trail, forced his way into a sprawling clump of cedars that clambered over two tilted boulders. The rifle *spanged* again and the bullet pinged against one of the boulders, went howling into space.

HUGGING the ground, Culver glanced toward the trail. The horse lay crumpled in the road, with a pool of blood darkening the wheel ruts. Hamilton, he knew, had deliberately shot the animal. Had gambled rifle against sixgun in a shoot-out on this rocky mountainside.

Culver grimaced. The odds were heavier than Hamilton could guess. With only one cartridge left in the six-shooter, he had virtually no chance at all. Up on the slope the rifle churned three quick shots and the bullets chunked wickedly into the cedar brake.

He's trying to smoke me out, Culver told himself. Only thing to do would be to work up the hill to the left of Hamilton's position, taking advantage of screening boulders and scrawny thickets of evergreen. Get above Hamilton so that he would have to come out. Culver surged to his feet and ran, bent low, zig-zagging, fighting his way up the debris-strewn slope.

Something slapped Culver in the shoulder and he was going over, plunging in a dizzy spin toward the jumbled rocks that lay under-foot. As if they did not belong to him, as if they were separate entities, he knew that his feet were fighting to hold him upright. But there was nothing they could do.

He reached out a hand and the hand fell limp. The fingers curled around a head-sized rock, curled and gripped and then slid off and sprawled upon the ground.

Hamilton got me, he thought. Got me just like he got Farson and Crip. Only this time he did it with his own hands instead of someone else's. He'll be coming out, figuring I am dead. Only he'll probably come over to make sure and when he

finds I'm not he'll put another bullet into me.

Culver lay face down upon the rocks and felt their coolness through his clothing. Pretty soon, he thought, that shoulder will begin to hurt like hell. Only probably, by that time I will be dead. If I move now, I'm dead, for Hamilton must be walking up and he'll have the rifle ready. To the right he heard the scrape of leather on rock and knew the man was coming. Why not use that cartridge? Why not take a chance? It wouldn't be the first time. Back on the river they said that Grant Culver would take a chance on anything. On the flip of a card, on the trickle of two raindrops running down a window, on impossible chances with a gun . . . on almost anything.

"A mean man to tangle with," they said, "because he doesn't give a damn."

And why should he now? He was as good as dead. When Hamilton saw he still had life in him, he would blast it out with a bullet from the rifle.

Culver lay and listened to the crunch of feet, to the rattle of the stones that loosened and rattled down the hillside. Thirty feet away, thought Culver. Ten paces. I'll let him come a little closer. He counted the steps. One, two, three, four . . . five paces now!

He tensed himself, wedged one toe against a rock, and then heaved upward, like a wounded bear rising on hind legs.

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His hand was moving for the gun sticking in his waistband, moving with the old precision, with the same detached efficiency which it always used.

Before him Hamilton had stopped, mouth open in astonishment, feet spread apart as if he'd frozen in mid-stride when Culver moved. But the rifle was coming up, the barrel a shining sweep of metal that pointed from the hip. Culver felt the sixgun come free and tilt upward in his fist. The rifle muzzle spit flame and smoke and a savage hand clutched at Culver's shirt and twitched it viciously.

Triumph surged in Culver's brain and his hand was sure. The sixgun bucked against his palm and the sound of its ugly bark echoed in his ears.

Out on the rocks, Hamilton stumbled forward, as if he had started to run and tripped. His hand came open and the rifle dropped and the man was pitching forward.

CULVER let his gun-hand sag, stood and watched Hamilton hit the ground. A dawn wind came rustling up the hillside and stirred the cedar brakes. Hamilton was a huddled darkness on the rocks.

"Mark," said Culver, "I guess I'll go back to the river. This isn't the kind of country for the likes of us."

He stuffed the sixgun back into his waistband, staggered down the hill on unsteady feet. The shoulder was hurting now, aching with a pounding pain that hammered through his body.

From the trail below came the sound of hoofs. The boys from Gun Gulch, he thought, coming out to see what it's all about. He reached the trail as they hammered up the slope.

Mike, the burly man Nancy had shot, was in the lead. A lump beneath his shirt sleeve betrayed a bandaged arm. Behind him was Jake, the printer, with about a dozen others. They pulled up, sat their horses in the trail, staring at him.

He shook his head at them. "Too late, gents," he said. "You missed all the fun. Hamilton is up there."

Mike chuckled in his beard. "Been having considerable fun yourself," he said. "Looks like Hamilton might have pegged you."

"He did," Culver told him. "But I pegged him back."

"Hang it, Mike," snapped Jake, "don't sit there gabbing. The man is all shot up. Let's get him back to town."

"Sure, sure," agreed Mike. "The lady will give us hell if we don't get him back." He ruffled his beard with a ham-like hand and chuckled. "First time I ever got shot by a woman, so help me."

"We found Perkins out in the vacant lot," said Jake, "and he spilled his guts. We're going to string him up just as soon as we get back."

"You mean there won't be any trial for me?"

"No trial," said Jake.

"Then," said Culver, "I'll be going down to the river. Not so exciting, maybe, but a whole lot healthier."

"Look, stranger," protested Mike, "we was just figuring how maybe you would stay here."

Culver shook his head. "I'm a gambling man," he told them. "My place is back on the boats again."

"Always deal them straight?" asked Jake.

"Sure," said Culver. "A man that can't deal them straight and win had better quit the game."

"Just the man we want," said Jake.

"But—"

Mike interrupted. Seems as how Brown figures on getting out of Gun Gulch. He's offering the Golden Slipper for sale . . . real cheap."

"The boys," said Jake, "would like to have you run it. Long as they're going to lose their money anyhow, they'd rather lose it honest."

"If you're a little short on cash," Mike told him, "the boys will pass the hat."

Culver laughed quietly. "Don't see how I can disappoint you gents."

Mike climbed off his horse. "Take it easy with that shoulder," he said. "Up you go."

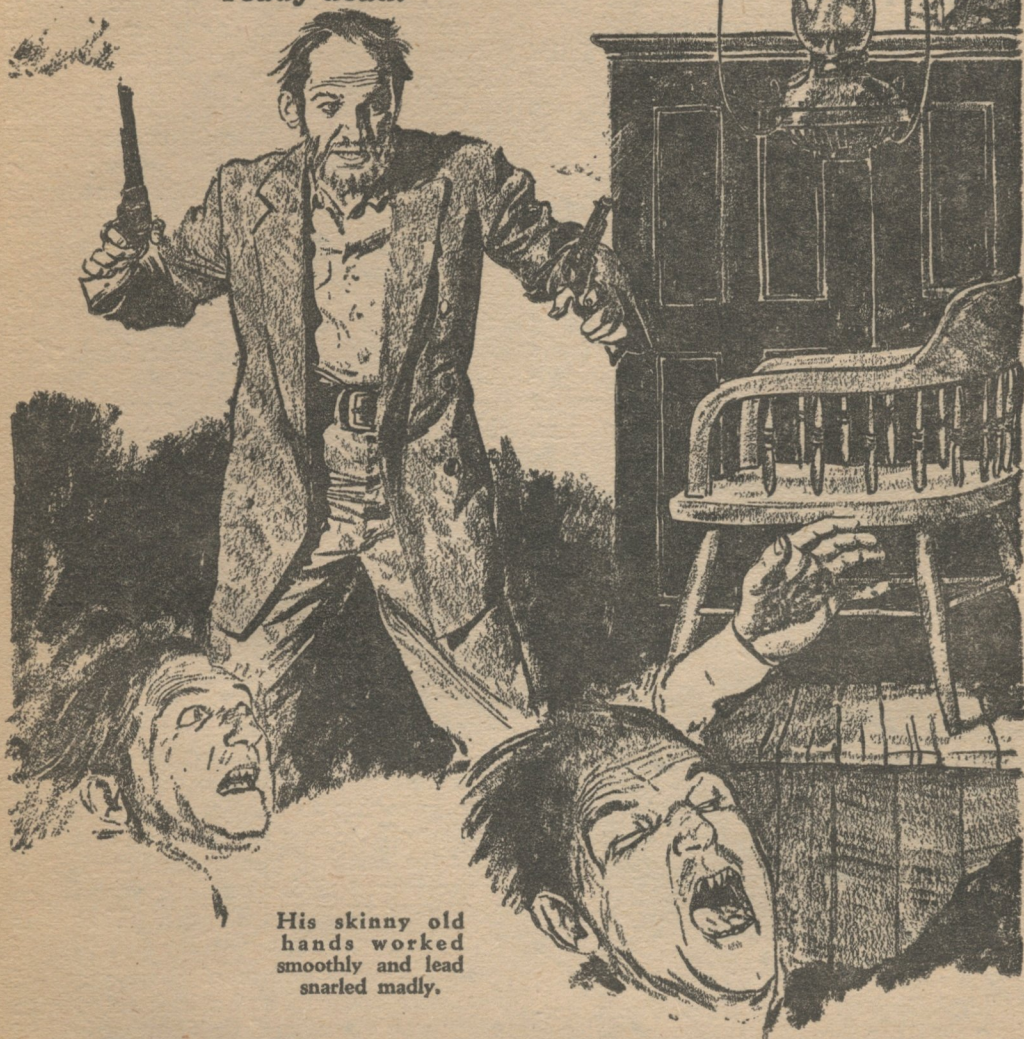
"But you—"

"Hell," growled Mike, "I take a long walk every morning, anyhow."

He held up a massive paw and Culver took it, felt the smooth, hard grip.

"You better get going," said Mike. "The little lady's waiting for you."

A two-bit owlhoot shyster had young Cliff Bowdell hamstringed for the gallows, until a graybeard lawyer rested for the defense, by offering the hangman his client—even though he was already dead!



His skinny old hands worked smoothly and lead snarled madly.

Judge Colt's Last Case

By Everett M. Webber

OLD Lafe Bridger waited until Doc Turntine started putting his bottles of pills and his stethoscope back into his satchel before he brought up the thing that was strongest in his mind—and, he knew, in Doc's.

Then, turning his sweaty pillow over, the lawyer said, "How's Cliff takin' it?"

"Fine," Doc Turntine said bluffly, but old Lafe heard a couple of bottles rattle together like the jingle of glass and bottle in a nerve-shot barfly's hands. "Yes, sir,"

Doc declared. "He's rarin' to go, soon as court takes up tomorrow. . . . Now, you get you a nap, you old vinegarroon. This time last week I figured we'd be goin' to your funeral by today—an' we'll be goin' yet if you start frettin' around . . ."

He shot Lafe a glance from his faded eyes, peeping over bustles of parchment-colored flesh, and snapped his satchel shut, and for the third time in six minutes he looked at his watch.

"Well," he said, "I got to go . . ."

His practice wasn't hurting, old Lafe knew. He had got a new young doctor last winter to handle his business when his legs were busted, and now he was letting him keep it for the most part. Usually he sat and smoked by Lafe's bed a couple of hours, talking but little, for a friendship as old as their own required few words. Now he hadn't been here ten minutes, and he was leaving.

Lafe said idly, "Yeah, I guess other folks need you—an' I could use a nap." A strange thought had come suddenly into his mind.

LAFE waited until he heard Doc's horse head toward town before he rang his bell, and then there came the quick pad of Cristobal's feet, and he struggled into a sitting position. He hadn't been shaved these four weeks, and in the bureau mirror he saw that he looked like the very image of doom. Putting on his fiercest courtroom appearance, he transfixed Cristobal with a hard look as the little man came into the doorway.

"Jim an' Elrod an' Jesus Alonzo fixin' fence, huh?"

"Yes, sir," Cristobal declared, blinking.

"An' Burl an' Corky fixin' that water-hole c'ral, are they?"

Cristobal made elaborate gestures. "Yes, sir!"

"An' Tom, he's shoein' his string?"

"Yes, sir . . ."

Old Lafe felt himself weakening, but he took a new grip and with his best effort at a roar he exclaimed, "It's the damndest industriousest bunch of grub-liners ever I saw, usin' up their Sunday that-away." And, with a sudden burst of strength, he *did* roar, "This is Monday and they've went to the trial! I've been lied to!"

"But—but—" Cristobal stammered.

"Damn it, don't give me any more buts! It is Monday—"

"But we knew all along if we let you know—" Cristobal began.

"So I been lied to about the day for three days. I knowed day before yesterday 'twas Sattidy when you all swore 'twas Friday. I knowed—"

Cristobal waved helpless brown hands. He was sweating. "The doctor, he said—"

"What does that old fool know?" Lafe hollered. "Get me my pants. That trial's goin' bad. I could tell from the way Doc acted. I got the kid into this, and—*get me my pants!*"

Cristobal got them. He helped old Lafe's skinny, pale feet into the legs and helped him stand and the world swam blackly for the old lawyer.

He wheezed, "I want some whisky. Nothin' fancy—some of that stuff you drink—"

"But—but, Senor—you are weak . . ." Then, quickly: "Yes, sir!"

Lafe hung to the foot of the bed till the liquid dynamite was brought. He held his nose with one hand and raised the bottle with the other and took six even swallows without stopping. He refused to cough. Glowering at Cristobal, he snarled, "Have Mary harnessed and at the door in exactly three minutes or I'll have you shot. Git!"

He sagged down on the edge of the bed and worked his toes into his boots, and then, weaving to his feet again, he got his hat off the peg and from a drawer he took the belt and gun he had carried on the owlhoot trail for four long years when he was Cliff Bowdell's age. That was thirty-five years ago.

And it was because of those years of loneliness and cold and a lank belly, with every man's hand against him, that he had advised Cliff to give himself up at once, with no hiding out, and stand trial.

"I've never took the case of a man that I didn't think had the right on his side," he told Cliff, "an' I've never lost a man to the rope yet. I ain't aimin' to start with you. I'll ride up to the jail with you. . . ."

And then he had fooled around and got tick bitten and come down with the fever. . . .

At the barn, Cristobal cried, "Get up!" and there came the rattle of the buggy. Old Lafe was feeling the rotgut he had swal-

lowed. About one more pull. . . . He found the bottle on the dresser and tilted it and then he walked unevenly out to the buggy.

OLD Mary was sassy from her long rest and she covered the two miles in what Lafe referred to in after years as eight minutes—by the sun. Keeping his hat on with one hand and hanging to the buggy with the other, he planned what he would say when he got to court. . . . “Your honor! Gentlemen of the jury! The crime in this case is two-fold, an’ Cliff never had hold of either end of it. First, his mother. . . .” No, you couldn’t say his mother committed a crime. She just didn’t use her head, leaving her property to Cliff and his step-daddy that-away, to be owned together and then inherited by the one that outlived the other. She loved them both. To the day she died, she couldn’t see that Meeker Forbes wasn’t the man for her. But he had comforted her years ago when Cliff’s daddy died, and married her, and taken charge of the CB which lay under fence a full day’s ride in either direction along the river.

Nor did he show his hand when she died. Not outright. Not so that a man who hadn’t met him, to his sorrow, on the owlhoot, would know what he was up to. It was his monthly contribution that paid the preacher, now that the CB was under his hand. It was his money that gave the

town three months of school every year instead of six weeks. And his money that was hiring a lawyer from over at Saddle-Up to refute the damaging evidence that it was Cliff who put a dry-gulch bullet through old J. C. “King” Cole. A new lawyer over there whom old Lafe didn’t yet know, by sight or reputation, named Prince.

LAFE was sick through and through as Cristobal put the mare down the hot, deserted street. Wagons and rigs were thick around Sweet Spring in the cottonwood grove at the other end of the town, and a few saddle animals stamped flies around the courthouse. The windows were jammed with people. Evidently there was a full crowd.

Cristobal pulled up in front. Lafe’s hand shook as he smeared clammy sweat off his forehead. Then he was chilling. He fumbled for the bottle in his pocket and it felt warm to his hand as he worried the cork out with his teeth and drank.

He never remembered how Cristobal got him up the steps. He just remembered being in the buggy, and then being in the courtroom door. Cliff’s step-daddy, Meeker Forbes, was on the witness stand. Well-dressed, well-fed, suave, his boiled shirt in startling contrast to the black broadcloth of his suit and boots.

He broke off in the midst of whatever

HELL-ON-THE-LOOSE!

It wasn’t that Mike Reno and the Texas Kid were ornery, but when a passel of quick-trigger lawdogs insisted that the two “peace-loving” punchers break in a brand-new hemp rope with their necks—that pair of hombres decided it was high time to open up with their own special brand of hell-on-the-loose!

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WESTERN
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he was saying and stared at Lafe, and the lawyer who had evidently been examining him turned, too, with the rest of the crowd. But it was the lawyer at whom Lafe looked. A little man with a thin face—and, at one time—a pair of derringers on a trick harness up his sleeves so that a certain little jerk of his elbows sprung them out into his hands. On the owlhoot they called him Parson Purdy because of his preacherish look and his slow, oratorical manner of speech which he used even when holding up a stage or a freighter.

So now he was a lawyer. Old Lafe thought that over wryly as he stood there, locking eyes with the man. "So am I, he told himself. "But I wasn't guilty of anything in the first place. And I came back and faced the music and proved it. And on the owlhoot I never robbed to live. I mostly starved. . . ."

His eyes still on Purdy, he walked slowly down the aisle of the hushed room, and at the gate he went in. He looked at old Judge Byrd. He said, "Your Honor, Doc Turntine brought me out word of the trial. I've been retained by the defense, and I apologize for bein' late to court."

A mighty relief was beginning to show in the judge's eyes. Behind his back, Lafe could sense the sudden hostility of the crowd. He glanced at the jury. Nine of them owed Meeker Forbes money on their land. They shifted uneasily. And finally he looked at Cliff Bowdell at the counsel table.

His weeks in jail—kept there for his own protection, for the murdered man was well liked—showed in the pallor of his face and the twitching of a muscle at the corner of his mouth. His eyes, black like his mother's, stood out larger and darker than ever. He looked like a man with one foot on the scaffold, and there was no blooming of hope in his countenance as old Lafe stared at him.

The judge said, "Your apology is accepted. If agreeable to the State, the court will recess while you confer with the other attorney for the defense—"

The prosecutor spat into a cuspidor and offered violent objections, and the lawyer on the floor said, "Far as I know, we're gettin' along all right here. My name is Prince."

"Mine is Lafe Bridger, Parson."

The man's eyes narrowed to the slits Lafe remembered from the days when he knew him as Parson Purdy.

Abruptly, the Parson turned back to his witness. He said smoothly, "But it is your opinion that while the shells there were fired by Cliff's gun, that he was not the one who did the shooting—"

Meeker Forbes shifted his feet. He said, "Well, ain't no use lying. Cliff's .30-.30 does scratch a ca'tridge just like them—" He gestured at the brass cylinders on the table. "But—"

The crowd was muttering and the judge was hammering for order.

"And," the lawyer said, "it is your opinion that the little quarrel they had here in town the week before was just their whisky talking—"

Old Lafe cried angrily, "They had no quarrel. I heard the whole thing. It was only a friendly argument and they weren't drinking—"

The prosecutor was snapping objections, and old Lafe subsided. Slowly he eased his creaking frame into a chair by Cliff.

In his ear, Cliff moaned, "It's no use. You should have stayed in bed. And I should have hit the long trail—"

Parson Purdy—or Prince—was saying to the prosecutor, "Your witness."

LAFE rose. He said, "The defense is not through with the witness. The defense would like to point out to this intelligent jury that only one man could profit by the death of our friend who has been murdered—and that man is the witness on the stand. The defense would also like to point out that for him to profit by that murder, the defendant at the bar will first have to die. . . ."

Lafe felt himself weakening. He heard the buzz behind him. He was aware that Meeker Forbes half rose and sat back down. But he kept his eyes mostly on the Parson.

The Parson's wizened face swam before Lafe's eyes. He knew that he could not complete his argument. Lafe took a new hitch on his strength and wheezed, "May it please the Court, there's several folks heard the shots that killed the good friend of the prisoner at the bar. Some said them shots was spaced *bang-bang . . . bang*. Other's say they went *bang . . . Like this!*"

His skinny old hands worked smoothly and lead snarled madly, and as the cursing jury men piled out the windows behind them or ran into the crowd in the room Lafe backed out of the cloud of gunsmoke. One gun thundered again, and the Parson stood there with a shattered hand. He let the derringer in the other one drop.

Cliff Bowdell scrambled for it, yelling, "Look out, Lafe—look—"

On his knees, Cliff fired, and Meeker Forbes, standing in front of the witness chair, crumpled a little and pitched headlong to the floor with his own pistol still in his hand. Forbes croaked, "I'll learn you two to tear up my playhouse, Bridger—"

Blood gushed from his mouth, strangling his words. He half raised himself, trying to point the gun at Lafe, and fell again.

The judge said sternly, "This was a most unusual occurrence. When the doctor is through with Mr. Prince, he will be dealt with by this court for bringing concealed weapons into it."

"Leetle late, Judge," Lafe broke in. "I just now saw him rowellin' his hoss over the hill!" He jerked a thumb northward. "When I was ridin' the owlhoot, he was a road-agent, goin' under the name of Parson Purdy—a sidekick of Meeker Forbes."

The judge grunted. "Good riddance. And as for you, you're fined a hundred dollars for contempt."

Lafe said humbly, "I sure do want to apologize, your Honor—and to move that this honorable Court declare a mistrial and release the prisoner into my custody."

"You don't have to tell me the law!" the judge snapped, his old eyes testy.

"Motion granted, an', on second thought, that fine is remitted!"

"But I object, your Honor!" the prosecutor exclaimed. "I—"

"Turn Cliff loose!" somebody at the back of the courtroom bawled. "It's plain as hell he was framed!"

Others took up the cry as the judge pounded his gavel.

"I'm runnin' this court!" he declared. "The defendant is charged with a serious crime. Unless the State drops the matter for lack of evidence, he'll be given a trial at the next term of court—if we can find a jury that ain't done heard it this time!"

Lafe was weary of all this. What he wanted was to get things settled and for him and the judge and Doc Turntine to get together for a big steak dinner and then maybe about a three-day session of stud.

Dimly he heard the prosecutor objecting some more and demanding to know what was wrong with the jury they had. He started to straighten up and tell him, but it didn't seem worth the trouble. He heard the judge growl, "What jury? That's just a passel of rabbits that jumped out the windows when Lafe was showin' 'em about them shots. An' when a jury leaves the courtroom without the sheriff's got 'em in tow, you got to throw 'em out and start over. Satisfied?"

Lafe didn't hear the answer, if there was one. He didn't even hear the judge say, "Court's adjourned. Lafe, let's go bend our elbow."

Nor Cliff Bowdell say, "Sh-h-h-h, Judge. He's dropped off to sleep. Let's let him have his nap out first."



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FAMOUS SINCE 1909

**Hugh Parker, gambler, spat in the face of death:
not for gold, land or glory—but for a faded
childhood memory that was worth more than the
biggest bonanza strike!**

HUGH PARKER shoved his hand into the discard and said, "No luck today, gentlemen." He leaned back against his chair. Bernie Mason had just entered from the street and she lifted her dark head quickly.

Hugh murmured, "Excuse me, please." He went up to her and said, "My luck is bad."

"Somebody else has worse luck, Hugh," the woman said. "They're trapping him out there on the street, and they'll kill him."

"Trapping whom?"

"Young Ben Reedley."

Hugh said, "Oh," and they went out into the hot glare of the Arizona sun. He stood there and thought, *This sight is strongly familiar.* This seeped into him and he felt a slow resentment, growing stronger because it came from his own past.

Bernie said, almost savagely, "Jinx Bradley'll kill him, Hugh!"

Ben Reedley was loading barbwire in his wagon. Rolling Jinx Bradley had left the Lobo and was going toward young Ben, who hadn't seen him yet. Hank Minden stood across the street and watched.

Hugh thought, *The stage is set and the players are moving in, ready for their lines.* Jinx Bradley carried the main role; his .45 would speak his words.

"Ben Reedley's no hand with a gun," said Bernie. "It will be murder, Hugh." He felt her fingers grip his sleeve. "Jinx Bradley will accuse him, and then—"

"You seem interested," Hugh said quietly.

Her voice was quick. "Ben's supporting his brother and two sisters. Mrs. Reedley is in bed; she'll be there for a long time. I was out to their farm yesterday with Doctor Connors."

Ben Reedley had seen Bradley now, and his hand had gone to his old gun. Hank Minden had moved back and put his thin shoulders against a building.

"You think somebody should interfere, Ben?" Parker asked the woman.

"Your damned right I do."

He said, "Excuse me," and moved ahead. Bernie's dark eyes were bright.

Hank Minden saw him, looked at him with hard eyes and said clearly "Maybe you can't see, Hugh Parker, but you're blunderin' in onto trouble."

"I can see," said Hugh.

Ben Reedley saw him now. Dullness left his eyes; relief showed there. Hugh said carefully, "Hello, Ben" and stopped beside him. "How are things out on Willow Springs, Ben?"

Jinx Bradley had stopped, twenty odd feet distant. Bradley said coarsely, "Don't horn in on my game, Parker!"

Hugh was silent for ten seconds. Then he said, "I don't get you, Bradley."

Bradley came close. He took his hand from his gun and said, "Well, I'll be damned, Parker, but I never picked you as that ignorant." He brought his fist up.

Hugh stepped under the blow. He hit Bradley twice on the jaw. Bradley sat down and held his jaw.

"I could hit you harder," Hugh said.

Slowly Jinx Bradley got to his feet, keeping his hands where they belonged because Ben Reedley had his old Colt out. Hank Minden came across the dust, hard eyes on Hugh Parker. "What brought this about, Bradley?"

"Damned if I know, Hank," Bradley said. "I was headin' to pass the time of day with young Reedley here an' this gambler come in an' forced me to fight him. Why? Don't ask me."

Hugh said, clearly, "You're even a poor liar, Bradley."

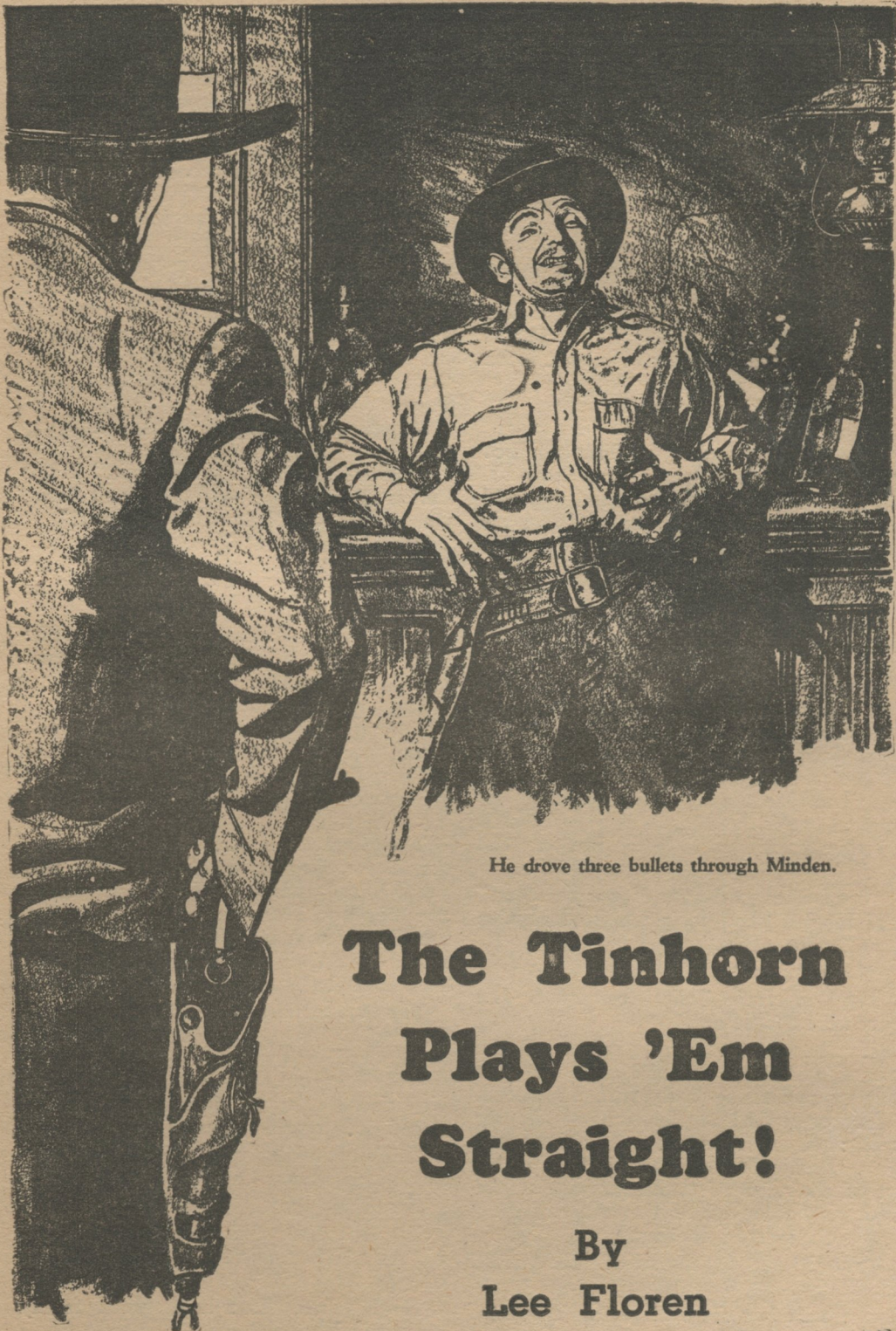
"I've killed a man for callin' me that, Parker."

"You won't kill me."

Jinx Bradley rolled that around in his slow mind. He said, "All right, Parker." Then, to Hank Minden, "Let's mosey on, boss."

Minden looked at Hugh Parker, wondering why he had moved in and broken this up. Finally he said, "Good day, Parker," and followed his hireling.

BEN REEDLEY said, "Gosh, thanks, Mr. Parker." He was young, and circumstance had doubled on him. This had



He drove three bullets through Minden.

The Tinhorn Plays 'Em Straight!

By
Lee Floren

driven him at nineteen to a premature manhood and marked him with the slow solemnness of maturity. "He'd've killed me, if not for you."

Hugh spoke roughly. "Where's Jack, your brother? You should know better than to come to town alone. Jack should be with you."

"He wanted to come. But I made him stay. I figured mother and the girls would need—"

"Don't ever travel alone," the gambler snapped. "This isn't Toledo, Ohio. This is Honda, Arizona, and you've moved in on Hank Minden's range."

"Then men kill for land here?"

"They do, Ben."

Ben Reedley looked at his calloused hands. "I won't go alone, from now on. But I needed some barbwire and staples." He climbed on the wagon-seat and took his reins. "Miss Bernie was out to see mother yesterday. She came with the doctor. Mom never got to thank Miss Bernie for the visit. She asked me to thank her. But now—You'll see her, sir, and tell her?"

"I sure will."

Ben spoke sharply then. "We're not goin' to move from Willow Springs, sir. We've got corn started and the wheat is nice. Jack and me are buildin' irrigation ditches and when that is done, we'll have a real farm. Martha an' Hannah are helping, too, but one of them has to be with Mom all the time now, ever since the runaway last week."

"You take good care of your mother," said Hugh. "And don't run from Minden and Bradley, Ben."

"I won't, sir."

"But be careful," Parker warned. His eyes were a little sad.

Ben backed his team, straightened the wagon, and drove out of Honda, the dust turning and rising lazily with his wheels.

Parker looked at the sign on the log cabin: DEPUTY SHERIFF, and he went that way. Porkie Malone had his bulk in his swivel chair, both feet planted wide on the floor as he looked at the ants traveling across the warped flooring.

"Well?" the deputy asked. He pursed his fat lips.

Hugh Parker chose his words carefully. "I just knocked Jinx Bradley down, Malone. He was fixing a gun-fight with young

Ben Reedley. I suppose you were sitting in here waiting for the guns to talk, huh?"

Malone studied him through sharp eyes. "Explain that last sentence, Parker?"

"You knew that Hank Minden was siccing Jinx Bradley on young Ben. You've been seen too often with Minden, Malone."

"You talk interestin', gambler."

"When the guns would have talked, then you'd have come out on the street. You'd have arrested Jinx Bradley and jailed him, making it all legal. Then, at the coroner's inquest, evidence would have been brought out that Ben Reedley had pulled first, and Bradley would have gone free on a self-defense plea."

Malone got to his feet. "You implying that I'm hired by Hank Minden?"

"I'm not implying; I'm stating it." Hugh Parker clipped his words. "Now sit down, you fat tub, or I'll knock you down!"

Porkie Malone sat down.

Hugh Parker looked at him. "You'll act smart if you leave this town, Malone," he said, and walked out of the building.

Bernie awaited him in the Mint. She said, "Thanks, Hugh, for taking his part. I could kiss you for it."

Hugh said, "Some other time."

The wrinkles formed between her eyes. "You have said that before, Hugh—said it too many times, maybe?" She forced her gaiety back. "You'll drink, Hugh?"

"A beer."

They went to the bar. A few of the miners were coming in, but the big influx was yet to come. This would be Saturday night and they would come from the Lucky Dog, the Silent Lady, the Ugly Princess. They would have their pay in their pockets and they would be hungry for the slap of a card.

The bartender said, "And for you, Miss Bernie?"

"Water."

"The boss wants to see you, Hugh." The big Irishman jerked his head toward the closed door marked OFFICE.

"He's not my boss," Hugh corrected. "I work for no man, Casey."

Casey shrugged.

They stood there for a long minute. Bernie said, "That didn't settle it, Hugh. It only postponed it."

Hugh asked, "Is a homesteader family my family?"

"You'd make some kids a good dad."

She studied her glass of clear mountain water. "But I've told you that before. I've followed you for almost a year through five mining towns—"

Hugh corrected. "Six towns." He added, "A gambler can't marry, Bernie. You know that. You're one yourself." He felt restless.

She closed her eyes and spoke softly. "I remember one night in Elko, Hugh. We went down the sidewalk together that early morning. You were tired and we sat on the steps of your boarding house."

"Bernie, please."

She looked at him. "Does this hurt you, Hugh?"

He considered. "No."

"You told me how you had been left by your dad's death to support your mother and two brothers. You worked hard in the mines and yet you were always behind. So you took to gambling. Your mother was against it—gambling cut her away from you."

"Bernie!"

"Hugh, I'm sorry. But you can see what I am getting to, can't you?"

"Yes."

"Ben Reedley reminds me of you, Hugh. He has your slow, determined talk. He handles his hands like you do. God, Hugh, he could be your boy—no, I said that wrong. You could be father to a boy his age. . . ."

"You bring up hopes a man figured were all behind him," Hugh murmured.

She toyed with her glass. "Hugh, I've got that ranch, down on the Pecos. You weren't cut for this and neither am I. We both got pushed by circumstances into it. Hugh, we can go there, sit on that broad porch, and watch the whole show move by,

watch the sun come lower. Is that asking too much of you, Hugh?"

"Yes, it is. Your money bought it."

She said, firmly "Foolish man."

The Mint proprietor, heavy Jack Smith, came up, scowling. "I told Casey to tell you to see me in my office, Parker."

"Casey told me."

Smith drew a chubby finger across a wet spot on the bar. "You just insulted Hank Minden when you knocked down Jinx Bradley. I don't know if the Mint can afford that, Parker. Minden and his C In A Box men spend lots of money here."

Hugh said, "You know what you can do, don't you?"

"No. What?"

"You can go to hell!"

Jack Smith moved back a little. His chubby fingers played with the big diamond stickpin in his loud tie. The diamonds on his fat fingers showed facets of light. Hugh Parker knew what he was thinking about.

His table carried a lot of trade, put a lot of money into Mint coffers. Was his table—and his dealing—worth more to Jack Smith than the money gathered in C In A Box trade?

"Go back and check your books," Hugh Parker murmured. "Figures don't lie, Smith."

Smith turned and waddled into his office. "Only when they're on a woman," Bernie whispered.

Hugh asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Figures, Hugh."

THE stale saloon air was rank in Hugh Parker's nostrils. Bernie glanced at the clock and said, "Well, put this girl to bed for

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a nap, even though it is hot. There'll be big play at roulette tonight."

Hugh said, "Sleep good, girl."

He ordered another beer. And while he drank it he went over the problem again. Bernie was correct, and he knew it. Out there he could put his legs around a horse and hit the roundup trail and he could knock the dust off his chaps and smell the sharp tang of a branding-iron when it hits hair and hide. But a man has strange prides, and because of these he is a man, not an animal. He had saved some of it, but not much—it had come too easily, and it was fast to go.

"Another?" Casey asked.

"No."

He went outside and stood in the shade of the wooden awning. The wind whipped in a small circle, narrowing down and becoming a devil-twist. He watched it idly, conscious that Hank Minden and Jinx Bradley had left the Mercantile, were coming toward the Mint.

Minden halted. "You talked with Porkie Malone, huh?"

"I did."

"Malone's left town," Minden said.

Hugh looked at Jinx Bradley's jaw. "He used sense," he said.

"Those Reedleys are on Willow Springs, and my cattle get water there. They're turnin' the springs across the bottomlands for irrigation. That means I have to drive down deep wells and you know what that costs?"

Hugh stirred. "I don't know, and I don't give a damn. You've got plenty of money, I understand. I didn't ask for your company."

Hank Minden's face showed heaviness. Jinx Bradley shifted, slack-hipped.

"Them Reedleys mean nothin' to you," said Minden suddenly. "They're no kin of yours. Then why stick in on their trouble, Parker?"

"You wouldn't understand." Parker was staring at him.

Hank Minden said, "Hell," and turned, entering the Mint. Jinx Bradley came behind him; the doors swished shut. Hugh Parker stepped into the slanting sun. He thought, *I don't really understand, myself.* He remembered his mother and his brothers, and how he had worked for them some fifteen years ago.

He went to the livery barn. His sorrel stood in his stall, nickering when he saw him. He put his nose up, his upper lip peeled back, and he nuzzled Hugh's shoulder. Hugh rubbed his ears but the horse kept on nuzzling. He got his nose in Hugh's coat pocket.

Hugh backed away. He took two cubes of sugar and the sorrel got them, chewing and rolling them between his grass-stained molars.

"He likes you," said the hostler.

Hugh said, "I'm glad somebody does, Bob."

The attendant was an old man, wiry with the weight of unseen years. "She loves you, too, Hugh. Never forget that."

Hugh looked at him. "Is it that apparent?"

"She has two friends, Hugh. You're one—more than a friend—and I'm the other. She's told me because she likes me." He was silent, chewing. "She hasn't had but a few friends, Hugh. A man can see that."

"What would you do, Bob, if you were me?"

The age-dimmed eyes rested on him. "I'd marry her. I'd make every day of hers happy. I'd—" He halted suddenly. "Malone left town," he said then.

Hugh said, "Good riddance."

HE SADDLED the sorrel and stepped up, riding out the wide front door and down the main street. A man said, "Howdy, Hugh," and Hugh lifted his flat-brimmed hat. The wind was soft and calm, the sun was dropping its heat. Beyond the town the Sangre de Madres lifted cold impersonal peaks that were covered with snow.

Doc Connors sat on the bench in the shade of his office. He was a heavy man, thick of girth, and he had seen life come and go, marking its passage with slow eyes. He lifted a hand and let it fall. Hugh rode up and stopped.

"I want to thank you, Hugh, for what you did for the boy."

Hugh murmured, "I'd do the same for you, Doc." Between himself and this man was a fine web of understanding. "Do you have any medicine for Mrs. Reedley?"

"You riding out that way?"

Hugh nodded.

The doctor got up and went into his office. He came out with a flat bottle wrapped in

an old newspaper. "That will give her rest," he said. "She has a broken pelvis, and it will be a long time." He sat down heavily.

Hugh said, "So long," and turned the sorrel. He rode past Hank Minden and Jinx Bradley and he looked at them long and hard. Minden's swarthy face was without shadows, and Jinx Bradley was hard as chiseled granite.

Hugh said, almost mockingly, "I'm not leaving for good. I'll be back, men."

Neither answered.

He set the sorrel at a running-walk, letting the horse follow the trail that ran east, lifting up on the bench-land. The heat was falling back rapidly and the wind was touched with chill as it came from the mountain snow. Dusk was moving like a shroud across the range, wrapping each plant and rock in an individual blanket.

Ten miles out of Honda, the desert broke off and the grasslands were ahead, parched by the harsh sun. A C In A Box puncher, Pug Hiddley, had proved up on Willow Springs, using his homestead rights for Hank Minden, who would buy the land on

a pre-arranged price from Pug Hiddley, when his homestead had been legal and the land become his. But Hiddley had double-crossed Hank Minden. For, instead of selling his rights to his boss, he had sold them to Mrs. Reedley for a higher price. And under cover of night, Hiddley had got out of Honda Basin. And he had left Mrs. Reedley and her family to face Hank Minden's wrath.

Here the trail entered between two barb-wire fences. On either side, grass was green and waving; wheat stood waist-high and corn was spreading wide leaves. The first results of Reedley irrigation were showing, Hugh thought.

He could see the Reedley kids at the barn. He saw them duck back suddenly into the building and he called, "Hugh Parker coming in, Ben." He rode into the yard and Ben came across the grass, carrying his rifle.

"Glad to see you, sir," said the youth. "We were milking, and when we saw you . . . Well, we have to be careful."

"No C In A Box man would ride in openly," said fourteen-year-old Jack. He

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was a fat boy and he smiled very easily.

"They'll come by night . . . if they come," Martha declared. She was seventeen, and her form was filling. Her hair was the color of rich taffy and her eyes were deep and blue.

"We're glad to see you, Mr. Parker," Hannah said. She was eleven, still a tom-boy; her eyes were black, dancing coals. "Won't you come in?"

Hugh said, "I brought some medicine for your mother. Doctor Connors asked me to ride out with it."

Martha said, "Mom's rested better today." She started to cry. She went to a bench beside the barn and sat down and hid her face and her shoulders shook with her sobs. Hannah put her arms around her. Jack smiled crookedly, drawing one dirty bare toe through the dust.

"Women cry so easy," said Jack slowly. "I wonder why they do that."

"We better get on with our chores," Ben said. "Marthy, quit that sniffin', an' take Mr. Parker in to see mom."

Hugh's throat was tight.

Martha looked up. She wiped her eyes with her apron. "Mom has always been so well . . . and now. I wonder if she'll ever walk again? A broken pelvis is a terrible thing. And all on account of those old tame horses running away. . . ."

Hugh went through a spotlessly clean frontroom. Blue China dishes showed in the cupboards partially covered by gay print curtains. A clean tablecloth covered the home-made table. A kettle bubbled on the wood stove and Hugh caught the fine smell of boiling beef.

"Mom's in here," said Martha.

SHE led Hugh into a small bedroom. Despite the encroaching dusk, the wide window still let in light. Mrs. Reedley said, "Why, hello, Mr. Parker," and her eyes showed surprise. Hugh had met her on Honda's streets and Ben had introduced them one day.

Hugh said, "You had a little tough luck, Mrs. Reedley."

Her dark hair lay against the white pillow. "Yes, I guess so. But I'll come out of it, I hope. Though the pain does grow severe, sometimes."

Hugh gave her Doctor Connors' medicine.

"Please thank Miss Bernie for her visit," the woman said. She was a young woman yet, only about Hugh's age. But she had had trouble and misfortune, and these had marked her fine features. But the marks were not coarse and rough, like those of a dancehall woman; they were soft and filled with character.

"She'll be out again," assured Hugh. Suddenly he asked, "What caused that team to run away with you, Mrs. Reedley?"

"They were frightened."

"Who frightened them?"

She looked at him steadily. "Did somebody have to frighten them, Mr. Parker?"

Hugh felt a tug of futility. He said, calmly, "Those are old horses and they are well-broke. Hank Minden doesn't want you in this country. If he could kill you, or drive you out, your family would go with you."

She said, finally, "Minden and Bradley scared that team. I never told anybody. If I told the boys they'd . . . Those two came out of the brush, waving their guns and shooting in the air . . . I couldn't hold the horses. . . ."

Hugh's face was dark. He was gravely considerate. "Don't tell anybody, madam. If your boys found out, they'd go against Minden and Bradley. Please don't tell a soul. You promise me that?"

"Yes, I promise."

He went out on the porch. Standing here he could look across Hondo Basin. And in the distance stood the clean peaks of the Sangre de Madres. He remembered Bernie's description of her ranch on the Pecos.

Ben Reedley walked with him to his horse. "You didn't tell mother, did you?" asked the youth.

"You mean about your run-in with Jinx Bradley? No, I didn't, Ben. You didn't either, did you?"

"No. I didn't think it best."

Hugh found his oxbow. "You did right, Ben."

He rode off. The corn was stirring in the warm night: it was growing, shooting out leaves. The wind was soft across growing wheat and oats. He rode at a fast walk, letting the sorrel set his own pace. The night was heavy when he came into Honda, and he put his horse into the livery.

"Nice night, Hugh," said old Bob.

Hugh stood in the wide doorway and looked at Honda. Men were moving on its

main street, for this was Saturday night. They were pushing one another and they would fight like dogs against each other, fired with whiskey and lust and hate.

"Man sometimes spoils nature, Bob."

"Yes, and sometimes he improves on the old lady. Look at what these Reedley boys are doing, turning part of a desert into a green paradise."

Hugh nodded.

He stood there, harkening to the sounds of the night. Finally he went to his room at the Taylor House. He washed and donned fresh linen and another suit. He put his .45 around his hip.

WHEN he entered the Mint, the miners were already busy at cards and at the bar. Bernie saw him, and lifted her dark eyes from her roulette wheel.

Fat Jack Smith came up. "Where in the hell have you been, Parker? Your table's empty and miners have been asking about you."

"Maybe I don't work here any more," said Hugh.

Smith's wheezing voice took a wheedling note. "Now don't let that little disagreement we had this afternoon affect our friendship, Parker."

Hugh nodded drily. "Then you looked in your books and found I made more money for you than Minden?"

"Your tongue is sharp," Jack Smith stormed.

Hugh slapped him. The blow rang out across the *bang-bang* of the piano. He ran his palm past the big face, brought it back sharply again. Smith's huge head wobbled.

"What do you say now?" Hugh demanded.

Jack Smith rubbed his jaw. Color came through the fat. He regarded Hugh through small eyes. Finally he said, "You don't work here any more, Parker."

"You aren't telling me anything."

Jack Smith turned and walked off. Hugh looked at Bernie. She lifted her head and smiled. "You did what I wanted to do, Hugh," she called.

Somebody laughed.

Hank Minden and Jinx Bradley were at the bar. Hugh went over to them and stopped and looked at them. He said, "You two ought to get out of town while you got

your hides on you. Otherwise, a bunch of us might take a notion to tar and feather you two pups."

Minden said, "You talk crazy, Parker."

Hugh kept his voice level. "Mrs. Reedley told me how you two had stampeded her team. You came out of the brush with your guns blasting and the old team broke away from her. She's out home now all broken to hell. You two put her in bed and today you tried to kill her oldest boy."

A miner came up and said, "My God, is that the Gospel truth, Parker?"

Hugh said, "Get back, you damned fool!"

Hugh was staring hard at Minden. Then he drove three bullets through Minden's chest.

Minden shot once, his bullet hitting the bar.

Hugh turned his gun on Jinx Bradley. Bradley had reached, too, but the miners had downed him. They were holding him down now, and he had ceased struggling. He looked at Hugh with shining, stricken eyes.

"God! Don't let them kill me, Parker! Don't—"

"Get some tar," a miner hollered. "Heat it up and get some feathers! Where in the hell are some feathers?"

Hugh said, "Don't kill him. Just run him out of town."

They carried the struggling cowman outside and took him down the street. Hugh moved ahead, his knees wooden, and sat down at his deserted table. Bernie came over and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Buck up, pal," she whispered.

Hugh said, "It wasn't really my fight, Bernie. But I got to thinking of myself, when I was a kid in a position like Ben Reedley. She has a fine family, Bernie, and it makes a man remember—"

"Hush, Hugh."

Hugh was silent for ten seconds and then asked, "Is Minden dead?"

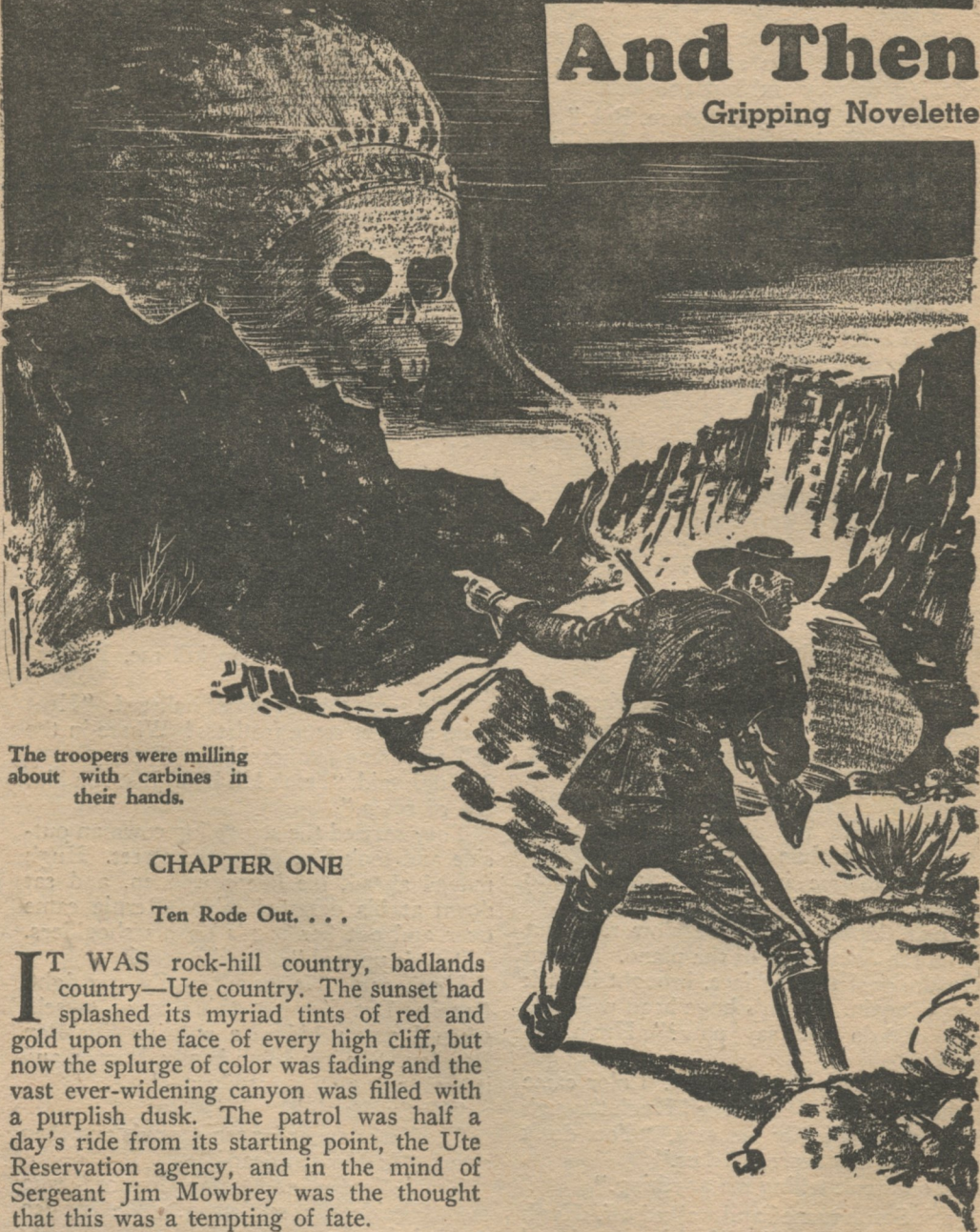
Bernie looked at Doctor Connors, who stood beside the cattleman. The medico nodded shortly.

Hugh spoke slowly. "I've had enough of it, Bernie. You win, girl. Out there today . . . when I met Mrs. Reedley and her fine children. . . . Oh, I know it's too late for that. We'll shove this overboard and be Pecos bound."

"You'll like it there, Hugh," she said.

And Then

Gripping Novelette



The troopers were milling about with carbines in their hands.

CHAPTER ONE

Ten Rode Out. . . .

IT WAS rock-hill country, badlands country—Ute country. The sunset had splashed its myriad tints of red and gold upon the face of every high cliff, but now the splurge of color was fading and the vast ever-widening canyon was filled with a purplish dusk. The patrol was half a day's ride from its starting point, the Ute Reservation agency, and in the mind of Sergeant Jim Mowbrey was the thought that this was a tempting of fate.

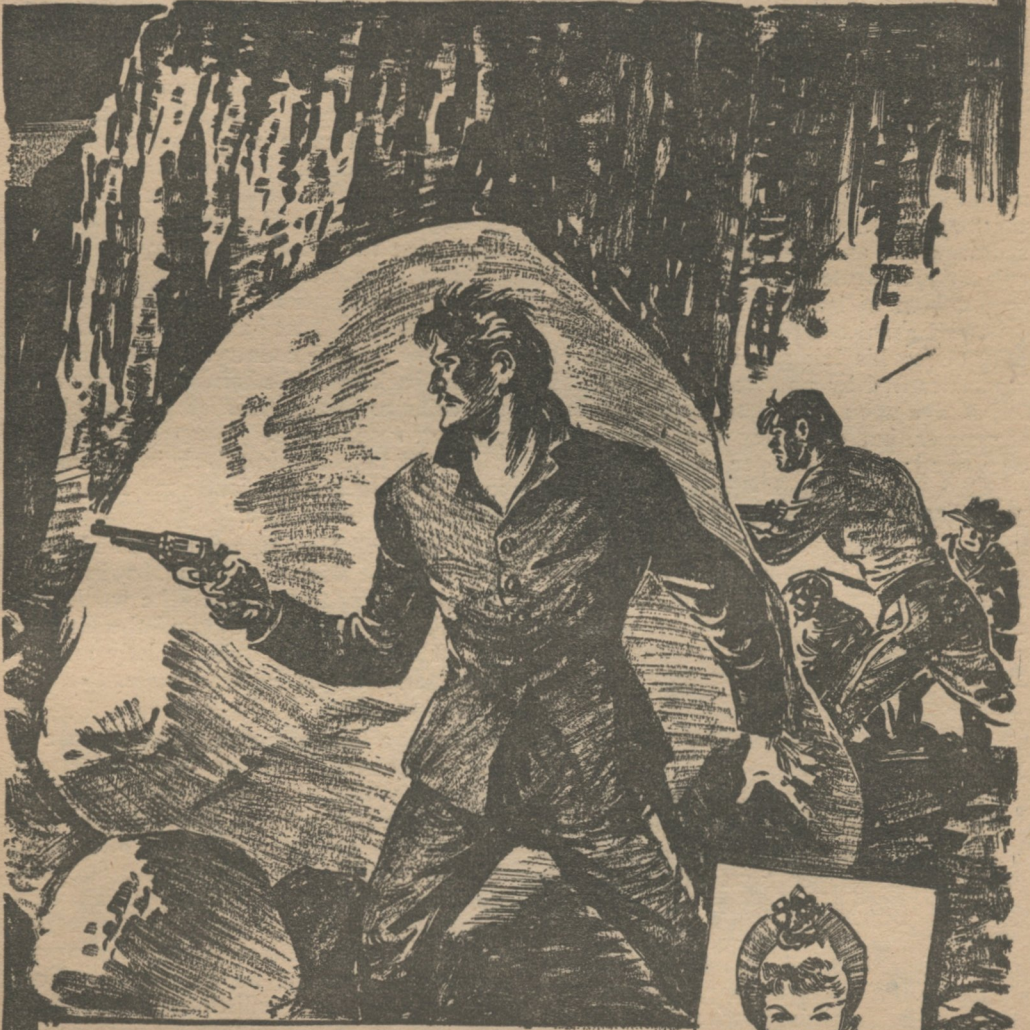
The sergeant was, after a dozen years of soldiering, a man often visited by premonitions. He had a superstition about hunches; if a man ignored a hunch, he could expect trouble. At the moment, the sergeant had an uneasy feeling that the patrol should have turned back hours ago.

True, the ten-man detail had cut no sign

at all of the reservation-jumping Utes. Ed Hackett, the civilian scout, a forlorn man clad in nondescript clothes and mounted upon a jughead mule, claimed the Indians had not ridden west after killing those two white men at the agency. He was certain that the band had swung south to join up

There Was One —

of America's Frontier Soldiers by JOSEPH CHADWICK



Ten blue-clad troopers bivouacked that black night in Hell's own canyon, and one by one they died. . . . Only the sole survivor, who of all those ten heard Satan's reveille, could tell the grisly story of why nine brave soldiers fell. . . .

with their occasional allies, the marauding Apaches. Still, Jim Mowbrey's uneasy feeling persisted.

Only the patrol's officer, a dapper and over-zealous young shavetail new to the frontier, wanted to push farther west. He was bent on making a showing on his very first campaign.

"Sergeant!"

"Yes, sir?"

Jim Mowbrey lifted his already jaded mount into a trot and swung in alongside the lieutenant. Jim was a big man in the saddle, taller and broader and more muscular than Lieutenant Jeffrey Kane. He was a man of leathery skin and metallic eyes and granite-hard jaw. There was a stiffness to his left shoulder, from an old wound caused by an Arapaho arrow. He had ridden upon more details than he could remember, but one thing was clear in his own mind: an old trooper like himself was worth a dozen young shavetails like Jeff Kane. Yet he had to say, "Yes, sir?" and await the words of military wisdom that would fall from the officer's lips. Kane was a fair-complexioned man, and his smooth cheeks were burned fiery red by scorching sun and desert wind. His eyes were tired, looking at the sergeant, yet they were full of zeal.

"We'll make night camp here in this canyon, Sergeant."

"If the lieutenant permits, sir—"

"Never mind, Sergeant," Kane said sharply. "I will give the command to turn back, at the proper time. There's water here, and forage for the horses. We'll bivouac. Call in the scout."

Mowbrey frowned, but he had to say, "Yes, sir." Trap or no trap, Indians or no Indians, neither his hunches nor his experience counted for anything when a decision was to be made. A shavetail never said, "Sergeant, as an old hand at Indian-fighting, what do you think?"

CAMP was made by a shallow creek. The tired horses were unsaddled, watered, rubbed down and turned out for an hour to graze on the scant bunch grass. No fires were built; Kane did not want to give away his position to the Utes he *knew* were lurking about, and, too, the troopers had nothing to cook. They munched hardtack and jerky from their saddlebags.

Two sentries were posted, one just east of the camp and the other the same distance west. The horses were brought in and roped-corrals. There was little talk this night, for the men were dog-tired. Pete Rondalay, one of the younger troopers, played a little on his harmonica—as was his custom—but tonight it was a mournful tune, and the instrument soon fell silent.

Ed Hackett came in an hour after dark. He was a gaunt and solemn man, and when he reported to the lieutenant he spoke in a gloomy tone. Jim Mowbrey was there to hear what the scout had to say.

"The Utes didn't come this way, Lieutenant," Hackett said. "It's like I've been saying all day. That band of killers headed south, for Apache country. We should have turned back by mid-afternoon, to report to the column. Major Hadley will be plumb put out, sure."

"We'll take one last look in the morning, Mr. Hackett," Lieutenant Kane said stiffly. "To make sure."

"Yes, sir," Hackett muttered, and turning away he winked at Jim Mowbrey. It did not matter to the scout—he would collect his pay whether he found the Utes or not. He drew off, talking quietly and almost sadly to his jughead mule.

Jim Mowbrey was last to turn in. He first took a final inspection, making sure of the horses and of the two sentries—Havelock and young Chronister—and giving the darkness a last survey. Even after he was wrapped in his blanket, he did not sleep. He lay wide awake with his hunch, wondering about it and not liking it. The sergeant wanted nothing to go wrong on this patrol. It was the last one he ever would make; by the time he got back to Fort Brandon, his final enlistment would have run out. . . . After that, he would don civilian duds and become a dyed-in-the-wool cattleman. Yes, the sergeant had plans. There was a pretty widow woman, Bess Naylor, who was waiting for him. Her man had been killed in a cattle stampede a year ago, and now, having worn her widow's weeds a proper length of time, she was ready and willing to become Mrs. James Mowbrey.

"Sarge, you awake?"

Mowbrey had dozed, but Ed Hackett's whisper woke him.

"Sarge, I got a locoed feeling," the scout

said drearily. "I'd swear the Utes are fifty miles from here, but I keep feeling mighty unsafe. Figure I'll do some night scouting."

"Help yourself, Ed."

"I'll be back in maybe an hour or two."

"Tell the sentries," Mowbrey said, and a moment later, with Hackett gone, he slept.

His sleep was deep and dreamless, the drugged sleep of a man who has ridden too many miles at a stretch, and yet when the sentry's shout and the carbine's blast rang out he came awake in every fiber of his being. He sprang up with his Navy Colt in his hand; not bothering with his boots, and he tried to take in the situation with the first flash of his restored reasoning.

The sentry had shouted, "Indians!" and he had fired the very next instant. He had roused the whole camp, and Lieutenant Kane was snapping orders in a loud voice barely edged with controlled excitement. The troopers were milling about with shirt-tails flapping and carbines in their hands. It had been Tom Chronister, the detail's newest recruit, who had done the shouting and the shooting. He was white-faced and trembling in the gloom as Mowbrey reached him.

"There are Indians out there," Chronister said, pointing into the darkness. "I think I downed one. Look! There's something moving!"

Jim Mowbrey saw a vague movement through the darkness, and Lieutenant Kane, now beside him, also saw it. "Sergeant, have the men fire one round. Sharp, now!"

Mowbrey, some reluctance in him, barked the order. The cavalry carbines roared their single volley, and the blast echoed far and away across the canyon. There was a wild

thrashing about, now, out there in the night. But there was no answering fire.

"Another round, Sergeant," Lieutenant Kane ordered.

Mowbrey's reluctance was a greater thing, now. He thought, *Hell, this isn't the way you fight Utes!* Aloud, he said, "With the lieutenant's permission, sir, I'm going out there for a look-see."

He moved silently forward on bootless feet before Kane could protest. He moved in a crouch, low to the ground, and with his Colt cocked in his hand. The thing that had been thrashing about was still now, and Mowbrey finally nearly stumbled over it. A horse? No . . . a mule. The sergeant was jolted, for he knew the truth. He went a little farther, and soon found the thing he sought. Ed Hackett was dead. He had been shot through the head. Chronister's marksmanship had been perfect, despite the darkness. Feeling sick at heart, Mowbrey returned to the camp.

Lieutenant Kane said, "Well, Mowbrey—Well?"

"There's no Utes out there, sir," the sergeant reported. "But we have a grave to dig, all the same. The sentry killed Ed Hackett."

There was a choked cry from the line of blue-clad troopers. It came from deep within young Tom Chronister. Mowbrey stepped over to the trooper, lay a hand on the boy's shaking shoulder.

"An accident, soldier," he said. "It couldn't be helped."

"I didn't know Ed was out there, Sarge! So help me, I didn't."

"He didn't tell you he was going out?"

"No," Chronister said. "I swear it!"

Mowbrey swung on Havelock, an older



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man and a steadier soldier. "Did he tell you, Havelock?" he asked.

"Not a damn word," Havelock growled. He too was shaken by what had happened. "Me, I didn't even see him leave camp. He always was too blamed good at Injunnin' about. He was a Ute himself, only he had a white skin. The kid here shouldn't be blamed."

No one was blaming Chronister, but the whole group stood there uncertainly—nine men suddenly aware of the quickness of death. Then finally a voice began to chant in sing-song fashion, very low:

*"Ten little soldiers
A-ridin' on patrol,
One stepped outa line
And then there were nine!"*

CHAPTER TWO

Death By the Knife

A TROOPER swore. Lieutenant Kane looked shocked. Young Tom Chronister shouted, "Stop it! Stop it!" Sergeant Jim Mowbrey felt a crawling sensation along the back of his neck. He was as thick-skinned as any man, but this seemed blasphemy. Without looking about he knew the fool who had done the chanting. It was Pete Rondalay, the trooper who would rather play a harmonica than eat. Mowbrey stepped over to the now silent but grinning trooper, stood so close to him that he could see the freckles scattered over his round face.

"Rondalay, you'll get stable detail for a month, for that," he said, and he wanted to smash a fist against the man's brash face. "Right now, you take over Chronister's post."

Rondalay still grinned, unabashed. Like Tom Chronister, he was a new recruit and a young bucko; unlike Chronister, he was a tough hand who knew his way around. He was a Texan, and he had been a cow-puncher, and he walked with all the swagger of that breed of men. Now, cradling his carbine in the crook of his right arm, he turned away. If he had been touched at all by Hackett's death, he hid it well. The others, Jim Mowbrey included, stared after him. The eight of them were still shocked by that crazy rhyme Rondalay had chanted. They watched him stop by his blankets and

pull on his boots. He came toward them again, swaggering again, but midway across the camp he stooped and picked up something from the ground. The next instant, he'd struck a match.

Lieutenant Kane barked, "Put out that light! If there are Utes about, they'll see it five miles off!"

Rondalay took his time about it. He let the match burn down while he stared at the object he had found on the ground. Stepping forward, Jim Mowbrey meant to knock the match from the man's hand. Mowbrey saw that Rondalay held some sort of a card. It was a picture, a photograph. The face of Pete Rondalay had changed. Just as the match flame flickered out, Mowbrey saw the man's twisted look of rage. He heard Rondalay mutter an oath. It was in that moment that Mowbrey realized that Pete Rondalay was no fool, but a man capable of wildness.

"What's eating at you, Pete?" Mowbrey said. "You know damned well the lieutenant said no lights. Get out there and stand guard!"

"Sergeant, I'm asking you," said Rondalay, and his voice was full of the rage that had shown on his face. "Did you drop this picture?"

"Me? Whose picture would I be carrying?"

"Maybe a woman's."

"Rondalay, I'm warning you—"

Pete Rondalay stepped past him and faced the others. He held up the photograph and expected someone of the group to identify it even in the dark. "A picture of a girl," he said, his voice oddly flat now. "Somebody dropped it out of his pocket when we got stampeded by what happened. I'm asking, who dropped it? Talk up, and claim it, you son!"

They stared at him, no man answering.

"What's the matter, you all tongued?" Rondalay demanded.

Lieutenant Kane said, "Why make an issue of it, man?"

"I tell you, somebody lost it here in camp!"

"If that is so," Kane argued, "certainly the owner would claim it."

"Sure—unless he don't want it known that he knows the girl," Pete Rondalay said savagely. "Unless he's a yellow-livered son!"

There was no understanding this thing, and it seemed to Jim Mowbrey that Pete Rondalay was a little crazy. Mowbrey said, "If none of us lost it, then it must have been Ed Hackett—and he can't claim it."

"Hackett!" said Rondalay, and swore. "He was an old man. No girl would give a hombre like him her picture. Well, I'm keeping it, see? If any man wants to claim it, he can come to Pete Rondalay!"

With that, he thrust the photograph inside his shirt and, after looking from man to man, strode out into the darkness to stand guard. Jim Mowbrey said, "O'Bannion, you're relieving Havelock," to a big Irish trooper. He turned and looked over the others, and said, "Chavez, you and Big Bill are on burial detail. We'll bury Ed Hackett where he fell. Step lively!"

He ordered the others to turn in, then joined Lieutenant Kane. The officer was worried, and he said, "Sergeant, that Rondalay is a trouble-maker. He would have tried to kill the man who claimed that photograph."

"I'll keep an eye on him, sir."

Kane nodded, then said, "I want to be there when they lay Ed Hackett away. He was a good man, Sergeant."

Jim Mowbrey nodded.

IT WAS perhaps half an hour later when Jim Mowbrey stood by the shallow grave with Lieutenant Kane and the two troopers, Chavez and Big Bill Small. The earthly remains of old Ed Hackett were wrapped in a blanket and lowered into the opened earth, and the four men uncovered and stood silent for a moment. There was nothing any of them could say, for they were not men to pray aloud, and finally Kane nodded. And the grave was filled up.

Mowbrey said, "Fetch some rocks for a marker," and shortly that was done. The only mark Ed Hackett had left upon the world was a crude rock cairn. The four walked back to the camp, passing Pete Rondalay at his sentry post. They returned to their bed places, and Jim Mowbrey, for one, lay there in the desert dark and pondered upon the shortness of a man's life. It occurred to him that old Ed Hackett never had smiled or laughed enough. . . . A voice pried into his gloomy reflections, saying, "Sergeant, something's bothering the horses."

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It was young Tom Chronister's voice.

Mowbrey grunted and lifted himself on an elbow, looking across camp to the rope corral where the nine mounts were bunched. The animals were milling about and nickering, and it was evident that something had spooked them. Grumbling to himself, Mowbrey rose and walked around the sleeping men. He called softly, "O'Bannion, what ails those animals?"

There was no answer.

Mowbrey circled the corral, expecting to see the big Irishman just beyond. He saw no one at all, but he called again: "O'Bannion!" He made a complete circuit of the corral, then started around again. This second time he found the sentry. O'Bannion lay sprawled on the ground, just inside the picket rope. It was from O'Bannion that the horses were shying, for there was blood on the trooper and upon the ground. O'Bannion was dead. Jim Mowbrey knew that, even before he put his hands on the fallen man.

MOWBREY roused Lieutenant Kane and took him around to the far side of the corral, where he said, "I'm going to risk a light, sir."

Kane offered no protest, so Mowbrey struck a match. The pale flare pushed back a little of the darkness, revealed that O'Bannion's throat had been cut. But Jim Mowbrey peered at the sandy ground rather than at the dead man, and he said, "Utes!" His voice was full of surprise and high alarm, and he quickly extinguished the match flame. He rose and faced the officer, who said, "You're sure, Mowbrey?"

"Moccasins."

Kane said, "I was ready to think something else."

"Rondalay?"

"Maybe, Sergeant."

"I'll have another look," Mowbrey said. "To make sure."

He risked another light, and as the match flickered both he and the lieutenant made sure that there were moccasin tracks in the loose ground. The match flame faded out, and the heavy darkness closed about the two men. The horses were still milling about the small rope corral.

Kane said, "I did not know Indians fought like this, Sergeant."

"Utes do, at times, sir," Mowbrey told him. "They're ambush Indians, and wily as the devil himself. They do less howling and more killing than Plains Indians, when the notion strikes them. They must have sent a buck in to size up the camp, while we were burying Hackett. O'Bannion couldn't have known one was about, until the knife went into his throat."

Kane nodded, and muttered, "I see," when it was clear that he really was confused and unnerved. No doubt he had come prepared, in his mind, to skirmish with the outlaw band of Utes by daylight. He was not experienced to fight a sneak attack like this. He said, "We'll have to move O'Bannion away from the horses—"

At that moment the horses broke through the picket rope and stampeded. Before Mowbrey or Kane could move to stop them, the whole string was racing away into the darkness. Mowbrey made a vain attempt to catch them, but after a few yards of running he turned back. He did not want to be caught as O'Bannion had been caught. Coming back, he found the camp aroused and Kane examining the picket rope at the point where it had parted. The officer said, "The rope was knife-cut almost through, Sergeant. When the horses pushed against it, the final strand parted—and they bolted."

A voice said, jumpily, "Indians?"

It was a trooper named Sam Yates, a corporal, who asked the question that was in the minds of all the others. Out in the darkness, there was a heavy pounding of hoofs. The cavalry mounts had swung about and now were racing back toward the camp. They thundered by the camp. A few minutes later, the whole band halted and took to grazing—less than half a mile down the canyon. They could be seen dimly from the camp.

CHAPTER THREE

Canyon of the Red Terror

CAVALRYMEN without mounts can be, on occasion, soldiers half beaten. So it was now, Jim Mowbrey saw. The faces about him in the gloom were like frightened masks. And some of these men were veterans. But fear was there, brought on not so much by O'Bannion's death as by the

loss of the horses. Loss? Lieutenant Kane was denying that, by saying, "Our mounts could be rounded up."

It seemed to Mowbrey a fool thing to say. True, the horses were over their fright. They were not likely to stampede again. And they were grazing not too far off. But out there in the darkness, as every man now knew, were the Utes. O'Bannion's dead body and the cut picket rope were proof of that. Kane was saying, "Are there any volunteers?"

For a moment, no man answered. Then Pete Rondalay called out, "I'll go, sir. Hell, I'm no hombre to be scared of the Utes."

That brought two of the others alive. Corporal Yates and Havelock said they would volunteer. Jim Mowbrey offered himself, but Lieutenant Kane said, "I need you here, Sergeant. At any rate, three men will do. Yates and Havelock will cover Rondalay—but all three will go armed."

So it was settled. The three men were to make a try for the horses, while the others were to cover the attempt as best they could from the camp. Pete Rondalay slipped away first, moving from rock to rock, from bush to bush. Yates followed, a minute later, and then Havelock started out. Their slow, careful progress could be watched by those who remained behind. For the night no longer was a thick black curtain. The overcast had parted so that a sickle moon showed in the clearing sky. . . . Jim Mowbrey silently cursed that moon.

It seemed an eternity to the five watching men, but finally Rondalay was near the horses. A moment later he was lost to sight, but Jim Mowbrey's mind could follow the Texan's actions. Rondalay was a top-hand with horses. He would be edging up to the string now, perhaps talking to the animals. He would be careful not to startle them. . . . Jim Mowbrey was gripped by tension, and his heart was pounding hard and fast. He looked at the men about him: at Lieutenant Kane, at Chavez and Big Bill Small, at young Tom Chronister—and the same tense look was reflected upon each man's face. And each man started violently when the guns blasted.

From across the canyon floor, beyond rocks and tangled brush, came the sudden din of shots and shouting voices. Jim Mowbrey saw the flashes of cavalry carbines,

bright spurts of powder flame against the night. There was a wild racket out there, for now the horses were stampeding again. The guns kept blazing, but now one had quit firing. . . . Another stopped, and then a third. A sudden quiet came, a quiet with a background of pounding hoofs. Jim Mowbrey had his Colt pistol in his hand, as he said, "Sir, I'm going out there!"

Lieutenant Kane said something. What, Mowbrey never knew. He was running forward. Mowbrey stumbled once, and nearly fell. The stampeding horses nearly ran him down, shied away within a few feet of him. He ran on, crashing through mesquite and over shale and loose rocks. The night seemed full of moving shapes, and once he fired a shot at what he thought was a Ute. No answering fire came, and he came finally to where Havelock lay sprawled in death. He made sure of the trooper, then went on to Corporal Yates. Yates' body was riddled. He went on, despairing, and finally he came upon Pete Rondalay crawling over the canyon floor—and trailing blood.

"Keep the hell back, Sarge!" Rondalay gasped. "The Utes—"

"Where you hit, Pete?"

"Leg and arm," the trooper said, and for once he had no mocking grin, no crazy song at all. "Clear out, Sarge—leave me!"

Mowbrey thrust the Colt inside his shirt. He bent down and dragged the wounded man to a kneeling position. He worked Pete Rondalay up over his shoulder, and the man was like a dead weight. Lurching widely as he turned back, Mowbrey carried his burden across the canyon bottom. Camp seemed a great distance, and the sergeant expected the Utes to jump him at any point along the way. But the attackers had withdrawn. Mowbrey got Pete Rondalay back. . . .

BIG BILL SMALL took the limp Pete Rondalay in his powerful arms and carried him to where some boulders formed a shelter. He lay the wounded man on a blanket, then set to work with expert hands to do what could be done. Big Bill was a blonde giant of a man; he had kindly blue eyes and a wispy mustache that was far too scant for so big a man. He had some surgical skill, having spent much time on detail in Fort Brandon's infirmary. He

carried bandages, a bottle of carbolic solution, swabs, and a flask of brandy in his saddle bag. . . . And he needed it all, now. Pete Rondalay was groaning.

Jim Mowbrey removed his campaign hat and wiped sweat from his forehead. He was shaken, unnerved. His trek across the canyon had been a nightmare. Across the camp, Lieutenant Kane was having Chavez and Chronister build a barricade of rocks. A futile thing, it seemed to Mowbrey. But he, too, went and gave a hand. Any sort of action was better than none. A man could not think of what was happening—of what was still to happen—when he was busy.

Half the night was gone, but enough dark hours lay ahead to fill a man with dread. And Jim Mowbrey could see no hope at all. Troop A, under the experienced Major Hadley, would certainly swing west to find out what was delaying the patrol. But from the Ute Agency to this unnamed canyon was a half day's ride; if Hadley delayed marching until morning, it would be too late. Four men out of ten were already gone, and one more was wounded. The dark patches of the vast canyon could be full of Utes, so far as the troopers knew, awaiting daybreak to launch an attack which would certainly overwhelm the patrol's survivors.

Work as he did, hoist rocks and build a barricade, Mowbrey could not halt the working of his troubled mind. He thought of Bess Naylor, a woman buxom and sweet and full of promise for a man, and he could imagine her full measure of grief when she heard how the patrol had been wiped out. It was ironic; for years Jim Mowbrey had thought of nothing but soldiering, and he had served with only a minor wound or two in a score of campaigns, but now, with a more pleasant life offering, he was facing a soldier's death. He was not afraid to die, but he wanted to live. He wanted to live and once again look upon Bess Naylor. He wanted to hold her in his arms and talk with her about their high hopes and fine dreams. Why, after Bess had expressed her willingness to take him for her husband, Jim Mowbrey had even dreamed of one day having a son! And now—now the sweat of fear was chill upon his face. There was a bleakness in his heart. He did not want to die out here, in this God-forsaken canyon!

Big Bill Small appeared to take Mowbrey's place at the barricade, and he said, "Pete wants to see you and the lieutenant, Sarge."

Mowbrey nodded and wiped his face with his shirt sleeve, and walked with Lieutenant Kane to where the wounded man lay. Pete Rondalay was propped up against a boulder, in a sitting position, and he had Big Bill's brandy flask in his right hand. His left arm was in a sling, but he told Mowbrey and the officer that his leg wound was not bad at all.

"I just wanted to say," Rondalay said, "that if I'm keeping the rest from moving out of this hell-hole, you can just forget me. I can't walk far, I reckon, so I'd just hold you up. So I'm saying, forget me and clear out."

Mowbrey said, "Hell, Pete. Don't play at being a hero."

Lieutenant Kane said, "Once we move out of these rocks, we're lost, Pete. The Utes are waiting for that. We're staying—until Troop A gets here to relieve us. By morning. . . ."

His voice trailed away. It was clear that Kane did not expect the column in the morning. Pete Rondalay knew perhaps even better than the officer that relief would not arrive until midday, at the earliest. Pete Rondalay was sharp. Jim Mowbrey saw that; he had more and more respect for the ex-cowpuncher, and it occurred to him suddenly that Pete was the sort of man other men never got to know or understand very well.

They left the trooper, who kept drinking from the brandy flask, and went back to where the others were working on the barricade. The troopers worked while Lieutenant Kane kept a sharp look-out. The night was still, now, and very quiet. Finally they halted the work, for they had a wall from which to crouch behind if an attack came from east or west. . . . They spread out and watched the night with tired and aching eyes. Sleep now had become an enemy, and more than once Jim Mowbrey found himself dozing. He was caught up finally by Pete Rondalay calling, shouting: "Bill—Big Bill, help!"

Big Bill Small rose and stumbled wearily back among the boulders to where the wounded man rested. Something happened back there, for there was an outcry—the

thud of a struck blow, and the blast of a gunshot. Jim Mowbrey jumped up from his place at the barricade. He heard Pete Rondalay shouting wildly. He saw a shadowy figure dart through the gloom. He swung up his pistol and fired, and missed. The hard-running figure splashed across the creek and plunged into the brush on the far side, losing himself to Mowbrey's sight. A Ute? Jim Mowbrey, swinging over to where Pete Rondalay was, knew that it had not been an Indian. The man who had fled was one of his own troopers. It was Chavez!

CHAPTER FOUR

"And Then There Were Three. . . ."

DESPITE his hurt leg, Pete Rondalay had gotten to his feet. He was staring in horror at Big Bill Small who lay in a crumpled heap. He muttered, over and over, "Chavez did it, Chavez did it—Chavez. . . ." Pete Rondalay was more than a little drunk. The empty brandy flask lay discarded on the ground. Turning from him, Jim Mowbrey examined Big Bill Small to assure himself of what he somehow already knew. Big Bill was dead. He had been shot in the chest, and without a doubt the slug had reached the heart.

Lieutenant Kane came, and he and Mowbrey tried to get the truth from Pete Rondalay. The Texan talked in voice awash with brandy, saying, "Chavez sneaked up on me like a damned Ute, and he had a knife in his hand. He held the blade to my throat and told me to keep my mouth shut, else he'd kill me. I figured he was after the picture—"

"Picture?" Jim Mowbrey muttered. "What you talking about, Pete?"

"The girl's picture, damn it!"

Mowbrey remembered, then. He had forgotten in all that had happened during the night how Pete had found the girl's photograph and had tried to make its owner put in a claim for it. He said, "Chavez wasn't after it, then?"

"No." A glint of slyness was in the Texan's eyes. "I was wrong. Chavez was after something else. When I savvied, I figured to hell with his knife—and I yelled for Big Bill. Big Bill came a-running, and Chavez shot him down, with his carbine. Then that damn' Mex high-tailed it, not getting what he was after."

Mowbrey shuddered. It was bad enough for the patrol to be killed off by the ambushing Utes; it was a worse thing for these men to be killing one another. He had his suspicions of Pete Rondalay in that moment, and he said, "Pete, you're up to something loco. Me, I'm going to search you."

Rondalay tried to back away, but his injured leg wouldn't hold his weight. He was pinned there against the boulder. But he made one more try, striking out at Mowbrey with his uninjured hand. Mowbrey knocked the blow aside. He started through Rondalay's uniform pockets. He found, besides the photograph, only the things always found in a man's pockets. Some silver coins, several of them Mexican; a clasp knife; quirky makings; a door key; sulphur matches. . . . Then he came upon the money belt under the man's shirt. He removed it despite the man's protests. It was heavy with minted gold.

Rondalay was wolf-savage now, cursing

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Mowbrey in a string of obscenity.

"So Chavez was after this gold?" Mowbrey said.

"The dirty thief knew I was carrying it!"

"Where'd you get it, Pete?"

"None of your business, Mowbrey," Rondalay said. "I came by it before I joined up, and I'm keeping it, see? Hand it back, Mowbrey!"

Mowbrey weighed the gold-filled belt in his hand, and the coins jingled with a sort of music. It had caused the death of a good man—Big Bill Small, who had been every man's friend—and it had caused Chavez to turn to murder and desertion. Desertion? Yes, Chavez would not come back to hang. He would rather risk death at the hands of the Utes than to be taken back to Fort Brandon as a prisoner for court martial. The gold was bloodstained, and Jim Mowbrey wanted to fling it far from reach. But it had been in Rondalay's possession, and so it must be considered his. Mowbrey tossed the belt and Rondalay caught it greedily.

"This is not the end of this, Pete," he said. "It'll be an Army matter, once we get back to Fort Brandon."

"Once we get back," said Pete Rondalay, and his tone was mocking.

THERE was another grave, then. They had not recovered the bodies of Yates and Havelock—the two men who had been killed out across the canyon—but they buried Big Bill Small as they had buried O'Bannon and Ed Hackett. They simply opened the earth and lay down the blanket-covered form, then closed the shallow opening. . . .

Four of them left. Jim Mowbrey took a mental roll call. Lieutenant Kane, young Tom Chronister, the wounded and half-drunk Pete Rondalay, and himself. Four out of ten. Mowbrey moved like a man dazed. He walked to the stream and belied down to drink. He thrust his head into the water, thinking the cold shock of it might clear his wits. He pulled back, then, and lay sprawled on his back and gasping for breath. And his mind was cleared. It was thinking, *One after another, and maybe you'll be next!* He shuddered, and tried to remember Bess Naylor's pretty face and buxom figure. But all his mind would dwell

upon was the relentless way in which the patrol was dying. Trapped and dying.

There was a sudden sound through the night's awesome quiet, the nicker of a horse. Mowbrey raised up to his knees and peered about. It took his eyes some minutes to sight the animal. It was beyond the stream, some hundred yards away. He could not make out whether or not it was one of the patrol's bays, but it seemed certain that a Ute pony without a rider would not venture so close to a white man's camp. The others too had heard and seen the animal, and they gathered by the water. Pete Rondalay hobbled with a carbine for a crutch. Lieutenant Kane's face was pale and haggard. But enthusiasm had returned to the youngster, Tom Chronister.

"If we had that mount," Chronister said, "one of us could ride for help. I'm going to make the try."

"I'll cover you," Mowbrey told him, and the two of them started wading the creek.

They paused on the opposite bank, crouching low. Mowbrey watched for trouble, and Chronister called softly to the horse. After a brief wait, they moved on. Chronister talked to the skittish horse as he approached it. It was a bay; Jim Mowbrey now could see its reddish sheen. But it had a wall-eyed look, and it kept shying away. Finally it started to bolt, and Chronister ran after it. A voice shouted, "Keep away from that horse!" It was Chavez' voice, and it was apparent that he too had been stalking the animal. Mowbrey saw Chavez come from some high rocks; he saw too the glint of a rifle barrel. Mowbrey shouted, "Chavez! Drop that gun!"

Chavez heard, yet he gambled his life for the mount. He fired at Tom Chronister, and the young trooper fell screaming. Chavez now darted after the horse, which had come to a stop among some brush. Mowbrey closed in at a lurching run, and Chavez whirled and fired on him. Mowbrey saw, he sighted and fired, but he was blind and unfeeling with rage. He watched Chavez fall and die with as little regret as he would have known in stamping the life out of a rattler.

He went and stood over Tom Chronister, and the youngster's eyes were wide open and staring—and seeing nothing at all. There was a movement in the brush. The horse came breaking through. It was a

CHAPTER FIVE

Boothill Patrol

cavalry mount, all right. By its markings, Jim Mowbrey knew that it was the mount Pete Rondalay had ridden. The animal was watching the man with some wariness, as though it knew the night was full of horror. It nickered and it pawed the ground. Then it shied away from the dead man on the ground. Jim Mowbrey did not try to catch it up.

"To hell with you," he muttered. "To hell with it all! Damn to hell the whole damn thing!"

He turned away, and he was a man sick in his soul.

THE bay followed Jim Mowbrey part way back to the camp. It halted at the stream and drank, while Mowbrey forded across. Lieutenant Kane was ready with a rope, and shortly he had caught and hobbled the horse. Pete Rondalay limped over and talked to the animal in that sing-song fashion of his. Jim Mowbrey sank to the ground, his back against a boulder. He held his head in his hands. Kane came over to him, saying, "Young Chronister is dead?"

"And Chavez, too." Mowbrey didn't take his head out of his hands.

"Chavez was after the horse?" the officer asked.

Jim Mowbrey nodded. But he was answering the officer's questions with only a part of his mind. His bleak thoughts were off on a tangent; the sergeant had a hunch. And he was trying to make something of it. Seven men had died in the night, and such a thing must have some meaning. There had to be a meaning, Mowbrey suddenly knew. And he tried to put a mental finger upon it. He looked across the camp to where Pete Rondalay stood with the returned horse. He looked at Lieutenant Kane, and the young officer was on sentry duty—walking to and fro, peering into the night, a carbine in his hand. Walking . . . walking . . . walking . . .

"The fool," Jim Mowbrey muttered. "The poor, stupid fool! The damned, dumb stupid fool!"

For the sergeant's hunch was this: *Lieutenant Kane was doomed. The officer was already a dead man. He could watch, and he could pace back and forth, and he could hold a gun. . . . And still he would not be alive to see the morning dawn!*

NOW it was the darkest part of the night, the hour before dawn. Jim Mowbrey's aching body and shock-dulled mind had put him to sleep for some few minutes. But he was awake again, as Lieutenant Kane stood before him. And he asked, "Yes, sir?" He did not rise.

"Sergeant, I've got to talk to you."

Mowbrey looked up, and through the gloom Lieutenant Jeffrey Kane was not the same man. His hat had been lost, his uniform tunic hung sloppily open, and he was stained with dust and sweat. All in one night, he had become gaunt. His eyes were dull in his haggard face. His back was to Pete Rondalay, and Pete was too far away to overhear, but Jeff Kane kept his voice pitched low.

"Mowbrey, I have a feeling . . ." he began.

Mowbrey nodded, for he knew what Kane meant and could not say. The lieutenant had a feeling that he was going to die.

Kane said, still low-voiced, "There's a girl back in Lanassa town, Mowbrey. Maybe you know of her. Her name is Margie Larue. . . ." His tone and his manner stiffened defensively. "Yes, she is a dancehall girl. She's in the Palace honkatonk. But that doesn't change what I feel toward her. You see, Mowbrey, I fell in love with her."

Once again Jim Mowbrey nodded. He saw, all right; he knew how a man could feel toward a certain woman. He knew, because of Bess Naylor.

"An Army officer hasn't the right to associate with girls like that," Kane went on. "But I'd looked upon Margie, and she had smiled upon me. We met, secretly. There is an abandoned shack a couple of miles away from the post and the town. I would have married her, but it would have hurt my career, and she never would have been accepted by other Army wives. I told Margie that, and she understood. But I was a selfish fool, Mowbrey. I see it now, when it's too late!"

He was silent a moment, but finally went on: "If you come through this, Mowbrey, I want you to give Margie a message."

"If I live," Jim Mowbrey said.

"Just tell her," Kane said, "that—that I loved her."

He started to turn away, but Jim Mowbrey halted him. "Lieutenant—" Mowbrey had risen, his mind alert and his body stripped of weariness. He faced the officer. "Sir, you've got to answer this. . . . The photograph Rondalay found, it was yours?"

"Yes," came the flat reply. "Margie had had it taken a year ago, at Dodge City. She gave it to me. When Rondalay made an issue of it, I kept silent. I did not want him to know and to tell it about that I had been associating with a honkatonk girl. Besides, I feared what he might do. You see, Mowbrey, Margie and he had once been—well, friends. She broke with him when she learned he had been traveling with a wild bunch. That gold he's carrying is probably loot from some robbery. From what Margie told me, Pete enlisted in the Army to hide from something—perhaps from the law."

JIM MOWBREY stared at Jeff Kane, and it seemed to him that the officer was now but an empty shell of a man. But in Mowbrey's mind a nightmarish idea had taken hold. And he knew. He knew the ugly truth. Seven men had died, and all because of a girl's picture! *Yes, because of a girl's picture!* No, not seven—six. For Ed Hackett's death had been an accident; but because of the scout's death, men had roused from their sleep and one of them in the excitement had lost the photograph. Lieutenant Kane was watching Mowbrey.

"What is it, Mowbrey?"

"Sir, did the lieutenant actually see any Utes tonight?"

"Why, no. . . . But surely—"

Mowbrey shook his head. "There are no Utes here," he said savagely. "Ed Hackett wasn't wrong. He couldn't have been wrong. Hell, he was a scout!"

"But O'Bannion," said Kane.

"A white man can cut a throat."

"But the moccasin tracks?"

"A white man with his boots off, in his socks."

Kane's dulled mind would not accept that. He said, "What about Havelock and Corporal Yates, when they tried to round up the horses—and Rondalay's wound?"

"How many guns were firing out there?" Mowbrey said. "Mighty few, no more than

three, I'd take an oath. Pete Rondalay went first, and he took cover out there. He bushwhacked Havelock and Yates, but they did some shooting too before they died, and they wounded Rondalay. I ran out to give them a hand. My imagination played a trick on me and I thought there were Indians about. I even fired a shot. But Rondalay worked it so that we all believed there really were Utes out there. He cut the picket rope to let the horses get away. To further the notion in our minds that the Utes were about—and to keep us here in until he'd managed to kill us all."

"But why, Mowbrey?" Kane asked. "Is he crazy?"

"Crazy with jealousy," Mowbrey said. "He must have known Margie Larue had taken up with another man. When he found that picture, he guessed that that man was one of the patrol. He went crazy then, and he must have made up his mind to kill whoever claimed the picture. But no man claimed it, and Rondalay's warped mind then planned to kill every man."

Kane drew his hand over his eyes. "It's unbelievable!" he muttered.

"He was like a tinhorn gambler playing a crooked game," Jim Mowbrey went on. "He baited Chavez with that gold, somehow—then shouted for Big Bill Small, maybe hoping Big Bill would kill Chavez. As it worked out, it was even better, to Rondalay's mind. Chavez gunned down Big Bill and deserted, then later killed young Chronister. And I shot Chavez." The sergeant paused and drew his Colt from its holster. "Lieutenant, he's got some scheme to get you and me, that's true. But I'm not going to die out here."

Kane gripped his arm. "Hold on, Sergeant!" he said, almost wildly. "I'm to blame for what happened. Yes, because I was a blind fool and afraid to admit my love for a woman those men died. I'll handle this madman. You understand?"

Jim Mowbrey said, "I savvy," and he stepped back.

The lieutenant started to turn away, and Mowbrey hit him.

PETE RONDALAY had not been idle. In the brief time Mowbrey had been occupied with the lieutenant, Rondalay had succeeded, despite his injured left arm, in saddling the bay. Jim Mowbrey saw that

as he crossed the cleared space which once had been the patrol's night camp. The horse was tied to a mesquite scrub. But Rondalay had faded from sight. There were jutting rock spires and tangled brush all about, there were huge boulders and broken patches of ground. And there was a curtain of darkness that would hide a man, for no longer was there moonlight. Sixgun in hand, Jim Mowbrey moved through the dark.

Time passed, an eternity of it, and Mowbrey caught no glimpse of his man. He moved from boulder to boulder, from one brush patch to another. At first, for a long interval, he heard no sound at all. But then he caught the sound of a stealthy footfall, and a chill crept along his spine. He made himself small against a rock formation. The sound of a moving man came closer. He could hear the man's labored breathing. He glimpsed a shadowy shape, a man with a carbine in his hands. He called out, "Pete, drop that rifle. I've got you covered."

The carbine swung up, lightning fast, and it blazed at Mowbrey. The slug came so close that the sergeant automatically ducked. He'd missed his chance, and, now recovering, he checked his aim. That was not Pete Rondalay out there, now running in the opposite direction. Rondalay was wounded in leg and arm. That was Lieutenant Kane befuddled and desperate. Mowbrey yelled, "Kane, get down—" But the warning came too late. Another carbine spurted flame, and Kane went down like a man tripped. The killer's weapon fired again, and if there had been life left in Lieutenant Jeffrey Kane it was surely gone now. Mowbrey swung up his sixgun, firing at the spot from which Rondalay's carbine had flashed. The man's harsh laughter mocked him.

"Only two of us left, Mowbrey," Rondalay called out. "And once there were ten. You coming to get me, Sergeant?"

Mowbrey was cold with a clammy sweat. He was a man who had fought Utes and Arapahoes and Apaches, but never before had he played a grim death game of hide-and-seek in the dark with a madman. And Pete Rondalay *was* a madman. Mowbrey made himself small behind a rock. He forced his mind to calmness. *He would play the game Rondalay's way!* He worked off his boots. He moved away from the rock,

crouching low, making no tell-tale sound. After circling widely, he hunkered down with his back to another rock. From this vantage point, he could keep his eye on the saddled horse. He waited with the cocked sixgun in his hand. He waited until his every nerve was cruelly knotted, until the first faint light of dawn tinged the eastern sky. And then Pete Rondalay appeared.

He came boldly enough, but warily too. He was after the horse, and he had not yet seen Mowbrey. He held his carbine with the stock braced against his side, so that he could fire one-handed. But Pete Rondalay's nerve had snapped. "Mowbrey, I'll bargain with you. . . ." His voice was lifted high. "I'll give you my gold, you let me ride out. There's five thousand—"

Mowbrey rose, revealing himself. He said tiredly, "Pete, drop that gun." And got a shot for an answer. He swung his Colt up and fired pointblank at Rondalay. But Rondalay was a man who had to be hit many times. The carbine blasted again as the man fell to his knees. It went off a third time as Mowbrey fired his fourth bullet into Rondalay. After that, after the echoes had died away down-canyon, there was only a deathlike silence.

Like a sleepwalker, Sergeant Jim Mowbrey went to the bay horse and pulled himself into the saddle. He rode away from the shambles that had been the patrol's night camp. The dead he left for another to bury. . . . He would meet the column, Troop A under Major Hadley, somewhere on the trail, and he would report what had happened.

But after a time, the sergeant's mind looked farther ahead. He was thinking that when he got back to Fort Brandon, his enlistment would be over. He could change to civilian clothes and go to Bess Naylor. And somehow she would cure him of this sudden sickness in his soul. Bess would help him forget the good men who had died because of a dancehall girl—no, because of a girl's picture.

But the trail ahead was long, and Bess Naylor was far away. As the sergeant rode along, a sort of crazy chant ran through his burdened mind. "*Ten little soldiers, a-ridin' on patrol. . . .*" Only Pete Rondalay would have known how to finish the rhyme. There was no rhythm in Jim Mowbrey's shocked soul.

Outlaw Masquerade

By Wayne D. Overholser

DANE HOLLIS was in the barn feeding his horses when he heard the clatter of Pete Ashton's buckboard on the frozen road. He jabbed his pitchfork into the hay and went into his store. He didn't like Pete Ashton, hadn't liked him from the time Ashton had driven a covered wagon into the Spring River country looking for a homestead. He didn't like anything about Ashton or his tall, skinny wife except their daughter Rose. She was definitely cut from another pattern, and Dane often wondered how she could possibly have drawn such a family.

Pete Ashton stamped into the store. "Got the mail ready?" he demanded belligerently.

It would be a real satisfaction to step out of the postoffice corner and punch Ashton right on the nose. Dane had a hunch that sooner or later he'd do exactly that.

"Here you are, Pete," Dane said, shoving the mailbag across the counter.

"You sure are damned slow," Ashton said irritably as he grabbed the mailbag. "No reason why you couldn't have had it ready when I got here."

"You didn't have to wait."

"The hell I didn't." Ashton stared at Dane with narrowed, hostile eyes. He asked in a challenging tone, "You want me to fetch anything from town?"

"No," Dale answered shortly.

Ashton swore. "Now look, Hollis. I'm losing money on this mail contract. The only way I can make it is to have you or some of the others who live down here order your stuff in town through me. Looks like it would be a favor to have me bring your stuff out so you wouldn't have to drive into Carson."

"It would be, Pete," Dane said, "if you didn't think you had to get rich off us."

"Maybe you're graveled over me getting the mail contract," Ashton suggested.

"No, Pete," Dane Hollis said slowly. "If you want to haul the mail at a loss I reckon it's your business."

Ashton was usually that way, proddy for no apparent reason. There was often, too, a furtive air about him, as if he were trying to hide something, but what that some-

thing was he kept as much of a secret as the reason for him being on the prod.

Ashton had moved to the door, and held it open with studied intent while the cold air whipped into the room. He looked at his buckboard, stared up at the leaden sky, and brought his gaze back to Dane; all in the manner of a man who had thought carefully about what he was going to do. Then he said, "Kind o' chilly, ain't it?"

Even when Ashton was trying to be friendly, as he was now, Dane felt the lack of sincerity in the man. Dane said sharply, "It is, and you might shut the door."

Ashton was staring up at the sky again, and shaking his head. "Gonna be an early winter. Reckon I'll be using the sled next week. Sure hope the snow holds off till I get back tomorrow night."

"You might close the door," Dane snapped.

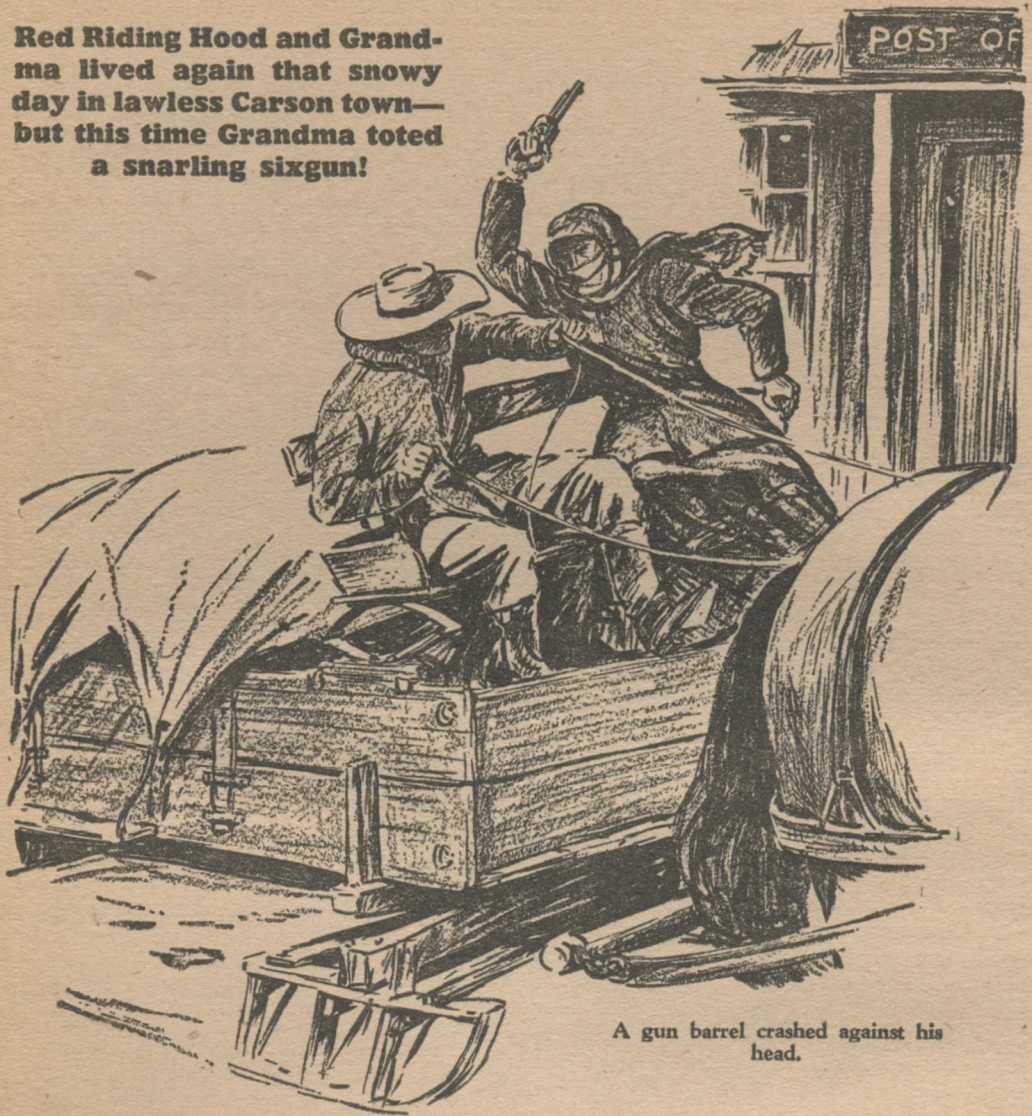
"Oh, sure," Ashton said, and went out, closing the door with an unnecessary slam.

Dane stood behind the counter, watching the buckboard wheel away, and feeling the hot wash of anger in him. Every time Pete Ashton came by he somehow always managed to say or do something that made Dane feel as if he'd been massaged by a red hot currycomb.

ASHTON, his wife, and their daughter Rose had stopped in their covered wagon three years before, and Ashton had asked if they could camp in the meadow behind Dane's barn. They had stayed there a week, Ashton's horses using Dane's water and eating his hay. Ashton said he wanted a place of his own, but when Dane offered to locate him on a homestead below the store, Ashton immediately announced that he'd been in a valley all his life and he wanted to live on a mountain. He wound up by buying, from a trapper, a cabin and a small tract of canyon bottom in the foothills of the Cascades called the Notch.

Another strange thing about Ashton was the way he acted when Dane called on Rose. She was, and he'd thought so from the time he'd first seen her riding a sorrel gelding beside Ashton's covered wagon, the girl

**Red Riding Hood and Grand-
ma lived again that snowy
day in lawless Carson town—
but this time Grandma toted
a snarling sixgun!**



A gun barrel crashed against his head.

he'd been waiting for. She had blue eyes, copper-colored hair, and a smile that was as warm and real as Pete Ashton's was false.

She'd been friendly when they'd camped at Dane's place, so after they bought the Notch, Dane rode up to see her. Ashton promptly told him to get out, that he'd bought the Notch to get away from other people, and that was exactly what he aimed to do. Dane had not seen Mrs. Ashton after they'd bought the Notch. In fact, he saw little of her when they had camped in his

meadow because she stayed inside the covered wagon. He did see Rose once in a while on Sunday when he rode into the hills, but she would never stop long to talk to him. It was easy to see that she was terribly afraid, but she never told him what or whom she feared.

Then the matter of the postoffice at Spring River had come up. The farmers around there wanted it, so Dane passed the petition, secured the signatures, and was named postmaster. He put off visiting Ashton until the last, and when he did ride up

to the cabin, Ashton met him in front with a double-barreled shotgun in his hands, and a surly order to vamoose.

He cooled down when he heard what Dane had to say, signed the petition, and announced that it might be a good deal to bid for the mail contract when it was called for. He and Dane both bid, and Ashton got the contract on what Dane knew was a ridiculously low figure. Since then he'd tried to increase his income by doing errands in Carson for Dane and other people along his route, but it didn't surprise Dane to hear him say that he was losing money.

In a land where people are forthright and honest, where visitors are always welcome and there are no secrets, Pete Ashton didn't fit. They talked about him, the Spring River folks, but none of them had any ideas that would account for Ashton's behavior. He said he wanted to be left alone, and he'd dust anybody off with buckshot who thought otherwise. He'd done exactly that to Jack Foley, one of Dane's neighbors who had ridden into the Notch to ask about a mare he'd lost.

IT SNOWED by the time Pete Ashton got back to Dane's store the next evening. He stomped in, kicked the snow off his feet after he was inside the store; then took off his coat, and shook the snow from it so that there was a large wet spot ten feet from the melting snow by the door. Then he handed Dane the mailbag, and said cheerfully as a man would who has just done something that made him feel good, "Gonna storm, Hollis. I'll sure be using my sled next week. My wife's going into town. She'll get a real ride in the snow. She ain't been out much. Ain't been well for quite a spell."

Sometimes Dane had wondered if Ashton had a wife. No one around Spring River had seen her since they'd camped that first week in Dane's meadow. As Dane began sorting the mail, he said, "Ain't seen her for a long time, Pete."

"No, she's bedfast most of the time. Well, see you next week, Hollis, providing I don't get snowed in."

"So long," Dane said.

Ashton hadn't been gone fifteen minutes when Jack Foley came in, still limping from the buckshot wound in his leg Ashton had given him, and still embittered by it. He

was a tall, gaunt man who somehow made a living out of a ten-cow spread in the foothills not far from the Notch.

"How's your friend Ashton?" Foley asked sourly.

"Time to lock up, Jack," Hollis said. "Come on back and I'll cook up a mess of slungullion. I sure feel the need of company after that hombre goes through here. I feel low enough to walk under a cow's belly with a ten-gallon hat on."

Foley chuckled. "I'd like to see that cow, Dane. She'd have to have some legs."

"Not the way I feel," Dane said.

Foley rolled a cigarette and cocked his feet up on the table. He said, "Dane, I don't have much to go on. Not enough to call the sheriff in, but since Ashton tried to shoot my leg off, I've done some detective work. I've got a hunch Ashton is a crook."

"Shoot."

"Well, I've been riding wide of Ashton's place since he shot me, but I can get a real good view of the Notch by using glasses from the top of Yorgan's Peak. A week or so ago a couple of fellers rode in driving some extra horses and some pack animals in front of 'em. They came right through the mountains and they headed smack for the Notch just like they knowed where they was going. Now nobody comes through them mountains unless they have to. Maybe they'd go up over the Santiam Pass and come south, but they sure as hell wouldn't travel straight east like them fellers done without a good reason."

"Reckon they wouldn't," Dane agreed.

"That ain't all. Since I've been watching Ashton's place, I seen Rose come in and out of the cabin a hundred times. I seen Ashton, but I never saw Mrs. Ashton till today. I seen her and a short, chunky jayhoo today several times, but I didn't see the lanky galoot who rode in with the chunky one. If I remember right when they camped here, you said Mrs. Ashton was powerful tall and skinny for a woman."

Dane stared at Foley, beginning to see what was in the cowman's mind.

"Now before you say anything, Dane, let me tell you one more thing. Then you add it up. A week or more ago Ashton came to see me, said he was plumb sorry about filling my leg with buckshot like he done. He said it like he didn't mean it, you

know, the way he says most things. Then he wanted to buy me out, and by damn, he did mean that. Said he'd give me anything I asked that was reasonable. I says why, and he says it's none of my business, but he wants to buy some cattle and he needs my place which is the closest one to his. When I says no he gets plumb nasty, and says mebbe I won't live long. Now add it up."

"I reckon I get the same answer you do," Dane said thoughtfully. "Ashton figures on running a hideout for owlhooters, and he don't want anybody as close as you are. Maybe he doesn't have a wife, and this tall gent who rode in disguises himself as a woman. Might be he was on the dodge when they first came in here, and Ashton was getting him out of hot water. That it?"

"That's sure the way I call it," Foley said. "Think we better see the sheriff?"

"No," Dane answered, "but was I you, I sure wouldn't stay home for a while."

"I'll hole up in that cave on the other side of Yorgan's Peak, and I'll sure keep an eye on the Notch."

"You show up here the day Ashton goes to town next week. If I'm adding it up and still getting the right answers, that's when they're going to pull whatever job they've got in mind."

IT SNOWED another six inches the following week, and stayed cold. On the morning Ashton was scheduled to go to town, Dane stayed in his store watching the road from the Notch. He was not surprised when he saw the sled appear out of the timber because he had expected Ashton to use the sled, but he was surprised when it was close enough for him to see who was in the seat. Rose was driving, and beside her was a tall woman with a red muffler wrapped around her head and all of her face but her eyes.

Dane swore softly. Ashton wasn't satisfied to go ahead himself with his devilment. He had to drag Rose into it, too. As the sled drew up in front of the store he studied the canvas behind the seat that obviously covered something, and wondered if Pete Ashton and the chubby man Jack Foley had mentioned were hidden there.

Dane had the mailbag ready when Rose came in for it, but he didn't hand it to her. He came around the end of the counter,

and took her hands. He said, "The cold air sure does give your cheeks a color."

Rose did not withdraw her hands for a moment, but stood smiling at him while she asked, "Is the mailbag ready?"

"All ready, but I'm not. I want to know why you're driving today?"

"Oh, Dad cut his foot yesterday, and he wasn't able to drive. Don't worry about me, Dane. I was brought up with a pair of lines in my hands. I'll make out fine."

"Sure you will," Dane said angrily, "but I know he's got something up his sleeve that's not good. I don't want you tangled up in it. Let me drive today. You can mind the store."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that," Rose said quickly, jerking her hands from Dane's. "Dad is trusting me to do this for him. Now if you'll give me the mailbag . . ."

"I hate to do this," Dane said grimly as he pulled Rose to him and put a hand over her mouth, "but I'm driving that sled to Carson."

Rose kicked his shins and tried to say something, but all she could manage was an unintelligible, "*Mfff.*" Dane carried her into his kitchen, locked the back door, and put the key into his pocket. He put the girl down on a chair, and stepped back to the door that led into the store. She sat staring at him, saying nothing, and it seemed to Dane that there was more fear than hate in her.

"For three years," Dane said feelingly, "I've sat here knowing that I love you and thinking that you'd love me if you had a chance. You've been scared to death of something, but I've never found out what. Today I'm going to find out."

"Be careful, Dane," she said softly, her lips trembling.

Quickly Dane took his belt and gun down from a nail on the wall, and buckled the belt around him. He slipped into his sheepskin, slapped his Stetson on his head, and left the room. He picked up the mailbag, and locked the front door behind him.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ashton," Dane said amiably as he came up to the sled. "I'm driving today. Rose can run the store. You don't mind, do you?"

"Umph," the woman grunted, her hard green eyes glaring at Dane.

Dane thought that if this was really a woman he'd eat the muffler that hid her

face. He dropped the mailbag under a corner of the canvas, certain that a man was hidden there. He stepped on around the sled and slid into the seat, not wanting to press for a fight here within earshot of Rose. As he picked up the lines, he caught the swift downward motion of the woman's arm out of the corner of his eye and started to duck. But he was too late. A gun barrel crashed against his head, smashing consciousness from him. He fell away from the woman and out of the seat into the snow.

DANE was in his own bed when he came to. It took some time for his head to clear, and more time to remember what had happened. Then he heard the front door of the store open, and a man knocking the snow from his feet. Dane drew his gun, pronged back the hammer, and waited as he heard steps coming toward his back room. He thought it was Pete Ashton, or possibly the tall man who was masquerading as Ashton's wife until Jack Foley called, "Where are you, Dane?"

Dane eased down the hammer, tension going out of him. "In here, Jack," he shouted, and sat up, feet on the floor.

"I'm sure glad to see you," Foley said when he came in, relief flooding his gaunt face. "I was coming down the mountain when I saw the sled pull up in front of the store. I got out my glasses and took a look just as that ornery son in the dress swung on you. He took the key to the door out of your pocket, and let Rose loose. They stood beside the sled augering a while. Finally he picked you up and packed you inside. I didn't know what shape I'd find you in."

"You see anything around the Notch this week?"

"Not a single damned thing," Foley grumbled.

"Then we don't know any more about what they're up to than we did," Dane said, "but I sure aim to beat that sled into Carson."

"Mebbe we'd better see the sheriff," Foley suggested.

"Nobody's broke any laws yet. What would we tell him? I don't reckon he'd arrest a man for wearing a woman's dress. The sheriff knows I don't like Ashton. He'd just say I was trying to do him dirt

because he beat me out of the mail contract."

"You got slugged, didn't you?"

"Sure, and I locked Rose up, too. They might get me arrested for that. No, Jack, we'll circle the sled and beat 'em into town. Ashton bought that little barn in behind the bank. He keeps his horses there at night, and sleeps in one corner. We can't be smart about this thing since we don't know what they're up to. The best we can do is for us to split. I'll watch the barn. I can see the back of the bank from there. You go down Main Street. Keep your eyes on the postoffice and the Mercantile. Whatever you do, don't start pitching lead if Rose is around."

Foley scratched his long chin. "Damn it, Dane, we can't fight what we can't see."

"We'll see it all right," Dane said grimly. "They wouldn't have gone to all the trouble they have if they didn't have something schemed up that looked good to 'em. It must be a holdup, which probably means either the bank or the Mercantile."

"Okay," Foley said. "That's the way we'll do it."

It was mid-afternoon when Dane and Foley reached Carson. By circling to the east they had by-passed Rose and the sled, but Dane knew she wasn't far behind. Before they separated at the edge of town, Dane said, "Keep your eyes on the front of the bank, too, Jack. There's a side door I can watch from the back."

Foley nodded agreement, and rode away. Dane turned into the side street which ran in front of the barn Ashton used for his horses when he was in town. Across from the barn was an empty house with a woodshed beside it. Dane left his horses behind the woodshed, and went into it. He kicked a board loose from the front so that he could see both the street which ran parallel with Main Street and the one connecting the two which flanked the bank. There he waited, gun in hand.

DANE didn't wait long. Two things happened almost together, timed perfectly as only old hands at the game could time it. A tall man rode around the bank from Main Street, casually dismounted, and went into the side door just as Rose, alone in the seat, drove her sled to the front of Ashton's barn, got down, and opened the door. Dane

guessed that the man who had gone into the bank was the one who had been disguised as a woman.

Rose came back to the sled, and was standing beside one of the horses, apparently examining the harness. Gunfire broke out in the bank, followed almost instantly by the tall man's departure. He ran out the side door, a partly filled sack in one hand which was, judging from the way he handled it, heavier than it looked. He swung into the saddle, dug in the steel, and rocketed down the side street straight toward the woodshed where Dane was hidden.

Then within a matter of seconds the scheme was unfolded before Dane's eyes. A chubby man jumped out from under the canvas in the back of the sled just as the tall outlaw reined his mount to a snow-flying stop around the corner of the barn. He swung down and leaped into the sled, pulling the canvas over him as the chubby man hit the saddle of the outlaw's horse and put the horse into a run. Rose stepped back into the seat of the sled and spoke to her team.

Old hands in the outlaw business, all right, Dane told himself. He wondered if Pete Ashton was the brains behind it, and had not taken part because of his own past. Probably he had forced Rose to drive today because a girl would less likely be suspected of complicity in the crime than he would.

Again it was only seconds before the sheriff, Jack Foley, and five other horsemen broke around the corner of the bank and swept into the side street. They reined up for just a moment as the sheriff bawled at Rose, "Where'd that bank robber go, ma'am?"

Before Rose could answer Foley saw the chubby man riding leisurely now, and yelled, "There he goes, sheriff." They wheeled their horses and took after him. Rose drove on and turned into the alley that ran behind the postoffice.

For a moment Dane hesitated. Whatever happened, he didn't want Rose drawn into the trouble. It had been a perfect job because it had been planned perfectly. For a few minutes Dane remained in the woodshed trying to foresee what the outlaws would do. The way he guessed it Rose would return to the barn with the team. The tall outlaw would hide there all night, and the next morning, disguised again as a

woman, or hiding under the canvas, he could ride safely out of town beside Rose. Meanwhile, the sheriff would catch the chubby man, he'd bring him back to the bank teller who would not be able to identify him as the robber, and, having no grounds upon which he could hold him, would have to let the fellow go. Later, at his own leisure, he could return to some hideout, perhaps Pete Ashton's place, and make the split.

Dane could wait until the sheriff returned to tell what he knew and what he guessed, but the sheriff wasn't one who took well to suggestions. Besides, Dane wasn't the kind of man to let someone else finish a job he'd started. He crossed the street to the barn, and slid into a corner behind a pile of hay just as Rose drove the sled into the barn. She closed the door, pulled the canvas off the outlaw, and said sharply, "You can put the team away. I'll be here at seven in the morning." She went out, closing the door behind her.

DANE waited until the horses were unharnessed and had been fed. The outlaw took a lunch bucket from under the canvas in the sled, and hunkered down under a window. This was exactly the moment Dane had been waiting for, but as he drew his gun the door opened and the chubby man came in.

"How's things, Red?" the chubby one asked, eyes probing the shadows of the barn corners.

"Worked slick," the tall outlaw said. "I didn't count it, but I reckon we've got twenty thousand or better. How'd you make out?"

"Easy. I was riding along slow like when the sheriff shows up and says I'm under arrest for robbing the bank. That makes me mighty mad 'cause I ain't done it, and I told him so. I says I rode down that side street 'cause I wanted to see the whole town before I put my horse in the stable. He says I was riding a horse just like the one the robber did, and I says mebbe they're twins, but I rode this animal in from Bear-dog. They took me into the bank, and the teller says I ain't the coyote who done it, so they turned me loose. Then the sheriff cusses something fierce, because you'd got plumb away while he was fooling with me."

"You're a danged fool for coming in here,

Chub," the tall man said angrily. "Might be the sheriff's still keeping an eye on you."

All the time that the chubby man had been talking, his eyes had been studying every corner, every possible hiding place in the barn. He must have seen fresh tracks in the snow. That was the only way Dane could think of by which the outlaw could have known a third man was there, but he didn't know where, and not knowing, he wasn't sure what he should do. There was no better time than this, Dane thought, and just as the chubby man said, "Let's go get some warm grub, Red," and started toward the door, and away from the thin winter light that came in through the dirty window, Dane moved from the hay.

Somehow the short outlaw had given the other man a signal, and with the first rustle of hay, they wheeled, guns blazing. Dane had not expected immediate action, but neither had the outlaws known the exact position of their enemy, so their first shots went wild. Then Dane was squeezing trigger with fatal accuracy. The tall outlaw bent at waist and knee and pitched full length into the litter on the barn floor. Dane triggered a bullet into the chubby one's chest, but was too high. It was then Dane felt the numbing impact of a slug in his right thigh, and his leg gave way under him.

Again the chubby outlaw fired, lead shrieking within inches of Dane's head, and having missed that shot, he had no other chance. Lying on his side with the warm run of blood along his leg, Dane pronged back hammer again, and squeezed trigger, centering the man's forehead with a slug as neatly as if he had measured it.

THE next days were hazy ones for Dane Hollis. The wound in his thigh was a bad one, and a fever took him into a far land where he saw the smiling face of Rose Ashton beckoning to him, but always far away. When at last the fever broke, it was Jack Foley who was sitting at the bedside.

"Hello, tough hand," Foley said, grinning broadly. "Sure glad to see you looking so well. Mostly lately you've been holering for that Rose girl, and say, you should o' seen the way she's taken care of you. Some nurse, I'm here to say."

Then Foley sobered. "You know, there's quite a yarn to all this. Ashton's been a

big outlaw. Used to be hooked up with them two coyotes you beefed. They was Red Rolf and Chub Tyler. Well, Ashton lost his wife, and she'd made him promise he'd go straight on account of Rose, so he pulled out of the gang, and went straight for five years. Then Rolf found him again, and threatened to give him away if he didn't smuggle him out of Nevada where he was ringed in. That's when they came in here in the first place. Since then Rolf's been making Ashton furnish him with a hide-out when it got too tough, and that's why Ashton's been so goldanged ornery. He was afraid to have anybody come around 'cause they might be there when Rolf showed up. This bank robbery that you busted up was Rolf's idea. He made Ashton get things ready."

"Does the sheriff know. Rose had any part of this?"

Foley chuckled. "Hell no. I didn't tell him. They just think Rolf ducked into the barn."

"I'd like to see Rose."

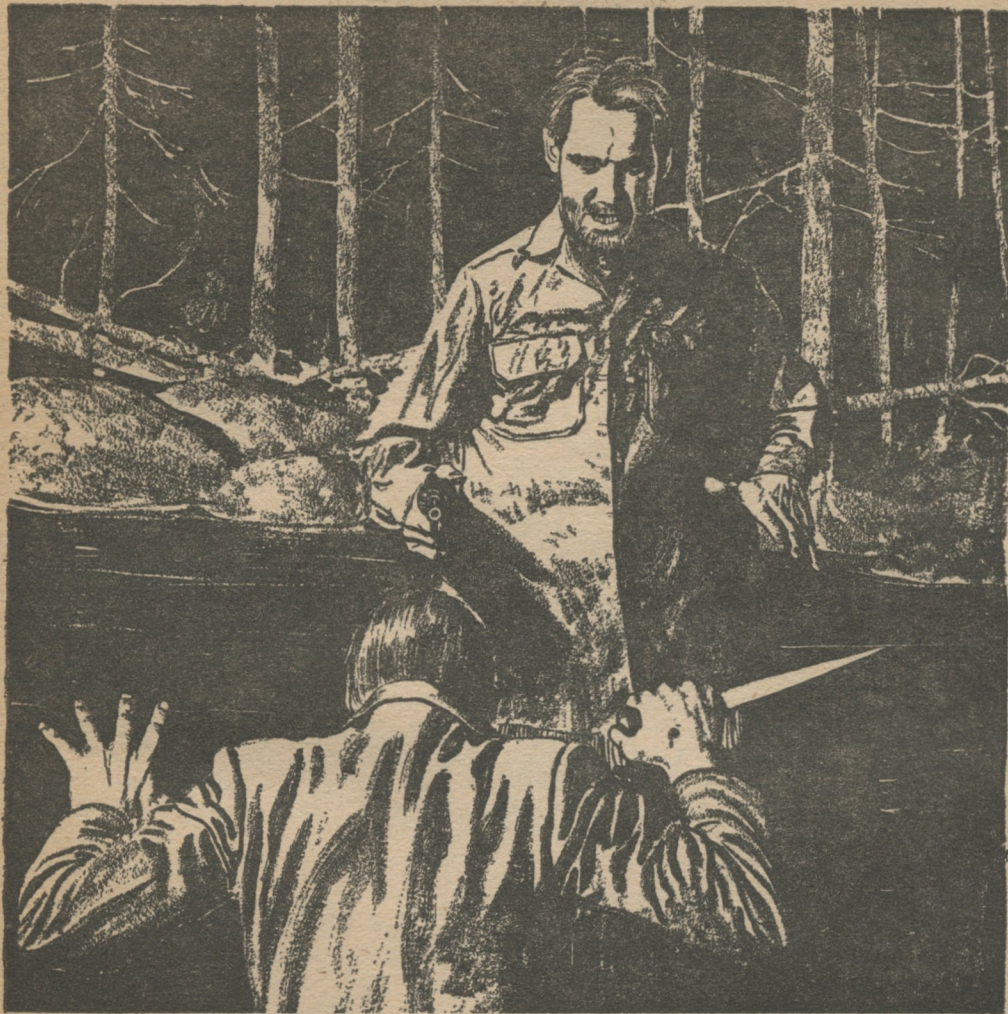
"She ain't far away," Foley said. "She ain't been since you got hit."

Rose came in a moment later, and she was, Dane thought, more beautiful than ever. He pulled her down on the bed, and when he opened his mouth, she put her fingers over his lips. She said, "Before you start talking, let me tell you that I am an outlaw's daughter. I am not ashamed of my father, although I am ashamed of some of the things he has done. I am very proud of the last thing he's done. He's gone back to Colorado to give himself up and be tried. He should have done it a long time ago, but Rolf had threatened to take it out on me if he did. Now we're free from Rolf and Tyler. You'll never know how bad Rolf was, Dane, but I do."

"I don't care who your father was, Rose," Dane said softly. "I told you I've loved you for three years. Now there's nothing to keep you from marrying me. Will you?"

"Well," she said blushing, "that's why I didn't go with Dad."

"Hey, Jack," Dane called, "get away from that door and go get a preacher." After he heard Foley's steps in the hall, Dane grinned at Rose and said, "A fellow ought to have his first kiss in private," and pulled her lips down to his.



Beaver fired point-blank at a third man.

White Water Traitor

By Archie Joscelyn

That plew-laden mackinaw plunged down the angry Missouri, bound for St. Louis and a fur fortune. For only the river gods knew that a traitor patron manned the sweep—and a kill-mad renegades' murder-camp was the boat's first port of call!

THE Missouri was widening here, beginning to take on the look of a real River. Quickening too, so that white water bared its teeth at them even as it hustled the laden mackinaw along. Jud

Morrison's big voice boomed above the roar of the rapids.

"Lean on that sweep, Pierre! Grab hold with him, Kansas! You, Beaver, stand in front to fend from danger!"

There was need for watching it, need for each man to do his duty, if the fur-laden mackinaw was not to come to grief in the rapids. Beaver Cox, standing big and brown-pelted as the animals he had trapped so successfully, grasped his long pole till his knuckles showed white, moccasined feet braced wide, while the shores, closing in from either side, hurtled past in a half-glimpsed panorama of scudding trees and opening hills.

No boulders reared themselves yet, hoary-headed, to challenge the passage of this man-made thing, but the very fact that the monsters lurked below the surface made them doubly dangerous. Beaver watched, alert. Then they hurtled around the bend, sharp and tricky as a horseshoe, and the roar came louder, breaking like thunder in his ears. The next instant the careening mackinaw seemed to stand on end.

The prow of it was going down like a dropped stone, and Beaver had time for only one confused thought—that Morrison was a short-minded *patron*, to have forgotten this waterfall. For himself, though journeying more than a thousand miles up-river the previous summer, Beaver had gone overland for two days and so missed knowing this section of river. Then all thought was gone as the waters closed over him.

The prow of the longboat had dipped clean under, and for a moment the suck and pull of it almost swept him over the side. Then, since the waterfall was, after all, not a very big one, the mackinaw righted itself again, shaking off the river it had spooned up, surging ahead as though nothing had happened. The other members of the crew, standing at the rear, had not even wetted their feet.

Only a little water had washed back to slosh around the cargo of fur, piled high in a rounded hump just back of center, between water-tight bulkheads, with huge bear and buffalo hides drawn over the hump for protection. These were fastened to the sides of the boat with cleats. Nothing had suffered save himself, but he emerged, dripping like a muskrat left overlong in the trap.

A raucous howl of laughter smote Beaver's ears as he shook them clear of water, and he saw Morrison, doubled up

with mirth, slapping the others hilariously on the back. Only the other men were not laughing.

"Kinda early in the season for your annual bath, mebbly, Beaver," Morrison chuckled. "But water's good for a man—or so they say. . . ."

Beaver shook himself, scowling. So that had been a deliberate trick on Morrison's part! Just one more of an over-long series. Again his knuckles whitened around the pole, and seeing the look on his face, Morrison took a quick backward step. But Beaver set his teeth and shrugged it off.

SOONER or later, at this rate, they'd clash. Long before they ever reached St. Louis, from the look of things. But Long John had seen fit, for some reason of his own, to place Morrison in command of this mackinaw, and they'd need every man of them to get it safely down-river, with its rich cargo of prime plevs. If it was humanly possible to avoid a row, he'd hold himself in.

But Morrison, taken aback for a moment, was cackling again like an old hen, since Beaver had taken the ducking in silence. He rested one hand against the piled hill of fur, as the river smoothed out ahead of them, and grinned widely at the others.

"By golly, but I'm a lucky man," he shouted. "Just a few weeks now, and we'll reach St. Louis. I was pretty well off last year, a right good catch for any wench, if I do say it myself. But now I'm really a rich man. Half of this fur—"

"Half?" Beaver cut in, stung by the boasting. "Aren't you getting too big for your boots? A twentieth of that is your share!"

Again, for a moment, Morrison seemed flustered, taken aback. Then he laughed again, tauntingly.

"Sure, I own a twentieth, which is a fortune," he nodded. "I just wanted to get your goat—and is that easy to do! Like I say, I'll be a rich man, this year. And with the sweetest girl in St. Louie waiting for me. I'll buy her a big diamond—a *real* diamond. Then I'll go, and I'll take her in my arms and give her a big kiss, and I'll say, 'Marie, little sweetheart—'"

A surge of red crept up Beaver's neck, spread across his face, crimsoned even his

ears. For a few moments he had listened stolidly to the bragging, which, for the last few days, and up till now, had been partly veiled. But for Morrison to use Marie's name so brazenly . . .

He swung, lifting the long pole, and drops of water sparkled in the sun, dripped down on the upturned, startled face of Morrison as the rod poised like a sword above him.

"Shut up!" he rasped. "Marie's my girl, and I won't listen to such talk. Just because you're *patron* on this boat, I don't have to stand for it! And I won't!"

Anger shook him, but he saw that Morrison had been deliberately seeking a showdown, now that they were well down-river, away from Long John, with himself in sole command. His own face reddened like a gobbling turkey's, and, big and beefy as he was, Morrison placed one hand on his private chuck-box, balancing, teetering forward on the balls of his feet as though about to spring.

"Who're you tellin' to shut up, you white-beak?" he roared. "I eat your kind for breakfast. I'd throw you to the fish, only it's a shame to pollute the river."

Beaver's fair skin, red a moment before, went white at the insult. To be called a *blanc-bec*, or white-beak, was the direst sort of slander which could be offered, to a man who had journeyed to the head-waters of Big Muddy and spent a winter there. It inferred that he was still a tender-foot to trapping country, one who had never been above the sprawling mouth of the Platte. Beaver took a swift step ahead, then both of them halted at a sharp hiss from gnarled old Pierre DuBois, handling the sweep in the stern.

"Somebody on shore, there!" he warned. "Looks like a canoe was puttin' out!"

Morrison swung quickly to look, as though, at the last moment, he was glad of the diversion. The river ran lazily here, and two hundred feet away was a line of red willows, which, at this near-flood stage of the river, stood with their feet in the water. Back again was a scattered grove of cottonwood and poplars, and, half-concealed among these, a log shack.

A canoe had been well hidden among the willows, until the old steersman's quick eye had spotted it. But now it was pushing out toward them. There were only two men

in it, white men. Beaver saw that, putting it down for what it was worth.

This interruption, he knew now, would only postpone and not avert showdown. He and Jud Morrison had been rivals for pretty Marie Deschard's favor, down in St. Louis, a year before. And she had seemed to smile with equal favor on both of them.

At that time, Morrison had possessed one great advantage. He had already spent a year, trapping near the head of the big river, and so had a considerable stake. It also entitled him to tell tall tales. Some of them, Beaver had thought, even then, were taller than any man had a right to tell.

Beaver had gone back up-river on the same boat, but Long John Murtaugh, who owned the keel-boat which they had poled and cordelled all the weary way up the river, heavy laden with trade goods, had been in command, averting a clash. During the winter, Beaver had demonstrated that he was more gifted than the average, both as a trapper or at trading with the Indians. For the most part, he had seen little enough of his rival, and the long cold months had passed pleasantly enough.

He had expected to come down-river this spring on the other fur-laden mackinaw, along with Long John. It was to leave the post three days behind the first. But Long John had decreed that he go on the first boat, and Beaver thought he knew why. So that he could reach St. Louis and Marie as soon as Morrison did! Long John had figured that to more than offset the handicaps. Now, Beaver wasn't so sure.

For, as *patron*, Morrison's authority was absolute. For any member of the crew to challenge the *patron* was mutiny, and punishable by the ancient law of the rover, according to any whim of the *patron*. A man might be flogged, or set ashore in the wilderness. . . .

THE canoe was approaching, now. Both men rowed as though used to it, as effortlessly as Indians. Beaver's eyes narrowed at sight of the bewhiskered face in the stern. Even a thatch of dirty reddish hair could not quite conceal the fox-like face underneath.

"That's Gene Vinal," he said, under his breath. "What's he want here? No good, I'll bet."

Morrison's eyes narrowed at the name, and he gave a twitch to the heavy fur cap which he always wore, regardless of season or occasion. Beaver had encountered Vinal the summer before, but, so far as he knew, he was the one man on board the mackinaw who had ever seen him. All knew of him, however, and the others looked dour at Beaver's word. Morrison scowled.

"Keep your opinions to yourself," he ordered shortly. "I'm *patron* here."

As if in rebuff to Beaver, Morrison welcomed Vinal on to the mackinaw with effusive cordiality. Vinal, Beaver saw, had spotted him before stepping on board, and his face had gone cold and pinched for just an instant. But now it was composed, and he nodded affably.

"Ah, but eet ees my old frien', w'at I meet las' summair," he purred. "Now eet geeve me the double plaisir' that I see you go past, and so am able to geeve you warning. For, eef I had not been close by, to see you . . ." He shrugged.

"Why, what's up, Vinal?" Morrison demanded. "Is something wrong?"

Vinal shrugged again and spat over the side.

"Eet could be," he agreed. "Me, I ron ze small trading post here, as you see. Nozzing like w'at Long John, my ver' good fr'end, 'ave, of course. But here, I see mooch, I hear many t'ings. You 'ave heard of heem called Hislaire, no? Weasel Hislaire, folks call heem?"

"Sure, I've heard of him," Morrison conceded. "The worst renegade along the river. What about him?"

Vinal shrugged again.

"Maybe nozzing mooch, for you," he said. "Long John, hees boats are strong, yes. But zey are also ze treasure craft, I know," he added, with a meaning glance at the mountain of fur. "And from the looks, you have ze good wintair, yes? That ees ver' fin', only . . ." He lowered his voice confidentially.

"Of all thees, the Weasel has been inform'. So that now, not ver' far below, he waits, weeth mebbly a score of hees renegades. W'en you come driftin' along—pouf! He plan ze beeg surprise, but ze not so pleasant one! But I learn of what he plan, and I theenk, Long John, he ees my ver' good frien'. I say, I keep watch, I try for to help heem, but no?"

"It was good of you to warn us, Vinal," Morrison conceded, a frown of worry between his eyes. "This Weasel has twenty men, you say?"

"Twanty, mebbly," Vinal shrugged carelessly. "Maybe ze two, t'ree dozain." His own eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I tell you w'at, my frien'. I hate ze gots of thees Weasel, who snoop like ze houn', bothair all ze t'am. Maybe we work togezzer, and geeve to heem ze bloody nose, eh? I come on your boat weeth five-six of my men, we keep out of sight. Then, w'en the Weasel he attack—pouf! Eet ees heem who get the surprise, maybe?"

"Say, would you be willing to do that?" Morrison asked. "It would be mighty good of you, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. That way, we should be able to fight him off."

Vinal waved a deprecating hand.

"Trobble? To hit at zat Weasel? Eet a pleasure weel be! Mos' sure we fight heem off, mebbly be locky and keel heem! Lik' I say, Long John, he ees my ver' good frien'. I go, I breeng back good fighting men, eh?"

MORRISON assented, and signed to Pierre to turn the boat inshore. Then he appeared to notice, for the first time, that there was no enthusiasm reflected on the faces of his crew. The canoe was already out of ear-shot. Morrison swung on Beaver.

"What are you all looking so glum about?" he demanded. "Not scared of the Weasel, are you? I thought you were all river men! Besides, we'll have help now!"

"Have you forgotten what Long John warned you about?" Beaver asked hotly. "To keep away from shore when there was anybody around, and to be suspicious of your own grandmother?"

Morrison colored angrily, then laughed.

"Is that what's bothering you?" he gibed. "I suppose after Vinal goes to the trouble of watching for us and warning us, that you'd turn down his offer of help?"

"I wouldn't let him set foot on this boat, with a crew that outnumber us," Beaver said sharply. "Don't you know that his reputation along this river is just as bad as the Weasel's—maybe worse?"

He had hardly expected to influence Morrison, who was stubborn to the point of pig-headedness. Indeed, Beaver saw now

that anything he said merely increased Morrison's determination to do the opposite.

"You're all a bunch of damn fools," the *patron* said angrily. "And as for you, *blanc-bec*, I have a bone to pick with you—after this is over. I've accepted Vinal's kind offer, and don't forget that I'm the *patron*. See to it that you treat them with respect when they come!"

Having delivered his ultimatum, he crossed to his chuck box, wherein he kept a collection to rival that of a pack rat, removed some tobacco and stuffed it in his cheek, and scowled blackly upon them. Beaver shrugged. Morrison was a fool, and if trouble came, they were wide open for it. But Long John had seen fit to place him in command, and that was that.

Now the canoe was pushing out again, this time with five men in it besides Vinal. Fighting men, he had called them, but to Beaver they looked like the sweepings of the river. It would be easy, right now, with a thrust of his pole, to upset the canoe and send them floundering, and for an instant he was strongly tempted.

Then they were swarming aboard, and they had brought with them a couple of long black bottles. The dour faces of the others lightened a little at that prospect. Long John Magruder was a good man to work for—the fairest and squarest trader on the Missouri, his own men called him. But he was a stern churchman as well, and he not only abhorred whiskey, but refused to allow it to be used on his boats or in his camps. These men had been a year without a taste of it.

"Better not let them get you drunk, Pierre," Beaver warned in a low voice, and some of the expectation died out of the steersman's face, to be replaced by resignation.

"By gar, Beaver, you're right," he sighed. "One little drink always leads to plenty more!"

Pulling their canoe on board, Vinal's crew were pushing the bottles upon their hosts, exclaiming jovially. Morrison lost no time in availing himself of the opportunity, and Tooker was only a moment behind him. Kansas hesitated, but the temptation was too strong.

For himself, Beaver was like his employer, and never touched the stuff. And

that, he was pretty sure, had been one reason why Long John had taken such an interest in him the season before. In any case, he reflected, he'd know better than to drink such liquid hell-fire as was current along the river.

Pierre shook his head stolidly at the invitation, and went on with his job of steering. The others did not hold back. Within an hour, the unaccustomed spirits were having their usual effect. Kansas and Tooker, and Morrison as well, were drunk.

Beaver, his own apprehensions steadily mounting as he saw the others verge on a state of helplessness, was trying to keep an alert watch. But he was handicapped by the long pole, for with the others virtually useless, a stretch of rapids called for his full attention. Pierre strained at the sweep, and Beaver looked inquiringly at Morrison, deep in converse with Vinal. But if Morrison was sober enough to be aware of the boat's danger, he gave no sign of it, made no request that some of the newcomers on board lend a hand. Now Vinal himself, still sober and alert, crossed to Beaver.

"You mebbe need a lettle help, eh?" he asked. "In zis white watair? Ho, boys! Lend a hand, here!"

He bent lower, and Beaver had to confess that the trick was neatly done. A pistol was thrust in his face, and behind it Vinal was smiling grimly.

"Weel eet be necessair' to blow your brains out, pouf?" he inquired softly. "Eet would be so ver' easy, M'sieu!"

IT would be, Beaver conceded grimly to himself. The raiders had chosen their moment well. Pierre and himself were so busy that to try and fight back would mean wrecking the mackinaw. The others were too drunk to realize what was happening until they had been disarmed. Vinal gestured.

"Tie their hands and feet, so they cannot sween," he instructed. "Then we get some stones, so zat they seenk queeck—and ver' deep!"

Others took the pole and sweep, and they were being tied tightly, efficiently. The mackinaw's nose swung toward the shore. Morrison, sobered a little, stood up, and then he laughed raucously, tears streaming down his face.

"Perfect!" he said. "You're an artist, Vinal." He swung to scowl at Beaver. "I said that I'd have half of this fur—and half of it belongs to me, now! Laugh that off!"

"You dirty, double-crossing traitor!" Beaver shouted.

"It's all right to be a traitor when it pays you—and nobody will ever live to tell of it," Morrison jeered. "But I don't like that name. Not from you!"

He started to advance, his intent only too obvious, but halted in consternation as Vinal looked tauntingly at him along the length of his pistol barrel.

"For w'y should you 'ave half thees fur?" he mocked. "Now that I am in charge, tell me wan good reason?"

Morrison stared, a little foolishly. Then his face flushed a shade redder.

"That was what we agreed on, weeks ago," he said thickly. "Why, you dirty, double-crossin' rat—"

"Eet ees all right to be a double-crosser we'n eet pays you—and nobody weel ever leeve to tell of eet," Vinal mocked him. "You 'ave heard of sauce for the goose, no? And you are the goose, but yes!"

There was a moment of tense silence. Beaver, hands jerked and tied savagely behind his back, stared at the pile of fur which was changing ownership so swiftly. He recognized the mammoth skin of the big grizzly which he himself had shot, dropping it with one bullet when it had charged at Long John, who had been caught at a helpless disadvantage. The claws, hanging at the ends of the long, skinned-out paws, were like small rapiers.

That skin, along with many others in the pile, belonged to him. His own catch would amount to almost as much as Morrison's vastly inferior catch, coupled with his share in the trading profits, would come to. It had been partly that knowledge which had so infuriated Morrison. He had expected to return to St. Louis a rich man—but Beaver could almost match him, dollar for dollar!

Or it had been that way an hour before. Now, the prospects were not bright, thanks to Morrison's deliberate double-crossing. But Beaver felt an unholy joy at seeing the tables so swiftly turned on him, and himself in the same predicament that he had so callously sold them into.

"I weel enjoy spending zis fur, for w'ich you 'ave labor all ze wintair," Vinal went on, as Morrison choked. "And ze feeshes, zey weel have so nice a feed, eh?"

But Morrison, faced with a real crisis, had sobered, and had control of himself now. His voice was a little hoarse.

"I guess you put one over on me, and gave me a dose of my own medicine," he conceded. "But if you try to feed me to the fishes, then you're a bigger fool than I think you are, Vinal. We could still work together and make it pay. Have you forgotten that there's another boatload of plew coming?"

Vinal laughed. "Non," he denied. "But I am not ze fool. Zis mooch fur is fine. That othair boat, eet weel 'ave ze beeg crew, and weeth Long John himself. Me, I do not reach for the moon, no."

Morrison bit his lip. His face had gone gray, and his voice rose in desperation.

"But there's something else on this boat—something worth more than all the fur. You'll not get it without me."

Vinal turned to look at him curiously, but his cupidity was aroused.

"Yes?" he asked.

MORRISON hesitated, wetting his lips. He was beginning, as he sobered, to realize that he had placed his own neck in jeopardy. A man who had double-crossed him once would be even more certain to do so again, for his own protection. As soon as he had betrayed what Vinal wanted to know, his life was forfeit. Seeing the hesitation, Vinal's pistol tilted a little.

"You need me to help you," Morrison whined. "Work with me, and I promise it'll be worth more than the furs. And you have them already."

"You talk," Vinal shrugged. "But you say nozzing."

"How do I know that you'll keep your word, this time, if I do tell you?" Morrison demanded.

Vinal studied him a moment, knowing it to be an apt question, and then he found the answer.

"Eef eet ees true, you go free, and weeth a share," he agreed. "I promise. For then, other men weel hunt you, anyway."

That was so manifestly true that Morrison's face grayed again. But it did hold

out a hope of life now, as opposed to certain doom, and he clutched at it eagerly.

"You'll find it's the biggest deal you ever made," he promised.

Vinal shrugged, then leaned forward. Morrison cringed a little as, with a sweep of his hunting knife, the renegade slashed the bonds which held him.

"We weel see," he agreed. "And these othairs—you would try to save them too, mabbe?"

"No, throw them overboard, if you like," Morrison shrugged indifferently. "Except Beaver there. We'll need him for a while. Long enough to make him talk."

Beaver had been suspicious before, and now he understood. His hatred for the man increased. But Vinal was regarding Morrison with a mocking half-smile.

"For the present, we keep them all," he decided. "And now, w'at ees thees so great traisure?"

"Sapphires," Morrison said hoarsely. "Beaver found a lot of them somewhere, last fall. I saw them. Somewhere in a creek bed, I guess, though I couldn't learn where. He's got them somewhere on board here. I don't know where, but I know that he has them."

"Sapphires?" Vinal wet his lips, his fox-like face grew avid. "Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure," Morrison growled. "I tell you I've seen them."

"And you 'ave, perhaps, look for zem but not fin', eh?"

Morrison met Beaver's look, and reddened a little more, but he nodded eagerly.

"I've done as much looking as I've had a chance to, so far," he agreed. "He's got them well hid. But he can be made to talk. And that ought to be worth a lot, hadn't it?"

"Eef true, eet ees ver' interestin'," Vinal conceded softly. "We weel see. You weesh to work on heem a leetle, eh?"

"Nothing could give me greater pleasure!" Morrison gritted. He stepped closer, then his foot shot out, and Beaver gasped with the pain in his side. But Morrison's moccasined toes had received the brunt of that blow as well, and he danced back, clutching at his foot, scowling. He was about to repeat, but with his heel, when Vinal stopped him.

"There ees no hurry," he said. "A leetle later, yes."

"There'll be plenty, later," Morrison growled. "I've been wanting to do that for a long time. You'd better tell where you've cached those stones!"

"You dirty *mangeurs de lard!*" Beaver spat, when he could gasp again, for the kick had driven the wind from him, and sent pain running in fiery waves through his body. "I'll tell you nothing!"

Morrison's teeth drew back from snarling lips, his face went white with rage. To call him a pork eater, a member of the lowest class of workers on the river, was a worse insult than he had applied to Beaver, when calling him a white-beak. Only Vinal's lifted hand stayed him from striking again.

Vinal asked more questions, and Morrison explained how he had sent the others away on an errand and had made a search, finding nothing.

"But he has them somewhere," he insisted. "A big handful of sapphires. They're worth a fortune, more than the fur."

Spurred on by that news, the renegade, with Morrison, searched zealously for a while. But to no avail. Finally, Vinal himself turned to Beaver.

"Mebby eet ees bettair that you tell us now, eh?" he suggested.

"Why should I?" Beaver asked reasonably. "Then you'd just kill me right away."

Vinal shook his head.

"I make ze bargain," he said. "Your life, and the othairs, eef you tell. Eef not—we go ashore and heat irons, eh?"

Beaver hesitated, but he had already seen a sample of the honor of this crew. Alive, they would be an increasing menace, so they would not be left alive. He shook his head.

"There's such a thing as overreaching yourself in double-crossing," he said thinly. "You've demonstrated that to Morrison, and it's still true."

"We go ashore," Vinal said calmly. "The othairs, weeth rocks, go in the deep watair—unless mebbly you want for to talk first," he added softly, to Beaver.

BEAVER was sweating now, as the boat turned inshore. The renegade was clever. He had guessed that Beaver would talk, before seeing Pierre, Kansas or even Tooker sunk helplessly in the river. And the worst of it was, that he was probably right. Yet if he did tell the secret, that

would only insure the death of all of them.

The sun was going down now, the line of cottonwoods along the shore loomed nearly as dark as the distant pines on the hills back from the river. Somewhere an owl hooted, a coyote answered querulously from the far shore of the Big Muddy. It was a lonely land, where they could expect no help from any other source.

No one was paying much attention, at the moment, to Pierre, Kansas, Tooker or himself. Tied hand and foot, there was little enough to be apprehended from them, Beaver conceded. It was even impossible to roll in such a way as to get over the side of the boat, and risk the river, as opposed to the tender mercies of their captors.

He writhed in his bonds, watching the shore draw up to them, as it seemed, the mass of cottonwoods take individual shapes. Twisting, he managed to half-flop, half-raise himself, so that he could sit, back to the pile of stacked skins. Behind him was the skin of the big grizzly, which had come so close to making an end to both Long John and himself.

Now the mackinaw was gliding through deep, still water, the shadows of the cottonwoods overhung them. A rope was flung out, and one man jumped ashore, tied it to the end of a tree. The boat drifted lazily. On the shore, Beaver saw, were plenty of stones, of a handy size for weighting a body down.

"Right here," Vinal grinned. "Plenty stones, and the watair, plenty deep!"

Now the crew were bringing stones, lifting them on to the mackinaw. Stones weighing from fifty to seventy pounds. One was dropped near Beaver's feet. Morrison, anxious to show himself helpful, busied himself with tying a thong of buckskin around it, making sure that there would be no chance of it slipping.

Vinal was disregarding him, preparing to tie stones to the feet and hands of Pierre, as the first sacrifice. He had cleverly figured that Beaver had a particularly soft spot in his heart for the old trapper. Pierre's face was a little gray, but his eyes were defiant.

It was now or never, Beaver knew. And this grizzly might still pay dividends. For the last few minutes, unnoticed in the fast-settling gloom, his body and the stack of

plew hiding his hands, Beaver had been at work. The long, sharp claws of the grizzly were convenient, and, fastened by one of the ropes which ran to the cleat, the paw was fairly solid.

Against this sharp claw he strained and tugged, keeping his body still, his face impassive. It was not easy, with the vicious claws lacerating his skin, but now he was beginning to get results. One hand came free, then the other.

His arms were half-numb from the long strain and confinement, but he could still use them. He had to. Morrison was starting to bend over him, preparatory to tying the stone to his feet. With a sudden heave, Beaver drew his feet back, legs up, and lashed out suddenly. The surprise of it caught Morrison in the stomach, lifting him, and sent him hurtling over the side and into the river.

Rolling, Beaver clasped his arms about the dropped stone. He came to his knees, steadied an instant, and half-threw, half-rolled it at one of the river pirates who had turned, startled, and was about to run at him. The stone struck the renegade just below the knees, knocking his legs from under him, bringing him down in a head-long sprawl, almost on top of Beaver. Before he could recover, Beaver snatched his pistol.

ONE quick motion rapped the barrel smartly alongside the head of the gun's former owner, effectually quieting him. Turning, bringing the gun up, Beaver fired at point-blank range at a third man who had been attracted by the fracas.

So far, luck had been with him. The odds had been reduced from eight to five in a matter of moments. But now the pistol was empty, his feet were still tied together, and the alarm had been raised. Two of Vinal's men were still back on shore, but they'd be coming quickly enough.

The man whom he had felled, and whose pistol he had appropriated, had a wicked looking knife thrust into his belt. Beaver reached it, and cut his feet free. He turned then to the straining Pierre and cut him loose. But now Vinal was racing for them, gun in hand.

Over-eagerness on the part of the fur pirate helped to even it. He discharged his pistol, and Beaver felt the sting of the

ball as it scratched his neck. But with his feet loose, he came to his feet and charged at Vinal, brandishing the knife.

There was no fear in Vinal's face, only a sort of pleased expectancy at this turn. Whipping out his own knife in preference to the empty gun, Vinal was ready for him. His attitude, as well as the look on his face, warned Beaver that he had probably had plenty of experience at that sort of fighting, was fully confident of his superiority now.

Which was probably the way it was, Beaver knew, for he had never fought with a knife in his life. Also, as Vinal knew, all that he needed was to hold him at bay until the others could come up—though Pierre might be of some use now.

Vinal was not disposed to wait for help, however. Grinning confidently, he charged suddenly, swinging his blade in a glittering arc. Beaver stumbled back before the savageness of the onslaught, felt it gash into his left arm, which he had thrown up to protect his face. He saw the now crimson blade swooping at him a second time, like a striking hawk, and hurled his own blindly. If he missed, he'd be weaponless, at the mercy of a cold-blooded killer.

But at that point-blank range, as he had counted on, it was nearly impossible to miss, or for Vinal to fend off the knife as it came. Not the blade, but the heavy handle struck the pirate beside the head, and he staggered back, wavered an instant, crashed down like a pole-axed steer.

Dizzy from pain and spurting blood, Beaver grabbed up the dropped knife again.

A look at Vinal's lax form showed that he wouldn't bother him again for a while. He started forward, barely able to see in the fast-growing darkness, stumbled over the other man who was sprawled there, and pitched forward headlong. Then, as he groped for the knife again, he more than half expected to feel a bullet or a knife in his own back at any moment. But nothing happened.

He found the knife, stood up, and saw that control had passed as swiftly as it had done before. Tooker, cut loose, had a gun and was herding two of the pirates. Pierre and Kansas, staggering a little, were throwing Vinal overside, into the river where he had aimed to consign them. There was no sign anywhere of Boss Man Morrison.

"Don't reckon he ever could swim, anyhow," Pierre grinned. "Seems like Vinal was in sorter the same fix." He spat disgustedly. "S'pose we'll have to kinda be bothered with these others a spell, though the same treatment'd be a durn sight simpler. Say," he added. "If I ain't pryin', where the heck *did* yuh hide them saphires, so's that skunk couldn't find 'em?"

Beaver grinned a little.

"I buried 'em right in the bottom of his chuck box, where he never would have thought to look," he chuckled. "Anyway, they aren't worth half as much as he was tryin' to make out. I'll give you boys a few when we hit St. Louie."

"Well, they're right pretty," Pierre agreed. "Anyway, I reckon they's a certain young lady'll think so."



Sheriff Big Tex McAllen had a heap of loco ways to figure out a knife-in-the-back killing . . . like using an empty gun, three fir needles—and his own old left leather boot!



The old man wasn't getting anywhere with his thinking.

TINSTAR MEDICINE-MAN

By Dev Klapp

SHERIFF "Big Tex" McAllen's office door banged inward, shattering the quiet of the dusty room. A little man lunged up against the sheriff's desk, his face working with excitement, his lips pulled back over small white teeth.

"I done it, Big Tex!" the little man squealed. "I done kilt Toby Carter!"

The man was panting. Sweat ran down his wizened, seamy cheeks. His beady eyes were glazed. They fastened themselves on the sheriff's genial face.

Big Tex raised his gray eyes. He observed his visitor calmly. "Go on home, Pee Wee, and simmer down," he advised.

"I tell you, Sheriff, I kilt the hombre!" Pee Wee Jones screeched. "He's layin' back of the Four Aces Saloon!"

"Pee Wee," Big Tex answered, "if we strung you up for every killin' you owned up to, that skinny neck of yours would be longer than a turkey gobbler's by now." The big sheriff's gray-white, bushy brows quirked upward. There was a grin under

the massive longhorn mustaches of which he was so proud.

Big Tex half carried the little man outside, then gave him a good humored shove toward home. Hitching up his belt where a big gun dragged, the lawman headed for the Four Aces Saloon. There was no humor on his face now. It was grim and hard. It gave evidence why he had time and again been re-elected sheriff of Redstone County.

Big Tex didn't belittle the news that Pee Wee brought. There always was a body when the little hombre got off one of his confessions. The sight of a dead body always sent Pee Wee gibbering to the sheriff's office. For five years it had been like that, ever since the little punk came to Redstone. Plumb loco, Pee Wee was. *But there always was a body.*

A crowd was bunched in the alley behind the Four Aces. They were looking down on a crumpled figure that lay half-in and half-out of the saloon. The man was of medium height, and plump. His body was twisted, showing where the hilt of a Barlow knife stuck from his back. He was recently dead, for the red-tan of his beefy cheeks had scarcely faded.

Big Tex shook his head and clucked disapprovingly. Killing and useless bloodshed distressed him. He hunkered down then and drew the knife from Toby Carter's back. "Know this hog sticker?" he asked, holding the weapon up for inspection. No one answered. The crowd shifted uneasily.

"Pee Wee done confessed to the killin'" the sheriff told them. Some one tittered.

A lanky cowboy called from the side of his mouth, "Whyn't you jest string up Pee Wee and call it quits, Big Tex? Redstone would be better off if it was shed of that hombre!"

Big Tex frowned. "Any of you mavericks seen who knifed Toby?" he asked. The sheriff twisted his mustaches with a horny fist and let his gray eyes jump from one face to another. He saw curiosity and uneasiness but that was all.

"Has Gil Spencer been in town right recent?" Big Tex prodded. "How about it, Gaines?" The sheriff's eyes pinned themselves on a puncher from the Flat Circle spread. "Gil in town?"

The man's eyes shifted, then came back

defiantly. His face flushed angrily. "Yea, Big Tex," he answered. "Gil left for home ten-fifteen minutes ago. There ain't no call to think he kilt Toby jest cause that there knife is his. Gil ain't no knife killer!"

The sheriff's eyes dulled. Lines of pain formed up and down his weathered cheeks.

"Two-three you fellers grab a-holt of Toby here and tote him over to Gloomy Gus'," he directed. "Tell Gus I'll be over pronto!"

The sheriff dismissed the crowd and entered the Four Aces Saloon by the back door. "Gimme a bottle of Old Crow, Garcia, and a drinkin' glass," he told the Mexican bartender. He then ambled over to a far table and sat down. He pulled the bloody knife from his pocket, snapped open the blade, eyed it a moment and frowned. Big Tex sat thus for fifteen minutes, chin on chest, running horny fingers through his thick gray hair and sipping whiskey.

Toby Carter didn't get along with his neighbors, Big Tex reasoned. The man had a powerful mean disposition. Some folks told it that the hombre couldn't spur his hoss without giving the critter bloodpizen.

What evidence there was pointed to one man, Gil Spencer. Gil Spencer hated Toby's guts for sure; had good reason to. All Redstone knew the Barlow belonged to Gil. He'd have to go out to the Flat Circle and jaw with Gil for a spell; show him the Barlow casual like. Sheriffing was a hell of a job sometimes.

The old sheriff sighed and raised himself from the table. He shoved the half-empty bottle in his back pocket and gave his comic-opera mustaches a characteristic twist before shoving through the batwings onto the street.

Can't see how Gil could be that dumb, Big Tex thought. *It's like one of them dime novels.*

AS SHERIFF McALLEN rode into the Flat Circle ranchyard, a tall, light-haired youth turned from a bridle he was fiddling with and grinned a welcome. "Howdy, Big Tex," he greeted, "light and rest yore nag."

Big Tex studied the freckled face, watched the boy's good-humored mouth play with a smile, and shook his head. Sure was hard to think this button just knifed a man.

"Was you in the Four Aces this mornin', son?" he asked.

Gil Spencer looked quickly at the lawman. The smile left his eyes and he waited, muscles tense.

"Why?"

Big Tex didn't answer. His horny hand brought forth from his pocket the bloody Barlow knife that he had pulled from Toby's back earlier in the day.

"Recollect this hog-sticker?" he asked quietly.

The boy's face paled. The sheriff watched him gulp and swallow.

"Yes!" Gil shot the word at the lawman then clamped his lips shut.

Criss-cross lines of sadness creased Big Tex's homely face. The big sweeping mustaches of which he was so proud, seemed to droop. He whipped out his neckerchief and blew his overlarge nose with a noise like a cowhorn on a coon hunt.

He and this boy's father had run coyotes together when the two of them were no higher than a calf's belly. Old Bill Spencer had set a lot of store by this boy.

"Toby Carter was kilt today, Gil," he said gently.

A look of hate came to the boy's eyes. Hate like that could easy make a man kill. But in the back; that wasn't like a Spencer!

"Toby been tellin' 'round town that he run you away from his gal. Reckon that kind of stuck in yore craw, didn't it, son?" the sheriff ventured.

"Leave her out of this!" Gil's voice rasped with emotion. The sheriff thought he caught a note of fear in the words.

"I gotta take you in, son," the old sheriff said. "Redstone don't take kindly to back-stabbin' hombres."

Gil Spencer's blue eyes widened, then turned to gimlets behind his downthrust brows. A Colt appeared in his brown fist. He rammed it in the lawman's ample midriff.

"I ain't going, Big Tex!"

The sheriff studied the kid's flushed face calmly. He ran blunt fingers through his mustaches.

"Don't be a fool, boy!" he exclaimed. "You know I'm a-goin' to take you in or you're gonna gun me down here and now! Gimme that hog-leg or start shootin'!"

Gil Spencer seemed to wilt all over like a

Jimson weed that has been pulled up by the roots.

"You win, Big Tex. Wait'll I sling a kak on the piebald."

GIL SPENCER wouldn't talk. Big Tex sat disconsolately behind his battered desk. A green-fly was trying to buzz its way through the dusty windowpane. Big Tex studied it absentmindedly, his brain slowly sifting all that he knew of Toby Carter's killing and getting nowhere. Tillie Carter had been in town and left before he brought Gil in. He wished he had seen her. The old man wasn't getting anywhere with his thinking.

Big Tex plopped his worn boots down from the desk top, his mouth firm with determination. He'd go out to the Carter spread and talk to Tillie. He'd get supper first, then light out. It'd put him on the road after dark, but what the hell. Maybe a little moonlight and the smell of sage would clear the kinks out of his head. . . .

"Damn!"

Big Tex threw himself from his horse's back and bent over a huddled figure by the road. "Miss Tillie, what happened? What you doing here?"

The girl moaned and opened her eyes. She saw the big sheriff stooping over her and clutched his shirt in two small fists. Tears came then; tears of terror. "He stabbed me, Big Tex!" she screamed.

The sheriff did his best to calm the hysterical girl. He tore the waist from her shoulders where a red stain was, and bound the wound.

"Who cut you up, Miss Tillie?"

"I don't know," Tillie Carter told him. She lay back, absorbing the strength that came through the sheriff's arms.

"How long you been here?"

Big Tex saw the girl bite her lips and close her eyes for a moment. The rising moon shot glints of gold from her tousled hair.

"Not long," she answered. "I was riding home from town. I had to see about Pa." Big Tex remembered then that Toby had been a hard father; had often beaten the girl, until she grew old enough to fight back. No love was lost, the sheriff knew, between Toby and his daughter.

"My pony shied when a man dropped from that liveoak limb hanging over the

road" the girl continued. "He struck at me and almost missed. I could feel the blade cut through my shoulder." Tillie Carter shuddered. "Reckon I fainted then, or near enough to make him think he'd killed me. Anyway, I saw him jump on a ground-hitched horse and ride that way." She pointed down the road.

It was Big Tex's claim that his mustaches had saved a hundred lives in their time. A crook would think twice, he explained, before shooting it out with a lawman of such ferocious visage. He yanked now at these mustaches.

"We'll find him, honey," he told the girl, and stroked her gold-gleaming hair. "*And when we do . . .*" He left the sentence hanging significantly.

Tracking the girl's attacker wasn't much of a trick for an old law-dog like Big Tex McAllen. He'd caught Tillie's horse, helped her to mount, and they now rode knee to knee, following the hoofprints that lay deep in the dust on the moonlit road. Then the hoofprints turned abruptly from the road into a small draw where they

petered out suddenly on the rocky bottom.

Big Tex and the girl pulled up their mounts. Tillie watched the big lawman's face anxiously as he stroked his mustaches and pondered.

Big Tex turned his gray head slowly and looked deep into the girl's eyes, then gently told her: "I had to lock Gil up today, honey. Looks like he kilt yore pa."

"No!" Tillie's breath caught in her throat with the word. Her small right hand fluttered up as if to ease the choking.

The old man took off his Stetson to let the cool, sage-scented air get to his sweating head. "'Pears so, Miss Tillie," he said.

"Then who attacked me?" she asked with a rush of words. "Gil couldn't for he was locked up. Big Tex, there is someone else, someone we don't know, who wants to hurt us! Who can it be, Big Tex?"

"That's what I aim to find out," Big Tex said simply.

The sun was treetop high in a cloudless sky when the sheriff of Redstone County dismounted before the unpainted shack that



served as his office. He had left Tillie with his wife at their little spread some two hours earlier.

Big Tex eased his large frame down in the squeaky swivel chair and rested his feet on the desk to, as he would say, take a load off his legs and give his brain room to graze. He had to think things out, but. . .

Big Tex's eyes closed slowly and he slept.

"I DONE it, Big Tex! I kilt Tillie Carter!"

Big Tex's feet crashed to the floor. It took him a moment to rope and hog-tie his wits after being so rudely jerked back from slumber. He rubbed the cobwebs from his eyes and saw Pee Wee standing there on the other side of his desk. The unsavory little man was wiping sweat from his face with a dirty bandanna and eyeing the lawman with black, beady eyes.

"I kilt Tillie Carter, Sheriff!" the little man screeched, "I'm a cold-blooded killer!"

Big Tex gave his caller a long stare. "Yep, I reckon you are, Pee Wee," he agreed quietly. His big blued gun jumped into his gnarled fist and leveled down on the man.

A look of utter stupefaction and disbelief spread over the little man's seamy face. His jaw dropped open and he swallowed noisily. He didn't say a word.

"You been mighty smart, Pee Wee," Big Tex said, "but like 'em all, you made one bad slip." The sheriff motioned toward the two jail cells in the rear. "Take yore pick, Pee Wee. You been honin' to try our vittles for quite a spell!"

The little man stood still. He began to sway from side to side. His eyes took on a dead fish blankness and he slid quietly to the floor.

"What the hell!" Big Tex roared, "You can't do that in here, you little runt!"

The big lawman jumped from his chair, holstered his gun and lumbered around the desk. He lifted Pee Wee's limp, light body in his arms and moved toward the wash basin in the corner.

Big Tex was reaching for the water pitcher when his inert burden turned to a squirming wildcat. He felt his Colt leave its scabbard, then a crashing impact behind his ear sent multi-colored lights shoot-

ing before his eyes; then came blackness.

Big Tex opened his eyes and looked around groggily. The little office was jam-packed with Redstone citizens. Old Doc Winkler was kneeling on the floor beside him, sopping blood from a goose egg on his head. The doc was talking.

"Better lay down and take it easy for two-three days, Big Tex. You got a pretty big wallop on yore head here," he advised.

"Two-three days!" Big Tex roared, "Why I gotta rope and hog-tie a locoed polecat twix now and midnight, Doc!"

The big man raised himself on one elbow. It felt like all the herds of hell were stampeding across his skull, but he gritted what teeth he had left, and staggered to his feet.

Getting rid of the crowd and Doc Winkler was a bigger job than mounting his horse, but both were finally accomplished. Big Tex told the crowd very little of what had happened. He could have gotten up a posse of half a hundred mighty quick, had he been that sort of sheriff. But Big Tex didn't like posses. He worked alone. . . .

BIG Tex sat his bay solidly. Now and then he examined a minute sprig of fir needles that lay in his fist. The sheriff chuckled when he thought of the expression on Gil's face when he unlocked the cell door and told the young scalawag to hightail it on out to Tillie.

It was late evening and the crickets and katy-dids were giving out with their usual twilight racket. The big man was thinking. He remembered now that only last week he had watched Tillie paring a prickly-pear with Gil's Barlow knife.

The dusty road began to climb and twist a tortuous way around great rocks, scrub oaks and gullies. The sheriff's big mount had been picking its footing carefully, following this road for a full half hour, when the mountain brush opened before them. Pee Wee Jones stepped out and confronted Big Tex. He had the sheriff's gun leveled and his small teeth gleamed in the meager light behind a tight, mirthless smile.

"I never thought you had the gumption to follow me up here, Big Tex," the little man said. "How'd you know I had a hide-out? I ain't told nobody. Folks think I live in town."

"All lawdogs ain't dumb, Pee Wee," Big Tex answered, nettled at the little man's sarcasm, "You left yore callin' card." The sheriff opened his fist then. Late as it was, the light was strong enough to show three fir needles where they lay on his palm. "There ain't no fir trees 'round Redstone except on Redstone Mountain!"

"You ain't so smart at that, lawman, or you wouldn't have followed me up here with no empty holster," Pee Wee sneered. "I wasn't figgerin' on gunnin' you, but things is different now. I gotta. You know too much."

There was a wide grin on Big Tex's face. He twisted the big mustaches with satisfaction. He said, "Pee Wee, I'll give it to you again. All lawdogs ain't dumb. I'll tell you somethin' Redstone don't know. *I never tote a loaded gun.* Folks expect a sheriff to gallivant around with a big six-gun tied to his leg and lookin' fierce, so I grewed these mustaches and bought the biggest short-gun I could find. I been sheriffin' for thirty years and ain't had to kill a man yet!"

Pee Wee Jones snarled and hastily broke the gun he held. It was unloaded. He threw it to one side and quick as a striking snake, plunged his hand inside the bosom of his shirt. He brought out a gleaming blade. There was menace now in his beady eyes. "I'm still aces up on you, Big Tex. Have you ever seen me throw a knife?"

"No. But I seen the results back of the Four Aces yestiddy, Pee Wee, and it ain't pretty," Big Tex answered. "I know now how come nobody seen you stick Toby Carter!"

Carter's name acted on the little man like kicking out a beaver dam. A torrent of words sprayed from his mouth, his eyes glazed over and flecks of foam shot from his lips.

"The dirty dog kilt my brother, Jud, and sister Bessie up in Oklahoma! I been aimin' to do what I done for a long spell!" Pee Wee panted. "It took me ten years to locate the sidewinder here in Redstone! Ten years changes a hombre like hell! The slimy polecat never knowed me, so I made my loop and waited!"

Big Tex was quiet. He knew when the little man stopped talking he would throw the knife. Slowly he inched his big fist

down his left leg toward his boot. He'd keep the crazy coot talking and play for time.

"How come Carter kilt your folks, Pee Wee?" Big Tex asked. He tried to pitch his voice on a soothing note.

Pee Wee looked at the sheriff incredulously, as if the lawman should know what happened. "Him and his baby gal run me and Jud and Sis in the 'sooner' race for a good creek bottom. Me and Jud and Sis had our stakes driv when he come rompin' up. He was killin' mad. Jud weren't no hand with a six-shooter. Toby gunned him down and clomped Sis over the head with the butt when she sunk her teeth in his arm! She died whilst I was runnin' like hell! Me, I always been scairt-like!"

The little man's breath came and went raspingly. He was reliving that day in Oklahoma behind tortured beady eyes that failed to see the sheriff's hand when it reached the boot-top.

Pee Wee cackled slyly. "I been pretty foxy, lawdog. I—"

"Yeah" Big Tex interrupted, "I know. You was pretty slick makin' yoreself out half loco and confessin' to all the killin's around Redstone. You might've got by with it when you knifed the man you been layin' for, but you made one bad slip!"

The little man's face turned blank. Big Tex could almost see the crazed brain, back behind the beady eyes, checking up to see where he had failed. "I'll ease yore mind, Pee Wee. *Tillie Carter, she ain't daid!*"

"*Ain't dead!*" the little man screeched. "I knifed her from her horse under the live-oak! I seen her fall and lay still!"

"That's what you thought!" Big Tex answered. He was violently wriggling his toes in the left boot, trying to remove it without attracting attention. "When you come stompin' into my office confessin' you'd kilt her, I knowed then you was behind it all! Nobody, but me and you and her knowed Tillie'd ever been jumped on!"

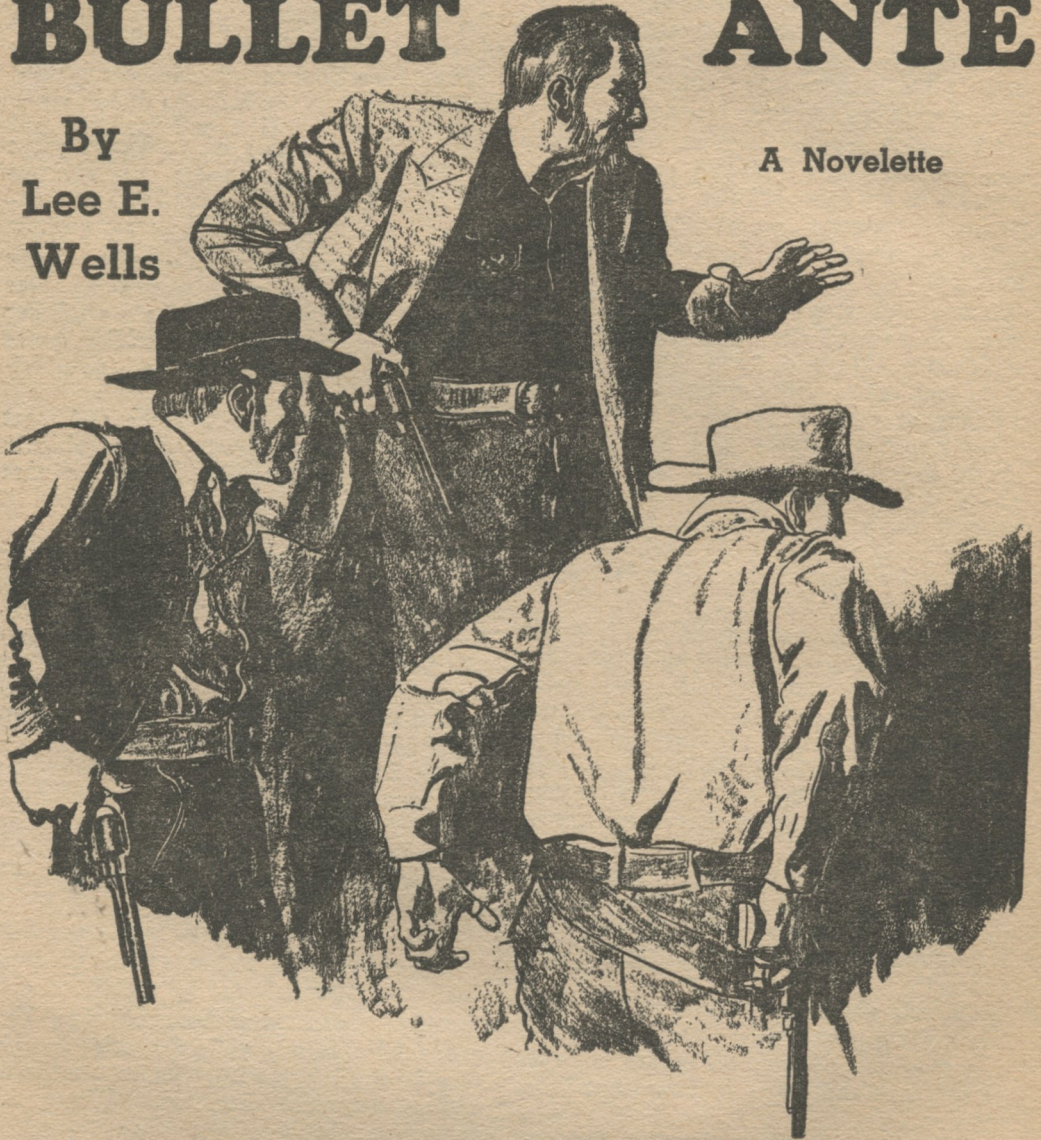
It was then Pee Wee saw Big Tex's hand. He thought the sheriff was reaching in his boot for a hidden gun. Big Tex pulled his foot out of the shoe-leather at the same moment the little man screamed with rage.

(Continued on column 96)

FRISCO BREEN'S BULLET ANTE

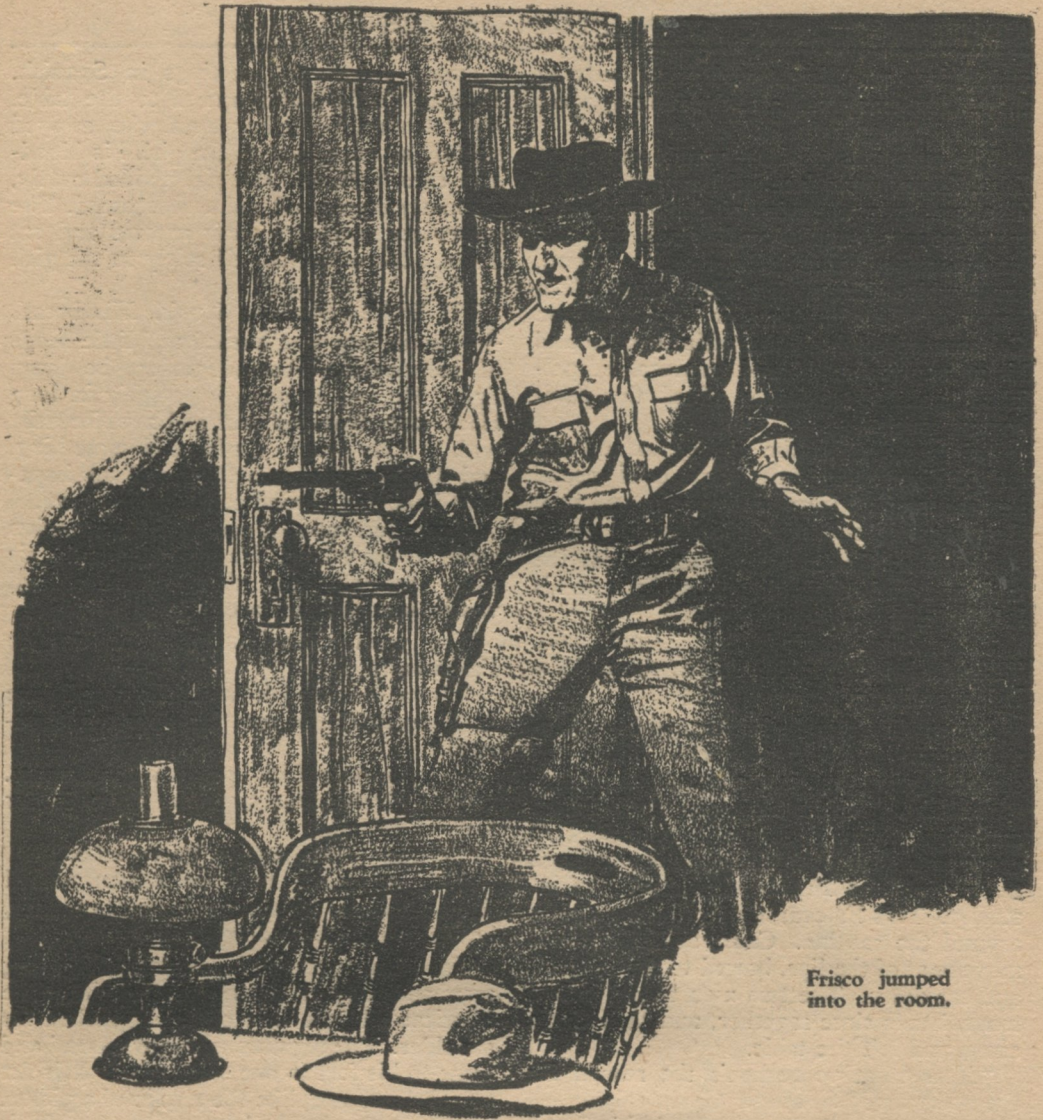
By
Lee E.
Wells

A Novelette



* Why did Gringo Frisco Breen take chips in a cut-
* throat, no-quarter war for a man he had never
* seen. . . ? For both the California owlhoot and the
* hangnoose Vigilantes awaited only one slip to nail
* Breen's hunted hide to the shadowy wall of Kingdom

Come!



Frisco jumped into the room.

CHAPTER ONE

City of Wanted Men

FRISCO BREEN had always heard that when a man got in trouble anywhere in California, he headed for a small district just north of the place called Los Diablos, in Los Angeles. Now, here he was on a narrow street called Calle Negros and in the Casa Pedro Doma, in the heart of outlaw California.

His long legs stretched out before him as he lolled in a chair near the wall. His black eyes watched the crowd that filled

the place. About him moved the scum of the Territory: bandits, renegades, thieves, killers. Frisco's strong fingers tightened on the whiskey glass and he stared moodily at the bottle before him on the table.

A sudden stir nearby caused him to look up. A young Mexican and a wisp of a girl made their way through the gawking crowd. They were out of place in Doma's casa, like bishops in a gambling hall. Frisco watched the girl.

Her black lace mantilla, doubled and redoubled, had been pulled over her face. But the eyes above it were large and deep brown. They rested on him for a moment

and Frisco read fright and uncertainty in them. She was small and the flowing dress accented the graceful body.

The man was no larger and equally as lithe. Thin, dark face held arrogant eyes. The lips, under the wisp of black mustache, were set in a proud, firm line and the delicate nostrils flared. He wore a bolero, snow white shirt with a black stock. The heavy handle of a Number Two Dragoon Colt protruded from the wide sash around his narrow waist. Flared trousers and polished, pointed-toe boots added the flamboyant touch.

Frisco stared at the girl again and she looked directly at him. For a brief second he read stark misery in her eyes and then they dropped and she looked hastily away.

Swamper Gavin spoke from across the table and pushed his old fur cap back on his bald pate.

"Them kind don't fit here," Gavin said. "They'll bring trouble. It's in the air like Injun smell."

Frisco didn't reply but turned his attention again to the newcomers. They had seated themselves, just a couple tables removed from where Swamper and Frisco sat. Frisco caught several low, whispered comments. A second Mexican came through the crowd, and Frisco recognized him instantly. This Estevan Cadiz was seen often around the cantina. Cadiz smiled, an oily movement of the lips, bowed to the señorita and sat down. The two men talked in low tones, heads close together, and then Cadiz arose and left the table.

"Now what ye reckon's the reason for the powwow?" Swamper Gavin asked.

"Don't know." Frisco shook his head. "Don't care much."

He poured another drink and gulped it down. He was tall, young, handsome in a rugged way, if the boney nose and angular, rocky jaws were discounted. He wore a checked shirt, the cloth strained over the wide shoulders and deep chest. His long, powerful legs were encased in buckskin trousers, unfringed, that were stuffed into short high-heeled boots. A wide leather belt was strapped around his narrow waist, pulled low by a home-made leather holster in which snuggled a heavy Navy Colt. A flat-crowned, broad-brimmed hat had been pushed back on his curly black hair.

He swung around when he heard a loud,

booming voice call greetings in Spanish. Estevan Cadiz had returned to the table. He introduced another man who swayed slightly as he bowed to the girl, his blood-shot eyes lighting. The girl nodded curtly, obviously displeased and embarrassed. The newcomer twirled a chair around and sat down, addressing himself solely to the girl.

HE WAS obviously drunk. His broad, harsh face was flushed and little beads of perspiration showed under the lamp light. He was dressed impeccably in long black coat, flowered vest and a white shirt with a frilly front. Cadiz said something, and Dapper Farnsworth waved an impatient hand but turned to the young man.

Frisco lost interest and gave his attention again to the bottle. He sank deeper in his dark thoughts, and then suddenly loud voices snapped him around.

The young Mexican was speaking to Farnsworth.

"Forty thousand dollars! The note I gave to Estevan Cadiz was for only ten thousand."

Farnsworth's thick lips parted in a sneer. "Sorry, Perez, the note we have is for forty thousand."

"Where is the note?" Perez asked.

"It's up north, held by a man named Bowie Adams. When you have the money, he'll bring the note down."

Farnsworth turned his back to the young man and started talking to the girl. The Mexican's hands shot out and grabbed his shoulder. The big man whipped around and came to his feet in one swift move. His fist traveled upward, like the stroke of a piston. The knuckles cracked loudly on the Mexican's chin and he sailed backward.

The girl screamed and came to her feet. Frisco started to jump up but Swamper spoke low.

"Hold on son, they may not need you now."

The young Mexican rolled over and sat up, glassy-eyed. Cadiz spoke softly to Farnsworth and rushed to get Perez on his feet.

"Por dios!" Perez said wildly. "I kill the gringo!"

He whirled around, but Cadiz's wiry arms circled his body and held him. The dark eyes grew wild and angry as he struggled against the arms that held him.

"Manuel, 'sta bueno," the girl said sharply. "Let us go."

Cadiz' soft speech had taken the fight out of Farnsworth. He stood aside and watched the three prepare to leave. They had taken only a few steps when he spoke to the young man.

"Perez, don't show your face around here until you have the forty thousand. You only have one week to raise it. The forty thousand or your holdings."

The Mexican glared at Farnsworth but did not answer. He and the girl left the Casa Doma, with Cadiz bringing up the rear.

The moment Frisco heard the name of Bowie Adams, he made up his mind to take cards in the game. He spoke to Swamper and the two followed the Mexicans.

From the time the voices raised until the trio left, Frisco had overheard the conversation and was determined to have a talk with the young couple, in the hopes of getting something on Adams. He spoke to Swamper.

"Don't trail too close, we don't want to draw attention until they have reached their place."

CHAPTER TWO

The Plot of Estevan Cadiz

THEY edged cautiously down the dark Calle Negros, and kept watching the Casa Doma over their shoulders to be sure no one followed.

Frisco Breen glanced again at the lithe figure of the girl, just in front, and wondered at her identity. She was certain to be one of the old Mexican families, a descendant of the hidalgos. He grinned, but it was a tortured twist of the lips, without mirth.

What good would it do him to be interested in any girl? His thoughts cast back, northward toward Monterey and the little rancho he had owned up there. Bowie Adams had that now, as he had hundreds of thousands of other acres of old Spanish grants. The American seizure of California five years before had been made to order for unscrupulous men like Adams. The Bear Flag revolt and the attendant disorders and trouble had cast confusion over the country. Out of this confusion Bowie Adams had formed his stolen empire.

Frisco Breen had come west by the way

of the Horn, establishing a small gunshop near the Presidio of San Francisco. Not long after, he had joined Fremont and had taken part in the conquest of California for the United States. Afterward, he had bought a land grant from an old Mexican near Monterey and had established his rancho. He had dreamed of a life of peace and quiet, improving his land, slowly building up his fortune. The gold fever of '49 had passed him by.

But Frisco realized bitterly now how fruitless his dreams had been. Bowie Adams had come into the district, a big man with a voice like a foghorn. He had mysterious connections, seemed to wield a strong influence on those who governed the newly-conquered territory.

As Breen worked to build up his rancho, he saw Adams extend his holdings and his power. Soon Frisco's rancho was the only stretch of land around Monterey that Adams didn't own. Then came Frisco's time.

As he halted now at the corner of an alley and watched the trio ahead, he could recall that single interview he had had with Adams. The big man had ridden up to the rancho just at sundown and Frisco had made him welcome. Once inside the house, Adams had come quickly to the point.

"I aim to buy your rancho, Breen. I need it to consolidate my holdings. Here's a bill of sale and transfer papers already made out. They need your signature. I have the cash with me."

Frisco had glanced over the papers, already shaking his head. He saw the price offered and had instantly dropped the papers to the table.

"Ten thousand dollars! Adams, you must think me a fool. This rancho is worth twice that and more."

"That's the price," Adams had grunted. "I advise you to take it while I feel like paying."

"Not me." Frisco had shook his head. "I intend to make this my home, Adams. I wouldn't sell at any price, but ten thousand is plumb loco."

"Breen," Adams answered unperturbed, "you got one week to sell. I have a heap of influence in these parts. Things might start happening to you. If you're wise, you'll sign those papers and take the dinero. Now, while you've got a chance."

Frisco had still refused. A week later he had not changed his mind when Bowie Adams had called. The big man had taken his final refusal almost as a matter of course. He heard Frisco out, nodded, and rode away.

Almost the next day, trouble came to the rancho. Cattle began to disappear. The local sheriff lost the trail and didn't seem too anxious to recover the stolen property. The barn and bunkhouse were destroyed by fire. There was no clue as to the arsonist and the sheriff had no interest at all in finding the man.

In desperation, Frisco had armed his cowboys and vaqueros. They drove strangers off the land, constantly patrolled the line fences. But it would have taken an army to have guarded the whole of the vast expanse of the old land grant. More cows disappeared. The wagon bringing supplies back from Monterey was held up, robbed and burned, the driver killed.

Then a worthless tinhorn gambler in Monterey was found shot in an alley. Frisco had no idea who had killed the man and cared less until the sheriff came to the rancho. The lawman came with a posse and a warrant for Frisco's arrest, charging him with the murder of the gambler.

FRISCO had submitted to arrest, knowing the trial would clear him. He was stunned when witness after witness appeared to describe the quarrel and shooting of the gambler, a man whom Frisco had only known in passing. Frisco was declared guilty by the jury and sentenced to hang by the judge. Stunned and amazed, Frisco had seen Bowie Adams' triumphant grin among the faces in the courtroom. Then Frisco realized that Bowie had railroaded him to a hangnoose in order to get the rancho.

With the help of a friend, he had broken out of jail the night before the hanging. He had headed south, dodging the sheriff's posse. A bandit near Ojai had told him of the sanctuary to be had in Los Angeles, in the district called Los Diablos, and Frisco had headed for it.

In this year of 1853, California was not fully organized. Up in the gold fields, miners' courts controlled what little law and order there was. Vigilantes patrolled San Francisco's streets. To the south, where

there were as yet no great cities, the law was lax. Los Angeles had its marshal, Star Evans, but he left the Los Diablos district to itself.

Frisco had soon discovered that a swift gun could find a ready market in Los Diablos. There were many opportunities. Pedro Doma had approached him with an offer, and Dapper Farnsworth, who seemed to rule the district, had openly made a bid.

Several times Frisco had been on the verge of accepting. He was wanted. He dared not leave. Because of a false murder charge, his rancho was gone and he faced a hangnoose if he ever turned northward. He was bitter and angry against the world, and yet something had held him back. He simply could not sink to the low level of the denizens of Los Diablos. Old Swamper Gavin, the only man he had made friends with since coming to the district, had helped when temptation was strong.

"Wagh, younker!" he had exploded on occasion. "Ye'd not want to be half man, half animal. I'm just a swamper. I ain't worth the lead it would take to send me to Boothill, but by grannies, I can still hold my head up."

If Swamper Gavin had pride, Frisco had bitterly reflected, he supposed he could. Old Swamper had been one of the fur brigade under Jim Bridger. Ten years before, when the fur business had died, he had wandered across the mountains to end up cleaning cuspidors and sweeping out at the Casa Doma.

"They've turned in," Swamper said, breaking in on Breen's thoughts.

Frisco circled the plaza, waited about ten minutes before knocking. He was surprised when Perez answered his knock.

"Señor, I was at the Casa Doma just now and overheard your argument with Farnsworth, and thought I might help."

"How can you?" the young Mexican asked in an arrogant voice. "I don't see that it's any of your business."

"Frisco Breen is my name. I've got a score to settle with Bowie Adams."

At the mention of Adams' name Perez asked him to enter and extended his hand. Manuel Perez led the way into the courtyard. The great patio was dark, only a faint lantern glow coming from the far side. They entered a long low room just off the patio.

The girl and Estevan Cadiz were talking over a glass of wine. At sight of Breen, Cadiz jumped to his feet.

Cadiz said, "What's the meaning of this? You are from the Casa Doma."

"Yes, I just came from there."

Manuel introduced the young girl, his sister Lolita, and explained that Breen had come to talk of Bowie Adams.

Estevan shot Frisco a bitter glance. His eyes dropped to the holstered gun and he shrugged, turned and bowed to the girl.

"I shall see Señor Farnsworth again and see what can be done. Manuel, why talk your business over with this renegade? He can only cause more trouble." He turned and disappeared down the dark patio.

"He is angered," Manuel said shortly. "He is an old friend of the family and lives only a short distance down the street."

THE party sat down at a table, Swamper Gavin ill at ease. Lolita sighed and took the mantilla from across her face. Frisco's eyes lighted and he hastily looked away. The girl was more than beautiful. Personality was hers, sweet, proud and lovely. Dark raven hair crowned a soft oval face, the skin olive color. The lips were full and soft red, the nose short and straight. High cheekbones accented the length of the face.

"Señor, my sister and I are in great trouble," Manuel said slowly. "I do not see how you can help us."

"I was a rancher up around Monterey until Adams stole the land from me," Breen explained.

"We have the same trouble, amigo," Manuel said bitterly. "We go to the Casa Doma to pay off a note of ten thousand only to find the note has again been sold to this Adams. He claims it is for forty thousand."

Breen only nodded. He was hardly aware of anything or anyone but Lolita Perez. He hardly touched his wine. All at once he realized that Manuel was again speaking.

"We have great holdings on the south boundary of Los Angeles, señor. Since 1640 it has belonged to the Perez, granted us by the King of Spain. Now, greedy ones attempt to wrest it from us."

"How did Farnsworth get your note?" Frisco asked.

"These times have been hard, señor. The war with the United States, the Bear Flag

Revolt, the occupation and change of government. Everything is confusion, señor, and no man can know what will happen tomorrow. For five years el rancho lost money. I borrow from my friend, Estevan Cadiz. Then he needs money and sells my note to Farnsworth."

"And now the loan is being called. There's a heap of hombres in the same fix," Frisco said.

"I know," Manuel sighed. He glanced at his sister. "Señor Farnsworth has sold the note to Adams', but how could it be for forty thousand? We knew two weeks ago, they would foreclose. So we sold part of our holdings to meet the note, but we can't meet what they are claiming."

"Can you prove your note was for only ten thousand?" Frisco asked.

"I don't know. My friend Estevan is the only one that can help. He is the one the note was made out to."

Frisco tugged thoughtfully at his earlobe. He couldn't think for the lovely eyes of Lolita. They watched him as though she believed that somehow he could help them. But Frisco didn't know how, since Bowie Adams was the shadowy figure behind the whole deal. Frisco would like a chance to upset his plans. If he could only prove Adams changed the amount of the note.

"Manuel, I'd like to take cards in this game," he said quietly. "I don't know what can be done, maybe nothing. But if I can strike back at Adams, I'd sure like to do it."

"That would be most fine, señor!" Lolita exclaimed softly and smiled.

"But what can you do?" Manuel demanded.

"Don't know. But I'm foot-loose and free. Maybe I could learn a heap of things in Los Diablos that you couldn't."

"That is not much, señor," Manuel answered slowly. "But the harm she is done now. Nothing worse can happen. If you wish, we welcome you to help, señor. Win or lose, you will have my gratitude."

Frisco made a slight gesture of dismissal with his hand. He hitched up his chair. "Estevan Cadiz is Dapper Farnsworth's friend, you say, and he is yours, Dapper got those notes of yours for Bowie. He must have known you could meet the amount. That is why the note was raised. Do you reckon Cadiz would help in proving the amount of the note?"

"I think so," Manuel agreed.

"Then I'll see Cadiz." Frisco slapped his hand on the table. He arose and smiled at the girl. "It is getting late, señorita, and you must be tired. Swamper and me will leave. I'll see you and Manuel in the morning."

Frisco and Swamper entered the dark street again and walked to the Plaza. Neither man said anything, each busy with his own thoughts. Frisco sat down on the low wall, took off his hat and looked toward the Casa Doma.

"If that place belongs to Bowie Adams, I'd best not go back."

"S'pect that's right. We'll sleep down the road a piece."

"No need for you to get in a mess," Breen said slowly. "You go back. I'll find a spot."

"Me go back and miss the fireworks?" Gavin snorted. "Come on, let's git."

Swamper led the way westward, toward the edge of town. They came to a livery stable, whose owner proved to be another old mountain man. Beaver Harris had been at the Green River with Swamper in the old days. He grunted at Swamper's tale and led the way inside with the long, loose stride of the mountain man. His lantern made his legs seem twice as long and thin as they actually were.

"Bed ye down," Harris said. "Naught will find ye here."

Frisco sank gratefully into the deep pile of hay. He stretched out, staring up in the darkness and saw again the delicate face of Lolita Perez. He fell asleep with startling abruptness.

SWAMPER shook him awake. Frisco sat up instantly, his hand dropping down to his gun. Then he saw Swamper's wide grin and straggly beard. Early morning light streamed in the wide doors of the stable. Horses stamped in their stalls. Beaver Harris called in a cracked voice.

"The vittels is on if ye want them."

Frisco followed Swamper into a room that was both office and home. Beaver made him welcome, quietly shook hands when Swamper made the introductions. Beaver was tall, angular, ungainly. He had a loose-gaited walk and movement as though long arms and legs were attached to the torso by wires. His lean face was deeply tanned,

the eyes narrowed by long years of sun and wind, used to a focus on great distances.

After the meal, Swamper leaned back and started picking his yellow teeth with a heavy sheath knife. He spoke around the edge of the blade.

"And now what do ye plan?" he demanded of Frisco.

"A talk with friend Estevan," Frisco arose.

"Careful there," Swamper warned.

Frisco patted his holster and smiled without speaking. Swamper arose, placed his knife in the sheath and followed Frisco outside. They headed for the Plaza again and a few inquiries brought them to the low walls of the Cadiz hacienda. A one-eyed mestizo answered their knock.

"Señor Cadiz see no one," he grunted surlily.

"Tell him the American whom he met with Manuel Perez wishes to talk to him," Frisco said.

The mestizo disappeared, slamming the planked door after him. Frisco and Swamper waited impatiently and the time seemed to stretch unduly long. Then the door opened and the mestizo stepped to one side.

"Enter, señor. Across the patio, if you will."

Swamper remained outside the wall, squatting down at its base in the sun. Frisco followed the servant across the patio where Estevan Cadiz waited, lolling in an easy chair. Cadiz did not arise but motioned Frisco to a seat across the little table.

Seen by daylight, Cadiz showed little greedy lines around the mouth and eyes. His voice was a condescending insult and Frisco found himself disliking the man. But he concealed his emotions and after the usual florid greetings brought the conversation around to Dapper Farnsworth and the Perez note. Cadiz instantly froze and Frisco saw his sharp glance cut to a distant doorway and back again.

"You've been with Farnsworth," Frisco said flatly, "time and again. You must know a heap about him and his connections with Adams. I've had dealings with Adams and know he's a skunk. I hope you will help prove that the amount of the note was only ten thousand when you sold it to Farnsworth."

"I can do nothing, señor," Cadiz answered. His eyes flashed a moment, then veiled all expression. "I see Señor Farnsworth only because of business. This does not concern you."

"Wrong, amigo!" Frisco shook his head. "I'm in the fight with the Perez. Will you help?"

"No." Estevan's brows arched and his voice was cold and distant. "I'm most sorry for the outcome for the Perez. You are outlaw, señor, else you would not live in the Casa Doma. You cannot help the Perez, so get out and tend to your own business."

Frisco smiled and his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "I wonder, Cadiz, if you have something to gain from this deal. Seems like you'd want to help the Perez, and welcome help from others."

"I do not welcome the help of killers and renegades, señor!" Cadiz spat. "My gain is the friendship for Manuel Perez. Buenas dias, señor."

Frisco came to his feet. He shifted the gun and holster at his side and his eyes bored into Cadiz' face. "I hope you play a straight game, amigo. Like you say, I'm a wanted man, so I won't bother too much worrying about your hide. Savvy?"

Estevan Cadiz drew himself straighter. "Buenas dias, señor," he repeated.

Frisco moved out the door and into the patio. The path to the wall gate skirted one side of the thick growth in the center. Blank doorways led into other parts of the rambling house. Frisco strode angrily along, certain now that Cadiz played a double game. He made the turn and the wall gate was just ahead, the one-eyed mestizo waiting to open it.

Some instinct made him whirl. It might have been a sixth sense developed in the long flight down from the north. Whatever it was, he sensed danger, and crouched and turned. He had a glimpse of a hurtling body. A gleaming knife struck downward, the blade ripping the shirt along his back and leaving a long brand of fire along the shoulder.

Frisco grabbed the wrist, twisted. His assailant was whirled around and Frisco looked into the cruel face of Pedro Doma. Wide lips setting in a grim line, Frisco's big muscles swelled and he twisted the knife from the sweating, squirming inn-keeper.

He shoved and Doma stumbled back to the house wall. When he straightened, Doma looked into Frisco's gun barrel.

"Birds of a feather," Frisco gritted.

"Maybe," Pedro shrugged. All fight had left him and his dark eyes narrowly watched Frisco's angry face. He glanced again at the gun in the tanned fist. Pedro Doma shrugged and a smile lit his face.

"I have the bad luck, señor. But you take a hand in something that is not your business. There will be others, like the hombre behind you, who has the gun dead center on your back."

CHAPTER THREE

A Charge of Murder. . . .

FRISCO grinned widely. "An old trick, Pedro. It won't work."

"No?" Pedro asked softly.

Then Frisco felt the hard jab of the gun barrel in his back. He stiffened spasmodically and then froze every muscle. His face became bleak and stern. He slowly opened his fingers and let the Navy Colt fall to the ground. Pedro bent and picked the weapon up without the least sign of haste. Frisco slowly turned to face the one-eyed servant.

"With care, señor," the man said.

"Señor Cadiz," Pedro spoke amiably, "and I do not like your presence here, amigo."

"Come on, shoot! Get it over with!" Frisco said.

"No, that would be murder," Pedro Doma said softly. "We do not want that. Better yet, I give you to the sheriff of Los Angeles, Star Evans. Cadiz, Farnsworth and I will tell the lawman you are bad man from north. That is the truth. He will put you in calabozo and send you to Monterey. Someone else will do our work for us. Simple."

Frisco said nothing. The plan was simplicity itself and would work like a charm. Pedro snapped orders to the servant, who holstered his gun and went to the door. He shot back the bolts. Pedro held the Colt steadily on Frisco's middle.

"I'll take you to the sheriff, señor. You are an outlaw. I would not be guilty to shoot you in the streets if you try to escape. We understand each other, eh?"

"Sure," Frisco answered heavily. "Lead the way."

"No, señor," Pedro grinned. "You will go first and I will follow with these very good sixgun. Vamose!"

Frisco stepped out through the planked door into the street, Pedro close at his heels. Swamper Gavin was not in sight and Frisco's last hope of escape went glimmering. He knew Doma would not hesitate to kill if he made a break for freedom, and Doma would go free.

At Pedro's sharp order, Frisco turned toward the Plaza, ambling down the street at a slow pace. A few Mexicans stared curiously but made no attempt to intervene and ask questions. That was never a healthy habit in Los Diablos. Cadiz' servant had closed the door after them and Frisco cursed silently at the thought of the treacherous Estevan. He was no friend to the Perez!

They passed a narrow alleyway. Pedro Doma kept just far enough behind that Frisco could not whirl and reach the gun before Pedro could squeeze the trigger. Frisco's thoughts grew black and bitter and he hardly saw the street or the few people they met. He halted, astounded, when he heard Swamper's hoarse voice.

"Wagh, ye kin quit marching, Frisco. I got this coon fair in a trap."

Frisco turned. Pedro stood stock still, his dark face blank with stunned surprise. Swamper held the point of his big sheath knife deep in Pedro's side. The old trapper had swung out of the alley after Pedro had passed. The rest had been simple.

Frisco came back and took the gun from Pedro's lax fingers. He turned and marched him down the alley. Then he searched him for further weapons, and told him to get back to his friends.

"Have ye figured ye let a snake free to take another strike at ye?" Swamper demanded.

"I know," Frisco said, "but we can't hold him. Let him go. The next time he won't get off so easy."

Swamper growled in his straggly beard and stepped aside. Pedro ran the length of the alley, vanishing around the corner. Frisco shifted his gun to a better position.

"We'd better see Manuel Perez," he said quickly. "If I know these hidalgos, it's going to be mighty hard to make him be-

lieve Estevan Cadiz is his enemy and won't help."

Swamper nodded soberly. "They figure honor is enough. Wagh, it depends on what kind of man gives his word. This Cadiz hombre has a forked tongue, as the Injuns would say."

FRISCO and the old trapper walked toward the Perez'. Frisco was busy trying to figure some way to break the news to Manuel. But thoughts of Lolita kept intruding and he found his step lengthening until Swamper had to go at a trot.

They rounded one side of the Plaza, pushing their way through the crowd that lines the walks. Frisco hoped that he would reach the Perez before Manuel contacted Estevan Cadiz again. His thoughts broke off sharp when Swamper grabbed his arm. The old trapper's narrowed glance bored straight ahead. Frisco turned his head and saw Dapper Farnsworth.

"Cadiz has told me of the interest you play in the Perez deal," Farnsworth snapped.

Frisco's hand dropped close to his holster. His lean face showed no emotion. "Any reason why I shouldn't?"

"In a way, yes," Farnsworth answered. "I intend to pass a warning. Get out of Los Angeles, pronto. The next time we meet—if you live that long—it'll be over gun-sights. You're too nose-y, Breen, and that's mighty unhealthy in Los Diablos."

"I'm not running, Dapper. Any time you want a showdown, you'll find me around. Now is as good a time as any."

"In my own time and place," Farnsworth snapped. His fingers touched his black string tie and he smiled unpleasantly. "But like I said, I might not have to bother. Think it over, Breen, and in a hurry. You won't get another chance."

He circled Breen and walked away, broad shoulders a hulking defiance. Frisco turned, watching him, careful not to give the dapper renegade a chance to put a bullet in his back. Dapper disappeared around the next corner. Swamper whistled, low.

"That was sure war talk. Frisco, I reckon we're in this up to our necks. We can drop everything and skeepaddle, or we can take a chance on losing our scalps."

"I'm through running," Frisco repeated firmly. "Let's get on."

As Frisco had feared, it was very hard to make Manuel Perez understand that his good friend and trusted countryman would not raise a finger to help clear up the note. He listened disbelievingly, and then an angry flush mounted into his thin, delicate face. At first, his anger was directed at Frisco and Swamper who had brought him this unpalatable truth.

Then Lolita joined them and again Frisco felt spell-bound by her beauty. Under her questioning, he again repeated what he had learned about Cadiz. Lolita's eyes widened and she gave her brother a long look, filled with pity and understanding. When Frisco finished, Manuel flung his arms wide.

"It cannot be so. Estevan and I, we have played together. He is my friend."

"That is true, Manuel," Lolita answered slowly and carefully, choosing her words. "Estevan, told me last night he could do nothing. There has been talk of Estevan, is it not so? He has always looked enviously at our lands. Aye, he has tried to get at least a part of the rancho through me, but I refused his offer of marriage."

"But to sell the note and refuse to help clear up the amount, and let them fore-close! I can pay the amount of the note but not the amount they are claiming. He wouldn't do that." Manuel exclaimed.

"It sounds reasonable," Lolita answered.

After nearly an hour of discussion, Manuel finally came around to a reluctant belief. Then his anger switched to Estevan Cadiz. He threatened to bring the man to terms through a duello, but Frisco quickly intervened.

"That will not save the rancho, Perez, amigo. Bowie Adams and Farnsworth have their clutches on the note, and Adams will do everything to get the rancho. I know how land hungry that hombre is."

Manuel jumped to his feet, refusal hot on his lips. A loud knocking on the street door interrupted him. He stood straight and angry, and Frisco realized the young man hoped the visitor was Cadiz. They heard the servant sputter angrily and a deep voice cut in. Heavy steps sounded in the patio.

Frisco turned around in his chair. He saw a tall man, broad-shouldered and lean hipped. He wore twin guns tied low and on his shirt glittered the sheriff's star. The man's hard gray eyes cut around the group,

rested on Frisco. The trap-like lips barely opened.

"Are you Frisco Breen?"

"That's me," Frisco acknowledged. He stood up. The lawman's hands blurred down and Frisco looked into two gun barrels.

"You're under arrest, Breen. There's a little matter of murder that you have to take care of."

CHAPTER FOUR

Showdown in Powdersmoke

FRISCO'S hand dropped to his gun and instantly both of the sheriff's sixes steadied, and his heavy thumbs dogged back the hammers. Swamper sat frozen, watching his chance to reach for his own weapon. But the sheriff's gray eyes were quick to catch the slightest movement. Swamper remained cat-eyed and tense.

Lolita had jumped to her feet, suppressing a little exclamation of fear. Manuel Perez looked stunned, his puzzled look switching from Frisco to the law officer. Frisco slowly raised his hands to shoulder level.

"Who gave you the information?"

"That's my affair, hombre. The main thing is I got it."

"Bowie Adams, I reckon," Frisco said, "or Dapper Farnsworth. Maybe even Estevan Cadiz." The lawman's expression showed that he had hit close to the truth. "Fine, upstanding citizens, those gents."

"Señor Evans," Manuel interrupted. "I do not savvy these thing you say about Señor Breen."

"Murder, that's all," Evans grunted. He dropped one gun into the holster, kept the other levelled. "There was a gambler back-shot up around Monterey. This jasper was found guilty but broke jail before they could stretch his neck. I'm sending him back so they can finish the job."

"That was the story you heard," Frisco put in swiftly. "People say you're a square-shooter, Evans. Do you want to hear my side?"

Evans rubbed his hand along his jaw and studied Frisco. He shrugged. "Tell it."

Frisco did, sparing no details. His small audience listened, Lolita with widening eyes

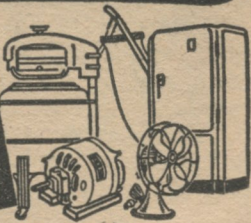
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and her face flooded with pity. Evans stopped him now and then with sharp questions that Frisco answered without hesitation. His own tale finished, Frisco continued with the story of the Perez Rancho and the plot made to seize it. He finished and stood waiting. Evans glanced sharply at Manuel.

"Is this all true, Perez?"

"Por Dios, as he said it, every word."

"Drop your hands, Breen," Evans said, "but don't make no breaks. I'm supposed to be mighty fast with a six."

He holstered the other gun and paced up and down the patio. Swamper's hand crept toward his Colt, but Frisco's swift signal stopped the old man. Evans finally swung around and stopped his thoughtful pacing.

"I got word about you from Dapper Farnsworth and Bowie Adams. Bowie's in town from the north. I try to be an honest lawman, Frisco, and I'd give my right arm to lock them two jaspers in jail. But Adams swings too much power. I couldn't hold him unless the evidence is airtight. You savvy that?"

"Certainly. I've had dealings with the slippery skunk."

"Sure. This Perez thing looks ugly. It may be what I'm looking for to nail Adams. Think you can get the evidence?"

"Of what?" Frisco demanded.

"Land grabs, by illegal methods. In the Perez case, changing the face of a note. Adams is getting a heap too many of the old grants that Congress confirmed when we took over California. There has to be something crooked. Maybe this Perez deal is what's needed to clinch things."

"I think I've got Cadiz and Farnsworth worried," Frisco answered. "They'll make some move mighty quick. If they're worried then Bowie Adams will be, too. I'll offer myself as bait for their guns. Would that be enough?"

"Attempted murder—or the real thing if they nail you," Evans said. "Yes, that would jail them. Breen, I'm plumb loco, but I've made up my mind about you. I'll tell Adams I came here, but you had gone. I can stall your arrest for maybe a couple of days—no more. Can you dab your loop on the renegades in that time?"

"Two days!" Frisco whistled. Then his

lips flattened in a determined line. "I'll make them move, Evans."

"Good. I'll protect you with my deputies as much as I can. Either a deputy or myself will be mighty close, ready for anything that comes up."

Frisco nodded. He picked up his hat and shoved it on his head. Swamper came uncertainly to his feet.

"You'd better start trailing pronto, Sheriff," Frisco said quietly. "I'm going into the Casa Doma right now. Your fireworks might start."

"You're kind of prodding things along, ain't you? How do you know Adams or Farnsworth will make a move?"

"They have to. Estevan and Doma have reported by now. They aren't going to let me go free, to help the Perez get a case against them, and lose the chance of getting the Perez holdings. When I walk into the Casa Doma, they'll jump me."

"I'll give you five minutes start," Evans said decisively. "I hope you're right, and I hope you're gun-fast."

"I'm right, anyhow," Frisco answered.

He bowed to Lolita. In an impulsive gesture she held out her hand. Her dark eyes glowed and her red lips trembled a little.

"Be careful, amigo," she said simply. "I—we should not want harm to come to you."

Frisco smiled. Her fingers were thrillingly warm in his big hand. He held them a moment and then turned away, walking swiftly around the patio. Swamper scrambled to his feet and scurried after him. Outside, in the street, Frisco paused.

"Swamper, reckon Beaver Harris would like to help watch my back?"

"Sure would, Beaver's plumb tired of feeding hosses. I'll get him."

"Make it fast, Swamper. Be at the Casa Doma as quick as you can get there. I might need your help."

SWAMPER scurried off, heading toward the livery stable. Frisco moved at a slow pace toward the Doma. He rounded the fountain and stopped, looking down into Los Diablos. Far down the street, he could see Pedro's big cantina. Frisco went on, lean face tight and hard.

He was but a few yards from the Casa Doma when he pulled up short, eyes hard



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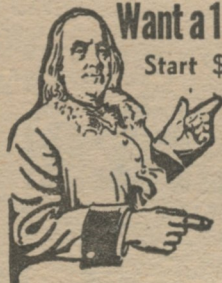
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on a big burly figure that approached the entrance. He instantly recognized the square jaw and brutal big face, the hulking shoulders. Frisco smiled in anticipation. Bowie Adams hurried inside the Casa. Frisco hitched up his gunbelt, fitted the holster snugly to his side and went on.

Without hesitation he pushed inside. The big room was full, as usual, and Frisco was not noticed. He saw Bowie disappear through the door that led to Doma's office and Frisco followed.

He pushed open the door and faced a short hall. He heard voices coming from Doma's office. Frisco pulled his six from the holster, closed the door behind him and edged forward. As he drew nearer, he heard Adams' harsh voice.

"All right, Cadiz. Did you get the power of attorney to act for Perez?"

"I cannot get it now," Estevan answered angrily. "These gringo Breen has intruded."

"Breen!" Adams snorted. "Dapper, I told you this morning to get the law after him. We'll drive him out of Los Angeles or kill him. Now, Cadiz, you get back to work on Manuel Perez. Had you done your work well, you'd have the power of attorney. Once we get that paper, we won't have to worry about that note.

Frisco whirled around when he heard a slight step behind him. Evans placed his finger to his lips. Behind him slipped Swamper and lanky Beaver Harris closed the door leading into the big room and stood guard. Adams spoke again.

"Doma, you and your knife can take care of Frisco Breen, if the sleepy law in this town don't get him. Dapper, we'll handle this like we did those grants north of here. Too bad we can't frame Perez with murder like we did Breen, but that'll take too long."

"Yes, señor," Doma replied.
 "Cadiz, we wouldn't be on the spot if you had gotten that power of attorney before he sold part of his holding to pay off that note. A ten thousand dollar note would force him to sell his holdings as well as forty thousand, if he couldn't meet it."

Evans touched Frisco and nodded, smiling.

"You have half the Perez rancho, Cadiz. That'll take care of your share."

"Half!" Cadiz exclaimed. "I want it all.

That is the word I have heard from you."

Adams' voice lowered to a deadly rumble. "I've changed my mind, amigo. You're lucky to get that much. Doma, here, could get rid of you easy. So could Dapper or me, for that matter. Do we understand one another, Estevan?"

There was a long, tense silence, and then Cadiz' voice came harsh and surly. "Si, we understand. I am understand that gringos like you cannot be trusted."

"Right," Adams chuckled. "I outsmart you, Estevan. Learn to be that way yourself. Now git over to the Perez and get to work putting on the soft soap. Dapper, you and Pedro start hunting Breen. If you find him loose, blast him down. I'll see that Evans don't make any arrest stick."

"That's plenty for me," Evans whispered. He looked around at Swamper. "You remember everything you heard? You might have to tell about it in court."

"Sure, I can remember," Swamper grinned. He licked his lips in anticipation. Evans straightened and pulled both his guns. Before he could move, Frisco jumped into the room.

ADAMS faced him and his eyes grew round with surprise. Dapper's jaw dropped and Pedro ripped out a sputtering oath. Then Estevan choked and the others saw the lawman. Dapper's hand dropped down to his hip and the big coat stirred as the heavy six jerked out of leather. Adams faded back, hand streaking toward his shoulder. This move suited Frisco.

His wide lips split in a fighting grin as his hand petted his drawn gun. The weapon lined down on Adams. Dapper fired, but Evans' gun blasted across the room at him. Dapper folded in the middle, his single slug going wild, snarling into the ceiling.

Pedro's hand streaked to his collar and the knife blade glittered as it split the air. Frisco had dropped into a crouch and the heavy blade missed his heart. He fell back and his shot, aimed at Adams, went wild. Pain like a streak of fire went through his shoulder.

Adams had his hideout gun in his hand. He fired wildly, half blinded by the curling powder-smoke. The slug ripped along Frisco's side, cutting a shallow trench. Frisco's

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brain tried to struggle through the waves of pain that swept over it. He brought up his gun, tried to line it on Adams.

He heard Evans shout and Estevan Cadiz cried out in mortal fear. Rolling gunfire blasted against his ears, and then Frisco felt his six slip from his fingers. He tried to catch himself, but couldn't. He hit the floor and then darkness came.

He had lost consciousness amidst the roar of guns and the smell of powder smoke. He had seen Adams' big shifting form and then—nothing. He opened his eyes to sunlight streaming through an ornately gridded window. He lay on a soft bed and not the scarred floor of Pedro Doma's cantina. Lolita Perez smiled down at him and placed a cool hand on his forehead. She bent over him.

"The others will come," she whispered, "but these things I must tell you myself. You are muy hombre, amigo."

He frowned at her, puzzled, but his fingers found her small hand. He held it tightly a moment. "Lolita, you are beautiful . . . I love you."

Lolita smiled. She gently disengaged her hand. "I tell Señor Evans and Manuel you are awake. Then I'll come back when they are gone, no?"

"Yes!" Frisco said firmly. She left the room and in a moment Evans, Manuel and Swamper came crowding through the door. They stood around his bed, solemn as owls until Frisco weakly greeted Swamper. That broke the tension. They all started talking at once and Frisco laughed.

"You don't make sense, gents. Suppose you tell the story, Evans. What happened? Where's Adams and Cadiz?"

"Adams is pretty bad shot up in my jail," Evans said and looked pleased. "Dapper's dead and so is Pedro Doma. Estevan Cadiz didn't have a scratch on him and none of us threw lead his way, but he blamed near died of fright. Blabbed all he knew, not only about the Perez deal but some older ones."

"Talked," Frisco smiled. He looked up at Manuel. "Then you needn't worry about your rancho?"

MANUEL nodded silently as Evans continued. "I had a U.S. Marshal listen to Estevan Cadiz. He knew a little about

FRISCO BREEN'S BULLET ANTE

your case, Frisco, when Adams stole your rancho. Adams is caught good and tight in a Federal loop, trying to embezzle the Mexicans out of their ranches and land grants. There's at least five counts against him that'll stick and clear you. I owe you a heap, Frisco. I can clean up Los Angeles now, and I've already run a whole passel of skunks out. I couldn't do it so long as Adams and Farnsworth were kings of Los Diablos."

"My gratitude also," Manuel exclaimed. "How can I thank you?"

"There is no thanks due from anyone. If what Evans says is so, then I'm a free man and have a chance of getting my rancho back, but you can send your sister in, Manuel," Frisco answered, "and leave us alone. Reckon she'll like Monterey?"

The young Mexican grinned and touched his waxed mustache. "She can say for herself, amigo. But these I tell you. Maybe any place is fine where you are, no?"

Evans and Manuel left and Swamper started to follow them. Frisco called him back. The baldheaded trapper stood working his coonskin cap around in his hands. Frisco grinned up at him.

"I got a place for you, Swamper. You'd like my rancho."

"That's white of ye," Swamper replied. He cleared his throat. "But I reckon I can't go. Me'n Beaver Harris has a heap to do here."

"Tending hosses?" Frisco demanded.

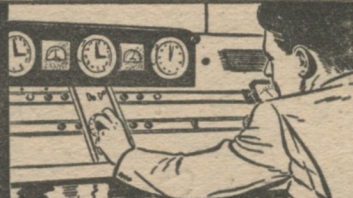
"Not hosses, Frisco. Beaver done took over Doma's place. Me'n him figure we can run a legal cantina mighty nice together. Ever since we trapped fur up on the Powder, Beaver'n me dreamed of owning a saloon and settling down someday. What the customers won't drink, we can. Powerful nice life, Frisco."

Lolita stood in the doorway and Swamper bobbed his head at her. He shook Frisco's hand and moved toward the door as Lolita advanced. He put his skin cap on his bald pate and his eyes twinkled when he saw Frisco take the girl's hand.

"Wagh!" he exclaimed. "You ain't gonna need me up on that rancho. With a squaw like her, I'd be plumb hard to find myself!"

THE END

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(Continued from page 79)

BIG TEX whirled the boot back and then spun it forward with all the strength in an oak-like arm. Pee Wee reached back and the keen, long knife glittered in the pale light of the rising moon as the arc came forward. As the blade was about to leave the little man's hand, Big Tex's number eleven boot hit knife, hand and knuckles with tremendous force. A chance throw, but one that saved his life.

Pee Wee screamed and clutched at his chest with his left hand, trying to pull out the blade that the sheriff's big boot had driven hilt-deep between his ribs. Blood gushed black in the moonlight, as the knife came free. The little man sank to one knee, reached for the ground with a bloody fist, then keeled over to one side with a wet gurgle.

Big Tex jumped from his horse, stooped over the dying man and flipped the knife to one side. Pee Wee slowly turned his head toward the sheriff and a smile twisted his lips. He spit out a mouthful of blood and spoke in a bubbly voice.

"Yea, Big Tex, I gotta admit all law-dogs ain't dumb. But some of 'em got hell's own luck!"

"I didn't aim to kill you, Pee Wee! I meant to clomp you across the head and fetch you in to our hanging jedge, but you've beat the rope. You're the one's got hell's luck!"

The little man grinned. "No hard feelings, lawman. You done yore job; I done mine. I'm glad now I didn't kill the gal. I ain't never kilt a woman!"

Big Tex could see that death was only a matter of minutes. There was one point he wanted to get straight before the little man sealed it behind his lips forever.

"Pee Wee, how come you got Gil Spencer's Barlow knife away from Tillie?"

Pee Wee gave a faint, wet chuckle and spit out another mouthful of blood. "I'll tell you, Big Tex if you'll promise me you won't tell Toby's gal about her pa. Somehow when an hombre's goin' up to the Big Range, and knows he's goin', things look mighty different! What Toby done to Jud and Sis is somethin' no gal ought to know about her pa!"

Big Tex yanked at his fierce longhorn mustaches and gulped. He blew his nose

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loudly before replying. "It's a deal, Pee Wee!"

The sheriff leaned close when Pee Wee beckoned weakly. There was contentment on the seamy face now, peace behind the beady eyes that were glazing over fast. A hint of mischief tinged his voice as he whispered in Big Tex's ear.

"Folks in Redstone knowed Gil's Barlow. I seen my chance to git Toby when I seen Tillie Carter cuttin' up some cactus apples with Gil's knife. I knew I had her then."

The little man stopped speaking. His eyes slowly closed. He clutched for the sheriff's big hand. Big Tex bent lower and urged the dying Pee Wee to finish what he was saying.

"I told her Gil asked me to fetch it to him, cause he had some hog-killin' to do!" Something resembling a chuckle came forth then. "It worked like a greased rope on a heifer. She thought he had it. He thought she had it. They each thought the other one kilt Toby! They both thought Pee Wee Jones wasn't nothin' but a harmless crazy coot! Just a poor damned old fool!"

The little man's head dropped back on the grass. Pee Wee Jones, killer, was dead.

Sheriff Big Tex McAllen stood up, dusted his knees and looked down at the dead man. He twisted his big mustaches and said: "Pee Wee, I bet you ten to one the Boss Wrangler up yonder ain't charged yore ticket up to me!"

Then Sheriff "Big Tex" McAllen got aboard his horse and turned him in the direction of Redstone town. His eyes were a little sad as he rode away. . . .

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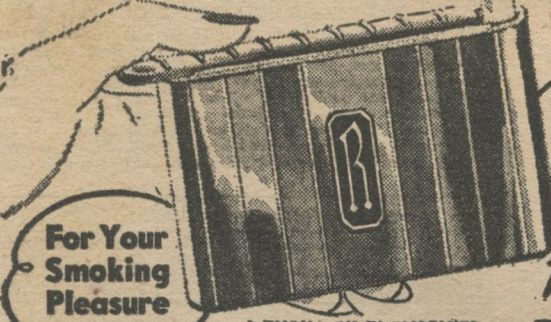
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Take the lighter, for instance! It's a genuine "Feather Lite," cased in gleaming heat resistant black plastic. Famed for the instant, positive action it's the favorite "flame" of smokers the nation over. Just a twirl of your thumb lights it—and its wind guard keeps it lit. And if you want the joy of added smoking pleasure, your answer is the matching POP-UP cigarette case, which is actually a cigarette holder too, ready to serve you on split-second notice! Every cigarette that bobs up out of a POP-UP is invitingly fresh, firm and enjoyably fragrant! They're a peach of a pair, both yours to own for only \$2.98—and if you don't think you've bought a double value after seeing your thrilling twosome—we'll refund your money cheerfully . . . quick as a flash . . . And that's a promise!

Plastic CIGARETTE CASE

**BOTH FOR
\$2.98
TAX FREE
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**A Matched Set
You'll Be Proud
To Give or Get**

Both Personalized



With a Rich Silver or Black Monogrammed INITIAL of your own choice

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR SMOKER SET

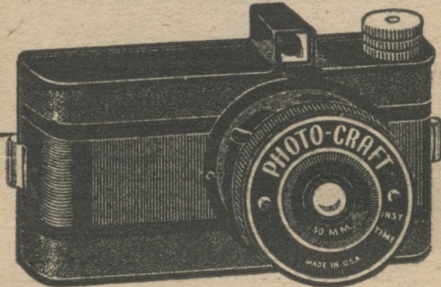
IMPERIAL INDUSTRIES—Dept. RP32 PRINT INITIAL IN THIS BOX
618 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.
Please rush Feather Lite Windproof Lighter and Matching POP-UP Cigarette case personalized with initial printed in box above.

CHECK ONE

I am enclosing \$2.98. Send my Personalized Smoker Set Postpaid
 Send my Personalized Smoker Set C.O.D. I will pay postman \$2.98 plus postage.

Name _____
Please Print Clearly
Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

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Includes All This!

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- ★ Genuine Simpson Ground and Pitch Polished Lens
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THREE ROLLS OF FILM INCLUDED



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Personalized WITH YOUR NAME IN 23-Kt. Gold

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. . . For while time stands still for no one, the memories of happy times can be preserved by Photocraft. Your Photocraft candid camera outfit comes to you ready to go to work—with a handy shoulder strap carrying case Personalized with the name of your choice in 23-Kt. GOLD, and enough film for 48 exposures—for only \$3.98 postpaid! Your Photocraft will also take full color pictures when loaded with Colorchrome film. So whether for a gift or for yourself, order your Complete 3-piece Photocraft Outfit now! Our guarantee is your assurance of satisfaction.

RUSH THIS COUPON NOW

Sold On A "Examine At Our Risk" GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

Yes, if you don't feel that Photocraft is everything you expected, you may return it in 10 days for a complete refund.

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618 South Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.
Rush my Photocraft Candid Camera Outfit at \$3.98 with Personalized Carrying Case and 3 rolls of No. 127 Film. My money will be refunded if returned in 10 days.
Name Wanted to Give _____

CHECK ONE

I'm enclosing \$3.98 in full payment. Please send my Photocraft Outfit Postpaid.
 Send my Photocraft C.O.D. I am enclosing \$1.00 deposit because I want my Carrying Case Personalized in GOLD. I'll pay postman balance of \$2.98 plus postage.
 Send my Photocraft C.O.D. without name on Carrying Case. I will pay postman \$3.98 plus postage.

Name _____
Please Print Clearly
Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

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