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.44 Western

MAGAZINE

OCT.

THREE FOR THE WILDCATTER WAR!

SMASHING NOVEL OF THE CHEROKEE STRIP

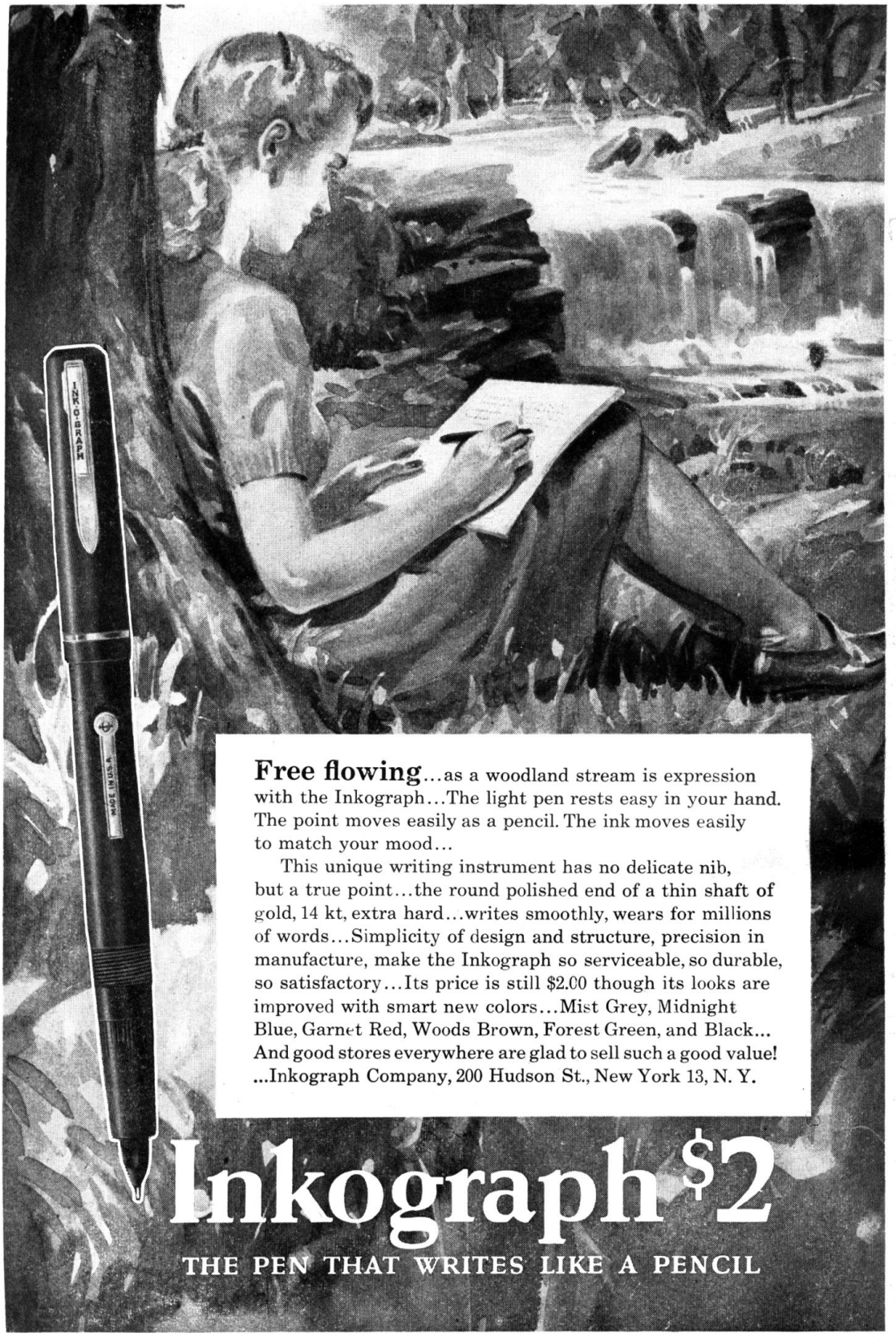
by MAX KESLER

WE NEED SHOOTIN' LAW!

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

WELLS·COLT CRUICKSHANK

AND OTHERS!



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PADDLE IN HERE QUICK! YOU'RE HEADING FOR SEA!
MY PADDLE'S BROKEN AND I CAN'T SWIM!
CAUGHT IN THE OUTGOING TIDE, GESS BENNETTS IS BEING SWEPT HELPLESSLY THROUGH SHARK INLET TO THE OPEN SEA...
I'VE GOT IT!
MAKE IT FAST TO THE BOW!
WHEW! NO STRIPED BASS EVER GAVE ME A FIGHT LIKE THAT
I'M A VERY LUCKY "FISH"
USING EVERY OUNCE OF HIS FISHING SKILL, LOU YOUNG SLOWLY "PLAYS" THE CANOE AND ITS PASSENGER INTO SHOAL WATER...
SAW YOU THROUGH THE GLASSES, SIS, BUT I COULDN'T GET HERE SOONER. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
YES, RICK. WE'LL MEET YOU AT BAY PIER
DO COME ABOARD
...WELL IF YOU DON'T MIND SANDY BOOTS AND SALTY WHISKERS...
NO EXCUSES. I'VE GOT SPARE SNEAKS AND A RAZOR, TOO
I'M TAKING YOU UP ON THAT RAZOR
SURE THING. COME BELOW
SAY, THAT'S THE SWEETEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY ON TENDER SKIN
I'M BREAKING CAMP TOMORROW. I'VE A ROOM AT SURF HOUSE
WONDERFUL! WE'RE THERE, TOO
HE'S REALLY HANDSOME
FOR THE QUICKEST, EASIEST SHAVES YOU EVER HAD WITH A LOW-PRICE BLADE, TRY THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE KEENER, SMOOTHER FINISHED AND LONGER LASTING. ALSO THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY AND PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
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.44 Western MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

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Three for the Wildcatter War!

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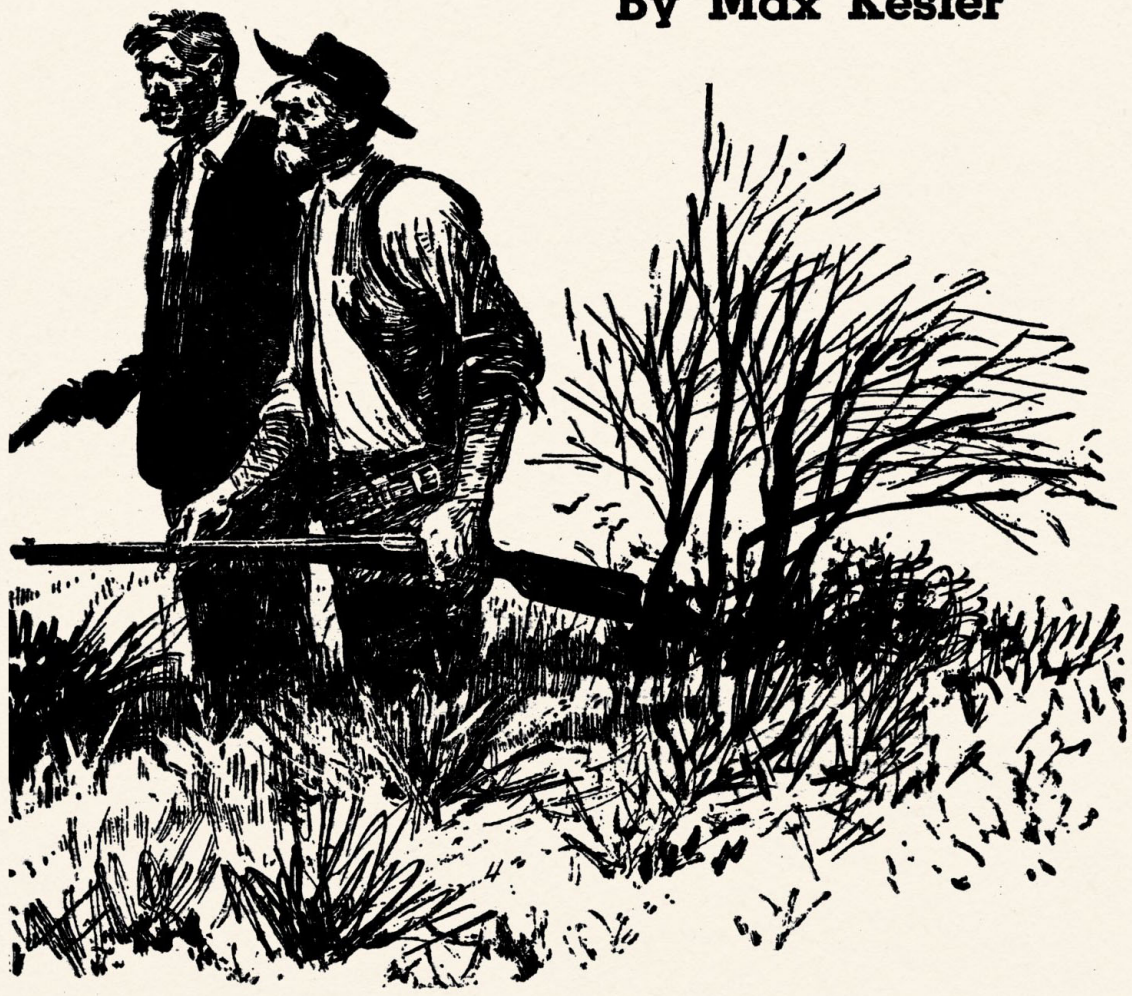
Surging Action Novel of Frontier Oil Fields

By Max Kesler



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CHAPTER ONE

The Man From Hell!

HE WALKED with the slow deliberate steps of a man driven by an inexorable purpose. Perspiration formed a dark pattern across the back of his gray shirt. Beneath his feet dust puffed up to hang motionless in the still air.

As he came abreast of the Driller Saloon he cut diagonally across the street toward Ed Keene's office. There was nothing menacing about him unless perhaps it was the .44 in the tied-down holster. Yet the tension among those watching mounted.

Wildcatter War! • •

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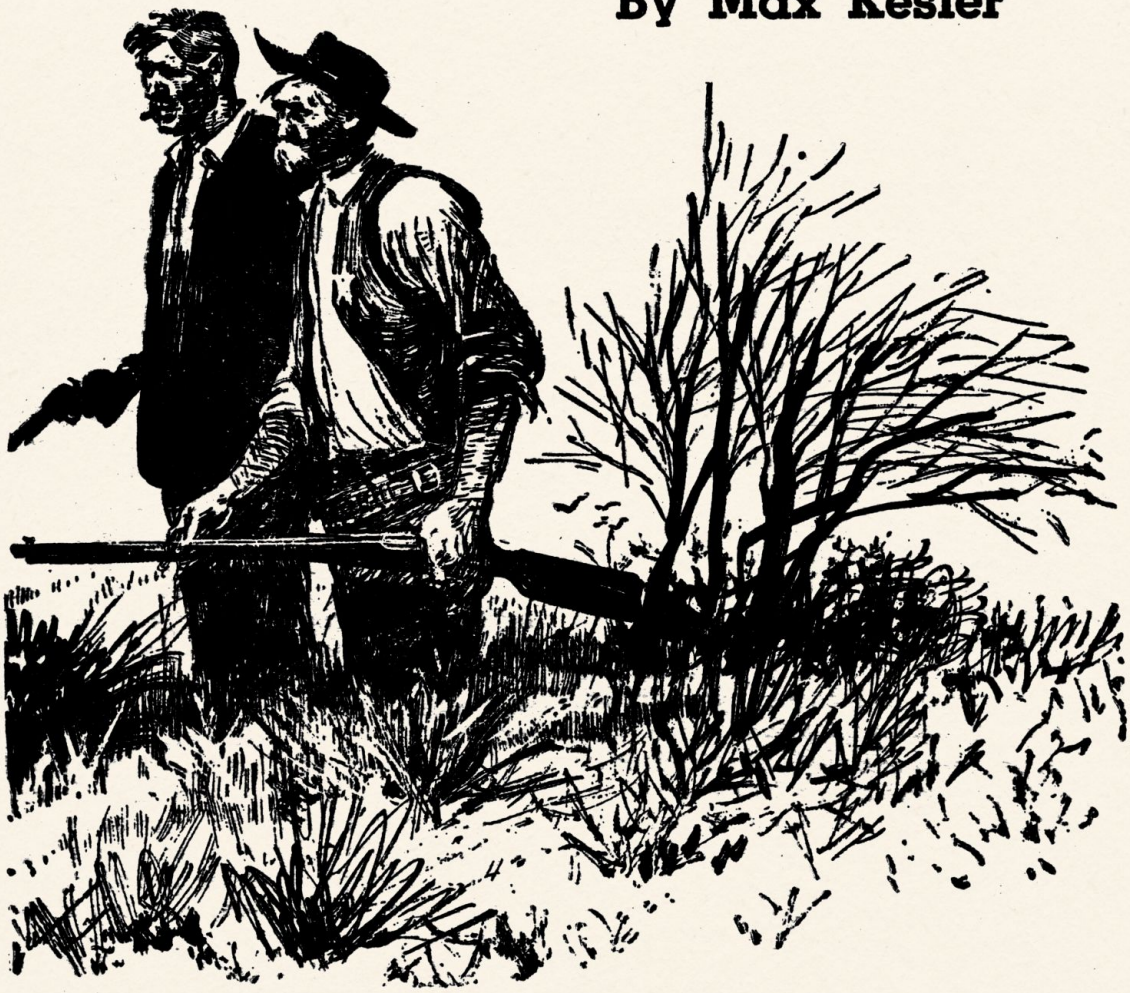

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He heard someone say, "Dave Ingram—a killer!" and his lips curled. The expression was not new to him. For ten years it had followed him from the Cherokee Strip to Montana and back again. Killer! A man whose gun could be had for a price—if the price was high enough.

The mid-afternoon sun laid merciless, probing fingers upon his face, delving into the deep lines around the eyes and the wide mouth that could have been kind—but wasn't.

There was about him an indefinable quality that challenged one's ability to pigeonhole him neatly in any known category. He was a killer. His record was proof of that. Yet vague rumors of another side of his character were whispered along the lengths of saloon bars and in dance hall dressing rooms from the North Canadian to the Rio Grande. Things that made one wonder whether he was a saint or a devil—or a combination of both.

Watching him now, the spectators in Marlow couldn't decide. News traveled fast in the Cherokee Strip—and word of the fight out at the Smalley well had already reached town.

There were few details. Only the fact that Ingram had warned Jeff Smalley to sell his oil holdings to Ed Keene while he still had a chance. Smalley had refused and in the heat of passion had drawn a gun. When it was all over Smalley was nursing an arm wound and Ingram was unhurt. That was all the town knew.

But there was more to it. No one doubted that. Ingram was known to be one of the fastest men in the country with a gun. And he had been imported to kill young Smalley. And with Smalley's own roustabouts as witnesses he could justifiably have claimed self-defense. Why then hadn't he done it before?"

Across the street, Ed Keene studied the approaching man from his office window. He permitted no trace of his anger to show. Forty years as gambler, banker, speculator, and now oil man had taught him the value of a poker face.

The front legs of his tilted chair touched the floor. Without turning, he spoke to the big red-haired man standing behind him.

"You'd better stick around, Tim. There may be trouble."

Tim O'Malley grunted. "I don't like this," he said. "I've got a damn good idea why Ingram didn't go through with it. And I'm not sure I'll back you up, Ed, if things come to a showdown."

Selecting a cigar from the humidor on his desk, Keene neatly clipped the end, then looked at the big driller. He said, "You'll back me up, Tim. You'll back me up in anything I do."

O'Malley's lips tightened. The big vein in his muscular neck began to throb visibly. When he spoke his voice was a mere whisper.

"I reckon I hate you more than anyone I ever knew, Ed. Someday I'm going to kill you!"

Keene applied a match to his cigar, puffed until the tip glowed redly, started to say something, and then swiveled around as he heard boots clomp on the broadwalk.

When Ingram entered, Ed Keene was sitting on the edge of his desk, the gun at his hip slightly forward of its usual position. O'Malley had not moved. The room was charged with tension.

Neither Keene or Ingram spoke for a moment. Their eyes met, clashed. Then with a deliberate gesture, Ingram dropped his cigarette on the thick rug, ground it out beneath a bootheel, and smiled at Keene.

The oil man flushed and his jaw muscles tightened. Ingram knew—and so did everybody else in the Strip—how proud he was of that Oriental rug. It had cost him a thousand dollars in Chicago. But he said nothing.

The gunman was in a dangerous mood. Keene had done business with such men too long not to recognize the symptoms. That ground-out cigarette had been an unspoken challenge. But he prided himself that he lived by his wits—and not by the speed of his draw.

Ingram flicked a glance at Tim O'Malley. The big driller stared at him with enigmatic eyes. His blank face told Ingram nothing. With studied care Ingram rolled another eigarette, lit it, and exhaled with a short gust.

He said, "I don't make war on kids, Keene. Hire yourself another man for the job."

"I'll do that," Keene said calmly. He leaned forward, his face hard. "Look, Ingram, I've been a power in the Cherokee Strip for ten years. I fought my way up

from nothing—from a tin-horn gambler. So far no one has had either the money or the guts to fight back.

"But Jeff Smalley is a different breed. He has courage. And what's more, he'll have the money if I let him bring in that well of his. I can't allow that. He's dangerous to me, Ingram—to my power here."

Ingram said nothing. "You might as well know now," Keene continued. "I intend to consolidate all the oil holdings in the Strip. Smalley's refusal to sell is creating opposition toward me among wildcat operators. They're waiting to see what happens on the Smalley lease. If he brings in a gusher—and he will—they will fight to hell and back before they sell.

"I know the oil game, Ingram—and I know what I'm talking about. I can't have that happen. I've made Smalley a fair offer; he's turned it down. But what I want, Ingram, I get. I want that well."

It was Keene's philosophy that some men were destined to rule, others destined to be ruled. If he was opposed, he did not carry the fight openly. That, to him, was both stupid and dangerous. There were men who made their living by the gun. He used them, directing his strategy from the big desk in his office.

In young Smalley's case he had deviated from his usual procedure. He had imported Dave Ingram instead of using Tim O'Malley. The red-haired driller had refused to take on the job because of Smalley's youth and great popularity among wildcatters in the strip. Nor could Keene's hold over him alter the driller's decision.

In importing Ingram, however, Keene had erred badly in his judgment of men. To him, gunmen were all to be classed in a single category—without regard to personalities or background—and Ingram was no exception. Dave Ingram was one of those rare gunmen who still retained a conscience. And now the main problem was to get rid of him without further trouble.

"I'll remember that, Keene," said Ingram. "But here's something for you to think about. When you bring in another man to kill Jeff Smalley, *be sure he's faster than me*. Because I've just appointed myself young Smalley's bodyguard!

"Why?" His smile was thin. "Maybe it's because I see in him everything I might have been, but wasn't. Good day, Keene!"

"Just a minute!" Keene's voice reached across the room. "You're forgetting something, aren't you?"

Ingram swung and came back. He unfastened the breast pocket of his jacket. "Yes. The money. I'm glad you reminded me."

There was something suggestive of a rattlesnake about Keene's movement then. It was not so much the speed of his draw—he was not that fast—but rather the treacherousness of the act. He had waited until Ingram's hand was hopelessly buried in his pocket—and then drawn.

Ingram was trapped. He knew it with that strange intuition of all men who lived by the gun. And he only cursed himself for his own stupidity.

BUT FOR the second time that day Ed Keene had erred in his judgment of men. Six feet away, Tim O'Malley moved with a clumsy deceptive speed. His big hand closed around Keene's wrist halting the upward sweep of the gun.

"I may be low, Ed," he said, "but not that low. Drop it!"

For a moment their eyes locked. Then Keene's fingers opened and the gun struck the carpet.

Ingram's hand came slowly out of the pocket. There was a thick roll of bills in it. He said, "Thanks, Tim. I'll remember that.

"As for your blood money, Keene—*here it is*!"

The thick roll of bills struck Keene in the face. The rubber band around it broke and greenbacks showered him, the desk, and the carpet around him. He sat there, unmoving, as Ingram spun and left the room. His face was ash-gray.

Emerging from Keene's office, Ingram strode toward his horse, his boots clomping loudly in the still silence that had settled over the watchers. Mounting, he wheeled the bay and rode out of town. A half mile out, he cut east and headed toward Jeff Smalley's lease.

Back in his office Keene sat straight-backed on the edge of his desk. Twenty-dollars bills were scattered over the desk and on the rug around him. When he rose at last it was in an almost leisurely manner. He picked up the .44 and crossed the room.

Tim O'Malley stood waiting, his heavy face set. He knew what was coming. He staggered as Keene laid the gun barrel across his face but did not fall.

"Don't make that mistake again, Tim." He dropped the .44 back in its holster.

Blood streamed down O'Malley's face. He raised one hand with an uncertain movement and cleared his eyes. Then he stood looking at his stained fingers with a kind of detached curiosity. Slow lights built up in his eyes.

"That did it, Ed." His voice was little more than a whisper. "You and me are through."

Keene smiled but his eyes were dangerous. "That's what you think *now,* Tim. But mull it over tonight. And be on the job first thing in the morning. I want No. 5 down to thirteen hundred by midnight tomorrow."

The big driller did not answer. He staggered out of the room and into the street. The sun was hot on his back as he wove an uncertain path toward Jess Thrasher's Livery Stable. There he saddled his roan and rode out of town, reeling a little from the sickness within him.

A half mile outside of Marlow, he cut east and headed toward Jeff Smalley's holdings. He was less than an hour's ride behind Dave Ingram. . . .

It was dark when Dave Ingram reined up on the slope overlooking Jeff Smalley's headquarters. Below him the gas flares strung throughout the derrick structure winked with bright orange eyes in the darkness.

He shivered. They reminded him of accusing eyes, eyes that his gun for hire had forever closed.

Although he was unaware of Ed Keene's final appraisal of him, he himself realized that he was different from the usual breed of gunmen. Killing was not his destiny. He had come from a Southern family. He was a son of a Protestant minister.

At seventeen he had killed his first man —a drunken ex-convict who had attempted to molest a girl at a Saturday night barn dance. Despite the fact that he had been defending a girl and that the ex-convict's death was no loss to the community, a warrant had been sworn out for his arrest.

At two o'clock in the morning he had slipped out of the house with nothing but the clothes he wore, three silver dollars he had earned working after school, and the .44 revolver.

Staring now at the orange flames in the darkness below, Ingram wondered what inner motive had impelled him to tuck the gun under his coat on the way to that dance. He had never been a trouble-maker or a vicious type. Perhaps it had been that the gun nestling under his coat represented an adventurous world of escape, of make-believe.

His lips thinned now as he reined into the path leading toward the Smalley well. He had recast the mould of his life when he had walked away from home that night. He was practical enough to see that there could be no return along the path of the years.

Once a killer—always a killer. It had taken him three years to accept that fact. He was a different breed—hard, ruthless men whose ego could be appeased only by challenging others with reputations as gunmen—and it always blocked the way back.

During those years, he had killed two men. Each had deliberately challenged his gun skill. It had been self-defense each time. Yet had people understood?

How could there be understanding in those who had never suffered? They sat smugly in their homes, puffed on their cigars, and said, "I hear that fellow Ingram killed another man in Guthrie last week. What's the world coming to when men go around killing innocent people?"

Ingram laughed aloud and his horse shied away at the harshness of the sound. *Innocent people!* Some of them had blood of a dozen killings on their hands!

He, Dave Ingram, was a killer, yes. Yet he did not put himself in their class. His whole life was not wrapped up in killing. The trail behind him was long and dark and bloody. He expected no forgiveness or understanding for his actions. But he had the feeling that the Almighty would find good in him.

THE GAS FLARES from the derrick were bright in his eyes now. He reined up just outside the circle of light and called, "Smalley! It's Ingram—Dave Ingram! Can I ride in?"

"What do you want, Ingram?" Smalley's voice came from behind the pump

house. "Another chance to shoot at me?"

"Don't be a fool! I could have killed you this afternoon."

"Yeah, I guess you could have." Smalley was silent a moment. Then he said, "What's on your mind?"

"I want to talk to you, Jeff."

"I'm listening."

"Stop acting like a kid," Ingram said and kneed his horse forward. "I'm ridin' in."

"I wouldn't, Ingram!" Light struck the rifle barrel thrust from behind the pump house. "Anything you've got to say can be said from there."

Ingram did not reply. His hands were shoulder high—the gun at his hip in full view as he entered the circle of light. The rifle swung to cover him but Smalley did not fire.

"Put down that rifle, Jeff!" a woman's voice said. "You've got enough trouble as it is. Besides, he's right. He could have killed you this afternoon."

After a moment the rifle disappeared and Smalley called, "All right, Ingram. But no false moves. Linda will be covering you."

Ingram straightened in his saddle. *Linda!* He had known a girl by that name once. A no good little. . . . Then the mood was gone and he was himself again. It was just that he hadn't heard the name in years.

Reining up near the rig, he dismounted and stretched his cramped muscles. Then he strode toward the derrick.

Jeff Smalley came out to meet him. His right arm was in a sling and there were dark circles under his eyes. He looked more like a kid than he had that afternoon. Pale yellow hair, a determined face, and a body that, for all its bigness, still betrayed signs of immaturity.

Smalley stood there a moment, uncertain. There was something about Ingram that baffled him. His wasn't a killer's face. Yet there was the man's record to belie the strength of character stamped on the lined features. He wondered whether anyone had ever ripped aside the mask and discovered what lay beneath. He wondered whether anyone would ever really know Dave Ingram.

Finally he said, "Sit down," and motioned to a pile of equipment. "Now—what's on your mind?"

Ingram's eyes took in the driller, tool dresser, and three roughnecks moving about the rig, their ears straining to pick up the conversation above the noise of the donkey engine.

"Too big an audience. How about your cabin?"

Smalley hesitated. Then he remembered the rifle covering them from the darkness. "Okay. But remember—that rifle's still on you."

Without speaking, Ingram followed the boy through the darkness. His mind was still struggling with this inexplicable change that had come over him. This afternoon he had thrown away a thousand dollars. Now he was on the verge of offering help to this boy he had been hired to kill less than twenty-four hours ago. He wondered if his mind were crumbling beneath the weight of the past.

"Here we are." Smalley swung open the door to the one room cabin and light poured across the threshold.

Ingram followed him inside. A lamp glowed with soft warmth on a small table beside the single bed. There were chintz curtains at the windows, a bear skin rug on the rough pine floor. And from the big kettle over the red embers in the fireplace came the tantalizing odors of spices and beef stew.

Ingram frowned. There was the unmistakable touch of a woman's hand here. Yet Smalley was not married. He had learned that much from Ed Keene. Then he remembered Linda. *So that was it.*

"Nice place you've got here. Mind if I sit down?"

Smalley said, "Go ahead." But there was still distrust in his eyes.

He had left the door partially open and through it Ingram caught a glimpse of a silk-clad figure.

Smalley followed his glance, scowled, but said nothing. It was clear, however, that he was taking no chances.

With a deliberate movement, Ingram unbuckled the heavy gun belt, untied the thong about his thigh, and tossed the .44 upon the bed.

Young Smalley's breath went out with a little gust. The tension left him then and some of the distrust went out of his eyes. He said, "All right. You can come in now. Linda."

A draft of warm air touched Ingram's

cheek but he did not turn. He waited until he heard the click of the rifle butt against the stone hearth. Then he turned.

Her eyes met his, held for a long moment, and he caught the flicker of recognition in them. Somehow he kept his own face inscrutable. Yet in that brief moment he was swept back five years to a little town on the banks of the Rio Grande.

The room had looked much like this. The woman had been younger. That had probably been the only time in his life that he had ever known complete happiness.

Watching him, Jeff Smalley wondered at the change. And with that rare instinct of youth he realized now that Dave Ingram's hardness—despite his reputation—was external.

It was then that he remembered the rumors floating around the Strip about the hidden side to this man's character. Suddenly his whole attitude toward Ingram changed. He didn't know why Dave Ingram had turned gunman; he didn't care now.

Smalley finally broke the silence.

"Okay, Ingram. Let's get down to business. What's bothering you?"

Ingram rolled a quirly, lit it, and said, "I want a job, Jeff."

"What!" Smalley stared at him. "Are you out of your mind? First you come here at Ed Keene's orders to kill me. Instead you only put a bullet hole in my arm. Now you want to work for me. What's the angle, Mister?"

Ingram's eyes slid past the girl and concentrated on the glowing coals on the hearth. When he spoke it was with the impersonal calm of a doctor dissecting a cadaver.

"This is going to be hard for you to believe, Jeff. But it's true. When I took on this job Ed Keene told me that you had jumped one of his most promising wells. And that you had hired a tough drilling crew to back you up.

"According to him he wanted no violence. The wildcatters here were already stirred up against him. But since you refused to leave or be bought off he had to take steps to protect his property. He hoped that he could scare you off by bringing me in.

"It was a thin story but I was sucked in. After all, you and he were both strangers to me. So—well, I came out expecting to tangle with a dangerous character. Instead—" He smiled and spread his hands.

The boy grinned for the first time. "Instead you found a clumsy, slow-triggered kid."

Smoke curled upward from the cigarette in Ingram's hand. He wasn't smiling anymore. He said, "I'd give half of my life, Jeff, to be you right now." He paused, dragged on the cigarette, and asked, "You understand why I'm telling you all this?"

Smalley shook his head. "No. And I don't understand why in hell you're here to begin with."

The lines around Ingram's eyes deepened. "Because, Jeff, you're going to have to put your life in my hands—or you're already as good as dead!"

Crossing the room Smalley sniffed at the stew. "Thanks," he said. "But you're talking a lot and saying nothing."

"Maybe," Ingram admitted. "But get this straight. Keene is calm—calm and deep like still water. And absolutely ruthless. You're up against a tough man, Jeff, and it's time you realized it.

"Keene's afraid of you. He feels you've formed the backbone of resistance toward him. So far he's had things pretty much his own way because he's had the money. *And money is power.* Never forget that, Jeff."

"I know it!" Smalley's voice was bitter. "Tell me something I don't."

"Keene says this well of yours will come in a gusher," Ingram continued. "All right, if it does—what happens? You've got a million dollars to fight back at him with. That's why he needs your well. And if it takes a thing like murder to get it—he'll get it that way."

Smalley's laugh was short. "That I don't doubt. That's the way he's gained control of practically the whole Strip. First an offer to buy for a song. Then threats, violence—and murder. The same old tactics of the cattle kings before him!"

"Then you know what you're bucking," Ingram said. "Now he's bringing in another gunmen, Jeff. That's why I'm asking for a job as a combination roughneck-bodyguard. You're going to need one. What do you say, Jeff?"

"Hell, I don't know what to say!" Smalley stared at him. "Just what is there in this thing for you? Except maybe a bullet in

the back. And I damned well can't pay you."

"Nothing," Ingram said. "Nothing except that I almost destroyed myself this afternoon. I want to prove that I didn't. When I've killed it's always been fighting for something decent and just. This fight of yours is that sort of fight—and it's too big for you alone."

"What do you think, Linda?" Smalley turned to the girl, who had remained silent during the conversation.

The girl's eyes met Ingram's. Flame was smouldering in their depths. Her mouth was bitter. "I think you're able to take care of yourself, Jeff. You don't need a hired killer as a bodyguard!"

Ingram's expression did not change. He said, "Don't be a fool! Jeff has sense enough to realize he's no match for a gunman. That's a profession—an art in itself. Jeff, either I stay or ride on. It's up to you."

The boy looked helplessly from one to the other. He sensed the antagonism between the man and girl.

"I—I couldn't afford your price, Ingram."

"What are you paying roughnecks?"

"Three-and-a-quarter a day."

"You've just hired yourself a man." Ingram rose, picked up the heavy gun belt and buckled it around his waist. "I'll be around with my gear first thing in the morning."

At the door he paused. "By the way—do you happen to know a man named Tim O'Malley?"

"Sure," said Smalley. "He's Ed Keene's trouble-shooter. Why?"

"He saved my life this afternoon," Ingram said. "I've a hunch he'll be around asking for a job. He's a good driller—and handy with a gun. You could use both."

Smalley groaned. "First I hire the man who was sent to kill me. Now you ask me to take on Ed Keene's chief trouble-shooter. Look, Ingram—is this a move by Keene to put you and O'Malley in my camp?"

"Wouldn't it have been much easier to kill you?" asked Ingram coolly. "Use your head, Jeff. Good night. See you in the morning."

He closed the door and went out into the night. His horse stood hip-shot, rump turned to the freshening wind. For a moment Ingram stood there, the blood pounding in his temples. *Linda Burke!* After three years. And pulling the same trick on Jeff Smalley as that she'd pulled on him three years before!

He mounted and rode back toward town. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Gunsmoke Driller

SHEET lightning rippled across the sky behind the mass of clouds boiling up in the southwest. The wind had died and now a hushed expectancy hung over the Strip. It was as though the land waited breathlessly for the storm to break.

An hour's ride from Marlow, Dave Ingram drew rein and listened to the muffled thud of horses' hoofs pounding toward him through the night. One, hard ridden, from the trail ahead; the other, more slowly, along the route he had just traveled.

Frowning, he pulled into a small clump of scrub oak and waited. Suddenly a horseman loomed out of the darkness ahead. He was riding hard and fast. Lightning blazed and Ingram caught a glimpse of the rider. Tim O'Malley! His face was blood-streaked and he reeled in the saddle as he rode.

Ingram swore. Trust Keene to pistol-whip a man! Well, Mister Keene had lost his right-hand man. O'Malley was on his way to throw in with Jeff Smalley.

As soon as O'Malley had disappeared, Ingram shoved out of the scrub oak and headed toward town. He had not ridden a quarter of a mile when the rider from behind caught up with him. He knew who it was even before Linda Burke cried, "Dave! Wait!"

Reining up he let her ride alongside. Back there in Smalley's cabin he had not dared to look at her. But now—even in the intermittent flares of lightning—he saw how little she had changed.

She was still slim, but with a rich maturity she had not possessed before; still with the same sea-green eyes and copper hair; still with the same falsely generous mouth.

His eyes traveled over the modishly cut blue-silk dress, badly wrinkled now by her ride. His smile was cynical. *You haven't changed much, have you, Linda? Except for the worse. How much did Jeff have to*

borrow to pay for that Jezebel's dress?

She bit her lip. "You fool! You fool! You were always ready to think the worst of me, weren't you?"

When he did not reply she went on half in anger, half in self-defense. "I know what you're thinking. And it isn't true. He's just a kid who needs some one to look after him. I fixed his cabin up like that three months ago. Now I ride over twice a week and clean the place for him."

She paused, searching his face. His eyes were flat. "As for this dress—I do a specialty dance at the Black Gold. The pay is good. I can afford what I—Oh, what's the use? You wouldn't understand. You never did." Her voice ran on.

"You're cold and hard, Dave. You've lived by the gun for years. Someday you'll die by it. That's why I ran out on you in Brazos."

"Was it?" Ingram's voice was thin. "Or was it because you thought I was dying from that bullet in my chest and figured it was time to clear out?"

She winced, but her eyes were steady. "Yes, I suppose it was, Dave—to a certain extent. I stood it as long as I could, living in fear from one day to the next. Shaking inside everytime I heard a shot. . . .

"Can't you understand, Dave?" She put her hands on his shoulders. "You can never escape your past, Dave. It will follow you to your grave. Sooner or later you would have wanted me with or without marriage. And, regardless of what you think, I am *not* that kind of woman, Dave."

There was amused tolerance on Ingram's face. He said, "That's not why you rode after me."

"No, you're right. It wasn't. Jeff loves me, Dave. He's asked me to marry him. I rode out to beg you not to tell him about us."

Some of the harshness went out of Ingram's face. He said, "As far as I'm concerned the past is dead. But if you run out on him—"

The girl shivered at the look in his eyes. Then he said, "Just one thing more. Do you love Jeff?"

"It's *not* a question of love, Dave," she said with a touch of desperation. "It's just that he can give me kindness and security, and a feeling of living without fear."

The bitterness he had harbored toward her for three years disappeared. "It's too late for us, I suppose?"

"It was always too late for us, Dave. You have courage, yes. But it's the wrong kind of courage. You refuse to put away that gun because you're not man enough to ignore the insults of killers."

"Yes?" Ingram's face twisted. "Admire him all you want, Linda. You'll never marry him."

Anger flared up in the girl. "Why? Because you'll kill him?"

With a sudden move he swept her into his arms and kissed her. "Because, you little fool, you still love me!"

For a moment the girl stood there looking at him with turbulent eyes. Finally she said, "You're hard and selfish. I could *never* love you again!"

Ingram spurred the bay into a run, and she could hear his laughter trailing back through the darkness. . . .

Half a mile ahead Dave Ingram lounged in the saddle. He smiled as he remembered Linda Burke's vehement denial of her love for him.

For an hour he rode on in this relaxed state. Then he remembered the serious business that lay ahead. From now on he would have to be on his guard every minute. Ed Keene would not waste much time. And when his hired killer came. . . . With the habit of years Ingram's hand brushed against the plain hickory butt of the .44.

Then he remembered Linda's words. *You have courage, yes. But it's the wrong kind of courage! You refuse to put away that gun because you're not man enough to ignore the insults of killers.*

His hand fumbled at the gunbelt buckle, and then dropped back to the reins. He shook his head. A boy's life and happiness were at stake. Not now. . . .

THE sun had not yet broken above the hills when Dave Ingram dismounted before Smalley's cabin. Against the cloud-shot sky the derrick thrust upward like a rough, gaunt skeleton. He could hear the labored *chug-chug* of the donkey engine. Men were moving about the derrick platform.

Ingram busied himself with his saddle roll. He had feared an unexpected move from Keene. That was the reason he had checked out of the hotel in Marlow long

before dawn had arrived and ridden here.

A yellow haired figure detached itself from the group around the rig and hurried toward him.

"Hello, Dave." Jeff Smalley's voice was friendly and the distrust had vanished from his eyes. "You're early. Have a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks," Ingram said. "How are things?"

Smalley flashed him an uncertain smile. "I don't quite know. Tim O'Malley rode in half an hour after you left last night."

"Yes, I know," said Ingram. "I passed him on the way into town. He was riding hell bent for leather. Looked to me like he'd been hurt."

"He is." Smalley threw open the cabin door. "Go in and see for yourself."

The morning sun lay harshly across Tim O'Malley's face. He lay on the bed staring at the ceiling. He looked like a steer had kicked him.

A tightening of the jaw was Ingram's only reaction. He stared down at O'Malley. The Irishman essayed a smile but gave it up.

Ingram said, "Keene?"

"Yeah. Keene." O'Malley tried to sit up, but Ingram shoved him back.

"I expected this, Tim," he said. "You'd better take it easy today. Tomorrow, if you feel like it, you can turn to. Meanwhile, that face needs attention."

Turning to Smalley he said, "He ought to have some stitches, Jeff. Could you send some one into town for a doctor?"

"I already have," Smalley said. "Doc Anderson ought to be here soon."

He went to the fireplace and poured coffee. He handed a cup to Ingram, then said to the injured man. "Feel up to it, Tim?"

O'Malley managed a grin and reached for the cup. Blood seeped from the ragged wound across his face. He wiped it away with his shirt sleeve. The grin was gone from his face.

Ingram placed his cup on the table. He said, "Let's go outside, Jeff. I want to talk to you. See you later, Tim. And take care of that handsome face!"

A hurled boot was his answer. He smiled. O'Malley was a long ways from dead.

Midway between the cabin and the rig, he halted and sat down on a pile of equipment. He rolled a quirly and slowly lit it.

"Keene says you'll bring in a gusher here, Jeff. What do you think?"

Young Smalley grinned. "You've always got a chance in the oil game, Dave. A dry hole, salt water, or a gusher. We're down to twelve hundred and fifty now, and the bits are bringing up oil bearing sand. A week or ten days more and—" He shrugged. "Well, who knows?"

"Then all you've really got to do is keep Keene off your tail until you bring it in. Right?"

Smalley kicked at a pebble in front of him. There was worry in his eyes. "It's not quite as simple as that, Dave. My money is running out. I started on a shoestring. And with oil supply houses in Marlow overcharging me it hasn't gone very far. Those overcharges are Keene's work. He controls every supply man in the Strip."

Ingram frowned. "The old squeeze play, eh? How long can you keep drilling, Jeff?"

"I've got a hundred dollars left. Say—five days. That is if the drill holds out."

"How often are your bits dressed?"

"That's the part I can't understand." Smalley's forehead creased. "Luke knows his business. He proved that the first few days he was here. It's just that somehow the last week or so the bits don't seem to cut."

"Luke, eh?" A hardness settled over Ingram's face. He rose, dusted his trousers, and said, "I'd like to talk to your tool-dresser, Jeff."

"Sure." Smalley led the way toward the rig. "He's dressing bits now."

AS THEY approached the men on the derrick floor halted their work. It was obvious to Ingram that they had somehow learned of his newly formed connection with Smalley. The atmosphere was tense, hostile—charged with unspoken belligerence. He had expected that. A gunman does not expect a cordial welcome.

"Oh, Luke!" called Smalley. "I'd like to see you for a minute."

A tall, wiry man working at the forge looking up, frowned, and laid aside a bit.

Ingram studied him from narrowed eyes. There was something familiar in the arrogant swing of the wide shoulders, the way the thin mouth twisted. He could not place

the tool-dresser, not until he grinned displaying one lower and two upper gold teeth. But then—!

Luke Thompson! The cleverest 'fixer' of tools in the oil game! A man who, operating under the pay of oil syndicates, had ruined countless small wild-catters. He was a master at his art and his bits always looked sharp. But they weren't. They slowed down drilling operations until the little men ran out of money and were forced to sell out.

"Luke," said Smalley. "This is Dave Ingram. He wants to talk to you."

"Yeah?" The tool-dresser's eyes swung to Ingram. Then there was both shocked recognition and fear in them. "What about?"

"Hello, Luke," said Ingram coolly. "Up to your old tricks I see."

Luke Thompson scowled. "What do you mean, Mister? I don't know you or what you're talking about."

"Cut it, Luke!" Ingram's right hand was hooked easily in his gun belt. "You know what I'm talking about. And you know me. Five years ago I chased you off old Ben Ames' place in Texas. Remember?"

"What's this all about, Dave?" Young Smalley asked Ed. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Ingram smiled tightly. "Come over here."

He halted before the forge and indicated the bit Luke had been working on. "Take a look at this."

After a careful inspection of the bit Smalley straightened. His face was puzzled. "I don't see anything wrong with it."

"You're not supposed to," Ingram said. "Luke's an artist. There's nothing wrong with it except that it wouldn't cut hot butter! With a bit like this your drilling efficiency is reduced forty percent. Luke's drawing at least a thousand dollars from Ed Keene for this—"

He had underestimated Luke Thompson's courage. He went down hard on his back under a crushing roundhouse blow. His head struck a derrick timber and for a moment he lay stunned.

Only the fact that Thompson was unarmed saved Ingram's life. But there was death in the heavy driller's boots Luke wore. He came in fast—booted feet driving.

But before his feet could land Ingram rolled away and up in a single movement. Luke whirled and Ingram caught him with a hard one-two punch to the belly. As Thompson doubled in pain Ingram's knee drove full in his face.

Luke Thompson's head snapped back, his whole body arcing as he fell. He lay there a moment, unmoving. Then he shoved himself painfully to his hand and knees. Blood gushed from his mouth. He staggered to his feet and stood reeling. His eyes were staring.

"Straddle your horse, Luke," said Ingram. "One of the boys will bring your pay and gear into town tonight. And, Luke—either get out of the Strip or start packing a gun."

"I'll start packing a gun, Ingram." Wiping the blood from his face, Thompson headed for the crew's quarters.

The group around the rig stood silent as he disappeared behind the roustabouts quarters. A few minutes later he rounded the shack aboard a paint stallion. He looked toward Ingram, his mouth twisted. Then he swung across the prairie toward town. His head rolled with the movement of the stallion.

Ingram rubbed his bruised knee-cap. There was a thoughtful look in his eyes. Already his mind was busy.

On the derrick floor the crew moved about uncertainly. They had not liked Thompson. Secretly they rejoiced in the beating he had taken. But they knew Ed Keene—knew he would not take the loss of Tim O'Malley and the eviction of his 'fixer'. There was trouble—and plenty of it—in store for the No. 1 Linda.

"All right, boys," said Smalley. "We've cleaned house. Now let's go back to work. Bring in a gusher and there's a thousand dollar bonus for each of you."

One old timer—the driller—grinned and said, "It's a long ways from the bottom of this hole to China, Jeff. But we're going to keep drilling for tea leaves!"

Smalley grinned. "Go to it, Pete." But when he turned back to Ingram the smile was gone. "They'd do it, too, if they had the money. But you can't drill far in five days."

He stood looking at the rig. "All my life I've dreamed of the day when I could stand back and watch the crown block blown off my derrick by a roaring column of oil. And I almost did. So close, and yet

so far—so damned far!" Ingram nodded.

Walking over to the rig Ingram sat down and rolled another of his innumerable cigarettes. He sat there for what must have been five minutes—thinking. Then he ground out the quirly and said, "What do you need, Jeff?"

Young Smalley's laughter was a little wild. "You'd better ask me what I don't need! Drills, bits, reamers, pipe tongs, six-inch casing—Oh, what's the use! I might as well ask for the moon!"

"How much money would it take?" Even as he asked Ingram thought of Johnny Martin, Manton Rawles, and others who would soon be in need of another check. "How much to get what you need?"

"About seven hundred dollars," said Smalley. "Why?" Do you know a man fool enough to lend it to me with Ed Keene out to break me?"

Reaching beneath his shirt Ingram unfastened the money belt around his waist. He opened it and let young Smalley see the sheaf of fifty dollar bills.

"There's a thousand dollars here, Jeff. If you'll give me a list of the things you need I'll ride into Marlow and have them sent out."

Jeff Smalley wet his lips. Finally he said, "Thanks, but I—I can't, Dave."

"I see." Ingram's lip curled. "Blood money, eh? You're right, Jeff. But I didn't get it from Ed Keene. Still—blood money or no—it will buy whatever equipment you need."

A hurt look swept across Smalley's face. "Don't be a fool, Dave. It's not that. It's just that—well, hell, you've known me less than two days. And yet you're offering me every dollar you have. How do you know you'd ever get it back even if Keene doesn't get me?"

Ingram smiled but his eyes remained serious. "Because, Jeff, I know human nature. You have to, in my business."

"It's a funny thing, Dave." The boy kicked at the derrick timber with a scuffed boot. "I've known a lot of men the world called good—and found them bad. Now I meet a man the world calls bad—and find him good. I don't think anyone ever really knew you. Unless maybe it was a woman."

Ingram grinned. "Women! Stay away from them, Jeff! They take everything and give nothing."

"You're wrong there, Dave." Young Smalley's voice was earnest. "A woman like Linda wouldn't."

There was no reply to that. Ingram sat silent a moment. Then he said slowly, "No—no, I guess she wouldn't."

He rose to his feet. The wind had freshened. Gray, scudding clouds were building up in the southwest. There was a sudden coolness in the air. Fastening the money belt around his waist he said, "Looks like rain. I'd better get going. If you'll give me that list of equipment I'll have it sent out first thing in the morning."

"I don't like for you to do it, Dave," said Smalley. "But I'd be a fool to turn it down. But only on a fifty-fifty partnership basis. Win, lose, or draw."

"We'll talk about that later," Ingram said as they walked toward the cabin. His horse stood patiently in the lee of the brush lean-to. Tightening the cinch, Ingram swung into the saddle.

"Thanks again, Dave." Smalley gave him the list of needed tools. "I don't think you know what this means to me."

"Forget it, kid," said Ingram curtly. "I realize more than you do!"

He swung the bay with a savageness alien to his nature and headed north. At that moment he hated himself for his own weakness and Linda, damn her, because he could not get her out of his mind!

With puzzled eyes Jeff Smalley stared after the tall, retreating figure. Then he shook his head and turned back into the cabin. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Drink with the Devil

IT WAS noon when Ingram swung into Marlow's main street. A sleepy, indolent air hung about the false fronted buildings with their shuttered blinds and cool, dim interiors.

Oil was new to the Cherokee Strip and operators—save for a few like Jeff Smalley—had not yet adopted the twenty-four hour drilling day. The stores, in general, remained closed until sundown and then opened the doors in the cool of the evening to the inrush of speculators, lease men, drillers, tool-dressers, roustabouts, cattle-

men, gamblers, and hangers-on who roared into town filling oil field supply houses and eating places to capacity."

During the day the town rested, regaining its strength for another hectic night. All that was soon to be changed. Then there would be no rest. The day would be simply a repetition of the night. Money and blood were to flow freely across bar tops and in the streets. But that madness still lay in the future and the town drowsed.

Before the *Drillers' Supply House—Basil Winters, Prop.*, Ingram dismounted. He looped the reins around the worn hitch-rack and strode inside.

A tall gaunt man behind the counter looked up from his task of checking inventories, the professional smile freezing on his lips. He was a futile looking type with a weak chin, pale watery blue eyes, and a bald, shining head. He scowled and said shortly, "Sorry. I ain't open for business."

Ingram ignored the remark. He flipped Smalley's list down on the counter. "Fill that and send it out right away. I want those supplies at the Smalley well by noon at the latest."

"I reckon you didn't hear right, Mister," Winters snapped. "Store don't open 'till sundown. Now clear out. I'm busy."

Ingram hitched the .44 closer to the front. "Ed Keene, huh? No supplies to Jeff Smalley or his friends. That's the order he gave you, wasn't it?"

The supply dealer wet his lips. His eyes shifted to the .44. "Look, Ingram," he said. "I know who you are, and what you are. And I'm not saying my sympathies ain't with young Smalley. But the answer is still the same. No supplies to the Smalley crew—now or any other time. I've got a family to think about."

Ingram frowned. It was obvious that Ed Keene's grip on the town was a real and formidable thing. This spineless fool was scared, badly scared. But he was more afraid of Keene's certain retaliation than of the present moment.

"If I was in your shoes," Ingram said slowly, "I'd see the handwriting on the wall and get out of them—damn quick! Let me tell you something, *Mister* Winters. That well of Smalley's is going to blow in a gusher—come hell, high water, or Ed Keene! And when it does, Jeff Smalley, along with the few wildcatters who are still holding out, are going to destroy Keene's power in the Strip! If you're smart you'll get on the bandwagon while there's still time."

For a moment Winters' pale watery eyes met Ingram's. Then they slid away and he said, "You're talking through your hat. No one will ever break Ed Keene's power here. Now get out!"

Ingram's mouth thinned. "I'll give you twenty-four hours, Winters. If those supplies aren't delivered by noon tomorrow Keene and his whole crew won't be able to keep me from killing you! Think it over, Winters."

He strode from the store conscious of the man's pale watery eyes following him. He knew that Winters would hurry to Keene with this latest development.

That was exactly what he wanted. Even Keene could stand only so much. If only he could shatter Keene's icy calm and force him into a personal show-down he might be able to destroy his influence over the Strip. It wouldn't be an even fight. He knew that. When Keene laid his cards on the table it would be with all his gun-slingers behind him.

One against many. And with not a chance in a million of coming out alive. *You've lived by the gun, Dave. Some day you'll die by it.* That was what Linda had said, wasn't it? But if he could destroy Ed Keene at the same time it would be a cheap price to pay.

Ingram took out a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his face. The day was hot and stifling. To the southwest heavy clouds were still building up but the freshness preceding the storm had not come. A tension within him continued to build throughout the hot sultry day.

Well into the evening the crews from the surrounding leases began pouring into town. Almost magically the quiet streets became turbulent rivers of shouting, cursing, sweating humanity, bent on forgetting the heat and the aching loneliness of the prairie. Toward this end—and their own profit—the stores and saloons sprang alive with light, and their doors swung wide to receive the influx.

Working his way through the crowds, Ingram headed toward the Black Gold House. He was impelled by two motives: the hope that he might run into Ed Keene

and force a showdown, and his desire to see Linda Burke.

The Black Gold was one of the most elaborate entertainment emporiums west of Kansas City. It was one of the few places not yet controlled by Ed Keene. It boasted a solid mahagony bar, vast stretches of gleaming mirrors, a small stage, and a clean floor show. The show drew more men than whiskey or roulette.

Kurt Schuman, a German immigrant, ran the place straight across the board. He was probably the only man other than Smalley and Ingram who wasn't afraid of Ed Keene. Yet, because he understood Keene's methods, he retained a couple of gun-slingers.

Thick smoke, the rattle of chips, and the clink of glasses rising above the din of conversation greeted Ingram as he strode inside. For a minute he stood there looking the crowd over. At a far table he spotted Art Devlin, a small inconspicuous man with thining red hair and nervous eyes. A Keene gunnie. Fast with a gun—but not fast enough.

Ingram frowned. He wished he knew more of Keene's crew by sight. It was dangerous this way, not knowing friend from enemy.

Ankling over to the bar he ordered Scotch. Then he turned as the noise died away and a thunderous applause swept the place. The house lights were dimmed. And then she was on the stage—dancing against a background of scantily dressed chorus girls.

He leaned back against the bar, the glass in his hand forgotten. She was good, too damned good for this place. He looked at the faces about him and experienced shock at the respect mirrored in these men's eyes. He frowned and downed his drink. Strange. For even though he loved her he had never truly respected Linda Burke. Her profession—as well as his own—had always been an unspoken wall between them. Yet these rough men saw in her a goodness and purity which he had somehow missed.

With a flare of skirts and a final crescendo of music from the four-piece orchestra Linda Burke finished her dance. As she took her bows her eyes met Ingram's across the crowded room. Her smile became fixed, artificial.

Ingram raised his glass and his lips formed the word *"Salud!"* That had been his way of applauding her performance in the old days. Then she was gone and the house was a bedlam of applause.

Someone slid into the empty space down the bar from him. The tension that had been building up within him all evening became almost unbearable. With a casual gesture he hauled a sack of Bull Durham from his breast pocket. It slipped from his fingers. He swore audibly, stooped and picked it up. When he straightened he was in a position for a quick draw. He raised his eyes and studied the man who had slipped in alongside him.

Gray, that was the word for him. Quiet and gray as the death that lay in the .44 on his hip. The left hip. The last time they had met it had been on the right.

The gray man looked up—caught Ingram's eye in the mirror. He did not smile. He was holding his whiskey glass in his right hand. It was a difficult task because the hand was shapeless and distorted.

Ingram looked at that hand. He remembered when he had done that. On the main street of Dodge City with the sun beating full upon his face, spoiling his aim. Seven years ago it was.

HE DOWNED his drink and said, "Hello, Chris."

"Hello, Dave."

"I see Ed Keene didn't let any grass grow under his feet. A little surprised that it's you though, Chris. I figured that smashed hand put you out of circulation."

Something akin to a smile curved the man's thin lips. "A man learns all over again, Dave—if he wants to bad enough."

Ingram was silent a moment. Of all the men he had faced across a gun-sight, Envers was the only man he had ever considered really dangerous. It was not Envers' draw—he was fast, yes—but his cold, emotionless approach. Like other gunmen, Envers considered killing a business. But, unlike the others, he was not filled with that constant restless urge to kill merely for the sake of killing. Devoid of all emotion—incapable of love, hate, or anger—Chris Envers was simply an efficient machine of destruction.

Ingram wondered just how good that left-hand draw was. He said, "I guess Keene told you that you'd have to take care of me before you could get Jeff Smalley. Think

you're fast enough to make it, Chris?"

"I never take risks, Dave." Envers must have read Ingram's mind. "That's the mistake I'm still paying for."

"Don't make another one now, Chris." Ingram's voice was level. "You don't have to prove your courage to me. You know that. Walk out of here, fork your horse, and keep riding. Otherwise—"

"Yes?" Envers had moved away from the bar. "Go on, Dave."

"Otherwise one of us isn't going to walk out of here. It's—"

He broke off—aware for the first time that his voice was carrying across a frozen stillness. He ran his eyes along the length of the bar. It was empty. Turning, he stared across an empty expanse of card tables and a deserted orchestra pit. The place was silent as a ghost-town saloon.

His eyes flicked over the tense, expectant faces of oil men, cattlemen, and dance hall girls flattened against the far wall—and his lip curled. They reminded him of jackals waiting for the kill.

He swung back to Envers. "It's up to you, Chris."

They were standing well away from the bar now. The palm of Ingram's right hand —hooked easily into his gun belt—was moist with perspiration.

Envers stood firmly planted on both feet, the whiskey glass still in his right hand. Somehow he did not look like a killer.

"I never quit a job I start, Dave."

"Whenever you're ready, Chris."

"Anytime," said Envers and drew. It was a fast draw—faster than his old right-hand one. But it wasn't fast enough. He got off one wild shot as a bullet drove him back against the bar. His legs buckled but he did not fall. Blood flowed from the corner of his mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his sleeve. He looked at Ingram, his face growing grayer by the second. Light from the kerosene lamps overhead slanted across his face as he fell.

The group flattened against the walls stirred then and came to life. A boot scuffed and Ingram spun in time to see Art Devlin fade through a side entrance. Headed for Ed Keene's office with the news, Ingram thought. Maybe that would smoke Keene out.

"All right." A heavy voice broke the silence. "A couple of you boys take him down to Spade Carmody's place. Tell Spade to fix him up in a good pine coffin. Killer or no, he still gets a proper burial.

"In twenty years it's the first time I've seen a gunnie who knew he was finished who didn't keep slinging wild lead and wrecking the place. Look! Not a single mirror smashed, not a bullet splinter on my bar! That's what I call being a gentleman!"

Somebody laughed and with that sound the tension of the room was broken. Men drifted back to the card tables and bellied up to the bar. The bartenders crawled from their hiding places to the accompaniment of much joshing and began serving drinks. Chris Envers' body had already been taken away. A swamper was busy now removing the last remaining traces of blood. Death in the Strip was quick and violent—and soon forgotten.

Ingram studied the man who had spoken. A typical burgomeister. Heavy-set, close cropped hair, heavy jowls, small twinkling blue eyes. This was Kurt Schuman.

The man caught Ingram's eye. He crossed the room and held out his hand. "I'm Kurt Schuman—owner of this place. I know your reputation, Ingram, but I'm still proud to shake your hand. Jeff Smalley's a friend of mine."

Ingram shook hands. He was thinking of Chris standing there at the bar with that still look on his graying face. He wondered what Chris had been thinking during those last few moments. What he, himself, would think when it happened to him. *Live by the gun; die by the gun.*

Kurt Schuman frowned. He had seen the trapped look on Ingram's face and understood. *This man's no gunman. He's being swept along by forces he can't fight. Some day, if he lives, he'll find himself.*

He said, "You've just shown the town where you stand in this fight, Ingram. And there are a good many of us who will back you up in a show-down. But I'm giving you this advice for what it's worth. Don't try to force a fight with Keene. It wouldn't work. He'd have one of his boys pot-shoot you from an alley at the last second."

"What do you expect me to do?" There was contempt in Ingram's voice. "Sit back and twiddle my thumbs like the rest of the town?"

Schuman shrugged. "It's your life, not

mine. But you can't help things that way. You see, until you came along, this fight was between Jeff and Keene with the wildcatters and Keene's men sort of in the background. That's the way it's got to stay. As long as Jeff hires you as a body-guard, well and good. People can understand that—knowing Keene's methods as they do.

"*But* the minute you go gunning for Keene, folks are going to start saying that Jeff is afraid to fight his own battles. That in hiring a gunman to go out and kill he's proven himself no better than Keene. That sort of thing would destroy Jeff forever here in the Strip."

Ingram poured himself a drink. He downed it and stood thinking a moment. Then he said, "It's a damned stupid way of looking at things."

"*Ja.*" Schuman sighed heavily. "But then people *are* stupid—like animals. It's all wrong. But what I tell you is true."

"What's the answer then?" asked Ingram. "Fork my horse and ride?"

"*Nein.* Jeff needs you," replied Schuman. "Just be patient. Sooner or later Keene will show his hand. Now that Envers failed to get either you or Jeff, Keene won't try bringing in another gunman. He'll make an attack on Jeff's well—or something of that sort. If you kill him then that's different. You'll only be defending Jeff's property—not fighting his personal battles for him."

Ingram said, "I guess you're right," and started for the door.

"One other thing," Schuman called after him. "Watch your step or you'll end up in an alley with a bullet in your back."

Without replying Ingram shoved out into the night.

The street was jammed with roistering men. With difficulty he worked his way through the crowd and toward the *Driller Hotel.* As he left the saloons and dance halls behind the crowd began to thin out. By the time he had reached the hotel the street was deserted.

He was half-way up the steps when a bullet plucked at his hat and thudded into the building. Instinctively he twisted, fell, and tumbled down the steps. An instant later he heard the crack of the rifle.

For a full minute he lay there, unmoving, his face buried in the dust—his body tensed against the impact of a second bullet more accurately aimed. Then he heard the sound of booted feet running across a roof-top somewhere. He waited until the footsteps faded, then got to his feet and made his way into the hotel lobby.

The clerk at the desk stared at his dusty clothing and then at the neat bullet hole in the crown of his hat. "What happened, Mister? I heard a shot and a bullet hit the building. Someone take a crack at you?"

Ingram grinned and slapped at his dusty trousers. "You're imagining things, young fellow. Just fell down the steps. Guess I had a little too much to drink. Good night."

The smile vanished from his face as he mounted the stairs to his room. That had been Cherokee Joe out there tonight. There could be no doubt about that. In that dimly lit street only Cherokee Joe could have come that close to killing him. And only Joe would have been so sure of his skill as to disdain another shot. That simple trick of falling down the steps as though hit would probably not have fooled anyone else. They would have thrown in a second shot for good luck. But not the half-breed.

The knowledge that Cherokee Joe was

not only here in the Strip but also working for Keene came as a complete surprise to Ingram. He had never seen the half-breed but he knew of him by reputation. Savage, treacherous, and possessing an uncanny skill with a rifle, Cherokee Joe was being sought by every U. S. Deputy Marshal in the country. There were half a dozen murder charges against him.

In his room Ingram sat down on the bed and pulled off his boots. He caught a reflection of the movement in the cracked mirror above the wash stand. For a full minute he studied the hard, scowling face staring back at him.

Keene can send a damned half-breed out to back shoot me and it's all right. But if I go gunning for Keene and kill him it's another matter. Then those stupid fools down in the street would accuse Jeff of hiring a gunman to do his own killing for him. There was only one way to fight a man like Keene—with his own weapons!

If one of Smalley's roustabouts were lucky enough to kill Keene, the town would praise him. Yet if he, Dave Ingram, killed Keene, he'd bring disgrace on Jeff Smalley —the man he was trying to help.

Gunman! Killer!

Swearing, he grabbed a boot and hurled it savagely at the face in the mirror. The glass shattered into glistening splinters. One small piece remained intact. And in it his distorted face glared back at him. It was as though he had been trying to wipe out his past with a single gesture, and had failed.

He remembered Linda Burke's words then. *You'll never escape your past, Dave. It will follow you always. . . .*

CHAPTER FOUR

Drill for Blood

THE tools arrived at the Smalley well shortly before noon. Three wagons loaded with everything from drills to six-inch casing. Dave Ingram was seated beside Basil Winters in the lead wagon, a rifle across his knees. As the little caravan drew to a creaking halt, Ingram jumped down, cradled the rifle under his arm, and waited for the two men hurrying toward him.

"What happened, Dave?" asked Jeff Smalley as he reached the wagons. His face was anxious. "We expected you back yesterday."

"Just a little delay," Ingram said. "But here you are, Jeff. Everything you listed. Figured Keene might try and stop us so I rode shot-gun guard. Hell of a dull job."

Tim O'Malley grinned despite the new stitches in his face. "I never thought you'd get away with it. Not right under Keene's nose anyway. How'd you talk Winters here out of those tools?"

From the wagon seat Basil Winters scowled down at him. "You and Ingram both changed horses in mid-stream, didn't you?" he snapped. "Reckon I've got the same right."

He didn't say that his switch to the Smalley camp had been in his own interest. After Chris Envers' death the night before he had become convinced of two things: that Ingram had meant what he said about that noon deadline for delivery of the tools, and that Ed Keene's power in the Strip was waning.

"Yeah." O'Malley's voice was full of contempt. "But not for the same reasons."

"All right, Tim. That's enough," said Ingram. "We got the tools. That's what we wanted. Now let's see what you can do with them!"

"Brother! And what I'll do with them!" O'Malley turned and shouted orders to the drilling crew. He had more or less taken over from Pete Lucas, the regular driller. Because the Irishman was known as one of the best drillers in the Strip old Pete had not objected.

"You'd better have a bite to eat," Smalley said and led the way to the cabin. He paused long enough to call over his shoulder, "When your men have finished unloading, Winters, the cook will take care of all of you."

Winters' pale watery eyes glared but he said nothing. Smalley had extended him the courtesy of grub but not of his company. It was a slap in the face and he knew it. He was in the unenviable position of belonging to neither one side nor the other.

"Winters didn't sell you those tools of his own accord, did he?" Smalley asked as he led the way into the cabin.

"I guess you could say he did—and he didn't."

Smalley dished up food and put the coffee pot on the coals. He said, "I heard about

what happened at the Black Gold last night, Dave. Linda rode out here after her act was finished. You shouldn't have done it, Dave."

Ingram's mouth thinned. "Is that your opinion, Jeff? Or was it hers?"

The boy turned back to the fireplace. His hand was shaking as he reached for the coffee pot. Suddenly he spun and came back.

"Dave, why does Linda hate you the way she does? It's not natural for any woman to hate like that. Especially Linda. What is it, Dave? I've got to find out. Did you and Linda know each other in the past?"

Ingram's knife slipped. He had been afraid that Jeff would find out sooner or later. But as yet the boy was only suspicious.

He kept his eyes down until he was sure that Jeff would not read them. Then he looked up and smiled.

"Do you think if I'd ever known Linda before I'd have let her get away without marrying me? Don't be silly! Look, Jeff—" He was serious now. "There is a lot you don't know about women. Some of them are afraid to face reality. I represent violence and fear and uncertainty. I'm a part of life she doesn't want to believe exists."

Some of the agitation left Smalley. He said, "I don't get it, Dave. She was shaking like a leaf, crying, and cursing you—all in the same breath. I've known women in love who acted that way. Dave, do you suppose—?"

Coffee splashed on the checkered tablecloth as Ingram kicked back his chair. He stood up, his face cold.

"Look, Jeff, we're up against one of the most ruthless men in the country. Your life is at stake. And you stand here talking nonsense! Last night I killed a man to save you. Linda Burke hates violence and she tells you it's wrong. Then she makes *you* believe it!

"Now you're afraid she's in love with me, Dave Ingram—a killer! For God's sake, why don't you wake up and start acting your age, Jeff!"

A dull red flush swept over Smalley's face. "Keep your shirt on, Dave. I didn't mean—"

"You don't know what you mean!" Ingram cut him short. "Now get this straight, Jeff. I'm not getting a damned thing out of this deal—except the satisfaction of making up for the wrong I did you. The minute I feel you distrust me I'll fork my horse and get out! Do you understand?"

The hurt look on Smalley's face stabbed at him. He ought not to have given the kid hell that way. But Jeff had been dangerously close to the truth. Truth that would have hurt.

"You've got no right to talk to me that way, Dave!" Anger was building in young Smalley now. "You're hinting that I can't make up my own mind or fight my own battles. That's a lie!"

"If it is, prove it to me!" Ingram snapped. "You've got a rig, a string of tools, a good drilling crew, and—"

His voice broke as the sharp, thin crack of a rifle slapped through the air. He stood there listening for another shot. There was none.

"Cherokee Joe!" he swore and ran outside with Smalley right behind him.

OVER NEAR the wagons the drilling crew and teamsters were gathered around a sprawled figure on the ground. Ingram hurried toward them. "What happened, Tim?" he snapped.

O'Malley said, "Somebody up on the slope just bushwhacked Winters."

Ingram grunted. "Dead?"

"Deader'n a door nail."

Shoving aside a roughneck, Ingram stared down at the sprawled body. Basil Winters lay face downward, one arm hooked under him. The earth around his chest was wet and dark.

"Anyone get a shot at the killer?"

"Hell, Dave!" exclaimed O'Malley. "That was Cherokee Joe! He was half way to town before Winters hit the ground! You know these breeds."

"Cherokee Joe!" Young Smalley looked worried. "You sure?"

O'Malley stared at him, open-mouthed. "Not another man in the Strip could kill at that distance!"

No one said anything to that. Jeff Smalley kept staring at the dead man with wide eyes. Suddenly he whirled on Ingram, his face working.

"Damn you, Ingram!" he shouted. "Linda was right. You're no good for anything except killing! Last night you killed Chris Envers. Then you forced Basil Win-

ters to sell you tools! Yeah, that's the only way you know how to get things—by violence!"

He thrust his face close to Ingram's. His fists were clenched. "Why, you damn gunhawk, do you think bringing in this well is worth two men's lives? Basil Winters was a family man. That part doesn't bother you though, does it, Ingr—"

"Shut up!" Ingram's voice had a metallic quality. "Now get this into your self-centered head, Smalley—and *keep it there!*

"What I'm fighting for here is something bigger than this well of yours. It's the right of every man, woman, and child in the Cherokee Strip to live free and without fear.

"Basil Winters is dead. I'm no hypocrite so I won't say I'm sorry—except for his family. He was a weakling, a man who tried to ride two horses at the same time."

Smalley said nothing. A murmur of assent went up from his crew.

"But other men—*good men*—are going to die before this trouble is over," Ingram went on. "It's like a volcano. It boils and rumbles beneath the surface until the pressure gets too great. One of these days the top is going to blow off. When it does there's going to be hell in the Cherokee Strip!

"As for what you said about me—" His face hardened. "If you were anything but a kid tied to a woman's apron strings I'd give you a sound thrashing. Instead, Jeff, you can fight your own battles. I'll do what I can to help the rest of the Strip fight theirs. And as for the money you owe me—forget it. It's worth something to learn the meaning of ingratitude."

He spun away and headed for the lead wagon. On the trip out he had hitched his horse to the tailboard while he rode shotgun. Now he freed the reins, swung into the saddle, and set spurs to the bay.

O'Malley shouted, "Wait for me, Dave!"

Reining in, Ingram waited until the big driller forked his horse and caught up. He looked at O'Malley with steady eyes. "This won't be fun, Tim."

The Irishman grinned. "I'll string along with you and the rest of the country. It will probably be mostly you. The rest of the country ain't got any guts!"

Behind them they heard Pete Lucas shout angrily. "Damn you, Jeff! You got no more sense than a jackass! For a plugged nickel me and the rest of the crew would walk off and leave you flat!"

Dust spurted up from the horses' hoofs as Ingram led the way toward open country. Gradually his anger toward Jeff Smalley cooled. He realized now that the boy was not responsible for his actions. It was Linda Burke who had poisoned his mind in order to turn him against Dave Ingram.

"You going to leave the kid on his own, Dave?" O'Malley's voice was worried. "Hell, he won't have a Chinaman's chance against Ed Keene in a show-down. You know that."

Ingram's mouth tightened. He said nothing as he swung into the brush and urged the bay up the slope where Cherokee Joe had lain in ambush.

Kill once and you kill always. There can be no stopping. It's the law of the gun. . . .

* * *

Day after day young Smalley drove his crew with relentless fury. The knowledge that he had unjustly accused Dave Ingram of many things—including Basil Winters' death—drove him more and more within himself.

The day after Winters' death Linda Burke rode out. Although she agreed that Ingram had been responsible for the oil supply man's death, she surprised Smalley by defending the gunman.

"Remember, Jeff, he wasn't getting a thing out of this. And he loaned you practically every dollar he had. I'm not proud of the way we've treated him. Somehow I feel that we've done him an unforgivable wrong. Especially me."

In the days following their conversation Jeff Smalley grew more and more morose. There were times when he spoke to no one for hours on end. Gradually even Pete Lucas and the rest of the crew forgot their anger toward him. And instead they began to feel sorry.

On the third day after drilling was resumed they passed out of the oil bearing sand and into a new formation. The drill crew shook their heads and talked among themselves.

Jeff knew what they were saying. *Dry hole!* The nightmare of all wildcatters who sunk their life savings and the sweat and nerve-wracking labor of months into one desperate gamble for liquid gold. It was a blow that would have broken an ordinary

man. But Jeff Smalley was no longer an ordinary man. For now he was hounded by the knowledge that Dave Ingram had trusted him—and that he had betrayed that trust. Now he realized that while he had been thinking only of himself, Dave Ingram had been struggling for the freedom of the entire Cherokee Strip.

That knowledge, coupled with the determination to exonerate himself, drove Jeff Smalley beyond failure, sent the bit pounding relentlessly into the earth hour after hour—day after day. . . .

DAVE INGRAM reined up on the slope overlooking the Smalley well. For five days now he and Tim O'Malley had kept to the hills. During that time they had maintained a constant vigil against any surprise attack upon the Smalley crew by Ed Keene.

So far Keene had made no move. But there was a tenseness hanging over the prairie country. It was in the air, in the storm clouds that hung threateningly in the southwest but never broke.

When, where, and in what manner, Ed Keene's next play would come Ingram could only guess. Cherokee Joe might play an important part in it. Or Keene might swoop down on the Smalley crew with his gunmen in a showdown fight. He might reason that if in a single raid he could wipe out Smalley, Ingram, and O'Malley the backbone of resistance would be broken.

And he would be right. Ingram's strategy was simple. Since the Smalley faction was not large enough to meet force with force in a showdown fight it would be necessary to use brains instead. That was where Cherokee Joe came in. For it was the half-breed that Ingram planned to use as a club to destroy Keene.

Ingram reined away now and headed back toward where he had left Tim O'Malley waiting. His course of action was clear.

He had to find Cherokee Joe. He was certain that the half-breed had not returned to town after killing Winters. Keene would not take a chance of being incriminated in Winters' death. Although he controlled the law in Marlow, his influence did not extend to the Territorial courts nor to the U. S. Marshal. If caught and convicted he would hang along with Cherokee Joe.

No, Ingram reasoned, Cherokee Joe had not returned to Marlow. He had taken to the back country to hide out until things blew over. And there was only one way to get him—go after him.

Tim O'Malley had a rifle slung across his saddle when Ingram broke into view. He slipped it back into the boot and said, "Anything new?"

"Same as before. Jeff's driving them like hell."

"Where do we go from here? I'm getting damned tired riding in circles."

Ingram sat silent a moment. Then he said, "Any idea where Cherokee Joe might have headed, Tim?"

"I don't know, Dave. We lost his trail after thirty minutes the day Winters was killed." The big driller wrinkled his forehead. "I've known Joe for three years but I never could figure out how his mind worked.

"But there *is* a cabin about thirty miles from here where Ed Keene used to rendezvous. It's in rough country and hard to get to. Maybe Joe went there; maybe he didn't. We could find out."

"How do you get there?"

O'Malley told him. "It's a long chance."

"It's worth a try." Ingram was thoughtful. "You see, Tim, Cherokee Joe's our trump card. I know these breeds. When the cards are down they crack and talk. Joe's no exception. And if we can turn him over to the U. S. Marshal alive—and with a confession—Ed Keene will be finished. Understand?"

O'Malley spat. "Sure, I understand. But I still don't like it. I know Joe. He's treacherous as a snake. You'll never bring him in alive, Dave."

"I'm going to try," Ingram said. "Meanwhile, Tim, keep scouting the hills around Jeff's place. If you spot Keene and his boys, ride hell bent for leather and warn Jeff. We'll meet at sundown day after tomorrow near the foot of Creek Hill."

"You're crazy, Dave!" protested the big driller. "Joe will knock you off with that rifle before you get within half a mile of him!"

"Let me worry about that," said Ingram, reining away. "And remember—Creek Hill day after tomorrow."

O'Malley shrugged. "It's your funeral, not mine."

"Crepe hanger!" retorted Ingram and sent the bay plunging through the brush.

Half an hour later he drew rein, and headed west toward Cherokee Joe's possible hide-out. Joe was both clever and dangerous. The chances of bringing him back alive—*and* with a confession for Winters' murder—were very slim. And the probability that he, Dave Ingram, would be too dead day after tomorrow to meet O'Malley at their rendezvous was exceptionally good. All Cherokee Joe needed would be one quick shot.

Ingram shifted the .44 around to a more convenient position and freed the carbine in its saddle-boot. Death up there in the distant hills would be lonely. At least Chris Envers had had company when he died. Ingram's hand tightened on the rein and he shivered.

Live by the gun; die by the gun. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Killers Are Yellow

THE CABIN lay half-hidden in an oak grove at the north end of the cup-shaped valley. A man not hunting for it could have passed within a hundred yards and never suspected it was there.

Up on the west rim Dave Ingram slid forward on his belly and scanned the place below. There was no sign of life, no smoke from the chimney, no horse in the tiny corral, no movement. Desolation lay heavily about the place.

Ingram had not expected to find Cherokee Joe in the cabin. For that reason he had dismounted a quarter of a mile back and worked forward on foot.

He knew how a breed's mind worked. The cabin below was a decoy to draw the duck—Dave Ingram. The minute he walked into that clearing he would be a dead one. Somewhere up on the valley's rim Cherokee Joe was squatting with a rifle across his knees—waiting patiently for him to show himself.

Crawling back, Ingram propped his rifle against a tree. He lay there debating his next move.

Somewhere he thought he heard a twig snap. He whipped out the .44 and crouched, listening. There was no further sound. Carefully he removed his boots, thrust the rifle into a clump of bushes, and began to work stealthily around the valley rim.

He was convinced somehow that the half-breed had not spotted him as he rode up. But Cherokee Joe had known for five days now that sooner or later he would come. They understood each other—he and the half-breed—even though they had never met. Instead of scouting around every day to pick up his sign, Joe chose instead to sit somewhere on the rim chewing jerky and caressing his rifle. Waiting with the patience of his ancestors day after day for the kill.

Ingram smiled grimly. He understood Cherokee's psychology. *Why risk my neck hunting Ingram? Let Ingram come to me. Then I'll kill him.* Sound reasoning. Only it wasn't going to work.

He paused now and listened. He heard no sound save that of his own breathing. Satisfied, he slipped forward through the scrub timber, his stockinged feet expertly avoiding dry twigs and loose stones. The half-breed had to be trapped before he could bring that rifle into play. Otherwise—

Ingram was half way around the valley rim when he flushed Cherokee Joe.

Tired and a little discouraged, Ingram had paused to rub a stone-bruised heel. As he straightened he caught a glimpse of bright color in a clump of brush to his right. For a long moment he froze, expecting a bullet to slam into him from Joe's rifle. When no further movement came from the brush he dropped to his belly and worked around to the rear of the half-breed. An inch, a foot at a time with sweat breaking out on his forehead, and the sound of his own breathing like thunder in his ears.

He had the .44 out now—the long barrel trained on that spot where he had last seen that flash of color. He was less than ten feet away when he finally spotted Joe. And even at that distance it wasn't easy.

The half-breed had hollowed himself out a nest in the brush. He lay there now on his stomach peering down at the cabin a hundred feet below. A rifle lay within reach of his right hand which, at the moment, clutched a jug of corn whiskey. He was wearing a bright red and white checkered cotton shirt.

He's like the rest of the pack! Always slipping up somewhere. Suddenly he wanted to laugh. Cherokee Joe lying up here dulling his mind with cheap whiskey and wearing a shirt that stood out like a

sore thumb. Taking life easy while he calmly waited to snuff out another life.

Directly behind the half-breed he halted. "Don't move, Joe," he said, "or I'll blow your head off!"

The muscles of Cherokee Joe's back rippled beneath the plaid shirt. For perhaps five seconds he lay there on his belly motionless. Then he rolled like a cat—taking the rifle with him.

O'Malley had warned Ingram against the breed's tricks and he was ready for them. Still it was hard to believe that a man could move that fast. As Cherokee Joe snapped the rifle up from his kneeling position Ingram shattered his elbow with a .44 slug. Joe dropped the rifle and grabbed his arm, his swarthy face twisting with pain.

"Try that trick again, Joe, if you feel up to it," Ingram said grimly. "I like target practice!"

The half-breed staggered to his feet. He said nothing—just stood there and stared at Ingram from slitted eyes.

For the first time Ingram got a good look at this man whose rifle skill was legend throughout the southwest. Small, he was—standing no more than five feet four in moccasins. So small that he could have passed for a mere boy save for his face. There the resemblance ended.

All of the cruel, vicious nature of the man was indelibly stamped on his swarthy face. It lay starkly revealed in the black beady eyes—in the vicious twist of the thin mouth. His forehead was low, receding, and the chin almost non-existent. He might have been thirty; he might have been fifty. There was no way of knowing.

"Get up, Joe." Ingram motioned with the .44. "I'm taking you back to answer for Basil Winters' murder!"

For the first time the half-breed spoke. His English was a white man's English. It was clear that he had not lived long among his mother's people.

"You crazy, Ingram? I ain't been around the Smalley place in months! How could I—"

"Cut it, Joe!" Ingram's mouth twitched. "How did you know Winters was killed at the Smalley place unless you were there? Save your breath. There are half a dozen men ready to swear they saw you riding away right after the shooting. Maybe they didn't actually *see* you, Joe, but they know you did it. And they're going to see that you hang for it. Higher than a kite!"

CHEROKEE JOE'S eyes shifted uneasily. His face was twisted with the pain of his shattered elbow. "You going to fix my arm?" he asked. "It's startin' to hurt like hell."

Ingram's lip curled. "You're not like your people, are you, Joe? You don't have the guts. That's going to make it tough on you. If you can't take a bullet in the arm without whining how are you going to stand hanging?"

The half-breed licked his lips. Death by the gun had no fear for him. But hanging. . . .

Ingram made the most of Joe's fright. "You've seen hangings, haven't you, Joe? They slip a rope around your neck. A strong rope, Joe, with a knot that fits snug behind your ear. You're standing on a little trap door—the gate between you and Hell. And you know that any second that trap door is going to drop out from under you. Then where are you?"

He watched the fear build up in Cherokee Joe's eyes. He was counting heavily on this psychology to break the half-breed's nerve. Right now the pain in Joe's arm had robbed him of his normal aggressiveness. His mind was dulled, fear-ridden, and receptive to the thoughts now being driven into it.

But take him down to the cabin, give him a shot of whiskey from that jug, and fix up his arm and he'd laugh at you till hell froze over. No—he had to break Joe here *now*. Because the breed wasn't laughing at this moment. Joe was scared—badly scared.

"Where are you then, Joe? You're right where Ed Keene put you! There's a priest standing there, praying for your soul. He's trying to help you. Only you're not interested in saving your soul. You only want to keep that little door from dropping out from under you.

"There's only one man can help you now. And where is he, Joe? Standing out there in the crowd just as eager for that trap to open as you are to keep it closed. Why? Because you're no good to him any more. He's not going to stick his own head in a noose for a half-breed killer. Not Ed Keene!

"He's going to stand there watching

while you dangle there at the end of that rope—kicking your life out. Then he'll go to a saloon and have a drink as though nothing has happened. But something *has* happened, Joe. You're dead! You're still out there dangling against the sky. And you died without naming the man who was guilty as you.

"Ed Keene is smart. He knows you wouldn't tell it was him who ordered you to kill Basil Winters."

"Smart, is he?" Cherokee Joe's black eyes glittered like a snake's, his lips were drawn back from his teeth. Ingram's voice droning into his whiskey-fogged, pain-dimmed mind had left him with the weird feeling that everything Ingram had described had actually happened to him. Then he realized that it had only been a warning. But it *could* happen.

"Smart, is he? I'll show him who's smart. The dirty son!" Cherokee Joe was shouting now. He had known of men who had been double-crossed. He had never figured Ed Keene would try it on him. Keene had promised to hide him out, to furnish him with bribed protection in case he was caught. But he knew better now. No. Keene wasn't going to risk his neck helping a half-breed.

"Look, Ingram, you want me to talk, don't you? Well, you take me to the U. S. Marshal and I'll tell him! I ain't goin' to hang alone for Keene's dirty work. He's the one who gave me orders to kill Winters. Said Winters wasn't going to cross him before the whole town and get away with it."

"You willing to tell the Marshal that?" asked Ingram.

"Sure," Joe snarled. "And I'll tell *you* something else. You think it was me tried to kill you that night in front of the hotel. It wasn't! Keene gave me the order. But Luke Thompson begged Keene to let him do the job. You beat him up and knocked out his gold teeth. The son tried to make it look like *my* work! *But I wouldn't have missed, Ingram!*"

Ingram picked up the whiskey jug and gave the breed another drink. Even now he found it hard to believe the confession had been so easy to get from the wily Joe. No matter how many drinks Cherokee Joe got under his belt now he would still brood over what Ingram had said. When the time came to talk he would talk—and plenty.

Ingram's face was almost relaxed as he followed Cherokee Joe down the trail to the hidden cabin. . . .

THE VAST shadow at the base of Creek Hill was lengthening. In the west the sun struggled to keep above the horizon. Dave Ingram had not yet showed up.

Tim O'Malley glanced nervously at the big gray-haired man beside him. He wondered what the marshal would say if he knew that he was still being sought for a framed-up murder charge back in Pennsylvania.

That had been one of the chances he'd taken in riding into Guthrie. But he figured that if by some miracle Ingram did succeed in bringing Cherokee Joe back alive it would be better to have the U. S. Marshal on the spot to get a confession. Then they could go after Ed Keene without any loss of time.

And time was important now. The volcano Ingram had been talking about was ready to erupt. Even in Guthrie there was rumor that Keene was ready to swoop down on the Smalley crew for a fast knock-out blow.

Keene was desperate. He had to do something—and do it quickly. Ingram had beaten him at every turn; the little wildcatters were growing more confident. One of them had even chased Art Devlin off his place with a rifle when Devlin turned up with Keene's officer to buy the place.

After that show of defiance Keene had to act—or his power in the Strip would be gone. And he wasn't a man to give up without a fight.

O'Malley looked again at the lengthening shadow. "No sign of him yet, Marshal. Do you—do you suppose Joe got him?"

Ed Pope, U. S. Marshal from Guthrie, shrugged. "Don't know. But I do know Ingram and Cherokee Joe's records. Ingram is a fair man. To me he's always seemed a sort of misguided Robin Hood. As for Joe—well, Joe's record speaks for itself. A degenerate killer."

The worry in O'Malley's eyes deepened. "You figure Joe got him?"

Pope smiled. "No. I figure Ingram got Cherokee Joe. He understands how a breed's mind works. He probably did just the opposite of what Joe figured he would."

Pope held up his hand in a warning

gesture. For a moment they sat there listening to the sound of approaching horsemen. O'Malley pressed his ear to the ground. Then he stood up and said, "Two of them."

"Get under cover," ordered Pope. "Maybe it's Ingram; maybe it's not."

Leading the horses into a grove of cottonwoods they crouched there, rifles resting in the crooks of their arms. For several minutes they waited. Then the hoofbeats ceased and Dave Ingram's voice shouted:

"Come out of those cottonwoods, you red-headed shanty Irish! I could spot you a mile away."

"It's him, Marshal!" O'Malley exclaimed and broke cover. Pope came along behind him, his rifle crooked in his arm.

"So help me!" Tim O'Malley stared first at Ingram then at the diminutive half-breed with him, his right arm in a sling. "This I never expected to see. Not in this world!"

"I know, crepe-hanger," said Ingram wearily. "Yes, I got him. And a confession, too. What more do you—" He caught sight of Ed Pope and stopped. "Who's this, Tim?"

O'Malley said reluctantly, "This is Ed Pope, U. S. Marshal from Guthrie, Dave. He's here to take care of Cherokee Joe, and Keene too."

"Yeah?" Ingram's voice was soft but there was anger building up in it. "So you left off scouting to ride into Guthrie. You damned fool!"

The big driller flushed. "Now keep your shirt on, Dave. I had to do it. You said yourself that Joe here was our trump card against Keene.

"All right then. Suppose you hadn't turned up today? Suppose Joe had got you instead of you getting him? Where would that have left Smalley and the rest of the little wildcatters? Still sitting here with Ed Keene in power and breathing down their necks."

"He's right, Ingram." Ed Pope said. "O'Malley figured that if you didn't turn up today someone still ought to go out and get a confession. He figured the law was the one to do it."

The anger went out of Ingram. "You're right, of course. And so was Tim." Yet the worry did not leave his eyes. "But I'm afraid it's given Keene the chance he's been waiting for." His voice was cold.

"Keene's held power here in the Strip only because the little wildcatters haven't banded together. That's been his whole strategy, to strike hard and fast before they could band together. He's followed that plan every time.

"But as long as he knew O'Malley and I were scouting the country he couldn't work that game. There's only half a dozen men on the Smalley well counting Jeff, but they're all handy with a gun. They could put up a hell of a fight if they were warned in time. Keene couldn't chance a drawn-out gun battle.

"He means to finish off Smalley's crew in a hurry and then fade. Otherwise the wildcatters would band them together for a show-down fight. Keene hasn't got enough men for that. That's how important it was to keep up that scouting."

The Marshal's face was grim. "Now that Keene's own scouts haven't seen you or O'Malley around Keene's probably already struck." Swinging into his saddle he said, "Come on. Let's ride!"

"What about Cherokee here?" O'Malley jerked his head toward the halfbreed. "What are we going to do with him?"

Cherokee Joe scowled. "Keene wouldn't try to save me from hanging. Just give me my rifle and I'll take care of him!"

As they swung out across the prairie toward the Smalley camp, Ed Pope smiled. "Thanks, Cherokee, for that confession. It's enough to hang Ed Keene even if you do get killed. An oral confession is as good as a written one."

Riding up beside the breed he looked Cherokee Joe squarely in the eyes. "And, Joe—don't try any tricks. I'm no slouch with a rifle myself!"

Cherokee Joe smiled but his eyes glittered.

Looking at him, Ingram knew that the only trick Joe would try would be to get Ed Keene before anyone else.

They rode for the most part in silence, pushing the horses at a reckless pace. The sun had dropped below the hills, and dusk lay heavily over the prairie country. Every beat of a horse's hoof was an invitation to death. A gopher hole, or a loose stone, and a man would die beneath the trampling hoofs of his companions' horses. But they did not slacken pace.

LOOMING OUT of the darkness like a gaunt skeleton, the derrick acted as a beacon for the four fast-traveling horsemen. There was something reassuring in the reddish flares and the staunch solidity of the structure.

Reining up on the slope the men breathed their winded horses. Below they could hear the labored *chug-chug* of the donkey engine and see men moving about on the rig.

Tim O'Malley said, "Looks like we got steamed up over nothing."

"Maybe." Dave Ingram studied the tiny figures moving about the platform. There was nothing unusual about the scene below, yet something kept tugging at his mind—a persistent warning in some remote area of his brain.

"What's the matter?" Ed Pope pulled up beside him. "Anything wrong?"

"I don't know," said Ingram. "Things look all right. But I've got a feeling we're riding into trouble." He slipped the .44 from its holster, flicked open the gate, spun the cylinder, and snapped the gate closed.

Pope said, "They're still drilling. They wouldn't be doing that if anything was wrong."

He pulled his gun and gave it a check. Tim O'Malley followed suit. Cherokee Joe looked as though he wished he had a rifle.

"Could be I'm wrong," Ingram admitted. "But I've got a feeling that Keene's set a trap for us down there."

The marshal shrugged. "I came here to arrest Keene for his part in Basil Winters' murder. If he's down there I intend to do it!"

In the darkness Ingram smiled grimly. Pope was a cool customer—a man of quiet courage. "No point in getting yourself killed doing it, Marshal. Let's go about this easy."

"You're leading the way," said Pope. "I'm following."

Without replying Ingram kneed his horse down the slope, groping his way carefully in the darkness. Behind him came Pope and O'Malley, with Cherokee Joe in the middle. As they drew closer they could make out individual figures now. There were five men working around the rig—the whole crew. That was funny, Ingram thought. A full crew at this time of night. Usually the driller and a couple of roustabouts were all that was necessary. There was something funny about their actions that puzzled him—a strange combination of excitement and lethargy. Something *was* wrong.

"There's Jeff over there by the pump shack," O'Malley whispered. "And Pete Lucas on the rig. Hell, Dave, there's nothing wrong!"

"We'll soon find out," Ingram said and fired three quick shots into the air.

The effect upon the men around the rig was instantaneous. They broke like rabbits away from the well. All but old Pete Lucas. He stood fast on the platform waving his skinny arms and shouting, "Don't come in, Dave! It's a trap! Ed Keene's—"

Orange flame spewed from the pump house and Pete Lucas went down on his face. As though awaiting that signal the whole derrick blazed rifle and pistol fire against Jeff Smalley's crew.

O'Malley yelled as he hit the ground and grabbed for his rifle. "You *were* right!" A moment later, along with Ingram, he was pouring lead at the gun flashes around the derrick.

Still in his saddle, Ed Pope twisted and brought his gun butt hard against Cherokee Joe's head. The breed slipped from his horse without a sound. Sighing, Pope dismounted and levered a shell into his carbine. He would have given his right arm to have been able to trust Cherokee Joe with a rifle.

Near the well one of the running men suddenly faltered, threw up his arms, and fell forward on his face. At that distance Ingram couldn't be sure who it was. He didn't think it was Jeff.

A bullet whined past him and he ducked instinctively. Other slugs were snapping twigs from the brush. For the moment Keene's men had diverted their fire from the Smalley crew to them.

One of the horses screamed and went down threshing as a bullet found its mark.

"Everybody all right?" he called. When he got two affirmative answers he said, "It's getting too hot here. We've got to move. Keene must have at least twenty men with him."

"Twenty, hell!" O'Malley swore. "There's at least a hundred bullets a minute buzzing around—and all acting like they had my name on them!"

From somewhere to the right Ed Pope

said quietly, "This is a funny time to tell you, O'Malley. But nothing's got your name on it, now. Not even that murder warrant that's been hounding you for the last ten years. The real murderer made a death-bed confession two months ago. I figured you ought to know in case anything happens to me."

No one said anything for a moment. But Ingram was thinking—so that was the club Keene held over Tim's head!

"Come on. Let's move!" Ingram said as brush began snapping closer around them. From his position he could see that the last of Jeff's men had reached cover. The only one in sight was the lone man lying sprawled on his face near the rig. Up on the flooring old Pete Lucas' body looked like a misshapen sack of coal.

Holding their fire they began working their way cautiously through the brush. Ingram was hoping to contact Jeff or one of his men and find out what had happened. The whole picture, however, was pretty clear in his mind. Jeff's crew busy drilling—probably unarmed. Ed Keene and his men working down the slope under cover until they were close enough. Then sweeping in with a rush upon the unsuspecting crew.

For a moment he wondered why Keene had not wiped out the whole Smalley crew from ambush. With the twenty or more gunnies with him it would have been a simple manner. Then he realized that Keene had wanted them alive as bait for his trap. Keene knew that Jeff Smalley's death would do him little good unless he got Ingram too. And of course he had a personal score to settle with O'Malley.

The whole plan was clear now. Keene forcing Jeff and his crew to work day after day under the threat of hidden guns, trying to make things around the rig look natural while he waited for Keene and O'Malley. He intended that the whole bunch of them be wiped out.

A rifle bullet tugged at Ingram's hat and he caught the pin-point of flame from the derrick forble board. He heard Pope's rifle answer immediately. The man up on the forble yelled.

"Probably didn't kill him," Pope said in a dry voice. "But I damn well scared the pants off him!"

Pope's shot, however, betrayed their new

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position. For a minute a storm of bullets forced them to hug the ground. Then they were moving again—working in a wide arc behind Keene's forces.

INGRAM paused to feed more shells into the .44 and to check his position. They were not yet close enough for a surprise show-down fight. He knew that he and his two men had no chance of winning alone. By now Keene must have guessed that there was only a handful of them. Being smart, he would send out a flanking party to take them from the rear. If Jeff and his men were armed it would be different. But they weren't.

Ingram knew how deadly he was with that .44 at close range. With any luck at all he could kill Keene, Devlin, and Thompson before he himself was gunned down. And that was all he asked. Men had died before in the defense of right. He and O'Malley and Pope were no better than those others.

For a moment he crouched there in the brush breathing heavily. The fire from Keene's men was wild now. Either they had lost contact in the darkness or this wide sweep had taken him and his companions beyond accurate range.

"Well, what are we going to do now?" asked Pope from the darkness. "We won't get anywhere this way."

"We're going in," Ingram replied and began working his way straight toward the rig.

He had progressed less than twenty feet when he heard the first muted rumblings from the well. Steadily the sound built up by the second. The earth beneath them began to tremble. The *chug-chug* of the donkey engine seemed to falter.

Then suddenly with a hissing roar a solid black column of oil spouted skyward carrying away part of the rig, the crown block and the rifleman hidden up there. Climbing high above the rig it sprayed outward, showering the surrounding prairie. Adding to the noise and confusion escaping gas hissed and roared like a hundred boilers letting off steam.

"Bejasus! She's blowin' in a gusher!" Tim O'Malley swore and wiped black glistening droplets of oil from his face. Then abruptly he was yelling. "Those damned gas flares! I told Jeff not to hook up that little *gasser* of his for lights! That well's gonna—!"

He never finished. One minute the well was there spouting black gold skyward. The next it disintegrated with a terrific explosion that hurled O'Malley, Ingram, and Pope backward like rag dolls as the gas caught fire from the rig flares.

In an instant an acre of ground with the well, its tankage, the tool house, roustabout quarters, and even Jeff's cabin were enveloped in a solid sheet of roaring flames.

Fifty yards beyond the outer perimeter of the fire Ingram staggered to his feet and stared at the flaming hell before him. He thought of Keene and his men trapped in there and shivered. Another five minutes and he, O'Malley, and Pope would have been there also.

Two fiery figures catapulted from the inferno. Luke Thompson and Art Devlin! Their bodies were enveloped in sheets of flame extending far above their heads, fed by the oil poured on their clothing by the explosion.

Thompson stumbled, fell, got up again and ran a few steps, fell again. Unable to rise, he scuttled forward on hands and knees like a giant fiery crab. His mouth was open, screaming, but the sound was drowned out by the roar of the flames.

Ed Pope said something hoarsely and whipped up his rifle.

Three guns, firing almost simultaneously, brought merciful death to Luke Thompson and Art Devlin. On the ground their bodies still blazed like pine torches and the stench of burning flesh lay heavy on the night air.

O'Malley gagged and turned away. Sweat ran down Ingram's face. Somehow he managed to fight down the sickness in him. He looked at the marshal.

Ed Pope's lips were compressed. "It's not easy to see men die that way," he said. "Some people might say that it was an act of God—twenty men dying in a fiery hell. But it wasn't. Keene knew they were close to oil. He should have doused those gas flares and rigged up lanterns. That mistake cost him his life."

"That's what you think, Marshal!" a voice behind him said. "Now reach—all of you—before I blow you to hell!"

"Keene!" O'Malley swore. "He wasn't in the fire!"

"No, Tim." Keene's voice was mocking.

"I happened to be out scouting alone. Wanted to find out for sure just how many of you there were. That's going to make it tough on Jeff Smalley. I can always bring in another crew. But it won't be easy for Smalley to pick up another Ingram and O'Malley."

"So that's your game, Keene." Tension was building up again in Ingram. "Well, it won't work this time."

"That's my game," said Keene. "And it *will* work. It worked on Cherokee Joe a few minutes ago."

Ed Pope said, "Murdering Cherokee Joe didn't help you any, Keene. Joe made a confession implicating you in Basil Winters' murder a few hours back."

"To you?"

"To me."

"That makes it tough on you, Marshal." Keene's eyes switched to Ingram. "As for you, Ingram, I told you I always got what I wanted. You're—"

From somewhere in the brush they heard a man curse and then Jeff Smalley's voice shouting, "Over this way, I think!"

Keene laughed softly. "I've got two guns here, Ingram. And Smalley and his men are unarmed. Simple, isn't it? First you, Tim, and the marshal. Then Jeff and his men. A clean sweep. How do you like that?"

"I don't." Ingram drew, spun, and fired in a single fluid movement. He was gambling his gun speed and the surprise element against Keene's advantage. But he was not quite fast enough.

Keene's bullet caught him in the chest and dropped him to his knees. He felt no pain but he knew that he was hard hit. And a .44 slug was a tough thing to whip.

It was hard to breath and Keene's face wavered before his eyes. He triggered three times—fast—aiming high. He wanted to make certain that he did not miss. Keene's head snapped back as two of the three slugs caught him in the forehead. He died on his feet and without a sound.

"Dave! Did he get you?"

Ingram stared up at O'Malley's worried face. His lips felt stiff, unnatural. Beside O'Malley he saw Ed Pope. And behind him a blue of approaching figures. Jeff and his men.

Suddenly he knew what had been in Chris Envers' mind as he stood there at the Black Gold bar with the life draining swiftly from him. *I could have turned back. But I didn't. It's too late.*

That's what Chris had thought and what he, Dave Ingram, was thinking now. Why hadn't he turned back while there was still time? Linda had been right—he could have if he'd had the right kind of courage. But he hadn't. Now—now it was too late.

People were around him now, talking in low voices, trying to make him comfortable. He felt the damp earth beneath his shoulders and knew that he was lying flat on his back. He felt very sleepy. He wished they would leave him alone. He just wanted to rest.

But first he needed something. Chris Envers had needed it too. What was it? Linda? What had Linda said? *Live by the gun: die by the gun. You can't escape your past, Dave. It will follow you to—to—Oh, yes. Mustn't forget Chris.*

He looked up at the anxious faces around him. Blurred, fuzzy.

"Give me a double, bartender," he said and closed his eyes . . . .

HE LAY there studying the clean unfamiliar knotty pine ceiling. A fly crawled slowly across the light-colored surface. He followed it with lazy eyes until finally it buzzed away.

The room was quiet—quiet and peaceful and permeated with a strangely familiar odor that somehow escaped identity. His mother? His sister? A room and a woman in a town near the Rio Grande? Somehow he knew with whom to connect it, yet the name kept eluding him.

He looked down at his hands—thin and

white against the blue bed spread. They looked more like claws than hands. What had happened to them? What had happened to him, Dave Ingram? Where was he? His eyes swept around the room with its dainty furnishings—the curtains at the windows, the bottles of perfume on the small dressing table. He frowned. This was a woman's room. A—

Then his eyes came to rest on the four people standing beside the bed. And with a rush everything came back to him. The fight at the well, the fire, he and Keene shooting it out—

Tim O'Malley said, "About time you woke up, Mister. You've been out long enough."

Gradually the faces came into focus. O'Malley, Jeff Smalley, Ed Pope, and Linda Burke. He let his eyes rest on her for a moment. Strange he'd never realized before just how beautiful she was.

"Hello, Linda, Jeff, Tim, Pope," he said and was surprised at the weakness of his own voice. "How long have I been here?"

O'Malley said, "Two weeks, Dave. You were out at the well three days before Doc Anderson would let us move you. Linda made us haul her mattress out there. We rigged up a shelter there until we could bring you into town."

"Keene and his crew?" Ingram switched his eyes to Jeff Smalley. "What about them?"

"You got Keene, Dave. The rest of them died in the fire." Jeff Smalley looked at him, his face miserable. "I made a fool out of myself, Dave. And I almost got you killed because of it. You would have died if Linda hadn't insisted that we bring you to her place. Then she quit work and nursed you like a baby. Otherwise you wouldn't be here now. And it would have been my fault."

Ingram looked at Linda Burke but said nothing. She would have done the same for any man under the circumstances.

"There's some things I can't make up for," Smalley went on. "But as far as the well is concerned, Dave, it's half yours. It didn't come in ten thousand barrels a day like Keene said it would. And it took us three days to put out the fire with earth and dung. But we did it. It's flowing a steady three thousand barrels a day now. So with oil selling from two and a quarter to seven dollars a barrel you can see what a half-interest will bring you. And let's don't argue *that* point."

He started to say something else, blushed like a kid, then blurted, "Dammit, Dave, why didn't you tell me that you and Linda had been in love for three years! I knew a woman couldn't hate a man like that unless she was in love with him!"

"Don't be a fool, Jeff!" said Ingram. "Linda's in love with you. She's going to marry you. She never was in love with me, Jeff."

"Dave, you liar!" Linda Burke grasped one of his thin hands. "Stop acting a hero. I've told Jeff everything. And he understands. Besides—" she flashed a quick smile at the boy—"besides Jeff has changed his mind about me since he's found out how old I am. You know how it is—a woman at twenty-four is practically an old maid to a twenty-year old! Right now he's got his eye on a little chit in Guthrie. Darn him!"

Smalley grinned and winked at Dave. "That's not true. But it sounds interesting."

Ed Pope, U. S. Marshal, drew up a chair near the bed. "Now that every one else has had their say, Ingram, I'm going to have mine. You need rest so I'll make it brief."

Ingram studied the marshal's face for a moment. Then he said quietly, "Shoot, Marshal."

Pope looked at him with thoughtful eyes. "Ingram, in my business you get to know character. You're not a killer by nature, Ingram. I know what happened back there in Ohio. And I think I know why it happened.

"Year after year I've wondered why you didn't turn back. It's not an easy thing to do. I know that. It takes courage—guts. But you can do it, Dave. You've done a lot of things to prove that. Your fight against Keene here for instance. You had nothing to gain and everything to lose. I'm one of the few people who know about Johnny Martin and all the rest."

Ingram said nothing. But he remembered what he had been thinking back there at the well when he thought he was dying. Perhaps the marshal was right. But then—

Pope leaned forward. His face was earnest. "Ingram, the day of the gunman is dying. He won't vanish overnight—no. But in a few years you'll read about him only in history. Law and order is coming

to the Cherokee Strip. A man don't have to stay a gunman unless he wants to."

"What are you driving at, Marshal?" Ingram's voice was harsh.

"Just this," Pope said. "I'm asking you for your own sake—as well as for the sake of this girl who loves you—to lay aside your gun. And to promise never to take it up again. Society, as well as Linda Burke, has a right to demand it of you.

"You're a natural leader; you've got intelligence, and a very real ability. You can go a long way if you will. That's up to you. I may sound like a preacher but I mean every word I say."

Ingram shook his head. "I could promise to take my gun off, Pope, and keep it off. Maybe I could even learn to ignore real killers on the prod. But sooner or later one of them would force my hand. And as long as I stay in the Strip that's how it will be."

Linda Burke clutched his hand. "Then, Dave, let's leave the Cherokee Strip. At least until the day of the gun is past. We could always come back then if you wanted to."

Ingram shook his head, but she went on almost fiercely. "Listen to me, Dave. I love you. And because I do I want a home, security, and children by you. And, you stubborn fool, I'm going to have them!

"Even if you want to take only a fourth interest in the well, it will still make you a rich man. We can go somewhere and start all over where you are not known. You've no excuse, Dave. Your work here is finished. Ed Keene is dead and his power destroyed. You've done your part. Now you'll be able to—"

He started to protest but it was a feeble attempt. She was only asking what he had always wanted.

"Don't argue with me, Mister," Linda said and kissed him. "You're in no shape for it. And by the time you are I'll have you standing knee-deep in Kentucky blue grass or somewhere like that! Well, Dave?"

They all stood there—waiting. Ingram looked at Linda. He knew that she had spoken in desperation and without any real hope. He knew also that she was right.

"What can I say, honey?" He grinned. "You're the boss!"

"Dave! Dave!" She was crying—the tears of a woman who has at last found happiness.

Ingram shut his eyes a moment. When he opened them again O'Malley, Pope, and Smalley were gone. He smiled and stroked the girl's dark hair. Then he closed his eyes again. He felt relaxed, sleepy.

Raising her head Linda Burke stared at the sleeping man. He looked tired—very tired. But even as she watched, the harshness left his face and the deep lines around his eyes and mouth relaxed.

Sun slanting in through the curtained window fell across Dave Ingram's face.

THE END

Duel in the Deadwood

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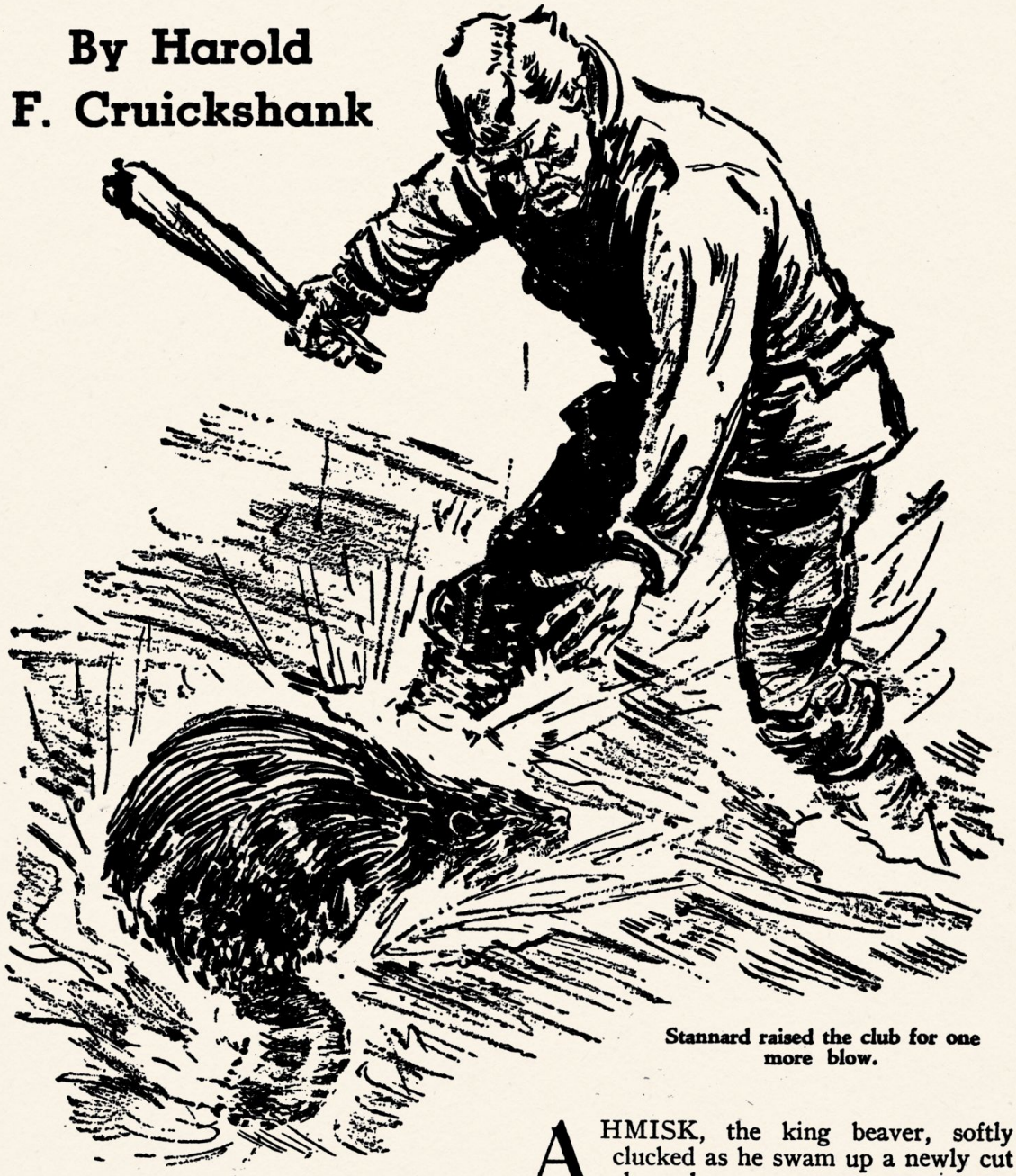
King of the River Pack

By Harold F. Cruickshank



Stannard raised the club for one more blow.

Ahmisk, proud beaver monarch, battled to the death the fanged wolf-creature that had killed and maimed his young—and with his last strength turned to face an even more deadly enemy. . . .

AHMISK, the king beaver, softly clucked as he swam up a newly cut channel.

His big mate, He-ak, and their kindred, responded to Ahmisk's goading. New channels were being cut in from timber zones too far from the creek for transportation of cut trees.

Suddenly Ahmisk's tail struck water with a resounding smack. At the cutting, three young, fully grown beavers froze. Others

scattered, leaping for the racing water.

A man's voice sounded. "Siccem, Wolf," it ordered, and silently, the huge beast bounded forward. A young male of Ahmisk's last year's brood whirled, but too late. Strong fangs seized him at the nape of the neck. He squealed once, then his every movement was quieted as the beast's fangs cut his spinal cord.

Mart Stannard, the man creature, chuckled thickly as he strode on in.

"That'll be okay for tonight, Wolf," he said. "One at a time, boy—one at a time. . . ." His eyes flashed with savage elation. More than once he'd been warned by the Mounted for letting his wolf-dog run deer and moose. His neighbors had complained that the big hound was chasing all deer and moose out of the country. And they suspected it of leading wolf packs in winter time in raids on their sheep and cattle heads.

"Now let the Mounties an' the Frasers try an' figure out just how these beaver was kilt, boy," he said. "We'll leave the critter here. Yore tracks are near enough to wolf tracks to fool anybody. . . ."

Stannard thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his mackinaw. Calling softly to his dog, he moved on toward the big beaver dam, crossing through the thin ribbon of water which spilled over its lip.

Stannard had been trapping farther north when Ahmisk and his kindred first struck the creek and rushed their amazing engineering work to rapid completion—the huge lodge, the wide, high dam. Stannard had chuckled when he saw the dam, and thought of his neighbors upstream. He had never been friendly with them. When the big dam closed off their supply of spring and fall running fish, he was happy. On his side of the dam there were plenty of fish.

But recently, when he discovered that the beavers were cutting channels in his land, he laid his plans for their extermination. Not that Ahmisk, by his channel digging and timber cutting, could do a great deal of material harm to such a wild, unimproved homestead as Stannard's, but Stannard hated his closest neighbors, the Frasers. He knew how closely young Hal Fraser guarded the beavers, whose lodge and dam were directly on the Fraser place.

Shrugging, the man turned up the collar of his mackinaw against a freshening spring wind and headed on to his cabin, satisfied that his plan was sound. Soon, one at a time, he would have the beaver colony cleaned out.

Ahead, moving like a timber wolf through the brush, trotted the huge form of the killer, whose scent still wrinkled up the quivering nose of Ahmisk back at the new channel area.

AHMISK waited for more than an hour after the departure of the man and the killer wolf, before emerging from cover. He clucked sharply and He-ak, his mate waddled to his side. She ran her muzzle along his neck and snuffled in close to his nose. Excitedly he clacked his big cutters, then scurried off, to come to a halt, braced on his broad tail, beside the dead form of his son.

The laboring instinct of these amazing river engineers was particularly strong. For two years they had worked with never ceasing vigor to establish their colony at a most favorable spot in the hinterland. First, Ahmisk and his kindred had fought off Napa, the king otter from upstream, whose fish supply had been cut off by the dam. Man had assailed the dam and with steel traps had caught two of Ahmisk's young ones. Ahmisk himself had been trapped by his toes, but had escaped. However, the colony had survived. Their amazing work continued and to young Hal Fraser, who watched them most carefully, became more amazing as timber supplies receded, demanding more and more of Ahmisk's skillful engineering talents in laying out and cutting channels for transportation of new green timber for food and for repair work.

Now Ahmisk clucked sharply and with the aid of He-ak, his mate, and two big young males, nudged and rolled the dead beaver into a channel, floating the body down to the main current of the creek which carried it well away from the beaver habitat and workings.

Ahmisk now snuffled the scent of death from his nostrils. He turned, and nose low to the ground, scurried about the channel zone, the site of the killing, followed by each member of his colony. In his great wisdom, he was impressing on the senses of his kinfolk this dread scent of the wolfish killer, charging their nostrils with his scent. In the future, they would be doubly alert.

Now, braced on his broad tail, he turned to face the brood, displaying his strong incisors which he clacked sharply as he made chuttering throat sounds. Then suddenly he whirled and shortly he and his kindred were digging, gouging, cutting as they pushed a channel workings closer and closer inland to the site of a bit new cutting of tall aspens.

* * *

That evening, as a new moon hung above the hinterland, Hal Fraser stole down to the creek. He still had some spring mink sets along the bank, upstream. For a long moment or so he paused near the dam, listening for the sound of gnawing cutters, or for the tell-tale splashes of heavy bodies striking water.

All at once he heard the crash of an aspen. He whirled, for the tree had fallen on Mart Stannard's land beyond the dam. Hal smiled, but quickly a frown displaced his smile. Stannard wouldn't like Ahmisk's activities on his land, he was sure.

For some time Hal had the idea that Ahmisk and his colonists were beginning another dam downstream. If this were so, Stannard, he was sure, would rebel, and find some means of exterminating Ahmisk and his band.

But suddenly, a dark shadowy form broke water surface this side of the dam, at an angle. . . . Hal gasped in amazement. The beavers had cut a diagonal, subterranean channel leading to their big storage cavern under the opposite bank of the flooded creek.

This was the most skillfully engineered piece of work Hal had so far observed. His heart picked up its beat as he watched the beaver, nudging a poplar limb along suddenly dive, taking the green limb on down to storage. . . .

Smiling, Hal turned and cat-footed along the bank to examine a few of his sets. He moved on farther upstream and shortly froze as he neared the area of the otter mudslides. Often in the moonlight he had sat and watched old Napa, the king otter, and his young cavorting in the water and down the wet mud slide. Never had Hal attempted to trap an otter and had served notice to any enthusiastic neighboring trappers that he would protect Napa and his kindred.

Now Hal turned. He had spent an hour watching the otters, was glad that the brood seemed intact.

Nearing the beaver dam on his return, he was suddenly brought up short by the sound of a man's voice.

"Stannard!" he gasped.

Then came a sharp, piercing animal scream, the slap of broad beaver tail in water, a scuffling sound and Hal Fraser quivered in every limb.

It was sometime before Hal at last glimpsed his neighbor's form. He started sharply as he saw the great half wolf at Stannard's heels.

Backing into the shadows, Hal stood, frozen, as he watched the mackinaw-clad form cross on the dam top. Hal searched the gloom looking for a beaver. Beaver pelts were prime, but Stannard had his hands stuck deep in his mackinaw coat pockets.

Now the hybrid snarled and Hal knew there was no use hiding himself any longer. In any case, he wanted Stannard to know he had seen.

He stepped out and the man's hand flashed down to the big hound's collar.

"Scairt the hell out uh me, Fraser," Stannard growled. "What's the idea snoopin' like this . . . Oh! I see you been at yore mink sets, huh? Nice pair uh darks you got there. First I thought they was otter, but then—" Stannard wiped his mustaches with the back of a hand, "—it wouldn't be right for a Fraser to break no trappin' laws, would it now?" Stannard stepped in close and Hal's right leg quivered as the big hybrid wolf dog showed his fangs not more than inches away from the leg.

"We was just watchin' the beavers' new workin's, Fraser," Stannard went on. "Ol' Wolf come clost to snappin' one up, but I ketched him in time."

Hal Fraser had no ready comment. He disliked and mistrusted his neighbor.

"Somethin' onusual for you to be visitin' the crick, nights, like this, Stannard," the boy said. "It's a good job your wolf dog critter only came close, huh? There's still a law against huntin' or trappin' beavers."

Stannard made a raucous throat sound. He took a sharp step forward, but Hal had turned and was moving off. Dark eyes flashed fierce glances into his retreating

form. Now Stannard turned. There was a dead beaver at the channel workings. This snooping young homesteader didn't seem too suspicious, but then, there was always a possibility of his returning.

But Stannard didn't dare risk a return to the site of the kill, for fear Hal might come back.

At his shack, Hal Fraser told his dad of meeting Stannard at the dam.

"It don't look right, Dad," he said, and old Dan Fraser's brows became furrowed.

"No, Hal, it don't. I wished that critter would take hisself off, for he ain't a homesteader. He's a hermit trapper who inclines to kill anythin' that has a pelt on it. But, unless we got proof he's up to somethin', there's nothin' we can do about it. He's got ever' right to cross back an' forth on the dam top. So—best pelt your good mink, boy an' get some sleep. There's work aplenty tomorrow."

FOR the next few nights, Ahmisk and his kinfolk worked in peace. This evening, scarcely before the sunset's afterglow had merged with the earliest shades of dusk, the big beaver was leading his forces into working action. His dam needed repairs on the downstream side—a piece of work that would demand the utmost of their skill and patience for they must work under the spillway. Hour after hour as the night faded toward dawn, he worked.

Every now and then, Ahmisk dragged himself from the water to rise on his stern sniffing for danger sign. When he did tang man scent he was alarmed until he identified it as the scent of the friendly man creature, but not until it faded did he call his kindred back to work.

Fiercely, assiduously, they attacked their work. It demanded the combined efforts of all of them to hold their anchor timber in the new, bracing abuttment at the cleft in the dam base.

It was while thus engaged with the roar of the spillway marring their sense of hearing, that the big wolf creature stole in on the creek zone.

Wolf, Stannard's hybrid, came alone tonight. He had slipped away from his master who, this evening, had drawn off the first of a new brew of moonshine he distilled from dried fruits. Stannard barely realized that the half wolf had gone until in his maudlin state he wanted something to snarl at.

He called to the dog, but got no answer. His anger mounting, he lurched on out of doors, partly conscious of the fact that Wolf naturally would make for the beaver workings.

The hybrid was close in on the water's edge now, his wolfish eyes flashing as he bellied down to watch the creekfolk at their work. Suddenly he started. A young beaver had wheeled away from the spillway and was moving alone downstream.

Slowly, the beast rose up. With the stealth of his timber wolf father, he stole down the bank toward the shallows.

The urge to kill was sharp in his wild mind. The faintest glow of dawn light was pushing into fading night as he now slid around a willow clump, increasing his speed.

Suddenly he whirled and leaped. He landed smartly in the water and before the swimming beaver was aware of the menace, before he could dive, the great jaws of the hybrid snapped and closed.

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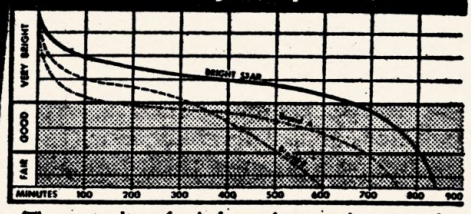

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A shrill scream penetrated the hinterland zone.

At the dam, despite the roar of the spillway, Ahmisk heard. He smacked water sharply with his broad tail and clucked to his kindred. Now, eyes flashing, he swam vigorously down with the current. His son, in the jaws of the big killer, was making a furious fight of it.

Ahmisk suddenly dived, an act He-ak, his mate, quickly emulated, while the big young beaver swung around the great floundering shape of the wolf creature.

The Wolf-beast, yelped. He let go his fang hold and the beaver flopped weakly off to the far bank.

Now the half wolf snarled and kicked out furiously, but fangs were fastened in his hair and hide. He struggled, head high, to keep above the surface, but another set of fangs struck him. Now over two hundred pounds of fighting beaver force clung to him. He was a powerful brute, but the current had carried him into deeper water, where there was no purchase for his strong limbs, no possibility of leverage by which he could have torn himself clear.

Beneath the surface, Ahmisk at the half wolf's off side neck sector, dug his incisors in deeper as with all his great power he tugged down—down. Not for much longer could Ahmisk remain below, yet in full and savage determination he persisted, knowing that his great seventy-pound mate was working with him, as were two of the big young ones while above, two lesserlings harassed the big black creature, forcing his head down. . . .

In the clearing dawnlight Mart Stannard fetched up at the creek.

* * *

For a long moment Stannard stood by the dam site calling thickly to the dog. The man carried a stout club. He was hatless, clad in his mackinaw and jeans. Wild-eyed he waved his club, then all at once he whirled, almost lurching into the water as he caught a strange, thick-throated dog cry from downstream.

Only the half-wolf's muzzle showed above surface now. Stannard uttered a sharp cry of rage and despair. The sharp realization of his dog's predicament seemed to sober him. Then the big dog sank.

"Wolf—Wolf, boy . . ." Sobbing, Stannard waited, waited for the killer to fight his way to the surface.

One minute, two—three. . . . And then the dog broke surface. But at his flopping flank there emerged the big form of Ahmisk, the king beaver.

Again the dog was pulled under and this time he had no strength for further battle. Stannard stood and watched as if frozen to immobility. Then suddenly he roared . . .

It was this roar which caught the attention of Young Hal Fraser upstream. Hal was early at his final mink sets of the season. He laid down his catch and traps near the dam and moved swiftly downstream, to slip into a thicket of alder from which point he watched the man creature on the bank.

Ahmink's whole attention was on the killer, the great wolfish creature which had several times now killed or maimed his kindred. The suddenness of the man creature's attack seemed to shock him momentarily, and he came within a hair of being dispatched by a sweeping blow from Stannard's club.

Suddenly Stannard yelled and lunged forward. His footing was very uncertain at best. When a booted foot slid off a slimy rock, he toppled into the water. . . .

Hal Fraser rushed out of cover as he saw Ahmisk's great front cutters flash, as the beaver struck. Those terrible cutters were at the man creature's throat, when Hal yelled, and flung a windfall club.

Whirling, Ahmisk dived.

Stannard started to snarl, but he swallowed his curses. Slowly he got to his feet, stared a long moment downstream in the direction in which Wolf had floated, then turning, he moved abruptly off, without a word of thanks to Hal Fraser.

Hal wheeled and moved silently on back to the dam zone, keeping well in cover. He smiled as he glimpsed the broad back of old Ahmisk, as with his strong forepaws, the king beaver forced an aspen limb into the repair works.

Hal slid around the neck of the dam and picking up his catch and traps, moved on toward home satisfied that Asmisk had again manifested his power, wreaking sharp vengeance on the killer of his kindred.

TRAIL BLAZERS of the FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC • W • WINDAS

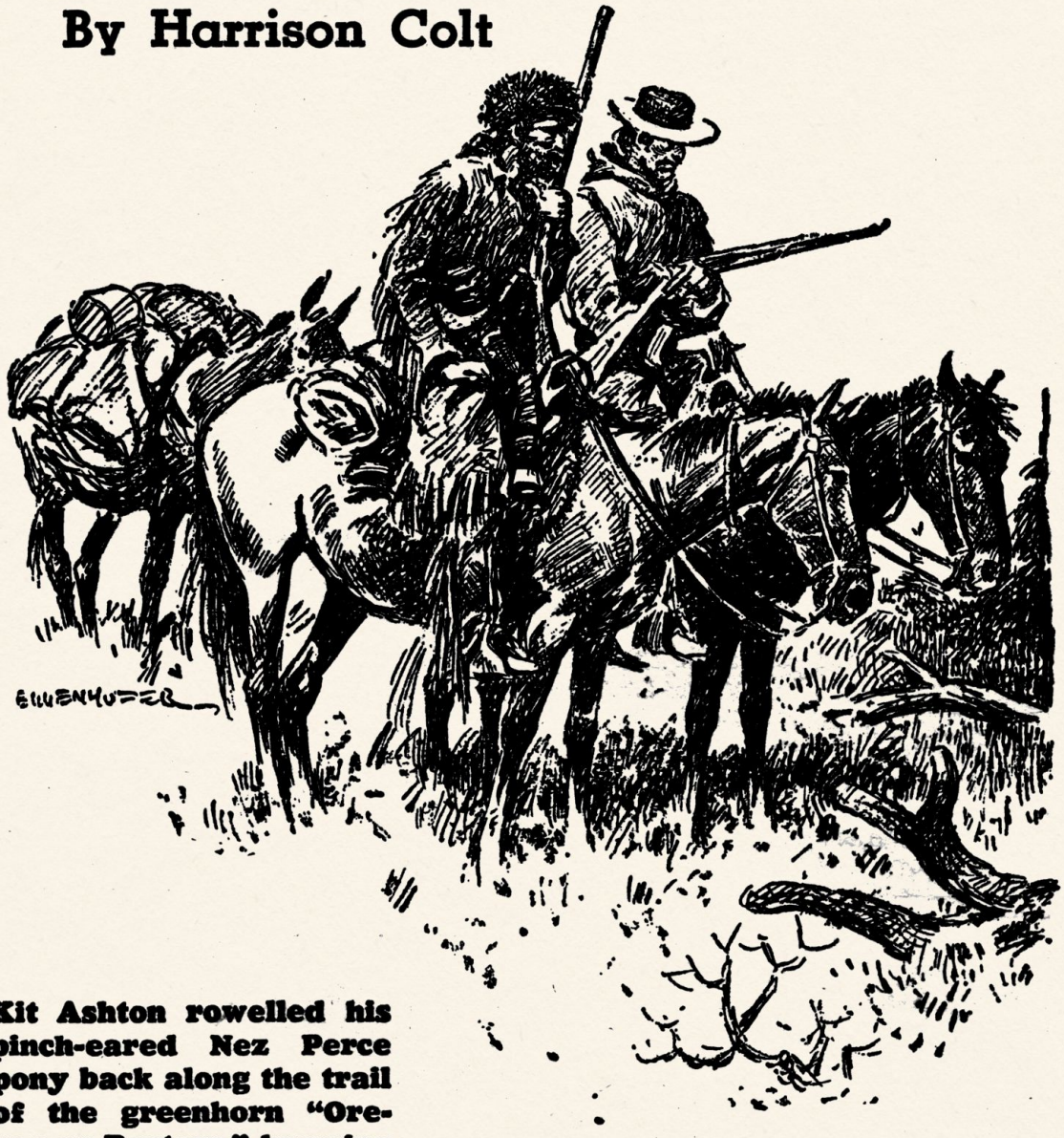
When James Sherwood of the Texas Rangers tangled with Mike Logan and his smuggling gang in 1883, he ran into twenty-four hours of excitement seldom equaled in Border annals. Sherwood's partner Blackton was disabled in the first exchange of shots as the smugglers crossed the Rio Grande one moonless night in June.

Jimmy evened up the score by killing two of the outlaws. Three others fled. Blackton, his arm broken, took charge of the smuggler's mule train, while Jimmy pursued the bandits. They tried to trap him in ambush, but Sherwood anticipated the trick, and by-passing the spot, shot the leader for his trouble.

The two survivors separated and spurred away in opposite directions into the darkness. When dawn came, Sherwood was tenaciously at the heels of one of the hombres. The fellow turned and shot it out with the Ranger, but a slug from Sherwood's Winchester caught the renegade in the mouth and he died at sunrise.

All morning, Sherwood rode in circles to cross the remaining smuggler's trail. At noon he caught him making a dash across the Rio. The bandit drowned when Jimmy shot his horse. Sherwood went wearily back to his partner. Ere darkness fell again, they brought the mules to headquarters....and called it a day.

By Harrison Colt



Kit Ashton rowelled his pinch-eared Nez Perce pony back along the trail of the greenhorn "Oregon-or-Busters," knowing that those covered-caravan wagoneers would give him a warm welcome—helped out by an up-ended wagon-tongue and the noose-end of a strangling rope!

CHAPTER ONE

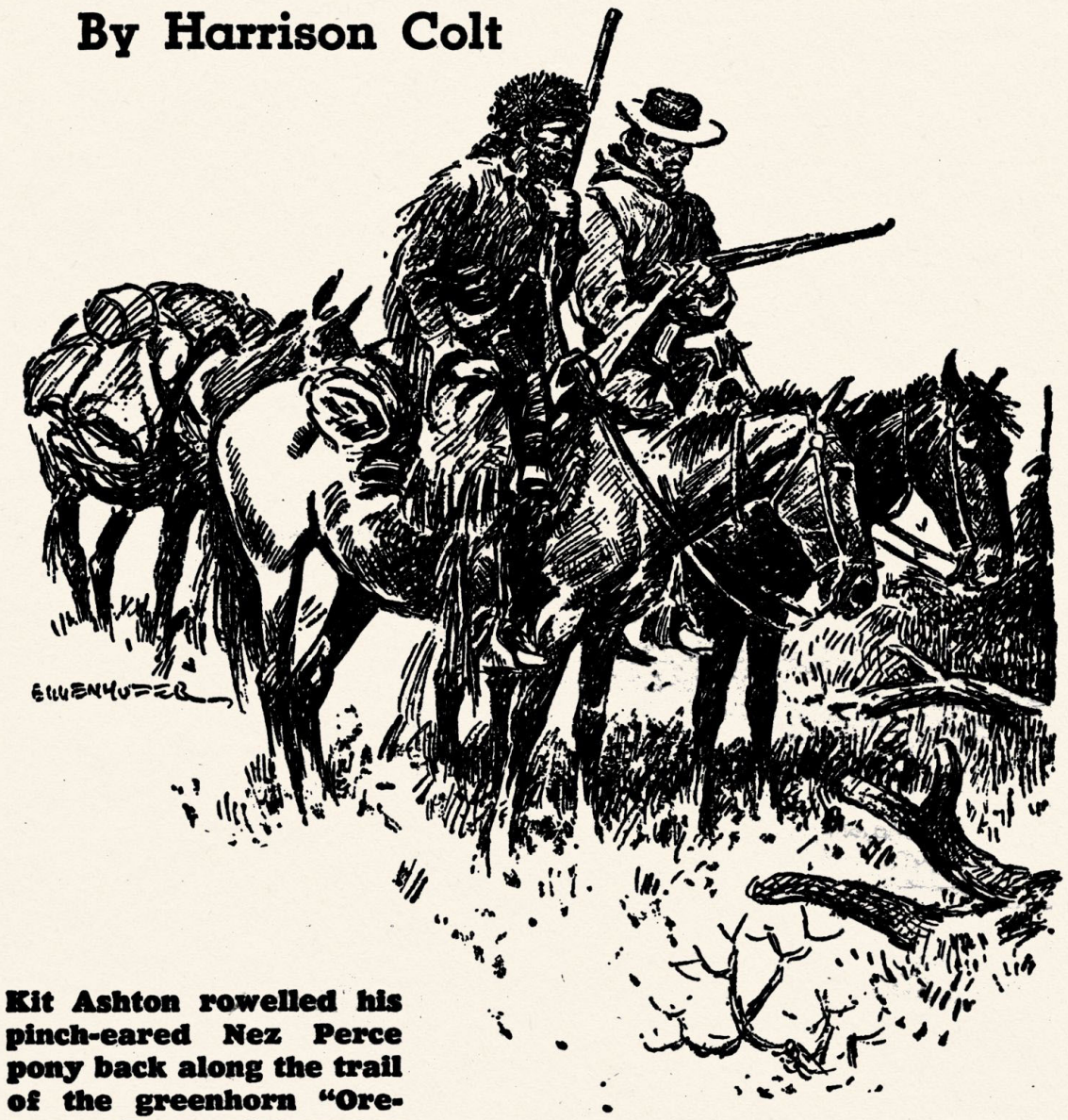
Wolf Meat for Blackfeet

ALL MORNING the three buckskin-clad riders had moved along the rough mountain trail in gloomy silence. They had forded swift-rushing streams fed by melting snow, picked their way across narrow ledges of rock where a single misstep could send man, horse or pack-mule hurtling a thousand feet to their death. It had been a relentless drive through forests of stunted pine and fir to reach these foothills.

Kit Ashton, jogging along behind his two companions, sensed the bitterness in the hearts and minds of the two older men.

By Harrison Colt

Mountain Men Make Tough Killing!



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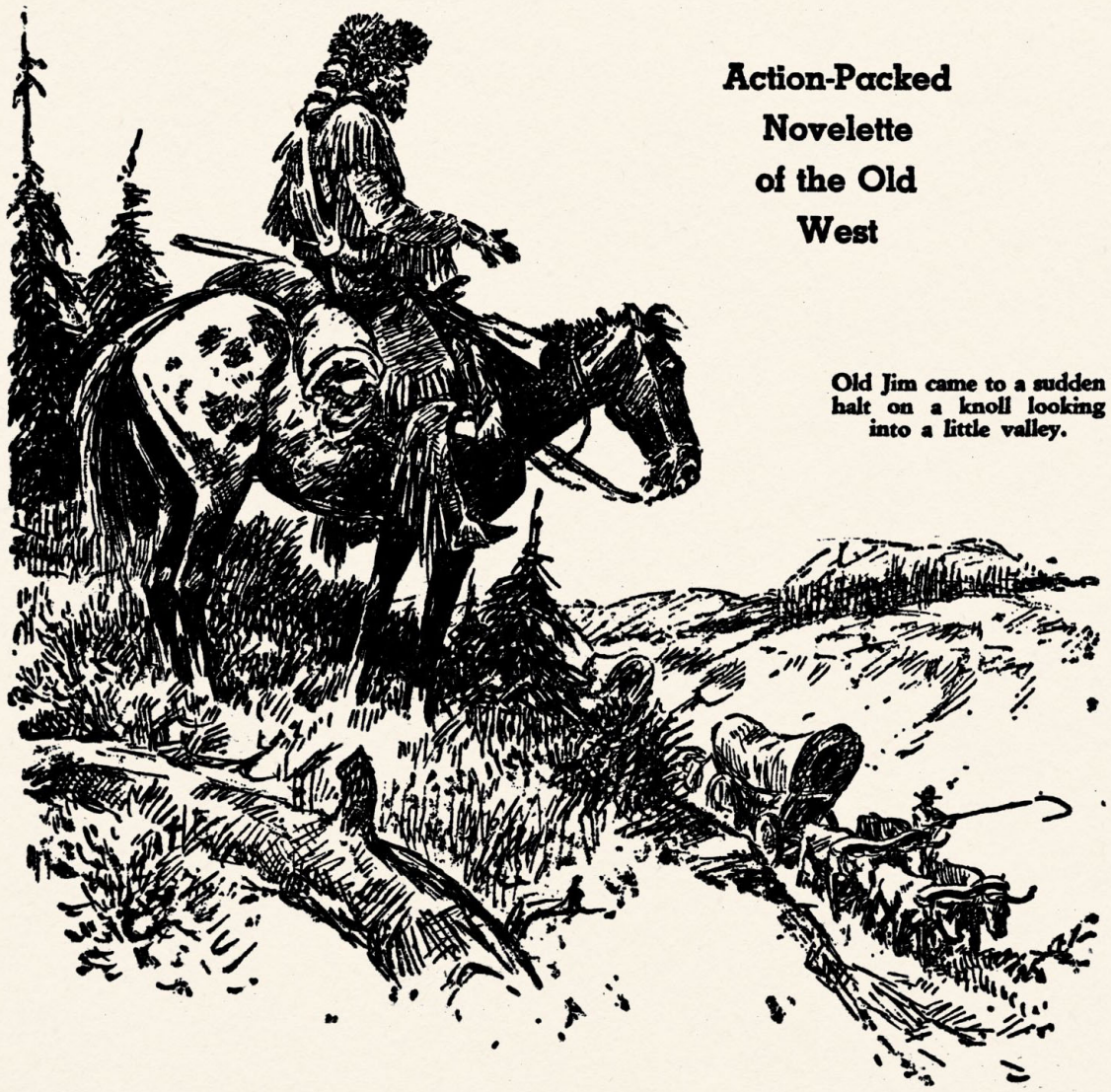
Action-Packed Novelette of the Old West



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Then, the rendezvous had been something to look forward to—a month or so of careless ease in some pleasant, game-filled valley, with all the whiskey one desired; daily contests of skills, gambling, and the opportunity of trade with the fur-buyers from St. Louis. Beaver had been king those days, and the trappers swaggering lords of a wild and savage domain.

But that had been before the market for beaver pelts had suddenly fallen off. Before Eastern dandies had discarded the stylish beaver hats for others of silk. Before the emigrants from the East had invaded the wilderness with their lumbering, white-hooded wagons.

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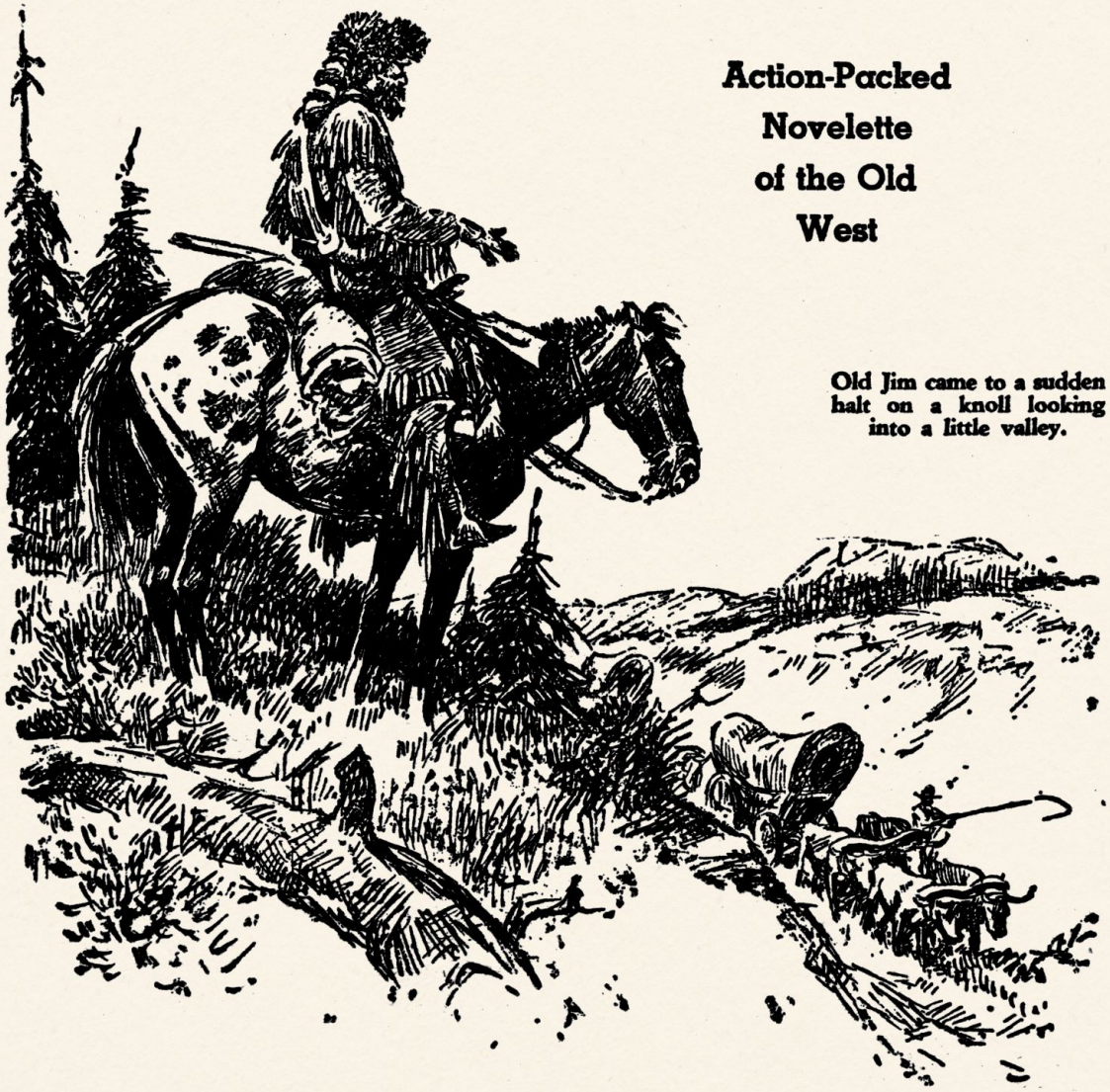

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oath, saw him rein in his raw-boned, crop-eared Nez Perce pony. The old man leaned forward slightly in his saddle, staring down into the valley below. Shifting his gaze, Kit saw a straggling line of slow-moving, ox-drawn Conestoga wagons crawling across the wide, green floor of the valley.

"Look at the damn fools!" grunted Old Jim scornfully. "If nobody told yuh diff'rent, yuh'd figger they was on a picnic. Whar's their advance scouts an' out-riders? An' the way those rear wagons are fallin' behind is a regular invite to the Blackfeet to lift some hair!"

"That'd suit me fine!" Bill Meek, a tall, thin, bony-faced man with lank black hair falling to his shoulders, eyed the wagons with a smouldering hostility in his black eyes. "I'd like to see the Blackfeet make wolf meat out of every damned one of these emigrants! Mebbe then they'd larn to stay home where they belong!"

Kit Ashton grinned a little. He recognized a fact that neither of his companions was ready to admit. The era of the mountain man was finished. This tide of eager home-seekers pushing in ever increasing numbers across the wide plains spelled his doom. Soon plow and axe would replace beaver trap and hunting knife. Although Kit shared the resentment of the other mountain men toward the invaders, he recognized the inevitability of their final triumph.

After a moment, leading the pack-animals, the three men moved down the slope toward the wagons. As they approached, Kit saw that one of the two riders who galloped well ahead of the leading wagon was a girl.

She and the man at her side pulled up their horses sharply at sight of the party of trappers. There was a scowl on the man's face as he waited for them to come up. He was a big, wide-shouldered man in his early thirties, a man with well-shaped, aristocratic features and an air of one who was used to giving orders. He was mounted on a magnificent roan-colored horse.

He called, in an authoritative voice, "Who the devil are you? What do you want?"

Kit Ashton and his two companions exchanged puzzled glances. Usually, in this wild, unsettled mountain country, it was the signal for the warmest and most enthusiastic of greetings when one party of whites encountered another. But there was little friendliness in the eyes of the man on the roan.

"We're trappers," explained Kit. "Headin' fer the rendezvous at Baxter's Hole."

"Mountain men, eh?" The cool, aloof eyes of the handsome young man held a hint of contempt as they slowly surveyed the three buckskin-clad figures and rested for a moment on the three pack-animals with their burden of fur. "You're the second party we've met up with in the past three days." He added, significantly, "Queer thing happened after that first meeting. That night our camp was raided and a dozen horses run off."

KIT ASHTON felt his face grow hot, and he was aware that the girl was staring at him with curious eyes. She was slim and young, and her face seemed incredibly pale to one who had lately known only ruddy-faced squaws or dusky, olive-skinned senoritas. Her eyes were a deep cobalt, the color of a mountain pool at twilight, and her hair held a faint coppery sheen where the sunlight touched it.

"You figger it was the trappers that did it?"

"I do." The big man gazed from one to another of the mountain men in open suspicion. "For your information, I'm posting a double guard about our horses tonight. I'm not taking chances of the same thing happening again."

Kit felt the blood pound angrily through his veins at the man's insolence. He noticed that Jim Webster's leathery face was dark with anger and that Bill Meek's hand had dropped to the knife at his belt.

"Thanks fer the warnin', mister," he said drily. "But it so happens we ain't none of us horse-thieves."

Webster broke in suddenly, "Who's the damn fool in charge o' this hyar train?"

The handsome young man on the roan darted an annoyed look his way. "What the devil do you mean by that?"

"Jest what I said. Be you the man who's bossin' this passel o' greenhorn wagons?"

The big man frowned, and faint color touched his cheeks. At first Kit thought that he would refuse to answer. But, after a pause, he announced coldly, "The wagon captain is David Jackson, I'm Roger St.

Clair, second in command of this group."

"Dave Jackson!" Webster blinked his eyes in astonishment. He twisted around in his saddle and stared at his two comrades. "It don't seem possible no-how," he frowned. "Ol' Dave is too good a woods-hawk to let his wagons head through Injun country without takin' precautions. What yuh reckon's the matter with the ol' hoss anyhow?"

It was then that the girl spoke up. She said, "Mr. Jackson is ill. He's back in my father's wagon."

The mountain men exchanged glances. The girl's words had done much to clear up the situation in their minds. With Jackson sick, St. Clair had taken over command of the wagons. It was his carelessness that was inviting disaster at the hands of the Indians.

Old Jim Webster frowned. "Sorry to hear that, miss. Dave is an old trappin' pardner o' mine. I've knowed him fer more years than yuh kin shake a stick at. Reckon we might see the ol' coot?"

The girl smiled. "I'll show you our wagon," she said, and swung her horse around.

"Right kind o' yuh, miss."

Roger St. Clair's mouth was drawn into a line of annoyance and his eyes were sullen. "Just a moment," he broke in. "Mr. Jackson is a very sick man. I'm not sure it would be wise for you to disturb him."

Surprise came into the girl's cobalt eyes. "Roger, I think that's silly," she protested. "I'm sure it'll do him good to see old friends."

With that, the girl moved back along the line of advancing wagons, and the party of trappers followed her. Roger St. Clair, his pale eyes shining with rage, stared after them for a long moment, then whirled his horse angrily and galloped forward to maintain his place in the van of the slow-moving Conestogas.

"Dad," said the girl as they reached a wagon driven by a stocky, gray-haired man with a square, kindly face, "these are friends of Mr. Jackson. My father, Dr. Henry Curtright."

The stocky man nodded, smiled pleasantly. "Glad to make your acquaintance, gentlemen." To his daughter, he confided, "I believe he's better, Barbara. Fever seems to have eased off a little."

Dave Jackson, the old mountain man, was overjoyed to see them. He lay under the canvas tilt of the wagon, a gaunt, wasted man whose eyes burned feverishly in the hollows of his face.

After the greetings were over, he burst out, "Reckon this is some o' the Almighty's work. My prayers have been answered. He guided yuh here a-purpose."

Webster asked, "Jest what yuh mean by that, Dave?"

Jackson said, "I'm worried. Jim, there ain't hardly another man beside myself in the whole wagon train that's ever bin west o' the Missouri afore this trip. What's worse, the man they've elected to take over in case anythin' happens to me is a brash young fool, a man who looks down upon anyone who ever worked with his hands fer a livin'. His father's a big man back in the States—a U. S. Senator, no less—an' the son's got the idea he's about the highest an' mightiest person ever got hisself born!"

"St. Clair, yuh mean?"

Jackson nodded. "I see yuh met him. Don't take long to rec'nize the breed, does it?"

"I knew he was a damn fool before I even clapped eyes on him," grunted Webster. He explained about the lack of outriders and advance guard, the wagons that straggled far behind the main column.

A flicker of anger stirred in the sick man's eyes. "That means he and Matt Cagle plumb ignored the orders I give 'em."

"Matt Cagle? Who's he?"

"Chief o' scouts," explained the wagon-train captain. "Now yuh see what I mean about prayin' someone would come along. Jim, I want yuh and yore friends to come with us to see that the wagons git through!"

An astonished oath broke from Bill Meek's lips. "We cain't do that!" he growled. "We're on our way to the rendezvous at Baxter's Hole!"

Jackson frowned. After a moment, he said, "Three, four days will git the train through the worst of the Injun country. Then yuh kin head back fer the rendezvous. That way yuh'll lose no more than a week."

"Wal, I dunno," remarked Jim Webster slowly. He directed an inquiring glance at his partners. "Far as I'm concerned, I'd like to do anythin' I kin to help out. But I don't know what the boys think of it. How about you, Bill? Yuh willin' to stick with

the wagons fer a few days or more?"

Bill Meek expressed his opposition to the idea in no uncertain terms. "I'm agin it," he argued. "Way things is, we don't know how long the fur-buyers will hang around the rendezvous. If we git there late, they may be gone and we'll be plumb out o' luck. Besides what about Black Mike Leary? Yuh gonna let him git there fust, so's he kin brag about how he sold all his pelts at top prices an' we had to take what we was offered?"

Kit saw the indecision on Jim Webster's grizzled features. Black Mike Leary was leader of the last fur brigade working the territory. Between him and the old man lay an ancient feud. This time Webster had set his heart on beating his rival in, reaching the rendezvous first. But there would be little chance of this if they did what Jackson asked.

Kit Ashton, for some reason he did not understand, found himself thinking of Barbara Curtright. He said, "I figger we ought to stay with the wagons."

Webster gave Kit a faintly puzzled glance, then looked over at Bill Meek who was scowling unhappily, anger in his dark eyes. "Reckon that leaves it up to me," he drawled slowly. After a moment's silence, he said, "Dave, I reckon we'll see yore wagons through. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

"Damn Fool Greenhorns"

LATER, when the wagons halted for the noon rest, Jackson sent for his second in command. The trappers, as they ate their mid-day meal around the Curtright cooking fire, listened to angry voices coming from the nearby wagon.

Webster chuckled. "Sounds like Dave is pluckin' a few tail-feathers from that young rooster," he remarked. " 'Bout time that happened!"

A few minutes later, St. Clair emerged from the wagon, a deep flush of anger staining his handsome features. He strode over to the fire where the mountain men were seated and stood for a moment staring down at them, rage gleaming hotly in his pale eyes.

"You mountain men stick together, don't you?" he snarled. "But if Jackson thinks he can put the lives and safety of this wagon train in the hands of a crew of filthy, half-savage ruffians and horse-thieves, he's more of a fool than I gave him credit for being! You'd save yourselves a great deal of grief by getting on your horses right this minute and riding off!"

Webster said slowly, "Mr. St. Clair, you're right when yuh say us mountain men stick together. That's why we figger on stayin' with the wagons."

St. Clair's features twisted into hard lines. "Back East there wouldn't be a one of you murderous rascals unhung. Well, we're Easterners—all of us in these wagons—and we intend to bring Eastern law and justice with us. I shouldn't be greatly surprised to see the three of you dangling at the end of a rope before very long!"

The big man spun around and stalked away.

The trappers finished their meal in silence. Then Jim Webster, wiping the grease from his mouth with the sleeve of his buckskin shirt, got to his feet. "Reckon mebbe we ought to look up a gent named Matt Cagle," he announced. "I'm a mite curious to know why he ain't bin takin' the precautions Jackson told him to!"

They found Cagle seated beside one of the several large cooking fires that had been built in the wagon-circled enclosure. A short, dark, bearded man with burly shoulders and shifty eyes, he came to his feet quickly, glaring at the trappers in an unfriendly manner. "I'm Cagle," he said belligerently. "What you want?"

"There's a couple o' things puzzlin' me," said Webster. "Yuh claim to be well acquainted with these parts, Cagle. Then yuh must o' knowed that this is dangerous Injun country?"

"What of it?"

"Wal, if yuh knowed that, why haven't yuh kept scouts an' out-riders ahead o' the wagons the last few days?"

The man was silent for a moment. "I just bin followin' orders," he growled sullenly.

"That's a lie, Cagle! Yore orders was to send out scouts. Jackson told me that!"

Rage welled up in the man's brown eyes, making them seem almost black. "I don't care what Jackson says—St. Clair is bossin' this train now! He's the only man I'll take orders from!"

Webster nodded. "That's what I fig-

gered. In that case, you're through as chief scout!"

For a moment, Cagle stood staring at the veteran trapper, blinking his tiny eyes in amazement. Then a string of curses spilled from his lips, and he lunged forward, a knife suddenly appearing in his hand.

Kit Ashton took a step forward, his gray eyes betraying sudden anxiety for what might happen to the old man, who was close to sixty if he was a day. But Bill Meek laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. For once the lean man's gloomy features held the faint hint of a smile. "Let old Jim handle this," he whispered.

As Cagle leaped forward, driving in with his knife hand, Webster shifted quickly on moccasined feet. Avoiding the flashing knife, he stepped in, his gnarled fingers curling about the stocky man's wrist. With a sudden wrench he doubled the man's arm behind his back, driving him to his knees.

A moment later, the knife dropped from Cagle's fingers and he cried out in pain. The mountain man released his hold, moved in close, and drove his moccasined foot into the other man's face. Cagle was driven flat on his back and he made no effort to get up.

A crowd had gathered quickly around the two men. Now they stood staring from the man on the ground to his buckskin-clad conqueror, their eyes filled with stunned shock and surprise. A hush had fallen over the camp, and Kit saw in the faces of the emigrants a growing hostility as they eyed the mountain men. Kit knew that to these greenhorns, unversed in the mountain style of fighting, there had been something unfair in the way the trapper had used his feet in gaining the victory.

Webster turned, looking grimly about at the unfriendly faces. He said, "I'm takin' over Cagle's job as chief o' scouts. This wagon train is in the middle o' Injun country, an' from now on every man will be expected to take his turn at guard duty or advance scoutin'. Another thing—when we reach the river we'll swing south to hit the lower ford, 'stead o' crossin' at Stony Pass where there's a much greater chance o' Injun attack. Anybody got any objections?"

The emigrants continued to stare at him in sullen hostility, but none of them voiced any protest. Quickly Jim Webster designated a number of men to make up the advance party for the afternoon's journey and shortly afterward the wagons rolled westward once more.

But there was a frown on Jim Webster's sun-blackened features, as the trappers rode in advance of the caravan that afternoon. He said, "I got a notion I seed Cagle afore some place. Only he didn't call hisself Cagle then. But I'll be damned if I kin remember where. Reckon mebbe I'll ask Jackson more about him when we make camp agin."

That evening the trappers, scorning the protection of the circle of corraled wagons, made their own camp a short distance from the main camp. After supper, Webster sought out the stricken wagon captain. A little later he returned and without a word resumed his place beside the fire, staring with troubled eyes into the yellowish glare of the leaping flames.

"Wal?" inquired Bill Meek, eyeing him intently. "Yuh find out anythin'?"

The old man shook his head. "All Jackson could tell me was he j'ined up with the wagons back in Jonesburg, when Larson, the head scout, was killed in some kind o' accident. St. Clair got Cagle the job, claimin' he knew every inch o' this country."

Kit Ashton let his eyes wander toward the ring of wagons. He could see Barbara Curtright, a slender, graceful figure silhouetted blackly against the orange glow of a cooking fire. The sight of her stirred a strange restlessness within him, and he said, "Mebbe I better have a look around camp," and got to his feet.

Bill Meek, who had been watching him, said quickly, "If it's the girl yuh're thinkin' of, yuh might as well fergit it right now."

Kit gave him an angry glance. "What yuh mean by that?"

The lean, dour-faced man peered up at him, his dark eyes glinting with a faint scorn. "I hear she is promised to St. Clair, an' they are to be married as soon as the wagons reach Oregon."

Kit stood staring at him for a moment, then spun on his heel and walked away. As he strode toward the wagons, a bitter frown robbed his face of some of its youthfulness. St. Clair? The thought of the girl and the aloof young man did not please him.

THE moon had come up, shedding a faint luminance over the meadow and the white-hooded wagons ahead. As he approached the Curtright wagon he found Barbara and her father seated on a log close to the fire. The girl was reading aloud from a book she held in her lap. Dr. Curtright, smoking his pipe, was listening with a gentle far-away look on his kind face.

Kit halted in the shadows, waited until the girl's voice died away and she put aside the book. Then he stepped forward into the firelight. Curtright gave him a friendly nod and for several minutes questioned him about the next day's line of march.

Finally, the doctor knocked out his pipe against the log and stiffly arose to his feet.

"Guess it's almost time to turn in," he grunted. "But first, I'll see how our patient is coming along." He moved off in the direction of the nearby wagon.

Barbara Curtright said suddenly, "Mr. Ashton, I've been wondering about you."

Kit stared at her, his gray eyes puzzled. "Wonderin' about me?"

"Yes," said the girl. "I can't help thinking you're different from your two friends."

"In what way?"

The girl hesitated. "Well, in the way you act and talk for one thing. Your manners show good breeding, and the air of a gentleman."

"Meanin' that you think my friends are no gentlemen?"

"Gentlemen!" The girl's eyes flashed. "Those two horrid men? Savages, ruffians—that is what the entire wagon train thinks of them after that disgraceful fight!"

"That's what you think of them, too?"

"What else could I think?"

Kit Ashton's features hardened. "Then I'm afraid yuh'll have to think the same about me! I'm a mountain man, too—an' proud of it!"

The girl stared at him, her cobalt eyes widening in astonishment. "You mean you're actually proud of being shiftless and ignorant and wild as an Indian? Why . . . why I'll wager neither of your friends can even read!"

"That's a safe enough bet, miss—if it's book writin' yuh mean!"

She frowned. "What other kind of reading is there?" she demanded impatiently.

"There's some kinds o' readin' a lot more important in these mountains. Little things, like a crushed leaf or a mark in the sand along some stream. Sign o' beaver or buffalo or Injun. That's the kind o' readin' counts in this country if yuh aim to keep yore top-knot on straight. As fer bein' ignorant—in this country, it's you an' the other greenhorns in this wagon train that are the ignorant ones. My friends know how to take care o' themselves. Kin yuh say as much?"

It gave Kit a queer pleasure to see anger glinting in the girl's eyes, color stirring in her cheeks. "You are impossible!" she said furiously.

Just then a voice demanded, "What's going on here? Is this fellow bothering you, Barbara?" Roger St. Clair stepped out of the darkness, a look of annoyance on his handsome face.

The girl opened her mouth as though to reply angrily, then seemed to think better of it. A moment later, she said, "Nothing that concerns you, Roger." Her voice was icy as she added, "Good night, Mr. Ashton," and turned away toward the wagon.

Kit stood watching her for a moment, ignoring St. Clair. Then he turned and started back to the camp he had left. As he left the wagons behind and moved across the moon-drenched meadow, his mind was filled with rage and bitterness.

Suddenly a hand fell roughly on his shoulder, spun him around. He caught a brief glimpse of St. Clair's sullen features in the dimness, then a hard fist crashed against his jaw.

Kit Ashton found himself on the ground, with the huge figure of the arrogant young man looming above him. St. Clair scowled down at him, his eyes, even in the gloom, glinting cruelly. "That's just a warning, you wilderness scum!" he growled. "Stay away from Miss Curtright!"

He turned and began to walk back toward the wagon corral. Kit managed to get to his feet, although the fog was still thick in his mind, and there was a salty taste of blood in his mouth. He shook his head, then moved swiftly in pursuit of the quick-striding figure.

Near the Curtright wagon he caught up with him. St. Clair gave a startled curse as Kit's driving shoulder took him from behind, knocked him flat on his face. Then the two men were rolling in the grass, struggling furiously.

After a minute, St. Clair broke away from Kit's grasp and climbed to his feet. He drove two vicious blows to Kit's head as he came in again, but was unable to avoid the mountain man's swift rush. Again they went down in a tumbled heap.

Despite the Easterner's superiority in weight and size, in a rough and tumble he was hardly the equal of the wilderness-hardened mountain man. Kit had just secured a head-lock about the larger man's throat when he saw Barbara Curtright, her eyes wide with fright, move toward them from the nearby wagon. She held a derringer in her hand, and its short barrel glinted in the moonlight.

"Stop it!" she exclaimed angrily. "Stop it this minute! I have a gun and I'll use it if I have to!"

Kit relaxed his hold and St. Clair sat up, breathing hard. his hands fingering his throat. "This—this ruffian would have choked me to death if you hadn't come along!" he rasped hoarsely.

The girl covered the mountain man with her derringer. "I was mistaken in thinking you were any different from your friends!" she exclaimed indignantly. "You're nothing but savages—all of you! Now go!—quickly!"

Kit arose, his features flushed. Without a word he moved away. . . .

NEXT morning, as the mountain men were preparing breakfast, Bill Meek gave an astonished oath and jumped to his feet. He stood staring in the direction of the emigrant camp. Kit and Jim Webster, following his gaze, saw that a number of emigrants had gathered about the Curtright wagon. The crowd was growing larger by the minute, and the excited murmur of voices reached their ears plainly.

A faint shadow of worry darkened Jim Webster's leathery countenance. He said quickly, "Come on!" and strode swiftly toward the wagon.

Three men stood beside the tailgate of the wagon, talking earnestly—St. Clair, Dr. Curtright, and Matt Cagle. They fell silent as the trappers approached, and St. Clair called out, loudly, "What do you men know about this?"

"About what?" demanded Webster gruffly.

"You're not aware then that Jackson's been murdered?" Kit thought he detected satisfaction mingled with the hatred in the arrogant young man's voice.

For a moment, Jim Webster stared at him. Then, quickly, he climbed into the wagon. A moment later he re-appeared, jumped to the ground. His face was grim, and there was a glint of rage in his eyes.

"Ol' Dave's gone under all right," he growled. "Some varmint left his knife stickin' in the old hoss's back!"

Dr. Curtright was shaking his head, a baffled, angry look in his eyes. "I still don't see how it was done," he commented. "There's only a blanket dividing my part of the wagon from Jackson's and I'm a light sleeper. Yet whoever it was that crept into the wagon and killed him moved so quietly, I wasn't even disturbed."

"In other words," broke in St. Clair, "it would have been impossible for an ordinary man to have committed this crime. Whoever is responsible for Jackson's death must have had the ability to move with extraordinary stealth and caution." He paused and stared over at Kit and his two companions. "You admit that?"

Kit saw that Webster's eyes were narrowed. The old man shot a quick glance at his two comrades. There was an uneasy look on his saddle-colored face. "Mebbe," he said. "What yuh gittin' at?"

There was a chill, arrogant smile on St. Clair's lips. "It would seem to me," he said slowly, "that the man who murdered Jackson must be either an Indian—or a mountain man!"

"That's what I was thinkin'!" agreed Matt Cagle. His shifty little eyes were filled with hate as he stared at the three trappers.

Bill Meek's hand darted to the knife in his belt and he would have moved forward if Jim Webster hadn't restrained him. Webster said, "Cagle, I don't see no reason fer yuh to talk. I noticed yuh're wearin' moccasins jest like we are. An' somehow, I got the notion yuh kin move around plenty quiet-like yoreself if yuh have a mind to."

Fury flamed in Matt Cagle's eyes. He snarled, "Yuh tryin' to say I had somethin' to do with Jackson's murder?"

"I don't know," said Jim Webster. "I'm jest pointin' out there's jest as much reason fer suspectin' you as fer suspectin' us."

"Not quite," said St. Clair, "Cagle, show them that thing you found."

The bearded, burly-shouldered man dug into his pocket and produced an elk horn phial. "Beaver-bait," he announced. "It must belong to one of 'em. No one but a trapper uses the stuff."

St. Clair asked, "Any of you men recognize it?"

Kit gave a startled curse and clapped a hand to the pocket of his beaded buckskin shirt. "Seems to be mine," he admitted. "Must have fallen from my pocket last night."

At his words, there was a sudden stir among the emigrants that had gathered about the wagon. Kit saw a flicker of triumph light up Matt Cagle's bearded, sullen features.

"Then you admit this is yours?" demanded St. Clair.

Kit nodded, gazing about at the hostile faces of the wagon-train men. "Sure it's mine. What of it?"

For a moment St. Clair regarded Kit with an expression of chill satisfaction. He said, "Matt, tell them where you picked up that bottle of beaver-bait!"

Matt Cagle let a slow, cruel grin play across his thick lips. "I found it in the grass beside the wagon here." He darted a vengeful glance toward Kit Ashton. "It musta fell from yore pocket when yuh was crawlin' over to the wagon to stick a knife into Jackson!"

Kit said quickly, "I think you're lyin'! Did anybody see yuh pick it up where yuh said yuh did?"

Dr. Curtright spoke up. "Cagle's not lying. I saw him pick it up. So did St. Clair." He was staring at Kit with a strange sternness on his wide face.

Kit realized suddenly that the beaver medicine must have fallen from his pocket last night when St. Clair and he had tumbled about in the grass close to the wagon. "Anyway, I didn't kill Jackson. What reason would I have fer doin' it?"

St. Clair frowned, eyeing the three trappers coldly. He said, "I never trusted you men from the moment I laid eyes on you. From what I've seen of mountain men, all of you are scoundrels of one sort or another. I've heard stories of wagon trains that were led into traps and plundered by bands of outlaws. How do we know you haven't some such plan in the back of your minds? Perhaps you thought that with Jackson out of the way, you could take command of the wagons and lead us anywhere you wished?"

Matt Cagle chimed in, "That makes sense to me, St. Clair! What are we gonna do about it, men?"

For a moment there was silence. Then an angry voice from the rear of the crowd demanded, "Ain't it about time we gave 'em shiftless heathens a taste of honest-to-God Justice? Fetch a rope, somebody!" A murmur of agreement swept the crowd. Men began to surge forward, faces dark with rage and the lust for action.

Jim Webster moved swiftly. He sprang forward, halting beside St. Clair, his derringer jabbed tightly against the man's stomach. "Quick, St. Clair—order yore men to fall back! Otherwise, I pull the trigger!"

St. Clair paled. His lips moved but no sound came forth. It had all happened so quickly that the emigrants stood stunned, unmoving. Webster glared about at the crowd. "We're leavin'," he growled. "Make a move an' I'll blow a hole in St. Clair's guts!"

Webster forced St. Clair to accompany them as they began to move toward their own camp. They reached it, and in a matter of minutes, the trappers were mounted. With their loaded pack-animals bringing up the rear, they galloped away. Kit, glancing back, caught a glimpse of St. Clair standing in the middle of their camp where they had left him, fury bringing the color back to his face.

From the main camp came the banging of several guns, and balls sang overhead. Bill Meek, his black eyes shining with hate, thumbed his nose at the riflemen and grinned. "Ain't nothin' to worry about so long as they keep aimin' at us!"

AFTER they had ridden out of rifle range, they slowed their horses to a walk and proceeded back along the wagon-rutted trail over which they had traveled the previous day. Reaching higher ground, Webster pulled up his pony and sat gazing back at the distant circle of white-topped wagons.

"Wal, reckon we may as well head fer the rendezvous," he decided. "The man

that killed ol' Dave is down among 'em wagons, but there don't seem to be anythin' we kin do about it right now."

Bill Meek nodded. "If the pair o' ye had listened to me in the first place, we'd bin there by now. Anyhow, there's still a chance we might beat Black Mike in if we hurry."

Webster's eyes gleamed. "Reckon yuh're right, Bill. After all, we didn't go very far outa our way. We ought to make the rendezvous by tomorrow noon at the latest. What d'yuh think, Kit?"

Kit sat his saddle glumly. At the sudden inquiry, he lifted his head and stared blankly. The old trapper had to repeat his question.

"I figger we kin," he said, but there was no enthusiasm in his voice.

The tiny caravan of horsemen and pack-mules moved ahead once again. By mid-morning they had reached the valley where they had first encountered the wagon-train. An hour later they halted to rest the animals. It was when they were once more in the saddle and moving forward that Webster suddenly slapped his thigh with the flat of his hand. "I got it!" he exclaimed. "I jest remembered where I seed Cagle afore! I knew it'd come to me if I jest kept thinkin' o' it. . . ."

"Don't make no diff'rence now anyhow, fur's I kin see," remarked Bill Meek indifferently.

"Makes a lot o' diff'rence!" retorted the old man. "Anyhow to those wagons we jest left!"

Kit Ashton stirred from the gloomy silence that had held him. "What's the meanin' o' that?"

A grimness took shape in Webster's eyes. "Reckon yuh kin figger it out fer yourself when I tell yuh that Cagle's real name is Ben Norton."

"Ben Norton!" Bill Meek was staring wide-eyed at his partner. "Yuh mean that damned renegade white?"

Jim Webster nodded. "I seed him once when he showed up at rendezvous with some o' his Blackfeet friends. He got a cold welcome an' jest did git out o' the valley without losin' his top-knot!"

Bill Meek said, "Then he musta bin the man who rubbed out Jackson?"

"Ain't much doubt about that," replied the older man. "I reckon that accident to Larson was no accident either. He j'ined up with those wagons on purpose. When we come along his plans got interfered with. But he figgered if we was out o' the way an' St. Clair was boss o' the train, he'd have things his own way agin. So he killed Jackson, figgering' it would be easy to persuade St. Clair an' the emigrants we was the guilty ones. When he stumbled on Kit's horn o' beaver-bait in the grass beside the wagon that was even more luck than he had bargained fer."

Kit was staring at Webster with a deepening anxiety in his gray eyes. "You say he had some purpose in joinin' the wagon train?"

Webster' lips twisted in the faint semblance of a smile, but his eyes were grimly sober. "Wouldn't surprise me none if a large war party o' Blackfeet was waitin' some'eres along the trail ahead o' the wagons. I reckon it's Norton's job to lead 'em into the trap."

They rode on in silence for a moment. Then, suddenly, Kit brought his horse to a halt. "I'm goin' back," he announced tersely.

The others reined in also, astonishment on their faces.

Bill Meek snarled, "Goin' back? So 'em fool greenhorns kin put yore head in a rope and swing yuh from a tree?"

"Bill's right," agreed Jim Webster. "They'd never believe a word yuh said. The minute yuh walked back into their camp yuh'd be a gone-beaver!"

Kit frowned. "Just the same, I'm goin'!"

"It's that damned pale-faced girl!" said Bill Meek angrily. "I seed this comin' ever since he got his first look at her white skin an' her fancy ways!"

Webster said, "If it's a woman yuh're hankerin' fer, Kit, there'll likely be some pretty squaws at the rendezvous. An' if ye don't fancy Injun women, we kin always take a swing down toward Taos after the rendezvous is over. Them senoritas ain't not only good to look at, they kin work as hard as any squaw. Take my advice an' don't let yoreself go soft fer a pretty face an' a lot o' foofaraw! What good is a woman like that? Kin she make moccasins or dress skins? Why, yuh couldn't even be sure ye'd be master in yore own lodge! Fergit her, Kit. She's no fit woman fer a mountain man."

Kit's face darkened with anger. "Don't yuh know the girl hates the sight o' me? Yuh talk as though she was eager to marry a mountain man. . . ."

"Then why concern yoreself about her?" demanded Bill Meek, "If 'em wagons git wiped out, they got only themselves to blame fer it!"

Kit stared at the skinny man with the black hair falling about his shoulders, anger and disgust in his eyes. Then, without another word, he clapped his moccasined heels against the horse's flank and headed back down the trail.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood-in-the-Sun

IT WAS noon of the following day when he reached the place where the wagons had turned off toward the upper crossing at Stony Pass. He reined in his tired horse and stared at the marks of the wagons in the sandy soil. Here was proof that Norton had again taken over direction of the train's guidance. Kit remembered Jim Webster's statement about the likelihood of attack at Stony Pass, and fear mounted within him. He urged his horse along the rutted trail left by the wagons.

Suddenly the faint sound of gun-fire came to his ears, and he sent the horse ahead at a gallop. The stout-hearted animal, despite its weariness, responded gallantly, and a few minutes later he swung over a ridge and caught a glimpse of the scene of confusion spread before him.

The river was a wild, churning stretch of racing water, swollen by recent rains and melting snows from the higher valleys. On the far bank, towering bluffs of rock hemmed in the river except at one point where a narrowing cleft breached the natural barrier—the famed Stony Pass.

Along the sandy stretch of beach at the mouth of the Pass, six or seven wagons were drawn up. A like number were in the process of breasting the swirling rush of the flood waters. The rest of the wagon train, roughly one half of the wagons, were still assembled on the near bank.

Kit saw puffs of white smoke rise from the rim of the rocky cliffs above the pass, and a gust of wind brought faintly across the wide barrier of the river the high-pitched yelling of Blackfeet warriors.

Among the drivers of the wagons in midstream was much confusion. One of them was trying to swing his oxen about and head back for the safety of the near bank. Even as Kit watched, the harness gave way as the outfit plunged into deeper water and the boiling current took hold of the wagon. Frightened screams of a woman and a child drifted clearly across the water. The wagon swung off down-stream, spinning slowly in the grip of the on-rushing flood.

Kit rode down the sandy slope to the line of halted wagons below. Men ran about aimlessly, shouting hoarsely and pointing at the other side of the river. There were a dozen or more men gathered at the water's edge, and their voices were raised in angry, desperate-voiced debate.

A stocky, bearded man stepped from behind one of the wagons. His eyes widened at sight of the mountain man. Curses spilled from Matt Cagle's lips. He quickly swung up the rifle in his hands.

Kit snatched the derringer from his belt and fired, saw the renegade go down. He swept past the sprawled figure and a few moments later was in the midst of the group of arguing, shouting men.

Astonishment came into the faces of the emigrants as they swung around, staring at this man who had so brashly ridden into their camp. Their bickering voices suddenly hushed, and they eyed him with mingled hostility and bewilderment. The mountain man saw St. Clair, the one mounted man among them, frowning uneasily, his pale eyes filled with annoyance.

"Listen to me!" Kit shouted harshly. "There's only one thing you kin do now! Fergit the wagons! Git yoreselves mounted and swim yore horses across the river—if yuh don't want to see the Blackfeet wipe out half of yore party! An' fer God's sake —hurry!"

For a brief moment, the wagon-train men stood undecided. But something in Kit Ashton's manner, the conviction in his voice, his instant recognition of what must be done, commanded their respect. Suddenly, they were running to obey his commands. Quickly they mounted and gathered at the water's edge.

St. Clair was scowling darkly, holding up his hand. "Wait a minute, men!" he protested. "How do we know this isn't a trick?"

"Damn you, St. Clair!" growled one of the emigrants. "If we hadn't been fools enough to listen to you and that damn Cagle, we wouldn't have been caught like rats in a trap! Ashton and his friends warned us what would happen if we crossed the river at Stony Pass! We wouldn't listen to him then. I say it's time we listened now!"

A murmur of agreement went up from the other men. Someone called, "We're with you, Ashton! Tell us what to do and we'll do it!"

A moment later, having mounted one of the fresher wagon-train horses, Kit led nearly two dozen horsemen into the swirling current. Spray flew through the air as they plunged forward. Then they were fighting their way through the chilling water toward the opposite bank, forced to swim in places because the river had risen so greatly.

As the horsemen neared the further bank, the fierce yelling of the Indians grew louder in their ears. Kit saw men moving about among the wagons, returning the fire from the heights above. By this time the last of the Conestogas had reached shore and had wheeled across the sand to take its place in the defensive half circle of wagons drawn up on the beach.

Bullets whined about them now, as the Blackfeet turned their attention to the rescue party. Two men riding beside Kit dropped from their horses, a third was unseated as his mount was wounded by an Indian bullet. Kit shouted for the men to seek cover, and they leaped from their mounts and scrambled toward the protection of the wagons.

Anxiously, Kit let his gaze dart among the defenders of the wagons. He couldn't be sure, but he thought it likely that the Curtright wagon was one of those that had crossed the river among the first.

At first he didn't recognize her. The lower part of her dress was torn and wet, as though she'd been wading in water up to her knees. There was a smear of blood along one cheek. But there was no fear in her cobalt eyes. As he watched, she leveled the heavy rifle in her hands, squinted along the barrel and pulled the trigger.

Kit felt a queer glow of pride. He wished Webster and Bill Meek could have seen her now. There wasn't squaw or senorita could have displayed more courage than this slender girl in a moment of crisis. He crawled toward her.

"Thank God!" he whispered a moment later. "You're safe!"

She looked around, her eyes widening. Kit never quite knew how it happened. But, amazingly, next moment she was in his arms, and her arms were tight about his neck. He kissed her, and she kissed him back—hard.

But then other matters claimed his attention. The fire from the bluffs was growing more intense. Kit found it necessary to order furniture and boxes dragged from the wagons to form a barricade against the thudding balls.

A little later, Kit saw Dr. Curtright. The stocky little medico was bandaging the wounds of several of the emigrants who'd been hit. "What are our chances of getting out of this alive?" he asked.

Kit shrugged. "If we kin hold 'em off until nightfall, I figger we might stand a chance. Then mebbe we could git back across the river and head fer the Lower Crossin'."

Curtright nodded. "I see. But you're not sure we can hold 'em off that long, is that it?"

Kit Ashton's face sobered. "Keep a bullet handy fer yore daughter if they should break through. Blackfeet got nasty ways with white women."

After that he moved to a vantage point that commanded a clear view of the Pass. Crouching behind a thick oak table, he fixed his eyes on the rimrock above and waited. After a while he located one of the attackers among the rocks and his long rifle barked. The warrior staggered upright, threw up his arms in what seemed a gesture of supplication, then toppled backward out of sight.

After a while, the Indian fire seemed to slacken and several of the emigrants suggested that the enemy might be withdrawing. Kit shook his head, and smiled faintly.

"I reckon I'd like to believe that," he said. "But I'm afraid it means somethin' quite diff'rent. If the Injuns figger to overrun us, they'll have to come at us from the Pass. There's no other way. Looks to me like they're withdrawin' from the bluffs and gatherin' on the other side o' the Pass. When they're ready, they'll come through

and ride us down. Better pass the word along to git ready fer 'em. I got a feelin' it won't be long now."

Half an hour later, an uneasy silence had settled over the scene. The emigrants waited tensely, grim-faced. Women clasped small children to them tightly and hugged them, with a realization that it might be for the last time.

The sun had broken through the scudding, swift-moving clouds that had made the morning gray. Suddenly a figure moved out of the deep shadows at the far end of the Pass. Sun glinted on a brilliant feathered head-dress, and the warrior rode slowly toward the wagons. He lifted the lance in his hand and shook it in a fierce gesture of defiance. Then he sent his pony racing forward.

Instantly a wild shout went up, and red horsemen swept forward. Kit got to his feet and called, "Hold your fire until yuh hear my rifle go off."

Closer and closer thundered the painted warriors, and still Kit waited. The emigrants cast nervous glances his way. Finally he yelled, "Now!" and pulled the trigger.

The rifles of the wagon-train men roared. They threw down rifles and seized others that the women passed up to them. Now there was a confusion of shouting, the steady crackle of rifles. Kit took the loaded rifle that was thrust into his hands and lined its sights on the war-chief who was leading the charge. He touched the trigger, saw through the lifting smoke the chief's pony swerve away, riderless.

"Here," said a voice at his elbow and another loaded weapon was given him. He turned long enough to see Barbara Curtright busily loading the first gun, smiling at him as she did so. Again he fired, watched a warrior fling up his hands and topple backwards.

Now a cheer went up from the men around him. They beat each other lustily on the back and laughed gayly. The red horsemen had swung around, were racing back toward the narrow cleft in the rock walls.

"Good work!" Kit called. He was pleased by the conduct of these Easterners—and surprised, too. They had held steady and they had given the Indians hell. But as he gazed about at the wagon's defenders he became aware that the attack had not been without cost to the emigrants, too. Here and there men were down, some wounded, others dead.

He shook his head, frowned. He knew that the Indians would be back. And next time there would be fewer rifles to turn them back. He directed the men to prepare for another attack, and sought to conceal his own concern about its outcome. . . .

The sun was sliding down the western sky and the cliff walls were casting lengthening shadows toward the wagons, when the Blackfeet made their second attack. They swarmed out of the blueish shadows of the Pass and flung their ponies ahead in a furious charge. Kit did not wait so long this time. He gave the signal and the afternoon again was filled with the noise of exploding gun powder, the shouts of men, the cries of the wounded and dying, the swelling, earth-shaking rumble of galloping red riders.

Despairingly, Kit watched the Blackfeet close in, and the conviction grew within him that this time they would not be turned back.

He sent shot after shot into the line of horsemen, but on they came. He took a quick glance to see that the derringer in his belt was loaded, and he felt a sickness inside of him as he darted a swift glance at the girl beside him. Again she smiled, nodding her head slightly in understanding of what he must do. Her cobalt eyes were filled with a quiet courage.

Somewhere along the line of wagons, a child screamed in terror as a first wave of crowding ponies swarmed through an opening between the wagons. Some of the Easterners, their guns empty, were using their rifles as clubs, attempting to batter the yelping red riders from their horses.

Kit fired at one of the warriors, wounding him in the arm. Then with something like a prayer on his lips, he pulled the derringer from his belt. But Barbara Curtright was staring past him in the direction of the Pass with a queer excitement in her eyes.

"Kit!" she cried. "Look! There—coming through the Pass! Aren't they white men?"

The mountain man swung his startled glance to follow her gaze, and a hoarse cry burst from his lips. A score of buckskin-

clad riders were pounding furiously toward the wagons, and now a savage shout went up as they dashed at the Indian rear.

For a moment there was a wild tangle of plunging, yelling, struggling riders. Then the Blackfeet swung away, again riding madly for the narrow neck of the Pass. . . .

THERE was much to be done. The dead had to be buried and the wounded cared for. The rest of the wagons had to be brought across the river, animals rounded up, and wagons repaired. Thus it was some time later before Kit had a chance to ask the questions that trembled on his tongue.

"Ain't nothin' much to it," explained Jim Webster. "We met Black Mike Leary an' his brigade within an hour o' the time yuh left us. He was comin' back from Baxter's Hole, his mules still loaded with fur. The rendezvous was off. Fur-buyer sent word the market in skins was so bad, he didn't figger on doin' any more buyin' this year.

"Wal, Black Mike was tryin' to make up his mind whether to head for Californy and Oregon where there might be a chance of sellin' his pelts to some New England tradin' schooner, or whether to move south to Taos, where they say there's still some buyin' goin' on. Reckon I kinda got him to thinkin' Oregon was the best bet, so we follered yuh along the trail. When we come to the river an' saw 'em pesky Blackfeet attackin', we left a couple o' men to guard the pack-animals and rode fer the Lower Ford, figgerin' to git on the other side o' the Pass an' take the varmints from the rear. Which we done, an' that's all they was."

Firelight flickered across the faces of the men as they sat about a fire of driftwood with the flames casting their shadows, magnified to grotesquely huge proportions, on the tall bluffs close by.

Kit said, "So yuh gave Black Mike advice it'd be easier to sell his pelts on the coast. I thought yuh always said Taos would be the likeliest market if St. Louis quit buyin'?"

Jim Webster grinned, and darted a glance toward another fire not far distant. Here Black Mike and his men laughed, joked, and feasted for the first time in years upon food cooked by feminine hands. "Don't let Black Mike hear about this—but I still think Taos is the better o' the two."

Kit looked at the old man and at Bill Meek with a strange softness in his gray eyes. "But if they had ridden south, they couldn't have helped the wagons under attack at the Pass—ain't that it?"

Webster stared into the flames. "Mountain men stick together," he said simply.

There was a silence, and then the old man said, "Boy, I want to tell yuh somethin'. I bin doin' some thinkin' lately. Beaver-trappin' is about finished in these mountains. Ain't no gittin' around it. We mountain men will have to find new stampin' grounds, turn to new things. Mebbe even become farmers or ranchers. I was even thinkin' there might be worse things than fer yuh to git married to that pale gal an' settle yoreselves some place in Oregon!"

Bill Meek had been listening to this with startled eyes. "Jim," he exclaimed in an aggrieved voice, "I never expected to hear *you* talk like that!"

Webster frowned over at the skinny man. He said, "Ought to be good huntin' an' fishin' an' even some trappin' in Oregon. O' course, a damn stubborn critter like yuh won't have sense enough to see that! Wal, stay in these mountains then! But me—I'm fer Oregon!"

Bill Meek sighed. "Oh, I'll come. Like yuh said—mountain men stick together. . . ."

THE END

Dally your mecate on the November issue of *.44 Western.* No Western-action fan will want to miss the hard-hitting issue coming his way next month, with vigorous stories by such aces of frontier fiction as James Shaffer, Joseph Chadwick, William R. Cox, and many other top-hand writing hombres, who bring you colorful, swift-moving sagas of the Old West!

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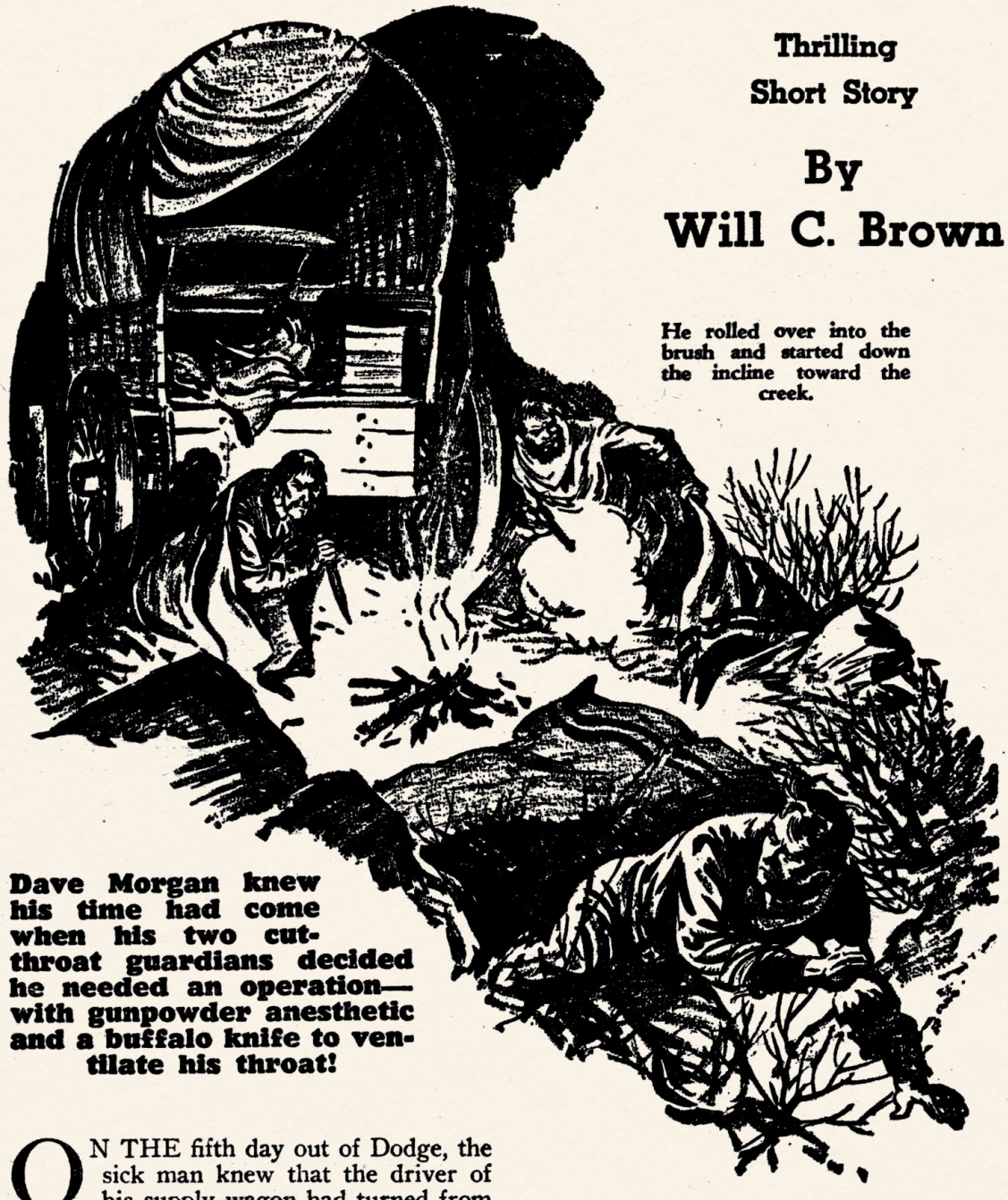
Chisholm Trail Gun-Cure

Thrilling
Short Story

By Will C. Brown



He rolled over into the brush and started down the incline toward the creek.

Dave Morgan knew his time had come when his two cut-throat guardians decided he needed an operation—with gunpowder anesthetic and a buffalo knife to ventilate his throat!

ON THE fifth day out of Dodge, the sick man knew that the driver of his supply wagon had turned from the main trail and was taking a slanting course toward the rough lands that lay southeast of the Chisholm. The worst of it was, Coble, the driver, would offer no explanation, even denied that he was off the route. Hervieux, the other one, simply lounged in the back of the wagon, always whetting his long knife and watching Dave from half-closed eyes.

The supply wagon lumbered on, a lonely speck on the saffron-colored plains that unrolled southward toward the panhandle strip of Indian Territory and the Canadian River.

Dave felt each jolt and turn of the wheels smashing in his fever-wracked head. Above him, a weathered wagonsheet flopped and sagged in the hot wind, meager protection from a violent July sun. Inside him, hatred for Coble and Hervieux flamed hot, like his fever.

"You're off the Chisholm," he mumbled again, knowing that Coble up there in the driver's seat would not listen.

Hervieux leaned over. "You goin' to leeve, you think, Meester Morgan?"

"Give me the canteen," Dave groaned. "Can't get enough water. I believe that damn medicine you're giving me is doped!"

Dave had run on to the pair of them around the stock yards in Dodge. Yes, Dave remembered, their acquaintance had developed fast in Dodge. After they had sized up the chunky roll of money paid him for his cattle at the end of the drive, they had been right happy over the chance of going back to Texas in the wagon with him. Good cowhands, they had assured him. Damn good. Just down on their luck a little. Mighty glad for the chance to go work for Dave on that Texas ranch.

Dave wondered what Eddie would have thought. Eddie would have smiled, no doubt, and called him a damned fool.

Coble was a massive man, red-stubbled, enormous in the shoulders, mean in the eye. Dave pulled himself up from his bedding and crawled toward the seat of the wagon. Hervieux's hand paused from whetting the knife.

"Damn it, Coble! I tell you we're off the trail!" Dave impatiently groaned. "You're straying east from the Chisholm, man. This direction will take us into bad country and we'll lose a lot of time!"

Coble twisted his great hulk about until his small reddish eyes glared down, and for a moment Dave saw the unveiled cruelty in them. The giant driver pulled up roughly on the lines with his left hand and the mustangs slowed. He reached down and put his spread right hand squarely into Dave's face and gave a strong backward push.

"Git back there and quit yore whinin'!" Coble snarled. "You're crazy with fever, and I'm fed up with hearin' you beef! Leave the drivin' to me!"

His shove sent Dave sprawling into the tangle of gear in the wagonbed. Hervieux looked at him without emotion, and started sharpening the knife again.

"Give him another dose of medicine, Hervieux," Coble called.

"I offered heem a dose," the swarthy one said softly. "He won't take eet. He too seek—theenk eet ees doped!"

The words tumbled and faded and came back to Dave. *Give him another dose of medicine!* Familiar words by now. Seemed like Coble had been saying them ever since the wagon had pulled out of Dodge.

Dave made up his mind then that he would take no more of Coble's medicine. If Hervieux even extended that ugly black bottle again, he would shoot it out of his hand. No—he couldn't do that. His gun and gunbelt were in his gear bag. Or was that where he had hidden the money, that last day in Dodge? No—he had poked the money down deep into a sack of oats, here in the back of the wagon. Dave realized his thoughts were confused, that the past day or two were dizzy, vague whirlings, and he groaned aloud, wishing his head would clear, that the fever would die down.

Hervieux crawled a foot over to Dave, extending a half-filled bottle of dark liquid.

"A leetle dose again, Morgan—eet weel do you good for that feevir."

Dave struck out savagely with his hand. The bottle was flung against the side of the wagon, breaking into pieces, and the medicine spread stickily to the wagonbed.

"That stuff!" he gritted. "That's what keeps making me sick. It's poisoned!"

Hervieux's teeth flashed in tight-drawn lips and his eyes turned icy. He rubbed a finger on the razor-like edge of the knife.

Dave lay huddled on his bedding until Coble stopped the wagon for a night camp. They must have thought he was asleep. He could hear their words out there where Coble was unhitching the team.

"WE'RE far enough off the main trail," Coble was telling Hervieux gruffly. "Ain't likely to be seen by any trail riders over here. Now let's find out where he's got that money."

Dave could not hear the rest of their words. The Texan climbed out on unsteady legs, and Coble and Hervieux became silent and went about making camp. Dave saw that they were in a clump of sun-sapped dwarf growth. A hundred paces down a

slope, a shallow, rocky creek twisted along the bottom of a ravine. He had taken no medicine for several hours and he thought he already was feeling better. And he was certain that Coble had been pouring a doped concoction down him in the guise of fever medicine.

Dave worked his way down to the creek, knowing that Coble and Hervieux would search the wagon while he was gone. He took off his clothes and soaked in the shallow stream letting the sluggish flow of the water cool his body. He felt his strength coming back, his hot fever subside. When he came back at dusk, the coffee pot was chugging on a bed of coals. Coble and Hervieux squatted at the fire.

As the trio ate, Coble spoke up in marked casualness. "Got a pretty big price for them steers you sold, didn't you, Morgan?"

"So-so," Dave grunted.

"Kinda dangerous, travelin' through the Territory with big money," Coble said. "Better git it hid. I hear there's been bandits and bad Indians about."

"It's hid," Dave said shortly.

He wished for the hundredth time that day that he could get to his gun in the duffle bag. But Hervieux had eternally watched him there in the back of the wagon.

Maybe they would decide to make their showdown this very night. It was coming sometime. He was sure of that. Right now, Dave thought, might be his last chance to cope with them. They were out to get that money. He had meant it to be a lure. But not this good—not so good that they would kill him for it before he had a chance. If he failed now, it would be a dismal flop and a slug in his back. Eddie would be laughing at him, up there in heaven, not contemptuous, not even sarcastically, but friendly like and good-natured. He wished Eddie was along now. Eddie was the swellest older brother a Texas kid ever had. Eddie hadn't known what fear was. He had laughed at it. But Eddie was under the year-old sod on a green, peaceful Texas hillside. Bullets in the back had killed Eddie. Bullets in the night, after that poker game trouble in Santone. A pair of Santone hardcases had killed Eddie and they had escaped, and seemed like nobody in Texas was ever going to run them down.

"Where'd you hide it?" Coble asked huskily. "Just in case bandits show up, or anything happens and we have to know?"

They were strained now. He could tell they were watching him breathlessly, but trying to keep it casual. Dave refilled his coffee cup with clammy hands.

"I didn't bring it along," he said after a pause. "I sent it south by a bunch of trail riders, friends of mine. They left the day before us. The Bar-Nine outfit. Thought it would be safer that way."

"We eenquired," Hervieux sighed, showing white teeth with no humor in the smile. "The Bar-Nine outfeet, they left one week ahead, not the day before us."

Coble looked square at Dave then, a belligerent, speculative stare, and Dave could almost see the massive man's mind at work.

He eyed the distance to the wagon. It would be impossible to make it. He couldn't get up and get there first, to untie and dig into his duffle bag, find his gun. The two of them would swarm all over him, with gun and knife. Then take that wagon to pieces to find the money.

He shook out tobacco and paper, wondering how long it would be until Coble's anger frayed and snapped. When it did—it would mean a riddled body for a mesquite clump and the buzzards, or river quicksands and the gars.

Dave slowly got up. He ambled toward the wagon. His strength was coming back after the meal and the hot coffee, but he knew he was still mighty weak. Coble could snap him in two with one hand.

He pulled himself up and over the tailgate. Coble sauntered to the wagon, right behind him, and Hervieux was behind Coble.

By lantern light, Dave straightened his pallet, taking his time. The contents of the wagon were disordered, and he knew that they had made a quick search while he was in the creek. But the oats sack didn't look tampered with.

"Bring yore beddin' out here and sleep by the fire," Coble spoke.

"Think I'll be more comfortable in here," Dave replied.

"Cooler outside—better for fever."

"I like it better in here, Coble."

"You'll feel better outside!" Coble's voice changed with that. It was low, hard and deliberate. Dave heard it as more than a suggestion. It was an absolute order.

Coble stood at the end of the wagon, his tall bulk towering in the dark. His massive fists were cradled on the wide belt at his straining middle. The belt dangled an old holster and a peculiarly carved brown-butted sixgun. Eddie used to have a Colt like that. Dave had remembered it, first time he saw Coble around Dodge. The gun had disappeared that time in Santone, along with Eddie's money. Dave had tried for a long time to get a description of the men who had killed Eddie, had taken a lot of time from the ranch, running down clues and cold trails.

"All right, I'll bunk by the fire," Dave said casually. "Got to get me a clean shirt out of my bag—sweated this one soaking wet today."

Coble stood immobile, hands still on his hips. Hervieux had moved up alongside him. Dave loosened the drawstrings at the neck of the weathered canvas bag. He pushed his right hand down. He felt through the first layer of clothing, ran his hand in between garments and gear. With a sinking feeling of despair, he pawed all around, down the sides, pushed clear to the bottom.

The gun was not there. And he knew the two of them were out there silently laughing at him.

"My last clean shirt," Eddie grunted. He climbed over the tailgate, stalked to the fire.

AFTER a while he rolled in his blankets and the fire died down. Coble and Hervieux spread their bunks further back in the shadows. They were working on a whiskey bottle.

"Maybe they'll get drunk!" Dave whispered to himself. He knew it was wishful thinking. But he was clutching at straws. He was clutching his clean, rolled-up shirt, too. And inside it was the neck of that broken medicine bottle. The neck was just right to fit in a man's hand, and the jagged shoulders of it were sharp and ugly. He hadn't found his gun, but he had dropped his shirt on the bottle neck there in the wagonbed, then picked up the shirt with the glass hidden under it. It wasn't as long and as sharp as Hervieux's knife, but it was better than no weapon at all.

A smothering of thick clouds blotted out the bleak stars after midnight and utter blackness engulfed the camp. Off beyond the wagons Dave could occasionally hear the horses. For long hours he had been thinking it out. Wondering if he could make a run for it. If he could make it to the mustangs ahead of slugs from Coble's gun. If he could, he might fashion a quick hackamore from a stake rope and ride for the cover of the night before they could overtake him.

He had to take the gamble. He knew that his last chance would be gone before the sun came up.

DEATH TO THE RIO RAIDERS!

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Without further planning, he abruptly rolled over, loosening himself from the blankets, keeping a grasp on the bottle piece. Then he kept rolling, out on the ground, down the incline toward the creek. Over and over. He struggled to his feet and started running on wobbly legs. He headed for the horses.

Coble's sixgun roared behind him. The slug crashed through the brush at his side. The gun roared again. He heard them coming, the sound of their feet and Coble's cursing.

He whacked at a stake rope with the shattered piece of glass, and it seemed an age before a jagged edge severed the strands. Then he worked to slash the other rope. One of the animals plunged high, frightened, and careened away. Dave got a quick hitch with the cut rope about the muzzle of the other, fashioning a crude hackamore. He pulled himself up on the bareback horse, still clutching the piece of the medicine bottle. He turned the horse away from camp, kicking it along, trying to guide with the rope, but this was the lazy one of the team, old and stubborn, and Dave had trouble getting him started.

Coble's voice bellowed out, an angry blast in the night.

"Morgan! What you doing' out there—where in hell are you?"

He must have heard the horse then. The roar of the .45 shattered the blackness. The bullet sang past and the horse jumped. Dave clawed desperately at the mane, but the gun blasted again, and the horse jumped mightily in fright. Dave was unbalanced. He made a last futile clutch at the animal's neck, sliding sideways as the horse reared again, and then he bounced to the rocky ground. The horse broke into a run.

Dave rolled for the inky blackness of a low bush and melted into its shadows. Coble was running toward him on heavy feet, was almost upon him now. Somewhere back of Coble came other running feet, and Dave knew he would have both of them upon him.

He grasped the neck of the bottle tighter. When a man had failed and had his back to the wall, he could only go down with one last hard try.

Coble was alongside the bush, nearly on top of him, when Dave shot up from the shadows. Coble heard him, half turned, and in that instant Dave swung with all his strength. He brought the jagged, sharp teeth of the broken bottle around in a mighty slap straight into the big man's massive face. Coble screamed in a blood-chilling high pitch, almost like a woman. His gun fell at his feet as he bent forward, grabbing at his bleeding face and eyes with both hands, but he did not go down. Dave stabbed with his left fist, straight and hard into Coble's stomach, and then he swung the saw-toothed glass again. Coble was moaning and threshing like a wounded giant, and his great fat arms encircled Dave, bearing him to the rocky ground by sheer weight. Dave never knew, exactly, how he clawed about for Coble's gun, or how he shoved in somewhere between their straining middles and fingered the trigger. The sharp powder burn of the explosion caused him to cry out, but Coble jerked back at that nasty, hollow sound of tearing flesh. He rolled aside, almost gracefully.

Hervieux was upon him then. The buffalo knife was poised when Dave fired upward from the ground. Hervieux froze for an instant, tensely upright, like a dark statue, then he folded down slowly almost upon the still body of his partner lying on the ground.

Dave closed his eyes from exhaustion. The hard rocky ground felt soft and good. Rest. Worry-free rest, was all he craved in that moment. Later he could hunt the horses, later he could cool his body in the sluggish creek, and later he could hitch and head back to hit the Chisholm and head for home. Right now, though, he was too fagged to move, to do anything but lie there, looking into the blackness of the night, with Eddie's sixgun still in his hand. He closed his eyes wearily and hoped Eddie might be looking down, and would be pleased. He hoped Eddie, from Somewhere, would know, and approve, that Eddie might even think his younger brother was tolerably clever, the way he had trailed those two hardcases all over Texas, clear to Dodge. And finally had hired them so he could try to get them back to jurisdiction of Santone law. Since they had decided they wanted to stand trial, so to speak, here in the lonely Territory, Dave reckoned that Eddie would be just as well satisfied with the verdict.

PIGGIN' STRINGS

The Western lariat did more than string up horse-thieves from cottonwoods—they were even used to catch cattle!

IT IS INTERESTING to speculate upon the range work that gave rise to the present day rodeo contests. Anyone can figure out where the idea of saddle bronc riding came from and all the other riding contests are natural outgrowths. The range work behind the roping contests is well known too. But I have heard only speculation as to the origin of one piece of equipment used in modern roping contests. That is the pigging string.

Some say the pigging string is an adaption of the Mexican vaquero's *mecate*. But the mecate as I have always known it has been put to an entirely different use, that of a "safety". A bridle or hackamore rein can often get away from a rider before he knows what's happened when a snaky bronc comes undone unexpectedly. But a mecate is longer and, being made of hair, is rougher and easier to freeze onto. So when riding such a bronc, many punchers fasten a mecate to the bit, or bosal, and stick the other end under their belt together with the slack done up in a small coil. And upon finding themselves in midair after an unexpected parting with saddle leather, a quick grab at the mecate often saves a long walk to camp.

Like all other items of cowpuncher equipment, I'm certain the pigging string originated on the range long before the present day type of contests originated. And like most other items of present day punchers' equipment, it originated in Texas and Mexico.

After the railroad hit Kansas and the trail north from Texas was established anything that wore cow hide came to have value. Down in the thorn brush country the thickets were full of mossyhorns that had been dropped before the War when a critter's only value was hide and tallow. But now it was different, and after the other ranges were pretty well cleaned of mavericks the little ranchers started in earning their money the hard way by trapping wild cattle in the thicket.

This took some doing, the critters being wilder than deer and cagier than a wild horse. Catching them feeding outside the thicket in little clearings at night and dabbing a loop around their horns pronto was the way most of it was done. Then's when the piggin' string originated, if not before. The same kind of cattle had been hunted in the mountains of Mexico, but there were trees around to anchor them to down there.

In the brush country it was different. They had to be tied down, just like a pig used to be tied down for hauling to market in an open boxed wagon. On other ranges a puncher might have used the slack of his lasso, but here with a thirty foot rope he didn't have any slack.

The piggin' string might have acquired its name later, however. About fifty years ago there were great droves of hogs on the range in Texas, as well as great herds of cattle. It seems to be a little known fact today, but I have frequently heard old Texans recalling the distasteful job of spaying gilts (young female pigs). This was mixed in as a regular part of pulling bogs and other such better known range riding chores. There were plenty of pigs, both male and female, and neither kind took on any fat while they retained the power of self-perpetuation.

A spayed gilt fattened better than a barrow because the boars didn't fight them, so whenever a puncher sighted a promising gilt, he tried to fit a loop to her. Nowdays they think roping goats is something, but roping wild pigs would make it simple by comparison. Nevertheless those young Texans did it. Texas wasn't an easy country those days, and a puncher riding for a little outfit, or a boy who's folks owned one, had to be there with all it took for any job that meant more income.

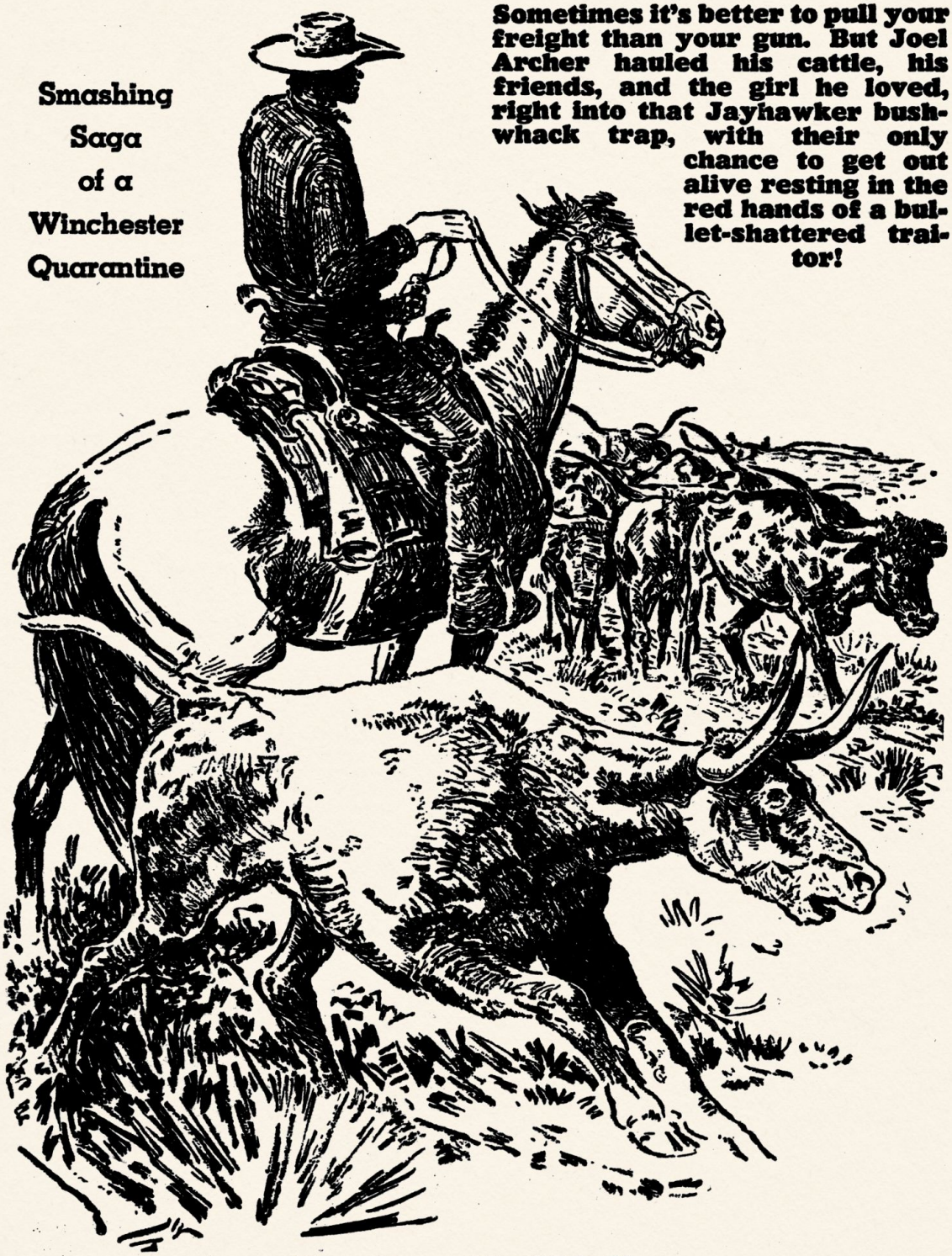
When a gilt was snagged the rider threw a hitch on her hind legs with a piggin' string and looped the center of the string across the saddle horn, letting her hang head downward along his bronc's shoulder. Then he got out his fish knife and went to work.

—*Del Rayburn.*

THAT TEXAS

Smashing Saga of a Winchester Quarantine

Sometimes it's better to pull your freight than your gun. But Joel Archer hauled his cattle, his friends, and the girl he loved, right into that Jayhawker bushwhack trap, with their only chance to get out alive resting in the red hands of a bullet-shattered traitor!



By Lee E. Wells

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CHAPTER ONE

Rifle Roost

"Baxter Springs by nightfall, so get along, you dogies!"

THE refrain had circled endlessly in Joel Archer's mind from the moment he had broken camp that morning and the trail herd had lined out. It had been a long way across Texas, and there had been a stampede in the Indian Territory that had cost several days of hard labor combing the draws and washes for strays. Joel was still a long way from the cattle market in Sedalia, over in Missouri, but once a man crossed the Kansas line he could figure the big job behind him.

He rode point now as the sun moved wearily toward the western edge of the low hills. Up ahead he could see the dust cloud of another herd and Joel's mobile lips quirked slightly. It was probably another broken Texan trying to get dollars from

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lean, tough, longhorns. He pulled his hat brim lower over his dark eyes, twisted his lean shape in the saddle and looked back over the herd, fifteen hundred head of mixed cattle, representing every damned cent the carpetbaggers and Freedman's Bureau had left to the Crazy A iron.

The beef spread out in a long, snake-like line. Little Doc Frake, one of the swing men, signaled that all was well and Joel answered with a lazy lift of his arm. He straightened, shifted his holster to an easier position and once again slouched to meet the miles yet remaining to the day's travel.

The sun moved lower, touched the rim of the world. Suddenly Joel straightened, seeing a rider come toward him. Whoever it was, he came fast and Joel noticed that there was no longer a dust cloud up ahead. That meant making a wide detour around the bedded herd that blocked his way, if he was to cross into Kansas. He signaled Frake to ride up and the little Texican reined in beside him.

"We got company and trouble, I think," Joel said quietly. "The bunch ahead of us is bedded."

Doc squinted ahead. He was a small man, wiry as a string of rawhide. He was young, about Joel's age, but his small features had a strangely old and puckish cast.

"Hell, that's a girl! I oughta slick down my hair and look right nice."

"Girl!" Joel spurred forward to meet the rider, Doc close beside him.

The girl came on at a fast trot, lifting a slender arm. She rode with willowy ease and Joel's eyes lingered on the clean, lovely lines of her figure that the split riding skirt and the loose, tan shirt could not fully conceal. As she drew rein a few feet away, Joel saw that she had red hair that had captured golden glints. Her hazel eyes were direct and a touch challenging. He noted the firm modeling of her face and the full red lips.

"Swing your herd east," she said. "We're stopped up ahead."

"Take your beef off the trail," Joel said. "I'm crossing the Kansas line before I'm bedding down tonight."

"You think you are," the girl answered. "Swing east or you'll run into trouble."

Joel glanced at the sun then folded his hands over the saddle-horn and stared at the girl. She was as pretty a woman as he had seen in many years, yet she symbolized just another irritating obstacle to him—one more added to the many he had doggedly overcome.

"Mighty early to bed," he stated flatly. "Must be a bunch of greenhorns chousing your beef. You'd better rattle back and tell your trail boss to get off the trail before we come through."

"You fool!" she snapped. "I said we're stopped—"

"Get 'em off the trail," Joel growled. He neck reined his horse and saw that Doc stared entranced at the girl. "Wake up, Doc, we're driving beef."

The girl's hand flashed down to her holster and the gun blurred upward, lined on Joel. Her eyes sparked in glittering anger and she gestured toward the east again.

"If you won't listen to reason, you'll listen to a Colt. Turn your herd before you get hurt."

Joel stared at her, his lean face showing blank amazement. Then he grinned and chuckled. The girl's cheeks flamed an angry red and her lips pressed together in a thin, harsh line.

"Hey!" Joel yelled in sudden alarm and set the spurs. Her gun spat flame and the bullet had an evil whine as it sped past his shoulder. He reached her before she could fire again and his fingers grasped her wrist, forcing the gun upward and to one side. It coughed its slug uselessly into the sky. Joel's muscles bunched and the gun flew in a high arc to the ground several feet away. He glared at her.

"You'll hurt someone acting like that."

"I intended to," she snapped and then her eyes filled with tears that she angrily tried to hold back. Her small fist beat at the saddle horn as though to drive the meaning of her words into Joel's brain. "We've stopped because we have to. Dad can't buck a hundred rifles with a crew of five. Neither can you. We knew you were back here and I came to ask you to swing around and warn you of what's up ahead."

Joel's jaw dropped in surprise and he searched her face to read confirmation of what she said. He lifted his hat and scratched his head.

"Rifles! A hundred of them? What's that for?"

"Cattle quarantine. They say the longhorns bring Texas fever and we can't drive into Kansas. They're backing their orders with rifles."

Joel digested the news and his jaw tightened. Then he realized how curtly he had treated the girl and his face flamed with embarrassment. He hastily dismounted and picked up the girl's Colt, extending it to her. She snatched the weapon from him and jammed it into the holster.

"Ma'am, I'm right sorry. I didn't know what was—"

"You're—you're impossible," she flared. "Swing east or my father will drive you back to Texas. That's a warning!"

She jerked savagely on the reins and set the spurs. The bay shot away, the girl leaning low along the animal's neck. Joel and Doc watched her race back toward the north, Joel with a feeling of regret. He glanced at Doc, who grinned impishly at him.

"Archer's never was much of a hand with the ladies, seems like. You ain't likely to take her to no dances. We'd better start turning east, like she said."

"You handle the herd. I'm riding on to find out what's the trouble."

"Blue Jones is good with beef," Doc said shortly. "You'll need siding if what she says is true."

Blue took over point and Joel swung around and headed up the trail, Doc riding at a fast trot by his side. Nearly an hour of riding brought them to the top of a small rise and Joel involuntarily drew rein. For all the distance that he could see, beef herds spread before him from the west to the east. Beyond the beef, drawn up as though along an invisible line, were mounted men who restlessly patrolled back and forth. The land to the north, Kansas land, was empty. Doc grunted and then pointed down the slope.

"Looks like a big pow-wow down there. Maybe we'd better join in."

JOEL nodded and the two men descended the slope at a fast trot. They soon came on the first crude camps that the Texas men had set up. Punchers looked up in sharp curiosity, recognized their own kind, and nodded in brief friendliness to Joel and Doc. The wiry Texan watched the brands as they rode toward the conference and his pinched face clouded. He began counting the brands.

"Box C, Bridlebit, Lazy K, Currycomb, HB Connected—Hell, there's real trouble here!"

They came up to the circle of dour men and dismounted. A huge man with a square face and a pegleg looked sharply at them from the center of the circle. The other men said nothing but their eyes were probing and suspicious. Joel came to the edge of the ring.

"I'm Archer," he said. "Ramrod and trail boss of the Crazy A near Santone. Can I listen in?"

"You sure can," the crippled man boomed. "I'm Greg Cummins of the Box C. Those gents out there won't let us across the line and they got rifles to back their mean talk. We're trying to decide what to do."

"If you gents are like me," Joel hunkered down in the circle, "you've got to reach Sedalia or plumb starve." There was a murmur of assent around the group. "So I'm willing to back the rest of you."

Greg Cummins spat to one side and acted as an unofficial chairman of the group. Joel listened, eyes busy, and they occasionally strayed beyond the men for some glimpse of the red-hair beauty who had tried to stop his herd. She was not in sight and Joel felt a strange sense of loss.

The discussion went on endlessly, sometimes loud and angry, again dying away to long silences. Solutions were suggested, some of them fairly good, but there were always objections and Joel realized at last that there was no unity in this group, there were too many pulls in different directions. At last he spoke in a whisper to Doc and arose.

"I'd better get back to my beef," he said when Cummins stopped talking and looked curiously at him. Joel smiled, a lop-sided thing with no real humor in it. "I reckon by morning you gents will decide something. I'll be around then."

He walked to his horse and swung into the saddle, neck-reined and moved slowly through the camps. He saw the Box C brand and its chuckwagon. The crew had gathered around the fire that Cooky had built and Joel saw the girl among them. He swung aside and rode up. One of the men said something and the girl stepped out to meet him. She had removed her hat

and the long rays of the dying sun touched her coppery hair with an aura of gold. Joel stared at her, his heart in his eyes, until at last he realized that he must be gaping like a fool. He jerked off his hat.

"I want to apologize again, ma'am—" he started, but she didn't let him finish. Her scornful glance was like a knife cut.

"I advise you to ride on, sir. Your apology is accepted, but I hope that we have no opportunity to meet again."

She turned on her heel and walked regally away as the men stared at Joel, their faces dark and antagonistic. Joel glanced at Doc, who shrugged and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Joel took the suggestion.

Crazy A had its own conference as soon as Joel returned to the herd. He outlined the trouble that faced them and the way in which trail herds were piling up against the deadline. His face was grim as he looked around at his men.

"If this beef don't reach Sedalia, we all lose," he stated flatly. "Every cent I've got is in them longhorns and that means every cent of your wages up from Texas. No market—no money."

"We're backing you," Doc said quietly. "How do you aim to get across?"

"I'm talking to the guards first. If they won't listen I'll ride into Baxter Springs and find the gent who's behind this. If he won't listen to reason and we can't get across, then I reckon we'll have to find some way around the blockade. I don't know exactly how yet, but there's bound to be a way if we have to make it with Colts."

After supper, Joel saddled up and Doc followed suit, without orders and despite Joel's profane wishes that he'd stay at the camp. Knowing Doc's stubbornness, Joel finally surrendered and they rode side by side toward the Kansas line, well away from the herds that collected along the deadline. It was pitch dark and Joel had toyed with the idea of slipping the beef across. That was blasted when a sharp challenge rang out from a black mass of bushes.

"Pull up and reach!" a harsh voice commanded and at the same instant a rifle cracked with a flat and evil sound. The warning bullet snarled close to Joel.

HE PULLED in. Doc cursed under his breath, but he also stopped his horse, raising his stubby arms toward the sky. Instantly a bullseye lantern flashed somewhere ahead and Joel heard something move on either side of him. Men loomed up out of the darkness and a rifle barrel prodded into his side. The man with the lantern came close and held it up so that Joel's face was clearly visible.

"Damned Texicans," someone cursed, "trying to slip them infected cows across."

"Texan, yes," Joel said after he swallowed his anger. "But no beef. Can't my partner and me ride to town?"

He realized that at least five men pressed close on him and Doc. The lantern light briefly outlined a gaunt face, the bib overalls of a farmer, but it also glinted on rifle barrels. Joel hooked his leg over the saddlehorn.

"Gents, you got this all wrong. We Texans are trying to furnish meat to you folks up this way."

"You're trying to kill our milk and feed stock with that damned Texas fever," one of the farmers shouted. Doc stirred restlessly but made no other move while Joel let the armed men mutter among themselves for a minute or so.

"If Texas beef don't come north, what happens to the folks that depend on it for food? Meat prices are already out of sight and they'll go higher if . . ."

"We got cows and we got some slaughter beef. We can take care of ourselves, Texan. We ain't losing just to keep someone else's belly full."

Joel straightened and the darkness hid the expression of disgust that passed across his face. "We haven't any Texas beef with us, me and my partner. We need supplies. Is there any reason why we can't ride to Baxter Springs to get 'em?"

"N-no, reckon not. But don't try bringing beef into Kansas, mister. You'll stop more lead'n your carcass can hold."

Joel urged the horse into motion and the armed farmers stepped aside to give him and Doc passage. Within a few yards the lantern glow had diminished to a pinpoint and then suddenly snuffed out as the farmers returned to their posts in the bushes. Doc rode up close.

"Looks like we don't slip anything across, Joel, as careful as they're all watching things."

Joel didn't answer, for he saw no immediate way out of the situation. There was a

slight touch of hope that Baxter Springs would offer a solution. A band of men as well organized as these Kansas farmers, meant that someone directed them and Joel had the vague thought that some sort of a deal might be made whereby Crazy A beef could go through.

It had to. A little over a year ago, Joel had returned to Texas after four years of cavalry service in the Confederate army. Like thousands of his kind, he had found Texas changed, its wealth destroyed, its economy shattered, its government in the hands of autocratic and conniving bureaucrats eager to take advantage of the chaotic conditions following a civil war.

Crazy A had been more fortunate than some in that none of its land and range had been confiscated. But Confederate greenbacks were worthless, there was no market for the beef that wore the brand, for business was paralyzed and no one had the money to buy. It became an axiom that the more beef a man had, the poorer he was—and Crazy A had no exact count of its thousands of steers. Most of the crew had scattered, though Doc Frake had stayed on and had run the ranch as best he could after Joel's father had died, just two years before.

Joel had returned to ruin and, for a year, there seemed to be nothing anyone could do about it. Then word came that the North was starving for meat and that Texas longhorns would bring a good price in the market of Missouri for the feeding grounds of Illinois. A few had tried driving northward and had sold out at handsome profits at Sedalia. The exciting news spread into Texas and Joel was among the first to hear of it. He and Doc had managed to collect a crew and, with promises of pay when Sedalia was reached, they had formed a herd and started north in the spring of this year of '66.

There had been another reason for driving north. Eph, Joel's younger brother, was the one Archer who had not believed in the Confederate cause and he had run away just six months before the end of the war, heading north toward the army posts in Oklahoma and Kansas. There had been only meager word of him and then none at all for the past year. Joel wanted to find Eph and bring him home. Now that the war was over, there was no further reason for enmity, and the way the Crazy A was now, it certainly needed the boy.

THE lights of Baxter Springs appeared ahead and Joel's shoulders unconsciously squared back. Even Doc lifted his horse to a faster pace. The town had a short main street, lined with frame stores, some of them false-fronted. There was a church, a livery stable and several saloons. Joel pulled into the hitchrack of one, dismounted and went inside. Doc leaned against the bar and rubbed the zinc top with the palm of his hand, looked with eager eyes at the array of bottles before the fly-specked mirror.

"A bar! Hell, I'd forgot what they looked like. The first one's on me, Joel, and I sure aim to linger over it."

Joel accepted the drink. There were surprisingly few people in the saloon, most of them appearing to be local residents. At a far table two men were bent low in quiet conversation and both of them occasionally glanced sharply at Joel and Doc. The bartender came back to Doc and filled his glass again, Joel refusing a second drink.

"Who heads the farmers?" Joel asked. The bartender looked curiously at him then pointed a stubby finger at a gaunt man seated not far away.

"Tuck Axe, Texan, but don't figure on any favors from him."

"I do my own figuring," Joel said amiably but there was a touch of steel in his voice. He made a sign to Doc to stay where he was, and he crossed over to the table. Axe looked up as Joel approached. He had a stubborn jaw and a tight mouth and Joel tagged him as an honest man who would stick like a leech to his convictions.

"I hear you ramrod the deadline," Joel said. Axe nodded and his eyes grew hard.

"I do—and there won't be a single head of infected Texas critters come into Kansas."

"That's fair enough," Joel pulled out a chair and sat down. "I want to talk about some beef that don't have the fever—good stock that the Northern markets need."

Tuck glared at Joel and leaned forward over the table. "Look, young feller, there ain't a longhorn born in Texas that don't carry the fever. Our stock dies like flies when the longhorns come through and we don't aim for that to happen any more. You're wasting your time and mine and my advice is to take your steers back where

they come from. You ain't going through Kansas!"

Joel choked down his anger and settled to the task of convincing Axe that Crazy A beef would bring no disease to local stock. The gaunt farmer listened well enough, but Joel soon realized that he was getting nowhere. Crazy A was in Texas and Tuck Axe automatically condemned all stock coming from the Lone Star State. Half an hour later, Joel conceded defeat. He arose and looked down at Tuck Axe.

"We Texans have to work for our money and eat just like you Kansas farmers," he said with quiet bitterness. "You've thrown up a deadline against us and it's the same as putting a gun to our heads. How long do you reckon we'll stand for it?"

"As long as we got rifles and men to shoot 'em," Tuck answered grimly. "I'm sorry for you but we got to watch out for ourselves first."

"The devil take the hindmost," Joel grimaced. "That's a hell of a way to make friends—and you're going to need Texas beef mighty bad someday."

He turned on his heel and strode back to the bar, tapped Doc on the shoulder and jerked his thumb toward the door. As they started out, a well-dressed man in a long black coat stopped them, and Joel recognized him as one of the two men who had talked so intensely at the far table.

"I heard you mention beef," the stranger said with a wide smile, "And I'm in the market for it. How many head?"

He had brown eyes that were slightly narrow and that never quite fully met Joel's searching look. His shirt was soft and white and his clothes had been carefully tailored of good material. A stone glinted in a ring on his right hand. His thin lips smiled more widely.

"My name's Brock—Isham Brock. I'm buyer for a packing house in Sedalia and Chicago. We need beef badly and I'm authorized to pay the top price, sir."

Brock looked the part of a prosperous buyer and Joel felt a new surge of hope. He looked over his shoulder at Tuck Axe's grim, uncompromising form and he smiled wryly.

"I'm sure interested, Brock. But my beef is across the line and the farmers aim to keep 'em there. That's a long way from Sedalia, where your company could use 'em, too far to work out any deal."

"It is," Brock nodded. His sharp eyes circled the room and his voice dropped almost to a whisper. "But there's a way around it. Come outside. I want you to meet a man."

He turned and went out the door. Joel and Doc exchanged surprised glances and followed him. They saw Brock walking away down the dark street and they trailed him around the next corner where Brock waited for them.

"It's a house right up the street," he assured them. "But first, I want to make sure this is worth my time. How many head are you trailing?"

"Fifteen hundred."

"Good! What would you say to ten dollars?"

Doc whistled in amazement and Joel blinked his surprise. "That's mighty high," he said, an edge of suspicion in his voice.

"Sure, it is," Brock answered readily. "But this damn' deadline has cut off our supply. There's a beef famine up North and we can make a profit at ten dollars if we can get our hands on the cattle. Willing to trade?"

"Where do I deliver 'em?" Joel demanded.

"In Sedalia. Sure, I know about the deadline," Brock hurried on, "but Cal Eggers can guide your herd along the Kansas line into Missouri and then work 'em to Sedalia. Cal charges a hundred a month, but he'll get you through to our market. I'll give you a purchase order and you'll get your money the minute the beef goes into our pens at Sedalia."

"At the price you name?" Joel asked sharply.

"At my price. Now, do you want to make a deal?"

Joel suddenly thought of a redheaded girl and her crippled father, held up at the deadline. They must be in his own desperate situation, he knew, and his own blundering had antagonized the girl. Perhaps he could square himself with Helen Cummins if he could arrange to slip their herd with his around the deadline and to market. He asked Brock and the buyer agreed.

"Depending on Cal Eggers," Brock amended. "He don't like to drive too many through at a time. Those Ozark hills makes hard trailing and some of you Texicans

just don't like to take orders at all."

"You take us to a ten dollar market," Joel laughed, "and we'll treat this Eggers gent like a general."

Eggers proved to be a huge, stocky man with a barrel paunch, circled by a heavy gunbelt. He had thick lips and the left eyelid covered an empty socket, but he was friendly enough and seemed to know his business.

"I been in this country for fifteen years," he stated flatly, "and them Ozark folks know me. They'd let me through without trouble and give me warning of any Jayhawkers that happen to be around."

"Jayhawkers?" Doc asked, puzzled.

"Just plain border scum, really," Brock explained. "During the war, they raided when and how they pleased—claiming to be guerilla troops. But they changed their colors a dozen times a day. It was loot they wanted. Now that the war's over, they haven't disbanded. and they're plain outlaws. Cal can save your beef from them."

"You pull your herd out of the deadline," Eggers said, "and head 'em south like you was going back to Texas. That'll fool the guards, and the rest of them ranchers won't trail you. I'll meet you one day south and we'll start for the Missouri line. My pay is one hundred dollars and found."

"High," Joel nodded, "but worth it if you get us to Sedalia. I'll have Crazy A ready to pull out and we'll meet you. Brock, you sure got my thanks."

"Forget it," Brock waved his hand lightly and smiled. "It's my job. I'll make my profit well enough."

Joel and Doc rode back toward the line and Joel felt that as a great load had been lifted from his mind. At ten dollars a head, he'd return to Texas with enough money to put the Crazy A back on its feet. If he could only find his brother, then the drive would be a complete success. He thought of Helen Cummins and of what she would say when she learned the news. Joel smiled in the darkness. Maybe once she was over her mad, she'd be friendly—that was a pleasant thought.

Joel sent Doc to the Crazy A camp when they had recrossed the deadline while he headed into the tangle of beef and camps to find the Box C. Greg and the crew were already wrapped up in their blankets when he found them, asleep around the dying embers of the fire. The crippled rancher put wood on the fire when he was aroused and not far off, Helen threw aside her blanket and glared angrily at Joel. She sat up.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. Joel grinned and hunkered down before the flames. Greg rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and looked inquiringly at the tall young Texan.

"I've found a way to get around the deadline," Joel said. Greg grunted and Helen arose and came to the fire, eyes suddenly alight with hope, and her beauty hit Joel with the impact of a fist on his heart. He caught his breath and briefly outlined his meeting with the buyers Isham Brock and Cal Eggers.

Greg listened with growing excitement and soon there was a tense circle around Joel. He finished and looked around the ring and then at Greg. The rancher slapped his leg with his palm.

"By dabs, we're getting somewhere! We'll follow your herd . . ."

"Dad," Helen said suddenly, "why is Mr. Archer being so kind to us? It doesn't fit with what I've learned about him. Only this afternoon, he threatened trouble unless the Box C herd was moved off the trail out of his way."

"But that—I didn't know then about the deadline!" Joel protested. Helen paid no attention to him.

"Dad, if one herd can get through to Sedalia, then we can do it on our own. I think that would be better."

"But the Jayhawkers," Joel protested, "won't let you through. That's where Eggers has the advantage."

"Box C can take care of itself," Helen said shortly. Greg Cummins pulled at his chin and squinted into the fire. At least he shook his head.

"We'll tie to Archer, Helen. It looks best that way."

"Then be ready for trouble," the girl said and walked back to her blankets. Joel's face was a ruddy flame but he held his tongue. Final arrangements were made and Joel at last left the camp. Helen did not so much as stir as he rode off.

Jim swore under his breath and then felt better. By the time they reached Sedalia, he hoped, Helen would know that he wanted only to help.

CHAPTER TWO

Cowthieves' Trap

THE scrub pines of the Ozarks had closed in around the giant herd, shutting them off from the rest of the world. Only occasionally did they come upon a clearing with its inevitable cabin sitting slightly askew and the ever-present hound dogs. Cal Eggers rode in the lead, Joel, Greg Cummins and Helen close around him.

They threaded a narrow valley that wound crookedly in the general direction of Sedalia and Joel clung to the thought that with each mile gained, their goal loomed ever closer. They were already across the line in Missouri but Joel didn't like to think of the last few days.

It had been simple enough slipping away from the jam-up at the deadline and meeting Eggers at the appointed spot. It had been equally easy to move eastward and across the line into Missouri, avoiding the farmer patrols in the broken foothills of the Ozarks. Box C had met the rendezvous and close to thirty-five hundred head of longhorns now threaded the valleys.

But there had been heavy rains and four swollen rivers to swim the beef across. There had been an irate and suspicious hillman who had fired on them from ambush. The bullet had killed a horse and the sudden, sharp report had stampeded the beef. A hundred head were lost, a Box C man had been trampled to death and it had taken four days of hard riding to comb the strays out of the hollows and bring cohesion to the herd again.

Rain, stampede and mud had frazzled tempers and Helen Cummins grew even more distant. She rode now with her chin up, eyes stonily watching the brushy slopes, never speaking except to her father or her own Box C men. The drive had been hard on Greg Cummins and the old man showed the strain in the way the lines deepened in his face, in the painful manner in which he climbed into saddle each morning and dismounted each night. Joel learned he had lost his leg in one of the many futile battles that had failed to keep Sherman from marching to the sea. Between physical fatigue and worry about his herd, Greg had aged several years since pulling out from Baxter Springs.

Now he rode slouched in the saddle, shoulders rounded, eyes closed, body swaying loosely with each step of the horse. Doc Frake watched the hills as he rode point, his pinched face showing the inner tension that the last few days had built up. Joel suddenly straightened when a man stepped out from behind some trees not far ahead. He was dressed in coarse butternut and held a fine rifle over his arm.

"One of my friends," Eggers exclaimed as the man lazily lifted an arm in greeting. The man had a straggly beard and slack, thin lips were tobacco stained. Joel noticed the sheathed knife that rode the man's hip.

"Better go on to Big Holler, Cal," the man said. "Dankers' Jayhawkers showed up a few miles over yonder way." He indicated the west.

"How many?" Cal asked. The hillman shrugged and his sharp eyes strayed over Joel, Doc and then swiftly appraised Helen.

"'Bout as usual—twenty. We'uns can watch 'em—let you know."

"We're obliged," Cal nodded. "We'll camp in Big Hollow tonight." The man nodded again, spat to one side and moved off. He melted into the bushes as silently as he appeared. Joel felt a touch of uneasiness.

"I'd say for these parts, he's a tough hombre."

"You'd be right," Eggers grinned crookedly. "He's one of the Lane clan—mean as sin and fighters. You're lucky he's a friend of mine. We'd better chouse them cows along if we're to reach Big Hollow."

"What is this Big Hollow?" Greg asked wearily.

"Best damn' bedding ground and natural fort you ever saw," Eggers answered. "It'd take an army of Jayhawkers to roust us out of there. We'll be safe enough until Dankers' gang rides on somewheres. We'd best get on."

They moved on and Eggers took a sharp tangent to the previous course that seemed to lead them deeper into the mountains. The brush choked ravines and gullies became more numerous and the punchers were hard pressed to keep the herd bunched up and moving along. Joel was thankful that most of them had long years experience in brush-popping. At last Greg Cummins drew rein and stared up and around him at the wild country. He looked sharply at Eggers.

"Sure you're not lost? You've chosen mighty bad country to drive through."

"I'm doing a job to get you to Sedalia, mister. That's what you wanted, ain't it?"

"Sure, but—but this country!"

"I'm taking you around quarantines and more deadlines," Eggers growled, "and trying to keep Jayhawkers off your beef. If you don't like the country, I can take you almost straight north to Springfield and you'd have open road clean to Sedalia. But you wouldn't travel ten miles before you hit a quarantine or Dankers' gang would learn about you. Would you want to go that way?"

"N-no," Greg shook his head and worriedly rubbed his stubbled cheek. Helen's eyes glittered.

"I've never liked this from the beginning." She looked at Joel directly for the first time. "I still can't understand why you took such a friendly interest in us all at once."

Joel's temper broke its bounds. "If you wasn't so blasted suspicious and ready to fight, ma'am," he said in a cold and level voice, "you'd see I'm trying to make up for a mistake. I figured you and your Dad was as bad busted as me and he had to sell his herd right away. I tried to help you—"

"This?" she asked with a swift circle of her arm.

"This!" Joel snapped. "I didn't know anymore'n you what it would be like. But it still looks like a gamble worth the play to me. I'm going on to Sedalia if I have to climb up and down every dam' mountain in Missouri. Box C can pull out or string along, how it wants."

"Helen," Greg said quietly, "you'd better get back with the swing men. Augering don't help matters none."

The girl wheeled and set the spurs. But she had to slow to walk as soon as she reached the point. Joel felt better for his outburst until he realized that he had placed just one more obstacle between himself and the girl.

THE sun reached the western peaks and the day began to fade. Cal Eggers led the way to a narrow pass between two high, rounded mountains, a dark passageway made more eerie with shadows by the thick pines that crowded down the slope.

At last they were well into the pass, a torturous stretch that finally opened, surprisingly into a big meadow, high-walled by the mountains. Cal turned, grinned.

"Big Hollow. Sides is too rough for anyone to slip up on you and there's just one entrance you can guard with a couple of men. We stay low here a day or two until Lane brings word that them Jayhawkers is gone. Mighty good fort, ain't it?"

"And it looks like a mighty good trap, too," Joel said slowly. Eggers' brows drew down in a deep scowl and then he chuckled.

"Hell, you could hide a million cows in here and no one'd know it. That redheaded gal has got you jumping at shadows."

"Maybe," Joel answered evenly, "but we'll leave her out of it."

Eggers shrugged his beefy shoulders and moved away. The trail herd streamed into the valley and the hills echoed with the shrill yips of the punchers as they urged the steers on. At last the job was done and the weary men came up to the cook's fire and dismounted.

Joel and Greg Cummins appointed the men to watch the entrance to the valley, two being enough to turn back any strays. It would be the first time since they left Texas that there would be no need to circle the herd in the monotonous night guard.

Cooky built up the fire and it blazed high as the last of daylight slipped from the sky. A soft wind whispered through the trees and Joel could feel the tension leaving him. He felt slack and almost rubbery from fatigue.

There was little said during the meal. Only after the hot, black coffee had warmed and soothed did tongues move a little. Eggers still extolled the valley and assured Joel that the Jayhawkers would never find them.

"One of the Lanes lives about a mile beyond the valley," he said. "Just to make sure, I'll ride over there. Be back in a couple of hours and maybe I can bring some extra men with me."

He arose and walked off to the remuda. Helen sat stiffly before the fire, staring into the flames, the flickering shadows making lovely tracery on her face. Joel watched her and she stirred restlessly, then she smiled.

"I guess I've been pretty mean, haven't I?"

Joel gulped and smiled and the hard, tired

angles of his face smoothed out. He drew up his knees and locked his arms around them.

"I know how it is," he said. "Since I left Santone with this herd, I've worried myself to a frazzle. Every little thing has looked mountain big to me. So much depends on reaching Sedalia, that I begin to figure everyone's trying to keep me from getting there. Worried like that, you don't think straight sometimes."

"We stripped Box C of every animal we could find," Helen said with a deep sigh. "We were being confiscated and Dad swore that the crooked politicians might get the land, but not the beef."

"Crazy A missed confiscation—the last I knew," Joel's voice sharpened a little. "What'll you do?"

"If we can sell this beef, Dad figures the money will give us a start somewhere else —maybe West Texas or New Mexico. Everything we've got in the world's in this drive." She looked around. "I'm so tired I'm restless."

"We could walk around the valley," Joel said hopefully. She looked up at him and her face lighted.

"Let's!"

They walked away from the fire. To their left they could sense the silent mass of the herd somewhere out in the blanketing darkness. To their right, the sheer walls of the pocket rose abruptly from the valley floor and disappeared into the night somewhere high above their heads.

Joel strolled close beside her as they moved along toward the narrow entrance. They talked aimlessly in low voices of their hopes for the future and of things of the past. Then Joel saw the glow of fire in the mouth of the canyon where the night guard kept watch. He hesitantly placed his hand on Helen's arm, stopping her. Her face was a soft white blur in the night as she turned and looked up at him.

"I've always wanted to tell you how really sorry I was—"

"That first day?" she broke in with a soft laugh. "I owe you an apology, too. Like you said, I was so worried and desperate I couldn't think straight. I've given you some bad moments and I'm sorry."

Joel dropped his hand and they moved slowly on. He was glad for the night for he knew that his face was red and his hands were moving nervously as he spoke.

"Crazy A has plenty of range and there's just me right now, until I find my brother, Eph, and bring him back. Even so, it's a man's ranch and that's no good. I've been hoping that maybe—well, Helen, I'm in love with you!"

"Joel!" She stopped, swayed toward him and then drew back. "I think I've known that all along. But talk to me after we reach Sedalia and all these worries are gone. I'll know then how to answer you."

"Then you sort of—?"

"When we reach Sedalia, Joel. Maybe we'd better get back to the camp. It has been a long, hard day."

JOEL found that sleep was long in coming. His body was tired and every muscle ached almost like a sore tooth. But he kept thinking of Helen and the things they had said on their walk, the words running over and over again in his mind. A new born hope would not allow him to relax and he found himself planning for the future. Sometime far in the night, he never knew exactly when, he drifted off to sleep.

Dawn awakened him. He threw back the blankets and drew on his boots. The camp was stirring, men yawning, stamping around to get the night chill out of their bones. Greg Cummins looked rested and Helen gave Joel a secret little smile that set his heart to thumping.

"Where's Eggers?" someone asked.

Joel looked around. Everyone was up and stirring and Eggers was not in sight. A little puzzled, Joel arose and moved over to the horse cavvy. The wrangler reported that Eggers had not come in. Greg limped up beside Joel and scratched his head, yawned prodigiously.

"Probably he stayed with them friends of his all night. He'll show up sometime this morning, I reckon."

Breakfast was cooked and the men ate voraciously. The sun finally appeared above the high rim and cast a warm, golden flood of light into the valley. Two men rode out to relieve the guards and Joel went with them. The night guards shook their heads.

"He never come through," one of them said. Joel looked up the twisting narrow canyon and toyed with the idea of riding down it to the far end to see if he could find some trace of the guide. Then he

thought of Cummins' explanation and dismissed the notion.

He turned to ride back to the camp with the night men. The cattle were now up and grazing and Joel saw that there was only a limited amount of grass for such a large herd. They could stay here about three days at the longest, and Eggers had suggested a week or so. Joel shook his head —just another of a thousand problems since leaving Texas.

"Hey!" one of the guards exclaimed. "Look up there!"

Joel turned, saw that the man pointed toward the rim of the cliff. He looked upward and caught the glint of sun on metal. A bush moved further on and a man appeared, a rifle resting in the crook of his arm.

"Jayhawkers!" Joel exclaimed. Then from up the canyon Eggers' loud voice bellowed.

"Archer! Get Cummins and come back to the canyon mouth for a parley. You make a wrong move and we'll kill every manjack in the Hollow. We ain't fooling one bit!"

CHAPTER THREE

Hell-on-the-Hoof

JOEL and the guards sat like stones. A rifle cracked from above and Joel's horse went down as though it had been hit in the head with a sledge. Joel instinctively threw himself out of the saddle and hit the ground in a rolling fall. He came to his feet, his hand sweeping down to his holster and the Colt flashing up.

But there was no one in sight on cliff walls or in the canyon mouth. The guards held in their horses and their Colts were also in their hands as they searched angrily for a target. There was no sound or movement for long, long minutes. Then Eggers' bellow sounded again, this time from a different place.

"Just to show you we mean business, Archer. Get back to camp and bring Cummins here—pronto!"

"What kind of a game is this?" Joel called. "You were working for us!"

"Like hell. Me'n Isham Brock works for Dankers. Yours ain't the first herd we've trapped in Big Hollow!"

Joel looked sharply around the rim but could see no one, still he realized how few men up there could command the whole pocket and a few more in the canyon would act like a cork in a bottle. He heard swift hoof beats behind him and he turned. Greg, Helen and half the crew came riding to investigate the rifle shot. Greg's eyes widened when he saw Joel's dead horse, the Colt in his hand.

"What happened!"

"We're trapped. Jayhawkers. Eggers was a damn' renegade working for Dankers. They want a parley."

Helen stared at him, then at the dead horse, then around the high cliffs. Her face paled and her lips set. Greg's jaw went slack, then he jerked around as Eggers' bellow echoed down the canyon.

"He's telling it straight, Cummins. If you gents drop your Colts and rifles and come out peaceful, you won't be hurt."

"Suppose we don't?" Helen flared.

"You saw what happened to Archer's horse!"

The little group stared at one another and Joel read the despair and anger in their eyes. He shook his head stubbornly and spoke in a low voice.

"We just can't surrender without a fight. If you move fast and ride low, you'll get back to the camp, out of rifle shot from here."

"What about you?" Helen asked.

"I'll find some cover," Joel said. "I've been in tights like this before—during the War."

"Joel!" a new voice called from the canyon. Joel jerked around, his eyes wide and staring. "Don't try anything foolish, Joel! You can't win. I'm coming out to parley—hold your fire."

"He knows you!" Helen exclaimed and suspicion flooded her eyes. Suddenly her jaw set and she wheeled the horse, driving the spurs deep. Before Joel could stop her, she raced toward the distant camp. For some reason, the men on the cliff didn't fire. Joel saw the punchers staring at him with ugly eyes.

Bushes moved down the canyon and a man stepped clear. One of the punchers cursed and lifted his Colt, but Joel sprang forward, grabbed the man's wrist.

"Hold it! That's my brother!" Another puncher cursed luridly and Joel wheeled, his Colt covering Greg and the men around

him. "I sure hate to do this, but don't any of you make a move."

"I bet you hate it!" Greg said through tight lips. Joel flushed.

"Maybe Eph needs killing, I don't know. But he's going to get a chance to say his piece. You can't expect me to stand by and see my own flesh and blood shot down, can you?"

He held the Colt steady, not taking his eyes from any of them. They sat stony-faced and still, occasionally glancing up the canyon at the man who approached. Finally Joel heard footsteps close by.

"It's been a long time, Joel."

"A long time, Eph. Move around so I can see you and watch these jaspers at the same time."

EPH ARCHER moved into Joel's range of vision. He was perhaps half a head shorter than his brother and his face had little of Joel's strong bone structure. But a single glance would prove that they were brothers. Eph's narrow face was stubbled and already slight, hard lines showed around the nose and the wide lips, that somehow just missed strength. He wore a gunbelt looped low over coarse blue jeans and a rifle dangled from his left hand. A nondescript hat shaded his face and the twisted smile with which he greeted Joel.

"You look natural," he drawled, "still telling folks what to do—and making 'em?"

"Eph, I reckon you'd better explain yourself," Joel said coldly. "Fighting in the Yankee army's bad enough, but riding with a band of cut-throats and renegades is something else."

"Explain, hell!" Eph exploded. "I'm just saving your hide! I ain't your little brother that you can order around. Them days are gone. You're taking my orders now!"

"All right, Eph," Joel said with surprising meekness. "You're in the saddle right now. Come over here and help me keep these jaspers in line. Hold a six on 'em while I get their Colts."

Eph grinned more widely and lifted his gun from the holster. Lining it on Cummins and the men, he nodded to his brother. Joel holstered his six and moved toward Greg, coming to within a couple of feet of Eph.

Suddenly he lunged toward his brother, knocking aside the Colt as it exploded wildly into the air. Joel's fist looped up and cracked sharply off Eph's chin. The man sagged and Joel grimly sank his fist into his brother's stomach. Eph's rifle and six dropped to the ground.

"Greg, take him!" Joel snapped. "One of you give me a hand up! We're getting out of here!"

With a sudden bunching of his muscles, Joel lifted Eph toward the old rancher. Greg stared a split second and then reached for the half conscious man, pulling him across the saddle before him like a sack of meal. Joel wheeled and sprang toward one of the puncher's vaulting into the saddle behind him, his spurs raking the horse's flanks.

It had happened so fast that the hidden renegades were caught flat-footed. Only after Joel had leaped into the saddle and the punchers had wheeled around did the outlaws recover from their surprise. Even so, their first volley was wild and ragged, giving the punchers a few precious seconds. Joel roweled the spurs cruelly and the horse opened up with everything it had. The ground blurred by. Rifles smashed thunderously from the walls and canyon mouth. A puncher screamed and rolled limply out of the saddle. Joel heard the whisper of bullets close around him.

They raced down the valley toward the camp and the renegade rifles silenced. The smash of guns had disturbed the beef and the herd moved restlessly, uncertain, and growing more proddy by the minute. The puncher pulled his mount to a haunch-dipping halt and Joel jumped to the ground. He swiftly examined this section of the Hollow and saw that the rocks would give no protection from the riflemen up above. But not far from the camp close to one wall stood a small and thick grove of trees. Greg came up and unceremoniously dropped Eph at Joel's feet.

"I've carried the skunk far enough. What you aim to do with him now?"

"Don't rightly know yet," Joel started. Eph came to his feet, his eyes mean and his face scowling.

"If you want to live, you'll let me go. By God, Fred Dankers will kill every blasted one of you—except maybe the girl and she'll be—"

Joel stepped forward and his strong fin-

gers gripped Eph's shirt front. He jerked the man to him, parried a blow and rocked Eph's head with an open-palm slap.

"Keep your mouth shut until you're asked to speak. If Pap knew what you drifted into, he'd be turning over in his grave."

Eph blubbered and lost his bravado. Joel ordered the horses and men to a position under the trees. He turned Eph over to Doc Frake and the little Texican was none too gentle as he hurried the man to shelter.

"You dam' sneaking pup!" he gritted. "I ought to pistol whip you to within an inch of your life. For Pap Archer's sake, I'm glad he's dead, and can't see your miserable, worthless face. Get along before I start to work on you."

DANKERS' Jayhawkers soon opened fire but by then most of the Texans were under the leafy cover of the trees. Though this was a protection, it also had its drawbacks. They could not see the men on the cliffs directly above them. On the other hand, the renegades could fire blindly down into the foliage with a fair chance of hitting something. A horse squealed and bolted as a slug burned down its leg. Punchers crouched down and their rifles began to fire at the trees and bushes on the far rim across the valley. Renegade fire from that direction swiftly slackened.

"Hell, we can't stay here long!" Greg Cummins swore, and Joel nodded bleakly, eyeing the restless cattle. They'd bolt soon and that presented a new danger. Joel rubbed his jaw and sudden decision came to his eyes.

"Greg, I want you and Helen to be with me when I talk to Eph."

"He's your brother. Make what dicker you want."

"Damn' it, Greg! I aim to marry your daughter, but both of you are stubborn as mules! I want Helen to know I'm not connected with these renegades in any way, even if my brother is. Now, will you stop jawing and get her?"

"Sure," Greg grunted, a new respect in his eyes. "Sure, Joel."

Eph Archer sat sullenly, back supported by a tree trunk. Now and then a renegade bullet would kick up dirt and the man would noticeably flinch. He tried to appear unafraid and sure of himself, but his fear was close to the surface. Joel hunkered down beside him, Greg and Helen standing silently just behind. Eph tried to meet Joel's stare but finally his eyes slid away.

"Eph, just one thing stands between you and a slug," Joel said quietly. "We've been led into a trap, and Texans don't take to a doublecross. They're ready to rid the world of one renegade right now."

"Dankers will—" Eph started but Joel's harsh grin stopped him. His brother shook his head.

"You won't be around to know it, Eph. I still don't know but what I'd better turn my back and let 'em take care of you."

"You're my brother!"

"I'm beginning to wonder about that. How did you get tangled up with a bunch of killers like this?"

"I headed north," Eph growled, dropping his head, "and joined up with Dankers at Baxter Springs. Joel, he was on the Union side then, irregular troops."

"Irregular!" Joel scoffed. "Thieves and bandits all the time, playing both sides against the middle! If you didn't know that at first, you'd soon find out. Why did you stay on?"

Eph twisted his hands together and looked around the ring of grim figures as though seeking a means of escape. A renegade bullet ripped down through the leaves, flattened against a rock and sped off with a high whine. Eph jerked as though the slug had struck him.

"You don't know Dankers, Joel. Once you're with him, you don't leave. He'd chase you down and kill you no matter how far you went. You know how he's organized. Isham Brock pretends to be a cattle buyer in Baxter Springs. On the side, he keeps the farmers scared about Texas fever so they hold the deadline secure. Brock and Eggers work together, have been for a year or more now. The minute Eggers leaves with a herd like yours, Isham sends a messenger to us. This is the tenth Texas herd we've worked into this trap."

"Where are the men who were with them?" Joel asked. Eph shrugged.

"Dead. Dankers don't dare let any word of the scheme get back to Baxter Springs."

"How many men has Dankers got up on the cliffs?"

"There's thirty of us. Five will be guarding the canyon, more'n enough to keep it bottled up. The rest'll be up above. You'll

starve out or surrender, Joel. Let me go. I can auger Fred into sparing you this time."

"Can you?" Joel demanded. "Don't be a bigger fool than you are, Eph. Dankers don't dare let word of this trap get back to the Texas herds at Baxter Springs, or to Sedalia."

Eph said nothing. Greg Cummins jerked as a bullet came close and he swore with deep, blasting oaths that punctuated the steady rifle fire.

"Hell, we can't stay here! We're bottled in the canyon and trapped from the rim!"

"You forget one thing, Greg," Joel said. He jerked his thumb toward the herd. "Them steers are ready to bolt. If we can head a stampede toward the canyon we can ride it through."

Greg blinked, turned to look down the valley at the narrow canyon mouth. Another bullet cut close but the peg-legged man didn't seem to notice it.

"Dangerous. If we mix in with the stampede and a horse slips, it's all over."

"Dankers' bullets give you the same chance," Joel said evenly. "It's your choice. Helen, I reckon I've been wrong again. Isham Brock fooled me completely and so did Cal Eggers. To top it all, I find my own brother one of the killers. I—I don't know what to say except—"

"You couldn't know," she said impulsively. "We'll ride out with the stampede. If we don't get through, Joel . . ." She broke off, came up on her toes and kissed him full on the lips. "To give us both luck, and a promise for you if we get through."

JOEL looked dazed and then smiled. He swung around, voice firm and decisive. "Hit saddles, boys, and hold tight to your rabbit foot. Doc, you ride herd on Eph here. If we get through, I aim to straighten him up."

The moment the punchers stopped spraying the far cliff rim with their bullets, the renegades over there went into action. More slugs cut into the trees, this time at definite targets. A horse went down and a Box C man took a slug across the arm. But in a few seconds every man was mounted and they looked to Joel for orders.

"Stampede the beef toward the canyon," he snapped. Doc Frake, pinched face creased in a reckless smile, drew his Colt out and then looked at Eph warningly.

"You take your chance with the rest of us," he said. "Just remember, I'm keeping you in sight and a .44 can travel faster'n your horse."

Joel spurred out into the open, Colt ready in his hand. He swung sharply along the edge of the cliff, and then directly toward the milling beef. His gun exploded into the air and he gave the long rebel yell. Greg Cummins and several punchers followed him. Renegade lead cut close around them but Joel grimly disregarded it.

The longhorns snorted, wheeled—and bolted. They headed straight for the canyon mouth and instantly the group under the trees shot out of the leafy cover and mingled with the thundering herd. Dust roiled up in clouds so that those on the rim had only dim and uncertain targets.

Joel, Greg and the others spurred hard after the bolting steers. Joel emptied his six in the air and hastily reloaded as his horse galloped blindly at full speed through the dust. The animal suddenly swerved to avoid a fallen steer, brought down by the blind shooting along the rim.

Joel rode low in the saddle and tried to probe the eddying dust for the first glimpse of the canyon mouth. It seemed an eternal time in coming and, for a despairing moment, he thought the cows might be running in a huge circle around the valley.

Then he glimpsed the brushy walls through the dust, and sound suddenly deepened, because chaotic with echoes as the stampede funnelled into the pass. Bullets still cut the air and the roar of the stampede was deafening. Now came the most dangerous part of the whole wild ride. Pressed like a raging torrent in a mill race, everything depended on the horses. One stumble, one split second of faltering and both mount and man would go down beneath the churning, slashing hoofs of the longhorns. Joel hung grimly on, vision so limited that the plunging steers to either side appeared only as erratic shadows in the dust. His mind and eyes searching through the cattle for Helen.

The canyon, it seemed, would never end and Joel wondered how many of the crew had gone down from renegade bullets or a fatal mis-step. Suddenly he realized that he no longer heard the spiteful whine of slugs, only the drumming roar of pounding hoofs.

Now and then he caught a brief glimpse of the brush covered walls, blurring past, then he sensed that the horse was running more free, that the longhorns were spreading out to either side, and he knew that he was through the pass.

He started working his horse on a long tangent to one side, though still forced to ride with the stampede. The dust thinned and at last he reached the edge of the herd, cut sharply to the left away from the longhorns and drew rein. The last of the bolting animals sped past and there was only a pall of dust that slowly lifted. Joel took a deep and shuddering breath, thankful that he was clear of the canyon and unscathed. He wheeled around when horsemen came out of the dust cloud. He grinned with relief when he saw Greg, Doc Frake and a dozen riders from both Crazy A and Box C.

"Where's Helen?" he called.

"She rode clear of the herd and she's up the canyon ahead of us," Greg answered. Doc looked apologetic and uncertain.

"Eph didn't make it, Joel. His horse stumbled and he went down just before we got clear of the canyon."

Joel's face darkened and a touch of mist came to his eyes. Then he remembered what Eph had become, a renegade and a killer, a man who would have always borne the mark of Cain. Joel recalled his promise to "straighten him up" and knew that he had only been whistling in the dark. Eph had stayed with Dankers and his Jayhawkers even after he knew what they were. Thoughts of Dankers jerked Joel back to his present.

"Those killers will still be scattered," he said sharply. "I reckon now's the time to teach 'em a lesson. Let's ride."

He wheeled and set the spurs, throwing his horse at the steep slope that would lead upward to the rim overlooking the hollow. He could not hope to corral all the renegade band, but at least he could give a gunsmoke lesson to a remnant of them. Doc rode close behind him.

They reached the crest of the ridge and raced along through the trees, twisting and turning. Suddenly they plunged into an open glade as another band of horsemen erupted from the other side. Joel had a glimpse of Cal Eggers' huge bulk, an array of hard-lined faces and glinting rifle barrels. Joel's hand dropped to his holster and his Colt blurred upward, lined and spat flame.

The attack was so sudden and unexpected that the renegades were thrown into confusion. Three of them dropped under the fire of the Texans. Joel spurred forward, eager to reach Eggers and down the treacherous guide, but another man cut in front of him. Joel twisted around to meet the attack. A bullet raked a fiery finger across his ribs and Joel smashed a slug into the strained twisted face that loomed in the dust before him. The man left the saddle.

The renegades had scattered, leaving several lying lifeless in the meadow. Cal Eggers sat in the grass, coarse face twisted in pain, his right shoulder shattered, all fight gone from him. Joel drew rein and dismounted.

"You're going to the nearest jail," Joel said, "and I hope the law hangs you from the highest tree. If we had Fred Dankers, I'd like to see him jailed and hung too."

Eggers licked his lips and pointed with his left hand at the man Joel had downed. "He won't hang. That's Dankers laying over there. I only followed his orders."

"I've heard that excuse before," Joel answered grimly, remembering Eph. "You could have ridden away any time you pleased and gone straight. You'll get more mercy from the courts than you ever gave the gents you've led into traps."

"I'll patch him up so he can stand trial," Greg said. He looked at Joel and his eyes twinkled. "There's a redheaded girl down the slope that was anxious about you."

Joel smiled and nodded. He turned away, disregarding the burning cut along his ribs and spurred down the slope.

He took a deep breath and the load of worry seemed to leave him. Once the cattle were rounded up, they could easily reach Sedalia and the market. With good, United States goldbacks in their hands, he and Greg could return to Texas

Joel came down the slope and saw Helen riding toward him. He set the spurs and the horse fairly slid down the hill.

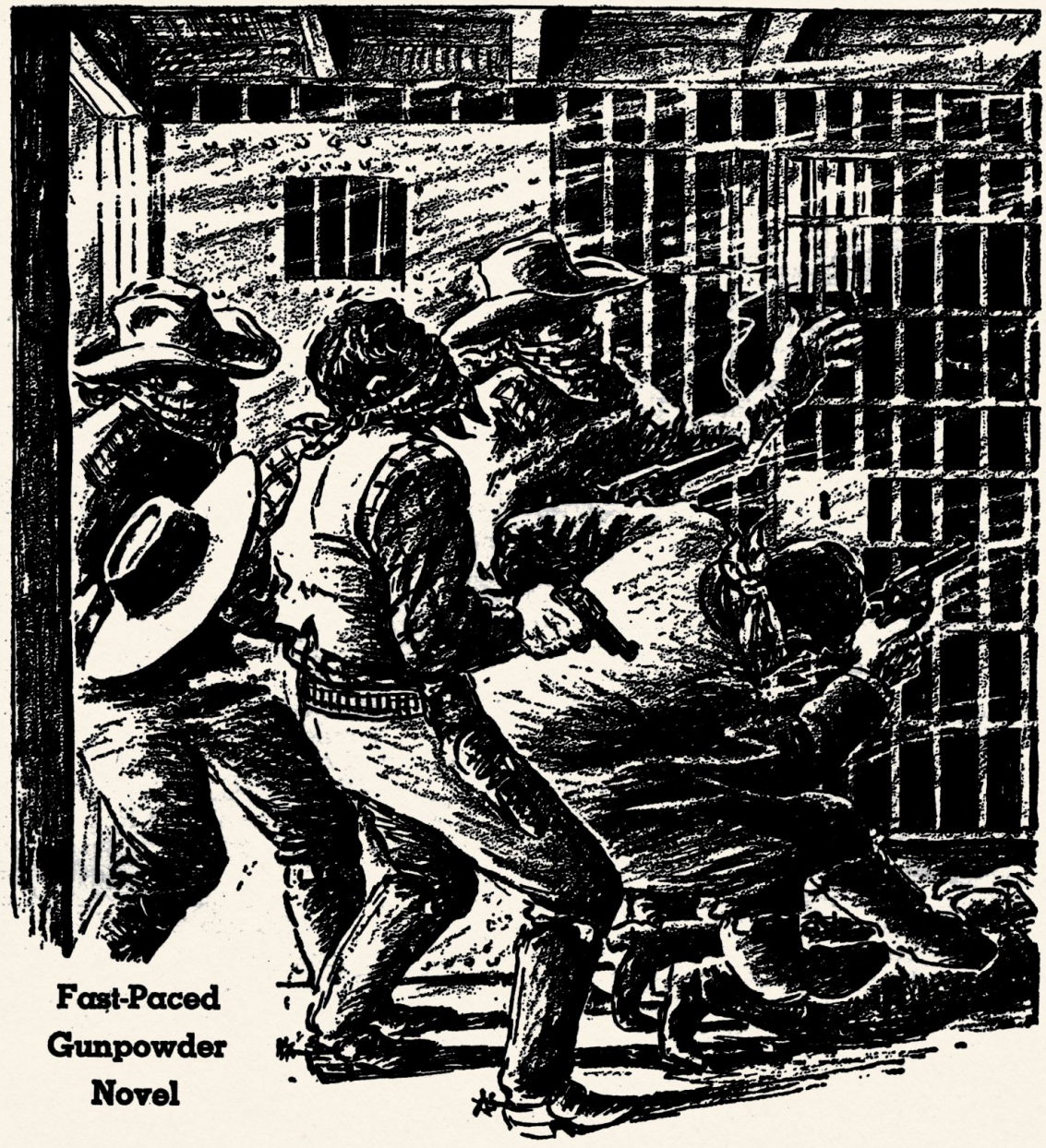
"When we get to Sedalia—" he began.

"Ask me now," she said.

Up on the slope, Greg checked Doc Frake and pointed to the man and the girl.

"I reckon we'd better head somewhere else. That looks mighty important to me."

THE END



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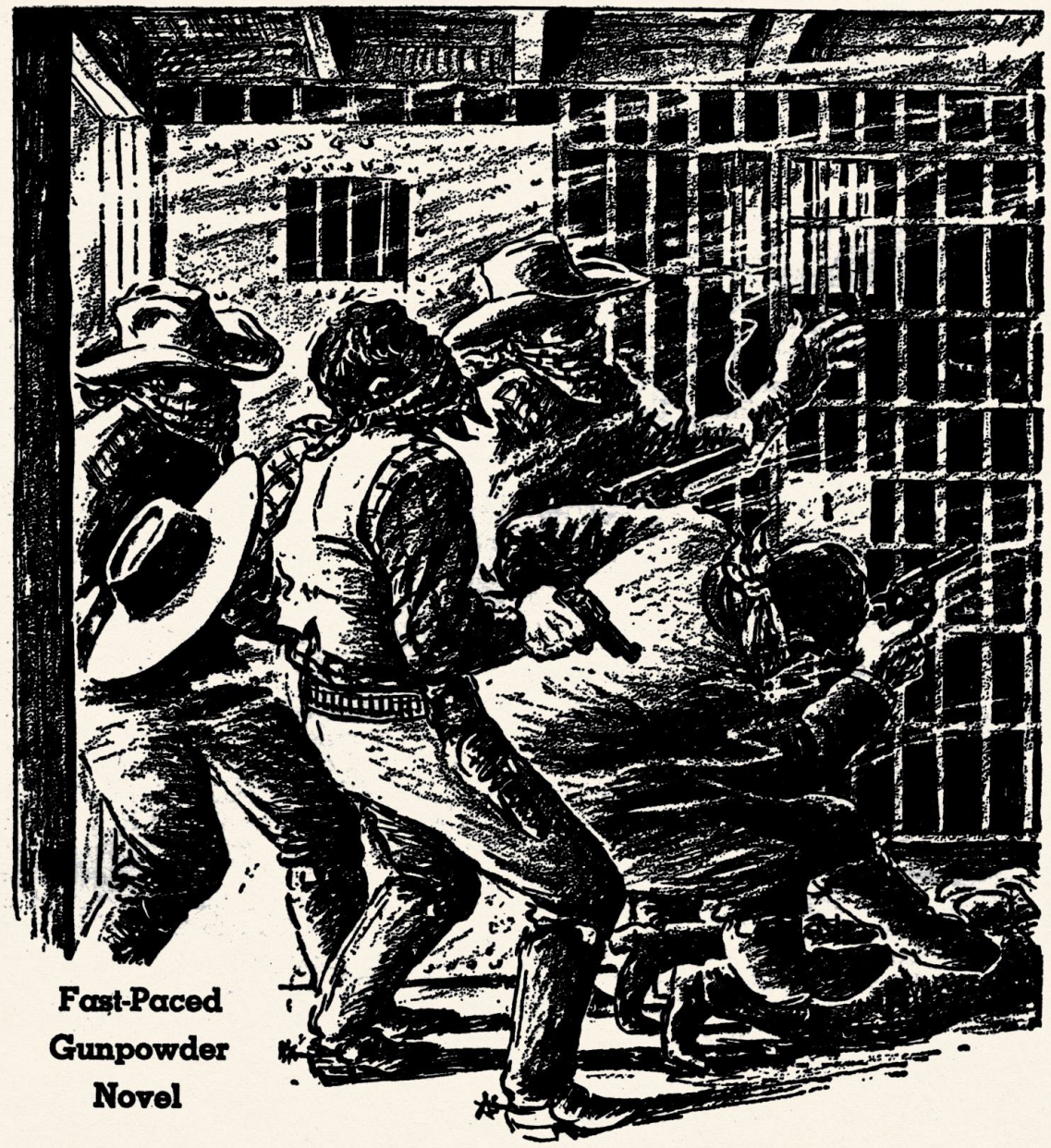

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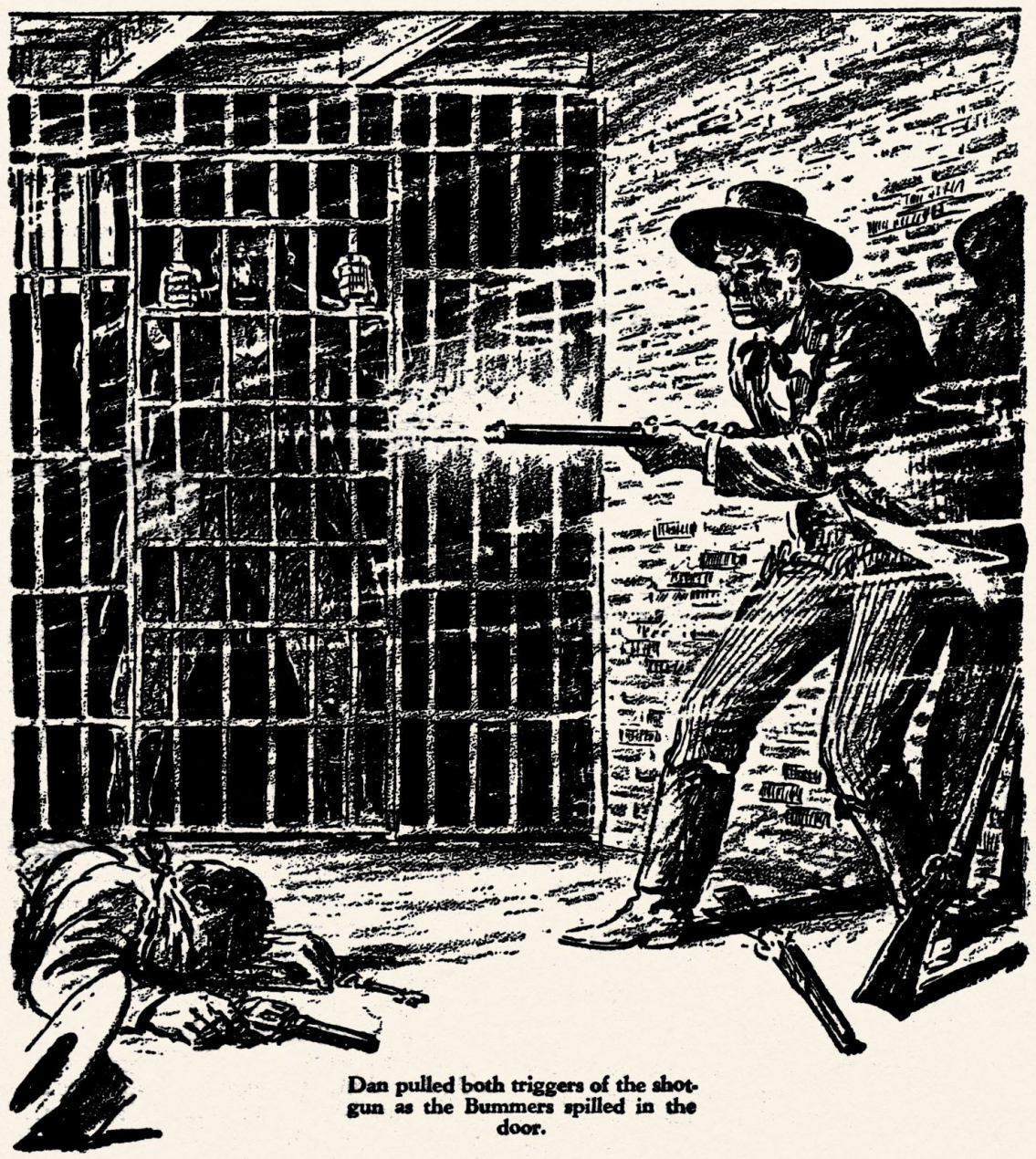


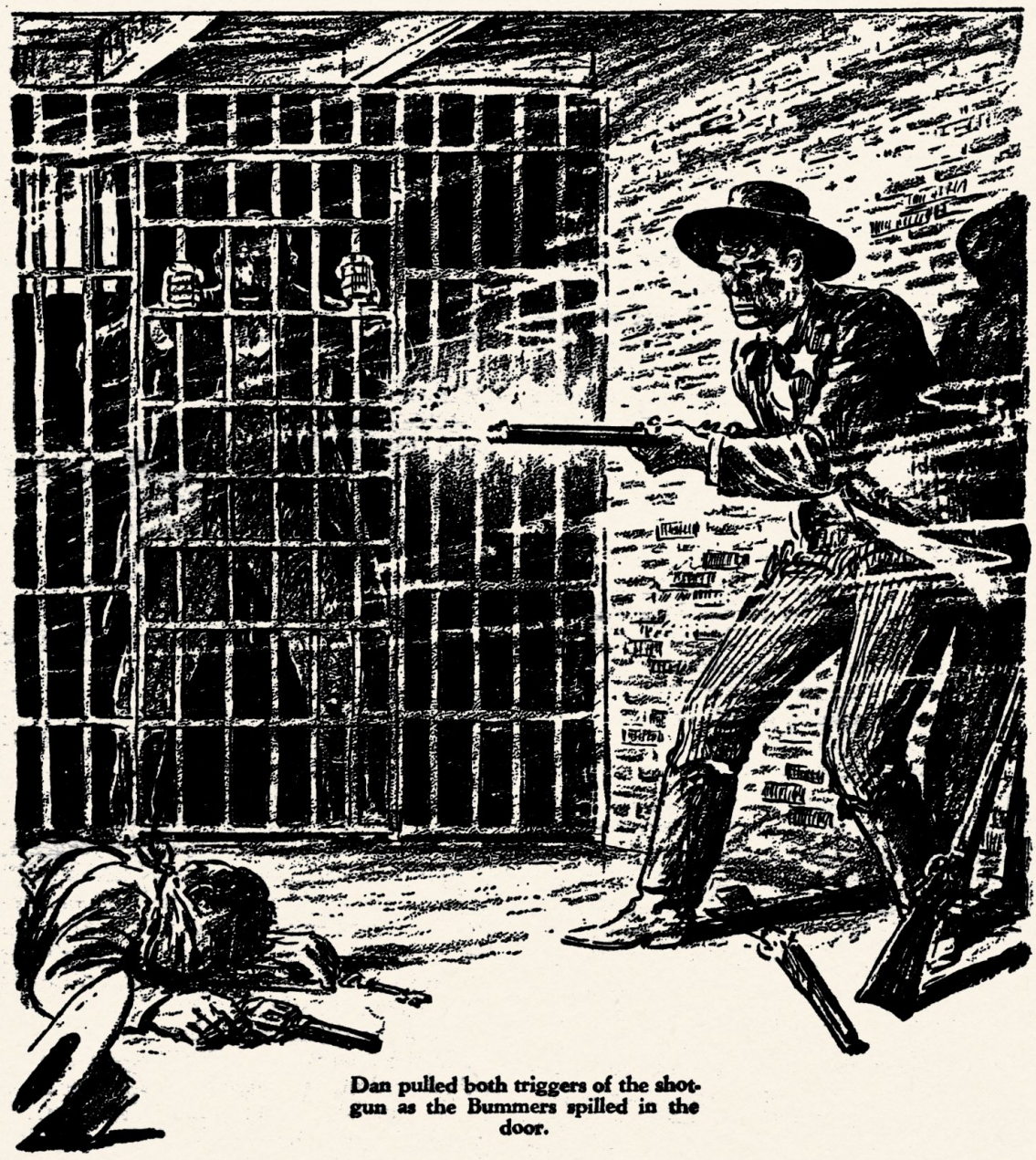
Dan pulled both triggers of the shotgun as the Bummers spilled in the door.

CHAPTER ONE

Town-Tamer Wanted

TWO lynch victims swayed at the end of hangropes under the cottonwood where Denver City's main thoroughfare met the muddy waters of Cherry Creek. From the waiting-room window of the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak stage depot, Dan Robie watched the morbid crowd milling around the hangtree and a cynical disgust touched the drowsy ennui of the man from California. He shifted his eyes.

All afternoon it had been like that. Shifting throngs of whiskered miners, blanketed Araphahoe bucks, painted jezebels from the honkies; frock-coated gamblers and buckskin-clad Santa Fe bullwhackers and fur-capped mountain men, drawn by a common curiosity to view these grisly reminders of Vigilante justice.



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Dan Robie wondered vaguely who the corpses had been this time yesterday; what they had done to rate the noose. But his curiosity was not enough to impell him to brave the heat and the dust and the flies to investigate. Robie's prime goal at the moment was making sure he got a seat on the Russell, Majors & Waddell stage leaving for Atchison within the hour.

Overland Concords carried just so many passengers. And the waiting room was jammed with a sweating, restive collection of Go-Backers, each of whom had planked down two hundred dollars for a "reserved" passage East. But getting a seat on any outgoing stage was strictly a first-come, first-serve affair, depending on muscle and gall and brute will.

Dan Robie had taken a long time to make up his mind to quit the West before some bushwhacker's bullet came along with his name on it. Denver City was half-way home from the Sierra gold camps which had known Robie for better than a decade. Hell or high water couldn't delay his journey now.

He pulled his bored gaze from the window and spread open the copy of the *Rocky Mountain News* which a hawker had sold him upon his arrival from Salt Lake that morning. The paper was a week old, which precluded any chance of learning the details of the affair which had resulted in two corpses spoiling in the midsummer heat.

Robie grinned bleakly as he read the headlines. Denver City, a lusty infant with three years of gold rush behind it this August of '61, admitted itself to be the hell-hole of the newly-formed Colorado Territory. Not proudly, but apologetically. The *News* devoted two columns on its front page to obituaries, and Dan Robie noticed that the decedents shared one thing in common: they had perished violently, with their boots on.

Some of the obituaries were of men Robie had brushed shoulders with out in California. Mike Sandifur, bushwhacked by a claim-jumper in the Gregory Diggings. Ole Lindbloom, stabbed to death in Vitch Slankard's Elephant Pen Saloon. Mertram Aargard, hanged by the People's Court in Central City. Owlie Peters, believe to be a member of the mysterious "Bummer Gang", tomahawked by a drunken Indian in a quarrel over a squaw.

Except for its Denver masthead, Robie mused, this paper could have been published in any one of a dozen California camps. . .

"Hey, you! You behind the paper there."

The gruff salutation caused Robie to lower his newspaper to meet the quizzical scowl of a heavy-set man wearing the red woolen shirt and flour-sack pants of a Pike's Peaker. The prospector eased himself into a vacant chair beside Robie and poked a black stogie between his lips.

"Ain't I seed you before somewhar, son? Californy, mebbe?"

Robie curbed the impatience which needled him. The stuffy waiting room was not conducive to conversation in the first place. Especially with a rough mucker whom Robie knew he had seen before, somewhere on his twisted back trail.

"Possible. I've drifted up and down the Mother Lode some."

The mucker lit his cigar, squinting at Robie with sharpening interest during the operation. He saw Robie to be a strapping young giant close to thirty, wearing foxed California pants and a hard-brimmed Chileno sombrero tipped back from an unruly shock of damp, coal-black hair. The bulge of a holstered Dragoon .45 was visible under Robie's unbuttoned butternut jacket.

"Headin' back to the States, stranger?"

Robie turned back to his newspaper, trying to concentrate on an editorial which deplored that Denver City was fast being ground under heel by a gang of cutthroats who called themselves the "Bummers". The *News* bemoaned the fact that the Stranglers, as the local Vigilantemen were called, had made little headway in exposing the membership of the lawless element. It was high time Denver got itself a fighting marshal, the *News* editorialized.

"Leavin' town, son? Gambler down on his luck, mebbe?"

Robie vented a patient sigh, raised a pair of amber-brown eyes to stare back at his nosey inquisitor.

"There's a war to fight back home, stranger. President Lincoln's calling for volunteers. I'm headed for Ohio to enlist —and I am *not* a tinhorn cardsharp."

The Pike's Peaker settled back in his chair, oblivious to the younger man's unsubtle rebuff.

"Miss the excitement out yander?" The miner's thumb indicated the crowd bunched

around the swaying riverbank hangtree.

"I'm passing through," Robie muttered. "Now listen, feller. If you don't mind—I'm trying to catch up on my—"

But the prospector was not to be squelched now.

"Injun Charley and a Cherry Cricker name of Lacey," he cut in, obviously referring to the deceased gentlemen. "Bummers, caught red-handed tryin' to rob the safe over at the Colorado Queen Palace just before daylight. The Stranglers had the pair of 'em doin' an air-jig within an hour after Californy Kitty whopped the two of 'em in line with her blacksnake whip." For the first time, a glint of interest crossed Dan Robie's lethargic face. He lowered his paper slowly.

California Kitty! The name awoke vivid memories of bygone years, when Dan Robie had been a town-taming marshal in camps like Mariposa and Jimtown and Sonora. Katharine Malotte, the most remarkable woman the Western gold camps had known or ever would know; a girl with the face of a Madonna and the heart of a gypsy queen, a temptress who kept men at a distance with a blacksnake whip in lieu of a gun, keeping herself aloof in a land where men lusted for the favor of a beautiful woman. . .

"So Kit wound up in Denver City," Robie mused aloud, his eyes fixed on a crack in the ceiling. "She didn't board ship in 'Frisco for New Orleans, then. . ."

The unkempt Pike's Peaker leaned closer, his whiskey-fouled breath revolting Robie's nostrils.

"How's that again? I'm a mite deef in my off ear—"

Annoyance carved a notch between Robie's level brows.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself." Robie hipped around in his chair, cold-shouldering his questioner by erecting a barricade with the front page of the *Rocky Mountain News*.

The mucker stood up, peering hard at Robie over the paper. You know Californy Kitty! By grab, I place ye now, stranger. Ye're Dan'l Robie, the marshal who chased Joaquin Murietta out o' the Southern Mines back in '53 for molestin' Kitty. Chased the Mexican son south to where Cap'n Love an' his Los Angeles Rangers could smoke down the Chinese-killin' greaser. By gawd—"

Before Robie could affirm or deny the identification, the Pike's Peaker wheeled, and elbowed his way hurriedly through the crowd, staring apprehensively over his shoulder until he disappeared through the waiting room door.

Robie settled back in relief. What had impelled the bearded stranger to make such a hasty departure, he could only guess. Robie no longer toted a star. Maybe old Greasy Sleaves was a fugitive from Mother Lode justice. . .

WELL, what the hell. Twenty minutes more, and he'd be on his way back to Ohio, to enlist for the fight against the seceding Rebels. It would be his first homecoming in twelve years, since the day when, as a sixteen-year-old orphan, he had joined a wagon train bound for the new gold fields of California.

Then Robie thought of California Kitty, and a vague unrest stirred his being. He was recalling their last meeting, when Kitty Malotte had returned his kisses one balmy night in Sonora, promising to be his wife if he would turn in his law badge and stop hunting for trouble.

Instead Robie had answered a summons to be Placerville's marshal, and when he returned to Sonora, minus a tin star on his shirt, he had found California Kitty gone . . . reputed to have booked passage on a Cape Horn steamer bound for New Orleans. He had traced her as far as San Francisco, and there California Kitty had vanished from his life. . .

Instead, she was here in Denver City, savoring the life of a boom town in the heyday of its infamy. Robie turned to the advertising pages of the *Rocky Mountain News*, recalling Kit's predilection for publicizing her various enterprises, wondering what fountain of wealth she had contrived to tap in this Sodom of the Colorado plains.

A small black-bordered advertisement in the center of the black page arrested his attention:

> WANTED: Capable man to handle marshal's job in Denver City. Preferably single, over 25. Right man can name his own salary. Apply to Vigilante Committee headquarters in Gold Exchange Bldg., corner 16th & Wazee Sts.

Robie's dreams of enlisting in the Union cavalry turned suddenly hazy as he re-read the ad, his blood responding to its call as an old warhorse would respond to a bugle. A symbol acccompanying the notice indicated that it had been running, evidentally without any takers, since last winter.

"All aboard for Atchison an' p'ints East—"

A hub-bub swept the waiting room as trace-chains jangled and a dusty Concord rolled to a stop out in front. Prospective passengers made a rush for the door, toting their leather bandboxes and carpetbags, jostling for a place in the queue which was forming in front of the stagecoach.

The waiting room was empty when Dan Robie sauntered over to the ticket office and checked his go-easter portmanteau.

"No room left?" the clerk apologized. "I'll book you a definite reservation on the Leavenworth Special leaving Sunday—"

Dan Robie shook his head, cursing himself for a fool as he did so.

"I'll take a refund, if you please. Changed my plans. Think I'll scout around Denver City and look for the elephant."

The idiom brought a sympathetic grin to the clerk's lips as he voided Robie's ticket and counted out specie in exchange. Time was when the clerk had come west to "look for the elephant", and the untold riches which the phrase implied. Only the lucky few hit paydirt. The majority of Argonauts wound up under the banner of defeat typical of the time: "Pike's Peak and Busted."

Robie sauntered outdoors in time to see the Atchison stage pull out in a cloud of dust, leaving a crowd of disappointed Go-Backers behind to wait for the next eastbound transportation.

Prospective marshals were to apply at the Gold Exchange, half a block away. But Robie had an errand to attend to at the nearest printshop first. Which would be the *Rocky Mountain News* office, according to the stage clerk. The printing plant was perched on pilings out in the mudflats where Cherry Creek flowed into the South Platte, straddling the boundary between Denver City and its rival mining camp across the stream, Auraria.

Robie was heading toward the newspaper shop when the bullet fanned his left ear with a noise like a popped handkerchief. He was dropping to one knee and whipping the Dragoon Colt from his belt when the roar of the gunshot crashed out thunderously in the humid air.

Whirling to face the sound of the shot, Robie caught a blur of movement as a rider wheeled a fat apaloosa stallion into an alley between a brewery and a livery barn. Gunsmoke smudged from the horseman's palmed gun as he hipped around in saddle for a second shot in Robie's direction.

It was the bearded prospector who had been quizzing Robie in the stage depot a few minutes before.

CHAPTER TWO

Suicide Badge

IT WAS long range for a Dragoon, but Robie steadied his gun muzzle across his uplifted left arm, lined his sights high to allow for the distance and squeezed off a shot.

The rider's second bullet went wild. In the act of clapping spurs to the apaloosa's flanks, the miner jerked to the impact of Robie's slug and pitched headlong from stirrups, dismounted by the stallion's panicked lunge.

Men shouted, raced for cover in the face of gunplay. A team hitched to a Dearborn carriage near the alley entrance reared and snorted as drifting gunsmoke crossed their muzzles.

But the fight was apparently over. The red-shirted miner lay where he had fallen, smoke spewing from his gun.

A hundred pairs of eyes watched Dan Robie come erect, then stride across the wheel-rutted street toward his victim.

Even before he reached the fallen gunslammer, Dan Robie knew who his questioner had been. Beardog Vane, a claim-jumper who had broken out of Robie's jail in Sonora back in '59. The last time he had seen Vane, the man was smooth shaven. Robie had jailed Vane pending trial by a miners' court for the murder of a Chinaman in the Sierra Nevadas. . .

Halting over Vane's corpse, Robie stared down at the rivulet of blood which guttered from a bullet hole punched in the miner's shaggy temple, to form a little puddle in the dust.

Blowing smoke from his gun barrel, Robie started to reload as a crowd began gathering. It was typical of the savage

tempo of Denver City life that no voice was raised to question this shooting scrape. The tall stranger in the California pants and Chileno sombrero had fired in defense of his life. That was that.

"Who handles situations like this, gents?" Robie inquired, holstering his Colt. "Is there a coroner I should notify?"

A burly Santa Fe freighter laughed harshly, poked Beardog Vane's limp carcass with a hobbed boot.

"There's no law in this camp, stranger. You can forget about this bucko who tried to 'bush you. The brewery foreman or the stable tender will bury the corpus when it smells bad enough."

Already the crowd was beginning to break up, drift off. Street shootings were too commonplace, it was obvious, to hold the interest of Denver City's denizens for long. The callous indifference of the boom camp to violent death struck home to Dan Robie. Beardog Vane was only an inch of type in next week's obituary column.

Arriving at the *News* office, Robie located the printshop foreman and scribbled out copy for a hundred posters. By greasing the compositor's palm with a gold octagonal he got the journeyman's promise to run the job off his press by six o'clock.

Returning to the stage office, Robie redeemed his luggage and went out to hunt up a rooming house. After a dozen tries, the clerk of the Pike's Peak Hotel informed him that a room was available, the first vacancy in months.

"Feller name of Vane occupied this room," the clerk said, grinning toothily. "Just got word he was shot to death. If you ain't superstitious—"

Robie counted out specie at the rate of twenty dollars a day to reserve lodgings for a week. After he had scrawled *Daniel Robie Jr., California* in the dogeared register, the clerk eyed him with sudden interest.

"Not Dan Robie, the marshal who chased Joaquin Murietta out of the Mother Lode country in '53?"

Robie took the room key and picked up his portmanteau.

"No relation," he grinned.

Arriving at the room lately occupied by Beardog Vane, Robie soaked himself in a zinc tub filled with tepid water by a half-breed porter, shaved himself and stretched out on a cot to catch up on lost sleep.

The sun was westering below the staggered crown of Pike's Peak when Robie emerged from the hostelry and headed for the *News* office to pick up his job of printing.

Passing the alley by the brewery, Robie saw a mongrel sniffing at Beardog Vane's corpse. Some ghoul had already stripped the dead man of his gun harness and hobnailed boots.

"So Denver's finally got itself a marshal, eh?" commented the ink-stained printer as he wrapped up the bundle of posters for Robie. "Whoever the damn fool is, he won't last long ag'in the Bummer Gang. Death rules Denver City, not man-made law. The marshal ain't born who could tame this hell-begotten burg."

* * *

The morrow's sun was barely an hour above the flat sepia prairie to the east of Denver City when the three kingpins of the camp's respectable element assembled in the back room of the Gold Exchange to swear in the new marshal which the Vigilantes, meeting in secret session the night before, had decided to elect.

Matt Sheraton, the Boston financier who had come to the Cherry Creek diggings after the strike in '59 to open Denver City's flourishing Gold Exchange, pulled open a drawer of his desk and took out a shield which a goldsmith had fabricated out of a newly-minted silver dollar and engraved with the word MARSHAL.

The banker's eyes were somber under cottony brows as he appraised Dan Robie, standing at slack-jointed ease before him.

"Your reputation as a town-tamer is too well known to merit wasting time discussing the objections which Mr. Pullman and Mr. Stanley have raised," Sheraton commented gravely, nodding in the direction of the two affluent-looking Vigilantemen seated in the room. "The man who was responsible for chasing Joaquin Murietta out of the California mines undoubtedly knows what he is doing, Mr. Robie."

A grin broke the reserve of Robie's stony face.

"Denver City isn't so tough, gentlemen. I could show you a dozen Mother Lode camps that would put these diggings to shame."

Sheraton leaned across the table and pinned the silver badge to the lapel of Robie's buttermut jacket, conscious of the historical import of this moment, yet uncomfortably aware of a feeling akin to guilt.

Robie's written application revealed that he was twenty-nine, that reckless age when the folly of youth is giving way to the tempered judgment of maturity. Robie had a young man's confidence in his animal strength and unshakeable courage, the gunrep he had won for himself in California, the record of tough camps he had whipped into line.

"Denver ain't California, Robie," spoke up George Pullman, the citizen who was destined to transfer the double-decked beds of Pike's Peaker bunkhouses into the railroad sleeping cars which would make his name familiar to posterity. "Before Mr. Sheraton administers the oath, you should know you're taking on what amounts to a suicide assignment, young man."

Robie made no comment until he had dispensed with the formalities of being sworn into office.

"You're referring to the Bummer Gang, I take it," he responded, eyeing Pullman gravely. "I'm fully aware of their threat to law and order in this camp. Smoking them out into the open will be my first objective as your marshal, gentlemen."

The other man in the office, Henry M. Stanley, shook his leonine head dubiously. An unassuming but influential citizen of Colorado Territory, the man whom destiny was to make a famous explorer who in years to come was to gain world-wide renown for the discovery of the missing Dr. Livingston in Africa, Stanley had cast the only dissenting vote against Robie's appointment when the Vigilantes had met the evening before.

"These '59ers in the Pike's Peak country include men who were too tough for California to handle, son," Stanley reminded Robie. "The Devil has had ten-twelve years to harden the riffraff who call themselves the Bummer Gang. I cannot see how a lone man, inviting death by the public display of a law badge, can succeed where our Stranglers have thus far failed."

Robie stooped to pick up a package he had brought with him. Breaking it open, he revealed a stack of cardboard signs printed in vivid red ink.

"These posters will be my opening gun," Robie explained. "Before noon I will have these signs tacked up on every saloon and crib and honkytonk in Denver City. Before nightfall, every hoodlum in camp will know I mean business, just as I meant business in Mariposa and Sonora and Placerville."

The three Vigilante officials peered at the sign which Robie flipped on Sheraton's desk:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Effective this date, it will be unlawful to carry weapons inside the limits of Denver City. This ruling applies to sidearms of all descriptions and knives measuring more than five inches in length exclusive of haft. Upon arrival in camp, weapons will be checked at the jailhouse for redemption upon leaving town. Offenders will be subject to immediate arrest and trial by the Vigilante Committee.

DANIEL ROBIE, Marshal

When Robie had made his departure, a grin tugged at the corners of Matt Sheraton's mouth.

"Robie printed those signs before he applied for the job," the banker grinned. "That speaks a lot for the man's guts. . ."

"He's asking for a bullet in the back," Stanley grumbled. "I give him a day at the outside before we bury him."

George Pullman shook his head slowly. "Robie's record proves the effectiveness of a no-gun-toting law," he admitted. "Dehorn your hoodlums and you cut out your barroom brawls and back-alley killings overnight. "Gentlemen, I have a hunch those signs of the marshal's will strike the fear of God into the hearts of the Bummer Gang."

LEAVING the Gold Exchange, Robie paid a visit to a hardware store and purchased a hammer and a box of tacks. Then he began his rounds of Denver City's business houses, leaving a red-printed placard tacked to each wall he passed.

Knots of men gathered about the signs in Robie's wake. The knowledge of the unknown odds he was bucking laid a chill down the marshal's spine. This was like old times again. . .

An hour later, Matt Sheraton accosted Robie just after he had affixed one of his placards to the batwing doors of the camp's most notorious deadfall, the Elephant Pen Saloon.

"For what it's worth, I'll pass along a

tip, marshal," the banker said. "A tinhorn named Vitch Slankard operates the Elephant. It's a wide-open, hells-the-limit sinkhole for the lawless element in Denver City. The Vigilantes can't prove a thing, but the private concensus is that Slankard's deadfall here is the headquarters of the Bummer Gang."

Robie thanked the banker and turned to survey the big white-painted building which occupied an entire block frontage across the street facing the Elephant Pen.

A pulse hammered his temples as he scanned the ornate lettering which spanned the high false front: COLORADO QUEEN PALACE—FINEST BAR IN THE WEST. HONEST GAMES OF CHANCE.

Nostalgia plucked at the lawman's heart as he worked his way through the heavy street traffic, dodging incoming jerkline ore wagons bound for the smelters, pony-mounted Indians, promenading ladies of the evening with their butterfly parasols and their sidelong, provocative glances in his direction.

This Colorado Queen Palace reminded Robie of other Palaces back in the El Dorado country. The Bonanza Queen Palace in Mariposa. Sonora's Lucky Nugget Palace. Placerville with its Golden Dream Palace. The Oriental Palace in Columbia and the Regal Palace in San Francisco's Barbary Coast.

Everywhere it was the same. California Kitty had founded her chain of saloons on the solid basis of a square deal for any man who crossed her portals. Her bar dispensed the finest available liquors at the lowest possible prices. Her gambling tables did not tolerate stacked decks. The girls who appeared in her floor shows and danced with her customers had been carefully selected back East for their high moral caliber as well as their beauty. Never had the breath of scandal touched any enterprise which California Kitty Malotte had a hand in.

Wherever a gold strike drew the scourings of humanity, one of California Kitty's "Palaces" would open its doors. Hard-rock prospectors used Kit's business acumen as a barometer for their own industry, knowing that the girl had an uncanny discernment for avoiding boom camps which would die overnight when the grass-root's color was skinned off.

Equally mysterious as the character of the woman who ruled over the lavish bars and gaming tables and dance floors of her establishments was the use to which her vast income was put. Dan Robie had seen uncounted shipments of California Kitty's specie and dust sent out of the Mother Lode by Wells-Fargo express messengers for deposit in unknown banks. Frontier gossip had it that the girl was rich by '50, a millionaire by '55. The truth probably exceeded the latter figure. . .

Robie mounted the steps of the collonaded gallery fronting the Colorado Queen Palace and tacked a gun-toting-law notice on the clapboard wall beside the main doorway of the barroom.

Disappointment awaited him when he tried the doorknob and found the establishment locked. Then a sign met his eye on the lintel: THE PALACE DOES NOT CATER TO DAYTIME TRADE. DOORS OPEN 6:00 P.M. to 5 A.M. CHECK YOUR GUNS WITH THE DOORMEN.

CHAPTER THREE

California Kitty

ROBIE'S supply of posters was exhausted by eleven o'clock. The town was already buzzing like a jostled beehive by the time he reached the brick jailhouse on Blake Avenue which the Vigilantes had erected. It was common knowledge that the dozen cells which the bullpen contained were used only as temporary housing for prisoners awaiting trial by the Vigilantes' kangaroo court.

The majority of their defendants wound up at the business end of a hangrope under the Cherry Creek cottonwood. Those found not guilty usually did not tarry around Denver City to brag about their narrow escape.

Robie set to work cleaning up the front office which would be his official headquarters. It was high noon he went to the door of the jail office with the intention of looking up a restaurant. He found a silent, sullen-faced crowd of miners and freighters and townsmen massed before the jail.

"You got the right idee, Robie!" called out a bushy-whiskered Pike's Peaker. "I seed yore no-gun law clean up Sonora when Murietta's gang had the diggin's buffaloed in '52. I'm right proud to be the fust to

check my own hardware with ye, marshal."

Robie grinned as he leaned down to accept a rusty old Allen's pepperbox pistol from the prospector. By the time he had issued a claim check for the ancient piece, men were crowding about him, unbuckling shell belts, emptying knife scabbards, proffering guns of all calibers and descriptions.

It was two o'clock before the rush tapered off, and Robie found himself hard pressed to find storage space for the arsenal of Dragoon Colts, sword canes, bowie knives, derringers, tomahawks and other weapons which Denver City's citizenry had left with him for safekeeping.

Obviously, this camp had had a belly full of terrorism and was jumping at the chance to back the new marshal's campaign. Fear had motivated many of his "customers" to follow the example of upright citizens who obviously intended to store their sidearms for an indefinite period. The psychology of Robie's idea was as simple as it was effective: law abiding men would surrender their arms; law-breakers would brand themselves as such if they toted weapons in public.

The scheme had worked miracles in half a dozen California gold camps during the heyday of the '49 rush. It appeared to be working here in Denver City. But Dan Robie was enough of a hard-shelled realist to know that no Bummer, no claim-jumper or crooked cardsharp had been included in the two-hundred-odd individuals who had voluntarily brought their weapons to the jailhouse so far.

Robie was locking up his office in response to the ravenous twinges in his stomach when a diminutive Negro in a red plush uniform shuffled across the splintered plank sidewalk and, bulbous eyes staring like ivory balls in his licorice face, pointed a shaky finger at the star on Robie's jacket.

"Y-all de new marshal ob dese diggin's, suh?" "Right as rain, son. Got a razor to put on ice?"

The colored boy's face split in a dubious grin. "Naw suh. Ah's got a personal message fo' yuh, suh."

Robie accepted the rose-tinted missive and lifted it to his nose. The subtle perfume brought memories crowding to him. By the time he snapped out of his reverie and reached in a pocket for a tip, the negro had scuttled away.

The note was written in a neat feminine script which had haunted Dan Robie's dreams for too long a time:

Danny boy:

Please come to the Palace at once and have lunch with me. I will do anything in my power to persuade you to give up this insane attempt to tame Denver City. You promised me once you had tamed your last camp, remember?

Kit

WORKING on the theory that business should come before pleasure, Dan Robie paid a visit to Matt Sheraton's bank and arranged for the hiring of a reliable deputy whose job would be to act as a clerk at the jail office, to issue receipts for such guns and knives as would be brought there for deposit during the remainder of the afternoon.

The sun was westering toward the granite pinnacles of the snow-wigged Rockies by the time Robie found himself on the block between the Elephant Pen Saloon and the Palace.

A heavy string of ore wagons from the Gregory Diggings, bound for the smelters along the South Platte, forced Robie to withdraw to the board walk in front of the Elephant Pen before crossing over to his destination. He was trying to curb his mounting impatience at the delay when a finger tapped his arm.

Turning, Robie found himself staring into the blocky face of a stranger whose rust-red heard hung in triple braids from a square, lithic jaw. A green Keevil hat shaded the man's veiny forehead, and the ornate flowered waistcoat and custom-tailored fustian steelpen town coat branded the man as a professional gambler.

"You'll be Marshal Robie." The man lifted thick splatulated fingers to roll the Cuban perfecto between his lips. "We'll meet sooner or later, so it might as well be now while you're still toting that star. . . I'm Vitch Slankard."

Robie nodded, not offering his hand. He was conscious that the tide of sidewalk traffic had ceased flowing past them, that a curious crowd was forming under the wooden awning of the Elephant Pen.

Vitch Slankard . . . the outlaw Matt Sheraton believed to be the kinpin of the vicious Bummer Gang. Vitch Slankard, owner of the most notorious deadfall.

Robie's eyes dropped to the pair of silver-plated Colt revolvers which Slankard displayed prominently on the outside of his swallowtail coat, holsters rigged for cross draw. His gaze lifted to meet Slankard's mocking stare.

"You've read the sign I put on the door of your establishment, Slankard?" His voice was icy.

"I have. Anything for a good laugh for my customers." Smoke clouded Slankard's grin. "That's why I didn't rip your sign down, marshal."

Robie met the saloonman's challenge with tightening lips.

"I'll be expecting you over at the jail office with those fancy shooting irons, Slankard."

Slankard's bottle-green eyes narrowed to slits under heavy cinnamon brows.

"Have you ever read the Constitution which governs the United States and Colorado Territory, young man? One of the Bill of Rights grants any man the right to bear arms?"

Dan Robie shrugged.

"Denver City is under Vigilante law until such time as the federals get out here to take over, Slankard. I'll give you an hour to think it over."

Hoarse laughter went around the press of humanity which rimmed the two men. The laughter died off suddenly on a hollow note.

"Any customers who come into the Elephant Pen are entitled to pack a smokepole if they see fit, marshal," Slankard retorted, a subtle menace replacing the mockery in his gravelly voice. "Out here in the Pike's Peak country a man carries his own law in his holster. I'll see you in hell before I obey your damn-fool gun-totin' law, Mister Marshal. What my trade does is their business."

The fighting tingle he had known of old shivered Robie's back as he took the saloonman's challenge. Every instinct in the man told him to smash Slankard in the jaw, snatch his guns and beat him into bloody submission on the spot.

Then he realized that Slankard's challenge would be the topic of feverish discussion at every bar and gambling table in Denver City before the hour was up. This was a test case, one which would measure Robie in the eyes of the camp which knew him only by repute. The sudden urge to kill drained from him as he shaped his plans.

"I'll give you till sundown to surrender your guns voluntarily, Vitch," Robie said grimly. "Otherwise I'll drop into the Elephant Pen and jail you to await Vigilante trial. Which would mean banishment from camp. It's up to you, Slankard. Take your choice."

Robie turned on his heel and headed across the street toward the Colorado Queen Palace before Slankard could make a retort. Off hand, Robie believed he had emerged victor from this little by-play which Slankard had engineered to humiliate him in public.

The kinky-headed darky who had delivered Kit's message unlocked the Palace door for the marshal.

"Miz' Kitty has vittles waitin' fo' y-all in de room to de lef' ob de bar, Mistuh Marshal suh."

Robie pushed through the barroom doors. He had been prepared for an impressive interior but the grandeur of this Denver City saloon was more ornate, richer in its fixtures than any of California Kitty's west coast houses.

Thousands of dollars had gone into the crystal chandeliers and backbar mirrors alone. The bar, two hundred feet long, was of gleaming mahogany and carved Honduras rosewood. The dance hall opening off to the right had a glossy floor of polished maple, and Robie glimpsed the gilded proscenium of a stage draped with fabulous curtains of maroon plush and gold tassling.

The left third of the block-long Palace was the gambling hall, its giant roulette wheels and chuck-a-luck cages untended at this hour, its circular card tables lined up in neat rows of green baize disks, cuspidors polished to a golden sheen, the floor covered with thick rugs loomed in Persia and imported to Colorado at tremendous expense.

Robie flicked the dust of Denver's streets off his cavalry boots with a handkerchief, feeling out of place in this gilded temple of chance. Adjusting the weight of the Dragoon pistol on his right flank, he moved across the spacious floor toward a teakwood door bearing a brass plate with the word PRIVATE etched thereon.

He was conscious that his heart was

pounding like a hammer, where it had not picked up its measured tempo by so much as a single throb during the tense moments he had faced Vitch Slankard across the street.

Pausing before the polished door, he was in the act of knocking when it swung open and California Kitty stood framed like a painting by some Old Master.

"Kit, girl—"

"Hello, Danny."

She was as he remembered her last: her face an oval of pale ivory between clustering auburn curls that held the gloss of burnished copper in their buns. Her body, slim and voluptuous in a low-cut basque of purple velvet, was something that had haunted his dreams, a vision of feminine loveliness that would make a saint forget his vows.

Except for the cameo broach at the cleft of her bosom, a clasp which had belonged to Dan Robie's mother, the girl wore no jewelry.

"I wish I could say I was glad to see you here, Danny," the girl said in a throaty whisper, her eyes on his law badge. "I should have known this would happen. Maybe I hoped it would—"

He pulled her close to him, crushing his mouth demandingly against her full red lips with a savage yearning that she matched with equal fire, leaving her spent and breathing fast when she disengaged herself from his arms and stepped back into the simply-furnished room which was the Palace office.

A table set with gleaming silver and lighted by two tall candles in wrought-gold Spanish sticks broke the severe austerity of a room furnished with a roll-top desk, filing cabinets and a black iron safe which bore the fresh scars of burglars' chisels.

This was the room, then, where California Kitty had caught two prowlers seeking to loot her vault. Men whose bodies dangled at ropes' end from the Cherry Creek cottonwood this afternoon. . .

No words passed between them as Robie adjusted a chair for her at the Duncan Fyfe table and seated himself to watch the girl fill goblets with bubbling Chiante.

"A toast," Katherine Malotte proposed, lifting her champagne glass. "A toast to Sonora, California. The town you vowed would be the last you'd ever tame—"

Robie's eyes were grave as they touched glasses and drank.

"A toast," he countered her, "to the girl who promised to give up her way of life to become my bride . . . and then ran away."

California Kitty toyed with the crystal stem of her glass.

"You nullified my pledge to you, Danny, when you moved on to Placerville to become the marshal there. You know I love you. You also know I have no desire to find myself a marshal's widow before my bridal bouquet has time to wither—"

Robie squirmed uncomfortably, picking at the oysters which were selling in Denver City this summer at twenty dollars per pound in the shell.

"Placerville needed me," he said. "And I surely don't have to tell you that Denver City could use a lawman."

Her eyes clouded over in the soft candle glow.

"True, Danny. But you've done your share—to bring law and order to the West. Denver City—this Bummer gang—it's all too big to handle. The Vigilantes failed. You will fail."

The slow tightening of his mouth was her only answer, and before that unshakeable resolve California Kitty knew her own charms were impotent.

"I saw your meeting with Vitch Slankard," she went on. "I heard your ultimatum to him. When you walk into the Elephant Pen at sunset, Danny, you will be walking to your own doom."

She got up suddenly, rounded the table and laid a white hand tenderly on his cheek.

"There's a padre over in Auraria who could marry us tonight, Dan," she whispered close by his ear. "We could catch the next east-bound stage, leave the West forever."

His blood raced wildly, but he fought down the desire to pull her into his arms, to taste her lips again.

"No dice, Kit. Not so long as this business between Vitch Slankard and me is hanging fire."

He lifted his eyes to drink in the loveliness of her face, tear-wet now in the candlelight, imprinting its classic planes deep in his memory, as if to sustain him in the hours ahead.

The girl returned to her chair and

slumped into it. The room became unbearably quiet, broken only by the measured ticking of a Seth Thomas clock above the safe, its pendulum counting the inexorable passage of time leading to Robie's sunset showdown at the Elephant Pen.

She had played her trump card, and she had lost. The implacable set of Robie's jaw told her that.

"As long as you've known me, Danny," she broke herself free of her mood, "you've never once asked me why I should be the mistress of a chain of honkytonks, a glorified barmaid, a croupier in skirts. Have you ever wondered—at the urge which drives me to such an unwomanly career? Has your love blinded you to the fact that I might be hiding something unsavory, avaricious?"

The marshal shook his head slowly, grinning.

"Your reasons must be strong ones, Kit. I knew you'd tell me the secret of your mystery—when the time came." His grin faded. "When my work in Denver City is finished, I'm heading back home to enlist with the Ohio Volunteer Regiment, Kitty. Maybe the time will never be ripe for you and me."

California Kitty met his gaze for a long moment. Then she rose, went to a filing cabinet and pulled open a drawer. Returning to the table, she dropped a dossier of dageurrotype photographs before Dan Robie.

Leafing through the pictures, Robie saw groups of laughing-eyed children of all ages and racial strains.

"I'm twenty-eight years old, Danny," California Kitty said softly. "I started life as a foundling. I knew poverty and hunger and cruelty during the years I should have been playing with dolls and making mud pies. When I should have been going to parties and charming beaux and sewing dresses, I was living in the filth and squallor of New Orleans' French Quarter."

Her bosom lifted and fell in a deep sigh.

"A Creole woman I nursed through a siege of cholera when I was fifteen died and left me a modest sum of money," Katherine Malotte went on. "I came West, started the first of my string of Palaces in Mariposa, where you were serving as Marshal, Danny. I proved that men enjoyed the company of decent women, that they want honest games of chances and honest whiskey after their hours at the mining claims. And I made money . . . huge sums of money."

She gestured toward the photographs on the table.

"With that money, Danny, I've founded schools and orphan homes in New Orleans, Atlanta, Mobile, Saint Louie. Oh, the clergy and the reformers will say I am a priestess of the Devil, that my philanthropy is motivated by some feeling of guilt, as a penance for sin. But I know that the money I have taken out of California and the Pike's Peak Country is going to make life worthwhile for countless children who faced their adolescence under the same handicaps as I did."

Dan Robie's eyes were suspiciously moist when she finished speaking and refilled their champagne glasses.

"Orphan kids who probably will never know the name of their benefactress, Kit. The West has never know a woman of your worth—"

She glanced at the clock, then lifted her champagne glass.

"To sunset, Danny boy. God grant that you live to see many. . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sunset Showdown

TRADE ordinarily reached its peak inside Vitch Slankard's Elephant Pen deadfall around midnight. This evening, the barroom was thronged to capacity before the sun's disk touched the saw-toothed divide of the Rockies west of Denver City.

A subdued quiet pervaded the big gambling annex, broken only by the drone of the croupiers, the click of roulette balls, the clink of gold coin and poker chips.

Taos Lightning, that devil's brew which passed for whiskey in the Pike's Peak Country, flowed like water at Vitch Slankard's bar, keeping his full staff of bartenders working full blast. An atmosphere of watchful waiting charged the Elephant Pen, a nerve-sapping tension which gripped the throng like some potent drug.

In his private office on the mezzanine above the smokey barroom, Vitch Slankard paced the floor, hands stuffed in the hip pockets of his ribbed marsailles pants, a ragged stub of cigar unlighted between his teeth.

From time to time the operator of Denver City's most notorious saloon went to his window and squinted at the western mountains, watched the blood-colored sun settle below the shoulder of Pike's Peak.

When the sun vanished, Slankard opened a cabinet on the wall and took out a bottle of his personal Scotch, poured himself a stiff dram and tossed it down. He needed something to bolster his nerves against the showdown which that sunset would bring.

He buckled his silver-plated Colt .45's outside his fustian frock coat. As an afterthought he checked the load in the .41 derringer which he carried in a concealed spring clip under the cuff of his right sleeve.

Then, inspecting his reflection for a moment in the full-length mirror on his office door, Slankard stepped out onto the bannistered balcony and headed down the stairs.

Always the showman, Slankard's ego derived a perverse satisfaction when he noted the stir which his appearance caused in the packed barroom. Scores of miners, freighters and townsmen who had never set foot inside the Elephant Pen were represented in the crowd this evening.

Something was missing from the overall picture which Denver City's citizens presented here in the saloon. Slankard was better than half way down the staircase before he sensed what it was. More than a third of his customers had come here tonight minus their customary sidearms. The new marshal's ultimatum was being taken seriously in Denver City, then. . .

Sundown glow was pinking the windows which fronted the Elephant Pen when Vitch Slankard, ostensibly engrossed in checking the receipts in his bar till, caught the electric excitement which flashed through the crowded establishment.

Slankard stood with his back to the bar. Lifting his eyes, the Elephant Pen boss stared at the reflection of the front doors in the blistered backbar glass.

Dan Robie stood framed there, the batwings fanning his back. The marshal's face was an inscrutable mask. His thumbs were hitched in a belt which carried his Dragoon pistol. The new silver badge caught the gleam of whale-oil lamps the swampers had lighted at sunset.

Closing the drawer of his cash box, Vitch Slankard raised a mahogany leaf in the bar and stepped out front. By some miracle of compression, the throng had cleared the sawdust floor as if to form an arena there, giving Slankard an unobstructed view of the lawman who had just entered.

"A drink for the new marshal, Curly!" Slankard ordered his nearest bartender. "A dram of Taos Lightning on the house."

The barkeep slid bottle and glasses on the mahogany. Dan Robie moved away from the door, walking over to halt at arm's length from Slankard.

"I don't drink during business hours, thanks," Robie's low-modulated voice carried through the gelid silence. The marshal's steely gaze was focussed on the ornate six-guns buckled ostentatiously against Slankard's belly. "You know why I'm here. Let's dispense with the amenities."

Vitch Slankard hitched his big shoulders, cleared his throat.

"If you didn't come here to drink, Marshal, the door is directly behind you. Get out."

The austere lines of Robie's face relaxed in a grin to answer Slankard's forming leer.

"Fine. I will. But you're going with me. I arrest you for illegal possession of firearms."

As he spoke, Robie's hand made a flicking blur toward his holster. Caught off guard by the abruptness of the draw, Slankard stood paralyzed before the menace of the gun leveled at his chest.

Moving in fast, Robie lifted Slankard's Colts from holsters, jabbed them through the belt at his midriff.

"Let's go," Robie ordered. "Your Vigilante trial is scheduled for tomorrow morning. Until then you will remain behind bars."

Vitch Slankard snapped out of his frozen paralysis then. He started to raise his arms, as if in surrender. Then his right wrist made a twitching motion and lamplight glinted off the stubby muzzle of a derringer which appeared like magic from his cuff.

Dan Robie hand anticipated a hide-out weapon and his own gun barrel jerked up to club Slankard's arm as the wicked little .41 spat flame. The slug whistled past the marshal's ear and smashed a swinging ceiling lamp to shards.

With a cold laugh, Dan Robie holstered his own Dragoon and reached out to grab Slankard's triple-braided whiskers. His

left arm came up in a smoking uppercut which smashed Slankard's jaw with a solid meaty impact.

Driven back against the bar by the bone-denting punch, Slankard attempted to drive a knee into the lawman's groin as Robie followed up with a devastating haymaker which flattened the saloonman's bulbous nose into a red-spurting pulp.

The barroom crowd came alive with a hoarse rumble of shouts as they saw Robie release Slankard's beard, measuring his man for a punch which would hammer the beefy saloonkeeper off his feet.

Off to one side, a whiskey bottle hurtled through space and shattered against Robie's skull with a spray of Taos Lightning and splintered glass. The bartender who had thrown the bottle ducked out of sight behind the bar as the Denver City marshal staggered back and slumped to his knees, blood gouting from a gash on his scalp, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs of oblivion which befogged his brain.

Seizing his foul advantage, Vitch Slankard launched a boot toe at Robie's chest, fracturing a rib and driving the marshal to the floor.

Whooping a shrill yell of Cain, Slankard launched himself like a berserk grizzly at his fallen prey, splayed hands clawing for Robie's windpipe.

Robie twisted himself free of Slankard's strangling fingers and the two went into a grapple, rolling over and over across the reasty sawdust until they struck the close-banked legs of the retreating spectators.

Slankard's guns fell from Robie's belt and were followed by his own loosely-holstered Dragoon. Neither man noted their loss, as they brawled across the floor in a welter of hammering fists.

The two fighters came to their feet, lungs heaving, their faces chopped to bloody caricatures. Circling, Vitch Slankard spotted an overturned chair in front of the semi-circle of the crowd and he snatched it up, raising it over his head as he charged the gasping marshal in front of him.

Robie lifted an arm to fend off the blow but the chair smashed to matchwood under the power of Slankard's driving muscles, rocking the marshal back on his heels, stunned and gasping.

One of the Elephant Pen's swampers broke free of the crowd, rushed up to thrust a long-barreled Remington .44 into Slankard's fist.

"Give the salty town-tamer a dose o' hot lead, Vitch!" howled his underling. "Spill his guts—"

The pandemonium in the Elephant Pen died off as Slankard thumbed back the knurled hammer of the .44 to full cock, his bloody mouth twisted in a triumphant grin as he lifted the Remington to cover his opponent.

"I'll give ye a chance to crawl out of my place or take a slug standin' up, marshal!" panted the saloonman, gauging the hostile tempers of men friendly to Robie's cause, men who could turn the barroom into a slaughterhouse.

"Shoot and be damned, Slankard!" Robie choked out. "If it takes a flunky to win your play for you—"

A flicker of movement over by the front doors drew Slankard's eye away from Dan Robie in that instant. The saloonman's battered face twisted in surprised alarm as he saw California Kitty standing there, a coiled blacksnake whip falling in loops to the floor as the girl readied the lash in her slim fist.

"You can't give a man an honest break, even in a fight, can you, Vitch?" Kitty's cool voice lashed out in the stunned silence.

Dan Robie whirled to face the girl, saw her wrist send the reptilian tremor through the long whip on the barroom floor.

Then Slankard gasped out a berserk oath and lifted his gun for a point-blank shot at the marshal.

Before his finger could tighten on trigger, California Kitty's arm blurred up, chopped forward. The blacksnake whipped past Robie's shoulder, its lash cutting deep spirals into the hairy flesh of Slankard's gun wrist, jerking his arm at the instant of the .44's blast.

A bullet splintered the puncheons at Robie's feet as the girl jerked her whip taut, breaking Slankard's clutch on the Remington and dropping it to the floor.

A flood of galling anger blended with the relief which welled through Dan Robie. He leaped to snatch the gun as Kitty withdrew the whip. Vitch Slankard stood like a graven image, staring at the dripping, lacerated flesh which braceleted his gun wrist.

"All right, Slankard. It's all over."

A hoarse bellow of laughter rang from behind the bar as the marshal jabbed the .44 muzzle into Slankard's paunch.

"Our new marshal cain't arrest a man without a woman's help!" howled the derisive jeer of a bartender. "Let him clap you in his stinkin' callaboose, Vitch. You won't stay there long!"

Vitch Slankard managed a venemous grin as he stalked across the floor to where California Kitty was coiling the blacksnake over a velvet-sleeved arm.

"I won't be forgetting this, Kit!" growled the saloon man, as Dan Robie escorted him outside. "You got a reputation for always backing a winner, Kit. This time you've drawed to a busted flush. This deal ain't over yet by a damned sight."

California Kitty Malotte met Robie's sheepish head-shake with a defiant toss of her own.

"You saved me from bein' cut down in cold blood, Kit," the marshal said heavily. "But listen to them hoodlums hoorawing me inside there. You've disgraced me, woman. Denver City will think their new star-toter is only fit to hide behind a female's skirts—"

The girl backed off toward the porch steps.

"Those Bummers would have seen you murdered like a gutter mongrel, Danny. Let them poke fun at you. Where would your pride be with Slankard's bullet in your heart?"

Robie's shoulders lifted and fell in a gesture of helpless chagrin as he watched the girl cross the street to disappear inside the brightly-lighted Colorado Queen Palace.

"Get moving, Slankard!" the marshal told his prisoner. "You know where the jail is."

CHAPTER FIVE

Bummer Vengeance

NIGHT was an ominous shroud over a Denver City which had undergone a reversal of character since sundown. Bets were being laid that the Bummer Gang would have the new marshal's scalp before sunrise. Odds were being quoted throughout the camp that Vitch Slankard would be free of the Vigilante jail before this wild night had run its course.

Dan Robie sensed the rumors and set about laying his plans accordingly. The town was split wide open now. It was a clean-cut issue of law versus hoodlumism. The abortive comedy of errors attending his showdown with Vitch Slankard had at least accomplished his purpose of bringing things to a head for the first time since the '59ers founded Denver City.

After jailing Slankard, Dan Robie reported to Matt Sheraton at the Gold Exchange, spending better than two hours in a council of war with the Vigilante chief.

Just before midnight Robie showed up at the Colorado Queen Palace, where the nightly floor show was going on in the dance hall annex before a smattering of nervous patrons.

As if she had been expecting him, California Kitty met the marshal as he stood blinking under the vivid glare of the crystal chandeliers in the deserted barroom.

"I only have a handful of customers tonight, Danny," the girl told him. "The whole camp is as nervous as a half-broke mustang. They're saying that the decent citizens have surrendered their guns to your keeping, leaving Denver City wide open to the mercy of the Bummers."

Dan Robie grinned reassuringly.

"What this town doesn't know is that I'm intending to use Vitch Slankard as bait for a mantrap that should bring the Bummer Gang into the open tonight, Kit." He paused, ears tuned to the sounds of clamoring voices in the Elephant Pen across the street. "Kit, I had to see you before trouble breaks loose. I want you to promise me something."

Kitty's eyes were suspiciously moist as she nodded.

"You mean you've come to tell me goodbye—for the last time," she whispered huskily. "You know the Bummers will storm the jail before daylight. They'll never let Vitch Slankard face a Vigilante court. And you'll be waiting at the jail when they show up . . ."

He waved aside the girl's apprehensions.

"I want you to promise me that you'll stay under cover tonight, no matter what breaks. Promise me on your word of honor?"

California Kitty bit her lip.

"You have my word, Danny. You've got to play out your hand in your own way, I know that. It—it's just hard, knowing

that this could have been our wedding night if you had placed our happiness ahead of that—that law badge."

He leaned down, kissed her briefly.

"There'll be other nights," he said. *"Hasta la vista."*

He was gone into the night then, his shoulders set at the jaunty angle that California Kitty remembered of old. Except that tonight, she was powerless to prevent the man she loved walking off to meet his destiny, her heart aching with the prescience that in Denver City Dan Robie had found a town too tough to tame . . .

The streets were ominously deserted under the summer moon when Dan Robie moved down a shadow-clotted alley next to the jailhouse and unlocked the side door leading into the cellblock. To have approached the calaboose by way of Blake Street would have been inviting an ambush bullet.

The white-faced deputy who had been writing out receipts for deposited weapons throughout the evening stared at Robie with ill-concealed discomfiture as the marshal entered the front office.

"Knock off for the night, Wilcox," Robie instructed his deputy. "Better report to Sheraton at the Exchange. Whatever you do, stay clear of this jail, understand?"

Wilcox made no effort to conceal his relief to quit the place. A moment later he was gone.

Whistling a nameless tune, Robie blew out the office light and drew the shades to curtain the iron-barred windows facing the street. He barricaded the flimsy door with a shivel chair, then moved out into the bullpen.

Vitch Slankard was pacing his corner cell like an animal, the ebb and glow of his cigar making his face float through the darkness like some sort of satan's mask.

"Where's Kitty Malotte, marshal?" jeered his prisoner. "I'm surprised you ain't got her here with that blacksnake of hers to welcome the Bummers when they show up with a hangman'snoose tailored to fit your neck."

Robie grinned in the murk, ignoring his prisoner. This was Slankard's first mention of the Bummer Gang, the first intimation that he was in league with the anonymous outlaw faction which had held Denver City in its lawless grip since the gold rush began.

"Your gun-toting law is the very thing the Bummers needed, Robie," Slankard taunted him. "You've dehorned the crowd that makes up the Vigilante Committee. Ever think of that?"

A dull rumble of sound from outside the jail made Slankard's voice trail off. At first Robie mistook the sound for thunder. Then he recognized the nature of that swelling, catastrophic rumble. A cacophony of voices which resembled the baying of a wolf-pack on the kill. He had heard that dull thunder more than once out in California's hell-roaring Mother Lode. The rallying-cry of a lynch mob approaching the jail . . .

"Your fish is fried, marshal. You still got time to unlock this cage and let me head off that hangin' bee—"

"Go to hell, Slankard. This *juzgado* makes a good fort."

Checking the bar on the back door, Dan Robie hurried out to the front office. The mob roar was louder in his ears now. Through pinholes in the window blinds he saw a twinkle of torch light moving up Blake Street.

Palming the Remington .44 he had brought with him from the Elephant Pen in lieu of his own Colt, Robie moved to a window and tipped back a corner of the shade.

The street in front of the jail was massing with a shifting sea of humanity. Flaring pine knots and kerosene-swab torches illuminated the surging mob outside.

Every face was masked. The Bummers had marshaled in full force on a street stripped empty of law-abiding citizens, most of whom had left their guns here in the jail in obedience to Robie's new ordinance. Two hundred strong, the muster-roll of the Pike's Peak hoodlum element was forcing a showdown . . .

A flung rock hit a window pane, clattered with a metallic thud on the interior bars. The mob was pushing up to the jail porch now, and the throaty, whiskey-hoarsened voice of its leader reached Dan Robie's ears:

"Open up before we bust in, marshal. We want Slankard."

Robie thrust his six-gun barrel under a window blind and triggered a slug over the heads of the Bummer mob.

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"Come and get him, you sons of perdition!"

A momentary silence gripped the lynch mob outside as the marshal's defy echoed up the street. Then the roar grew to a deafening pitch, punctuated by a spate of gunshots which sent a leaden sleet hammering into the impregnable brick front of the jail building.

A dozen men manning the big hickory tongue of a Conestoga freight wagon launched themselves at the front door. The first bludgeoning impact of the battering ram broke through the panels, stopping inches short of where Robie crouched.

To defend the front office was out of the question. Robie gathered up an armload of loaded shotguns from the arsenal he had laid out on the office desk and withdrew to the bullpen, secure in the belief that nothing short of dynamite could force the connecting iron door.

Barring the door, Robie moved to a corner of the cell block where his guns could command all the jail windows.

The attack came from all quarters of the compass. Ladders thudded against the eaves in the rear of the jail. Above the shouting of the mob out front, the repeated splintering impacts of the battering ram which was reducing the front door to wreckage, Robie heard an ominous, alien sound.

Men were climbing the ladders with buckets of kerosene, soaking the tinder-dry shingles of the roof. His nostrils caught the oily petroleum fumes dripping through cracks between the rafters.

"They'll smoke you into the open, marshal!" came Vitch Slankard's shout from the corner cell. "What kind of a fool are you, bucking these odds?"

Robie laughed harshly as he saw a pine-knot torch pass the window in the back gable, converting the roof of the jail into a seething inferno in a matter of seconds.

"You'll fry with me, Slankard!" he shouted above the crackle of the flames.

The front office was jammed with Bummers now, pouring in through the broken doorway. Gun butts hammered impotently against the steel-plated connecting door.

Crouched in the darkness, a shotgun cradled across his knees, three more leaning against the wall handy to his reach,

Dan Robie watched the flames eating through the shingled roof overhead. He glimpsed a head silhouetted in the square frame of a barred window across the cell block where a Bummer had mounted a ladder, hoping for a shot at his cornered foe.

Robie leveled his shotgun and drove a double charge of Number Four buckshot at the window. When the smoke cleared the Bummer's head had vanished.

Then disaster which Dan Robie could not have foreseen struck from an unexpected quarter. A key grated in the massive lock of the bullpen door and a moment later it swung open, revealing the closely packed bodies of Bummers plunging into the cell-block.

The Bummers had possessed a key, gained through some treachery in the past. But it was too late to worry about that now.

Robie's shotgun blasted like a cannon, slaughtering the vanguard of outlaws who blocked the doorway. His back to the wall, the marshal of Denver City grabbed his

reserve shotgun, squeezed both triggers simultaneously as the Bummers charged him.

He was flinging the empty buckshot gun aside and pulling his holstered .44 when the Bummers overpowered him. A rock-hard fist smashed his jaw. A boot found his ribs, paralyzing him.

Groggy with pain, Robie was conscious of going down under a welter of bodies. He felt a pair of hands ripping the ring of keys from his pants pocket, heard the raucous voice of Vitch Slankard screeching orders from his cell:

"Save Robie for me, men! The marshal's my meat—"

Iron muscled hands hauled Robie to his feet, his face a battered ruin. By the glare of flames eating through the roof overhead he saw confederates unlock Slankard's cell, saw the outlaw boss elbow his way forward.

The heat of the blazing rafters made the

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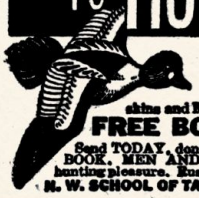

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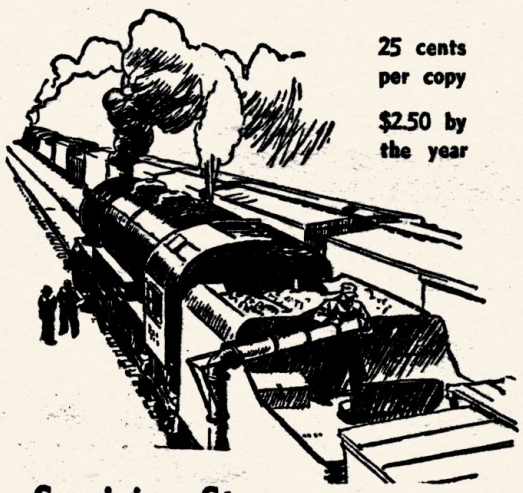

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bullpen untenable. Bummers, shouting triumphantly behind their masks, dragged Robie out through the front office into the street.

There, his Chileno sombrero was torn from his head and a sinister five-roll hangman's knot was pulled down over his ears, jerked taut under his jawbone. The roof of the jail caved in at that instant, sending a pink geyser of smoke and sparks billowing toward the zenith to obscure the Colorado moon.

"To the Vigilante hangtree with him, buckos!" Vitch Slankard bawled from the jail porch. The saloon boss was brandishing a pair of Colt .45s now. "We'll show this burg how long a startoter can buck the Bummer Gang—"

A semblance of order came to the milling outlaws now, as they pushed out into the center of Blake Street with Dan Robie the center of the wheeling vortex of masked desperadoes.

Then the mob started slogging eastward toward Cherry Creek and the waiting cottonwood. The holocaust of the doomed jail fell behind them as the half-strangled marshal found himself booted and dragged toward his doom.

Half a block from the jailhouse, the advancing lynch mob broke off its hellish clamor as the night suddenly exploded to the roar of concentrated gunfire.

Muzzle-flashes ripped from the upstairs windows of the Gold Exchange, from the Pike's Peak Hotel opposite. Bullets raked into the closely-massed phalanx of Bummers, dropping men in their tracks.

In the stunned hush which followed the first thunderclap of fast-triggered guns, the stentorian voice of banker Matt Sheraton boomed through the night from somewhere on the flat roof of the Gold Exchange overhead:

"Throw down your guns or die in your tracks, Bummers! The Vigilantes have boxed you in!"

The rough hands which were dragging Marshal Dan Robie went suddenly lax, freeing him. From somewhere on the back edge of the crowd, a masked Bummer tried to make a break for an alley. A crack of a Sharps buffalo gun dropped him.

A harsh yell of exultation burst from Dan Robie's bruised lips as he jerked off the

strangulating hangrope and flung himself at the nearest Bummer. The burly ruffian went down under Robie's sledging fist and before he hit the ground the marshal had clawed a pair of Colt .45s from the man.

Pandemonium hit the ranks of the lynch mob then. A stampede started toward the river, only to halt when a cordon of armed Vigilantes appeared in the moonlight from both sides of the street to face them with a solid phalanx of leveled rifles.

Flaming torches dropped into the wheel-churned dust of Blake Street as Bummers began flinging their arms aloft before the menace of Vigilante guns circling them on all sides. There was no bucking an army of concealed sharpshooters hiding behind brick walls, covering them from second-story windows.

"We got them Stranglers out-numbered!" came the frantic bawl of Vitch Slankard somewhere off to Robie's left. "Give 'em the fight they're after, you gutless cowards!"

But the men who took their courage from bottles of Taos Lightning, craven hoodlums who worked best as a mob behind the anonymity of masks, were not made of the stuff to buck the organized forces of law and order.

Bummers dropped to their knees, groveling for mercy. And from all sides, rifle-toting Stranglers began emerging.

Vitch Slankard whirled desperately as he heard his name called. Dan Robie stood there, his silhouette blocking out the glare of the burning jail building.

"Elevate, Slankard!" Robie's voice cut through the melee. "I'm giving you your chance to stretch legal hemp—don't move!"

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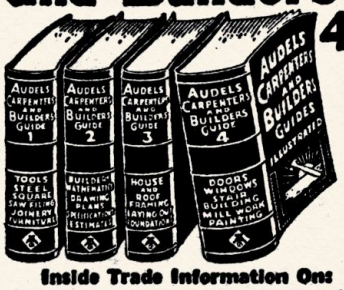

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Choking an obscene oath, the cornered outlaw whipped up his guns. Flame spewed from their bores, bracketing Robie's crouched form with streaking lead whispering death.

Aiming with cold precision, the marshal of Denver City tripped gunhammers. The big Colts bucked in his fists, came back to a level again and yet again as he hammered his slugs in a closely-spaced pattern on Vitch Slankard's bull chest.

The leader of the Bummer Gang kept his feet until Robie's last cartridge was spent. Then, with a gagging exhalation, the gun-boss of Denver City buckled sideways and pitched into the dirt. The new era of law and order for the Colorado settlements was born in that gunsmoke moment . . .

Through the haze of dust and smoke and milling bodies, Dan Robie saw Matt Sheraton striding his direction. At his elbow was George Pullman, carrying a smoking shotgun.

"We had the devil's own time holding the Vigilantes back, marshal," the dusty-faced banker grinned. "Your scheme to bait the Bummer gang into the open paid off. This was the only way we could have ever learned their membership *en masse* . . ."

Robie knew what the chief of the Vigilantes was trying to say. Peace had come to Denver City to stay, born of this night's carnage of blood and gunsmoke and whistling lead.

"I won't be needing this any longer," Robie said, unpinning the silver badge from his ragged coat. He flipped the marshal's star to Matt Sheraton.

Then he caught sight of California Kitty running toward him through the moonlight. He wondered, in that moment, if the padre at the Auraria mission across the river would be available at this ungodly hour . . .

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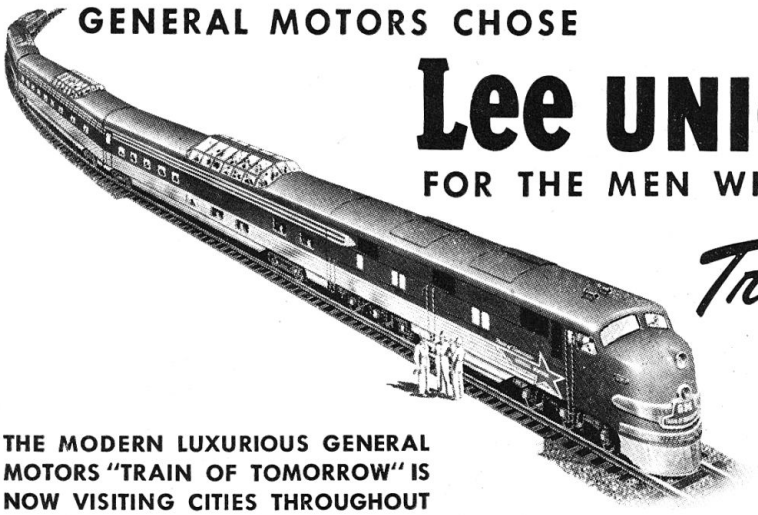

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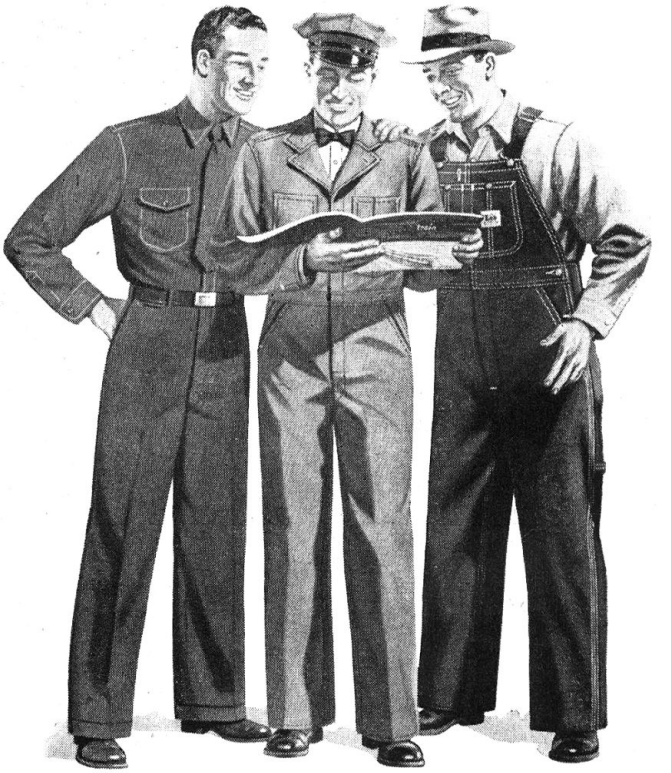

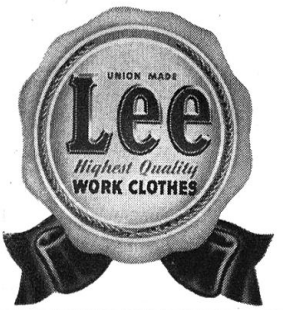

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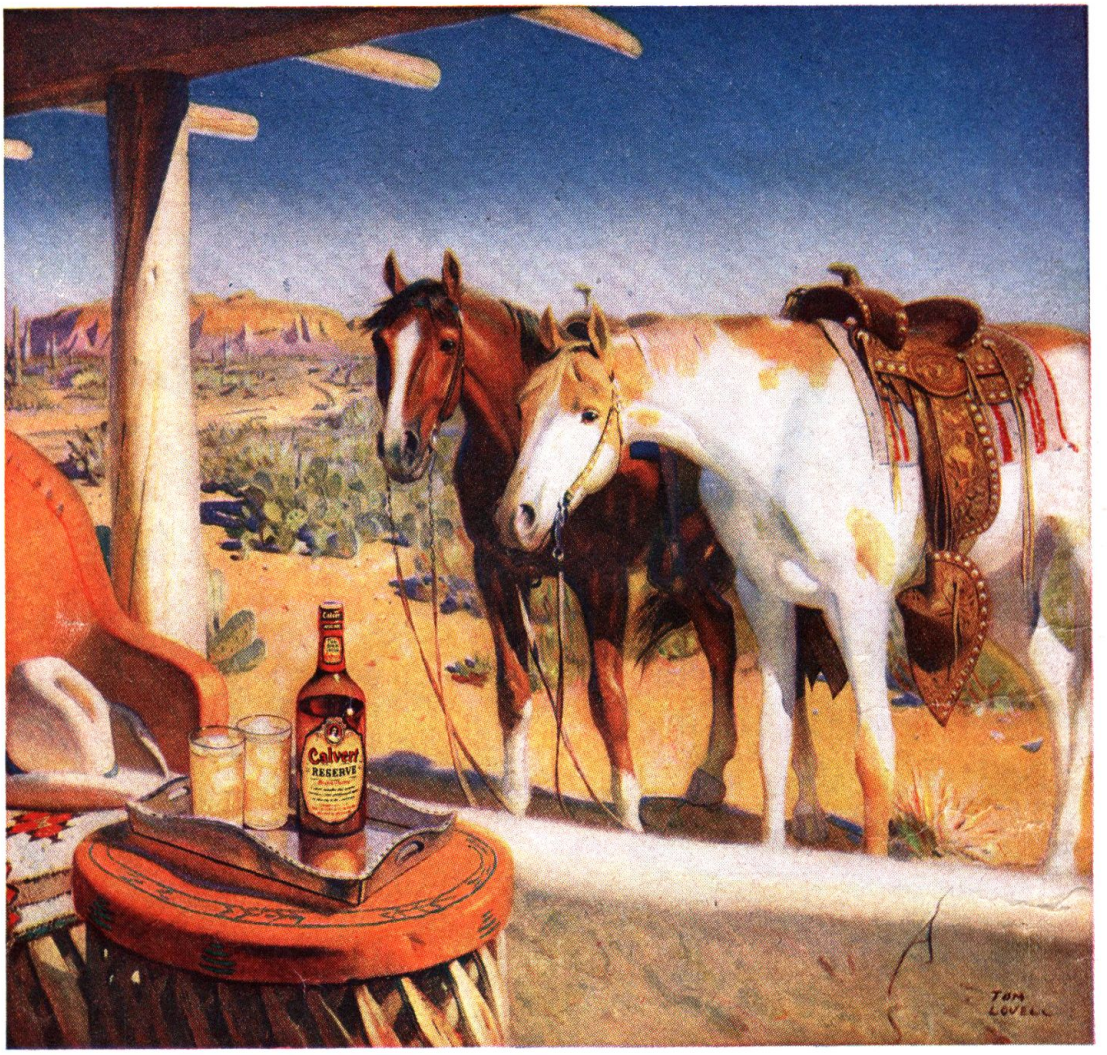

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