THE BIG FRONTIER WESTERN MAGAZINE

25¢

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

.44 Western

MAGAZINE

MAR.

ROLL THOSE WAGONS WEST!

EPIC OF THE COVERED CARAVANS

by GIFF CHESHIRE

START A Fine Business in Spare Time!

RUN THE BEST "SHOE STORE BUSINESS" IN YOUR TOWN!

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YOU DON'T INVEST A CENT! EVERYTHING FURNISHED FREE!

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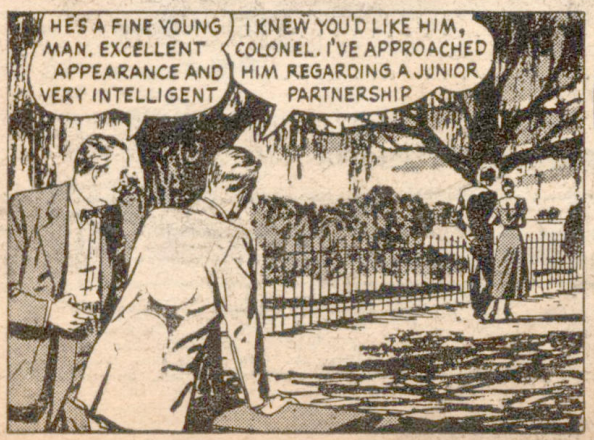

25¢

.44 Western MAGAZINE

Combined with **ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES**

Vol. 28 **Contents for March, 1952** **No. 2**

• • COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES • •

• • WESTERN SHORT STORIES • •

• • FEATURES • •

NEXT ISSUE OUT FEBRUARY 20th

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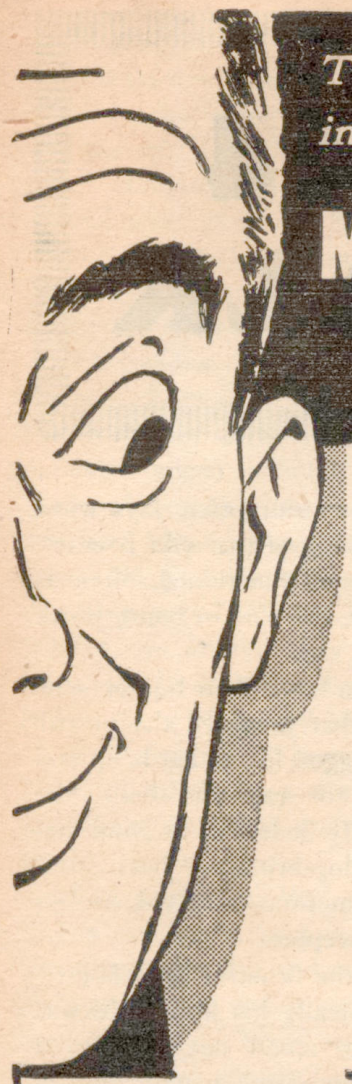

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.44 TALK

IN THE old but unforgotten days when the Colt was king of the wild frontier, and Judge Lynch functioned, often as not as executioner, the rôle of court jester was an important one.

For frontiersmen loved their humor—the lusty belly-laugh that provided the proper seasoning for a rugged life of hardship and violence. Instead of cap and bells, the clowns were usually bedecked in hand-me-downs, beat-up flop-brimmed hats, run-over boots, and sometimes a rusted, useless pistol as a fool's scepter.

Booger James, the boastful little failure, we think, was typically his kind. He was an individual who stood out even in a place where individualism—usually backed up with bullets—ran rampant. Like many a later ultra-individualist, he was also something of a clown. But he wasn't so silly that he didn't know how to get around what little law there was in Hangtown Camp.

To the isolated miners of that lonely camp, the wizened little derelict who had drifted in from God knows where, was a source of delight and entertainment. He was an artist at lying, and somehow brought into their hard-working lives a touch of the glamorous outside world and all its wonders. He had—according to Booger—been the one to string up that bold outlaw, Henry Plummer, in Bannock. He had "fit like a tiger" beside the heroes of the Alamo, and had been the one left to

(Continued on page 8)

You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

I send you parts to build this transmitter

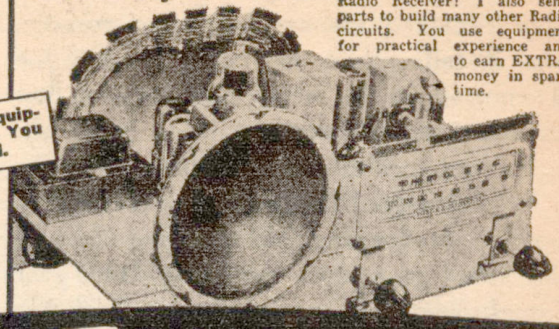
As part of my Communications Course you build this low power broadcasting transmitter, learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many tests.

This is just part of the equipment my students build. You keep all parts I send.

You Practice Radio SERVICING

on this modern radio you build with parts I send

As part of my Servicing Course, I send you the speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, EVERYTHING you need to build this modern, powerful Radio Receiver! I also send parts to build many other Radio circuits. You use equipment for practical experience and to earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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Keep your job while training. Hundreds of successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS I trained had no previous experience, some only a grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE—build valuable multitester—experiment with circuits common to Radio and Television. Keep all equipment. Many students make $5, $10 extra a week fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. SPECIAL BOOKLETS start teaching you the day you enroll.

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Send now for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. You get actual Servicing lesson to show you how you learn at home. Also my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing, earning; see equipment you practice with at home. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2BRI, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 38th Year.

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"I have been operating my own Servicing business. In two years I did $14,000 worth of business; net profit $6,850. Have one full time employee, an NRI student."—PHILLIP G. BROGAN, Louisville, Ky.

"Four years ago, I was a bookkeeper, with a hand-to-mouth salary. Now I am a Radio Engineer with a key station of the American Broadcasting Company network."—NORMAN H. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey.

"When halfway through the NRI course, I made $5 to $8 a week fixing sets in my spare time. Am now selling and installing Television sets and antennas."—E. J. STREITENBERGER, New Boston, O.

"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Engineer of Police Radio Station WQOX. I never hesitate to endorse NRI."—T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio.

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Many N.R.I. trained men start their own Radio-Television sales and service business without capital. Let me show you how you, too, can be your own boss, have a good income from your own shop. Send coupon for FREE book now!

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Approved for training under G. I. Bill

(Continued from page 6)

tell first-hand of that bloody massacre. He had. . . .

But his one achievement, which invariably climaxed his evening's performance, was in telling how he took Buckskin Joe Turner under his wing, and showed that famous frontier marshal how to bring law to the untamed towns along the gold trails.

Buckskin Joe! He was the idol of every boom-camp lawman, and the envy of every ambitious gun-toter—excepting Booger James, who had generously let Buckskin grab the credit for deeds of prowess which—so Booger hinted—were rightfully his own.

At the end of the three days, he started to repeat himself. There was a restless shifting of feet among his audience. And at the end of a week, Booger found himself talking to a flop-eared hound dog that drowsed by the barroom stove, a gruff bartender and a wide-eyed half breed kid who had appointed himself Booger's Man Friday from the first hour of his arrival.

When he found that even his story of Buckskin Joe Turner was not provocative of free drinks and grub, he promptly hunted up the marshal, and presented himself as candidate for a deputy.

Marshal Sam O'Keefe nodded, pinned a battered badge on Booger's shirt and stuck a broom in his hand. "Start in right now," he told Booger.

Booger was wise enough to take the job. He started industriously, but soon it was discovered that Tonto, the breed kid, was doing most of the work, and little whiskered Booger was bustling about importantly, a rusty, discarded Colt jammed in his waistband and the shining badge on his chest.

Young Tonto, it seemed, never tired of listening to his idol's windies, no more than he tired of standing hour after hour before the harness shop which displayed in its window a pair of bench-made red-topped boots, complete with silver-mounted spurs. Kid's boots, they were, ordered at one time by a very rich miner for his boy who had died

Booger applied for a leave of absence. "Got a hunch that Big Ear George an' his bunch is hid out near here, Marshal. Ol' Bob McCue was found shot in the back two days ago, an' robbed. Looks to me like Big Ear's work," he told the lawman.

And so Booger set out on foot. He was gone a week. That was the week during which the harness-shop was broken into, and the boy's bench-made boots stolen. Shortly after Booger returned—without Big Ear George or without finding trace of of him—Tonto, the dark-eyed breed kid, appeared in those same boots—or their twins. Booger told a tall story about trailing Big Ear George and his cutthroat crew into the Sierras. But he made a mistake when he told also of finding boots just like those that were stolen from the harness shop along the trail.

It didn't require much deduction on the part of certain citizens to realize just what had happened. Old Booger had broken into the shop, grabbed the boots, then circled around and come into town, presenting them to the only human being who would still listen to his lies.

The boots were straightway taken away from Tonto, and identified as belonging to the harness maker. That night a committee called upon Booger.

"Yo're elected the tiresomest citizen we've had for years," one of the men told Booger. "We got a rope an' a tree-limb ready for you."

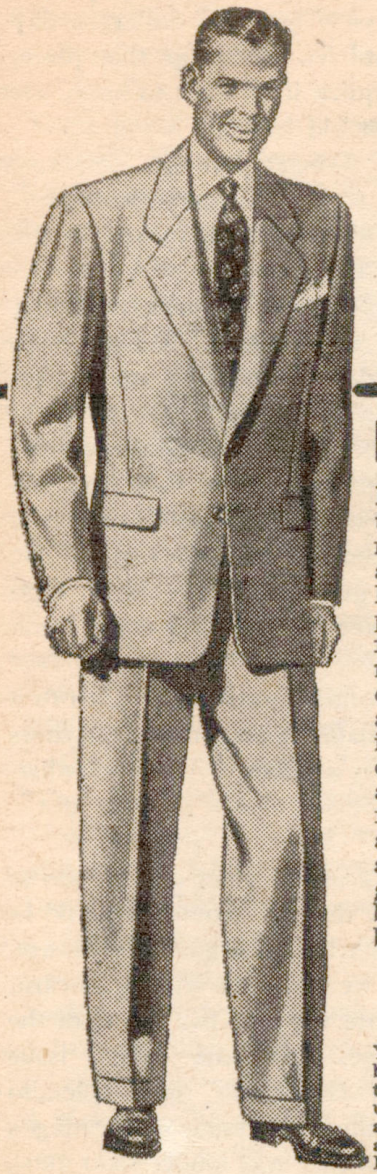
Whimpering, frightened, Booger was dragged down to the hang-tree.

"I—I tell you, Big Ear George is fixin' to raid this camp!" he cried, when the noose was fitted about his skinny neck. "Hang me if you want to, but send fer Buckskin Joe Turner if you do. He's the only one 'sides me who can fight off Big Ear. . . ."

"To hell with that!" broke in one of the committee. "Yank him—"

(Continued on page 10)

I need 500 Men to wear SAMPLE SUITS!



PAY NO MONEY—SEND NO MONEY!

My values in made-to-measure suits are so sensational, thousands of men order when they see the actual garments. I make it easy for you to get your own suit to wear and show—and to MAKE MONEY IN FULL OR SPARE TIME! MY PLAN IS AMAZING! Just take a few orders at my low money-saving prices—that's all! Get your own personal suit, and make money fast taking orders. You need no experience. You need no money now or any time. Just rush your name and address for complete facts and BIG SAMPLE KIT containing more than 100 actual woolen samples. It's FREE! Get into the big-pay tailoring field and earn up to $15.00 in a day! Many men are earning even more! You can begin at once in spare time to take orders and pocket big profits. All you do is show the big, colorful different styles. Men order quickly because you offer fine quality at unbeatable prices. Yes—superb made-to-measure cutting and sewing—and complete satisfaction guaranteed. It's easy to get first orders, but repeat orders come even easier. With my big, complete line you begin earning big money at once and you build a steady, big-profit repeat business at the same time.

No Experience—No Money Needed
EVERYTHING SUPPLIED FREE!

You need no money—no experience—no special training. Your friends, neighbors, relatives, fellow-workers, will be eager to give you orders once you show them the outstanding quality of the fabrics, the top notch fit of made-to-measure tailoring and the money-saving low prices. Every customer is a source of additional prospects. In no time at all, you'll find the orders rolling in faster and faster. And every order puts a handsome, spot-cash profit in your pocket! Mail the coupon for your big FREE OUTFIT of styles and samples NOW!

Mail Coupon for FREE OUTFIT!

We supply everything—sample fabrics, full-color style cards, order forms, measuring materials—all packed in a handsome, professional leatherette-covered carrying case. Work full time or spare time. Either way you'll be amazed at how fast you take orders and how your profits begin to mount! Fill out and mail coupon today.

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Name .....

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(Continued from page 8)

And then he stopped. A man, running and breathless, appeared out of the night from the direction of town.

"My God!" he gasped. "It's Big Ear an' his bunch, all right! He's hittin' the bank now. Grab yore guns an' git back—"

It wasn't a joke, nor was it a lie. The hanging committee pounded away, and Booger, weak, heart thumping, squirmed out of the ropes that bound him. But instead of running into the hills, he headed back toward town!

Sounds of gunfire came to him, and he stumbled on through the rough path. And then, coming out from behind a building, he found himself alone, right in the path of the escaping, loot-laden renegades.

For a moment he was beside himself with fright. Trembling, without a gun, he crouched there beside a wall, until a voice sounded in his ear.

"Here's a .45, feller," a strange voice said in his ear. "We got 'em right where we want 'em now."

His fingers closed over the butt of the stranger's pistol; it bucked and leaped in his hand, spitting fire at the raiders. And beside him, he heard the thunder of the other's gun, as Big Ear's men, surprised by this new attack, milled and went down. . . .

THEY found Booger later, wounded, leaning against the side of the building. They found, too, a familiar looking stranger who identified himself as Buckskin Joe Turner, gun-marshal of the boom-camps. And they gasped when they saw Buckskin shake Booger's hand as Booger lay in bed, recuperating from his wounds. . . .

"A brainy little feller. Nervy, too!" was Buckskin's commendation. "This here is Hangtown, eh? Lucky I arrived just when I did. I—I got yore letter, an' I'll be plump pleased to take the job. . . ."

Blank faces looked at the letter that Buckskin Joe tossed onto the table before the eyes of the mayor and town officials. Frowning, they read its illiterate scrawl:

Mister Buckskin Turner will yu plees come to hangtown where hell is poppin we can giv yu a hunnerd dollars a day an grub until yu cleen up this place. Plees come quick if yu ain't to busy.

Yur old frend,
Booger James,
Deppity marshal.

The mayor of Hangtown looked at the paper, then at Booger.

"Guess it has turned out just as well that I did send fer my old pard," Booger said. "We fit shoulder to shoulder more than once before, ain't we, Mister Turner?"

Buckskin Joe smiled non-committally, his wise, sympathetic eyes following old Booger's gaze, toward the little breed boy.

"Shore we cleaned 'em out—you an' me, ol' timer," he grinned. "An' before I go on, I want to see if there's anything I can do fer you—"

Booger beckoned him closer. "There's a pair of handmade boots in the harness shop. . . . Boy's boots. . . ." he whispered. . . .

Your editors of *.44 Western Magazine* have been busy digging around for gold in them thar hills where the good stories are, and we think we came up with a 24-carat find—a novelette with the full flavor of the old-time range, for the next issue "Hell With a Handgun!" is a splendid hard-hitting range war saga, concerning a corpse whose silence was louder than guns, and of a loyalty between rugged men that is tempered in the crucible of hot lead and cold steel. It's the work of Marvin DeVries, a top-string Western writing hand, who knows both his old West and people who helped to tame it.

Don't miss this next issue, with its fistful of Western fiction entertainment! You'll find it at your newsstand on February 20.

Salud, amigos!

—The Editor

6 MAGIC WORDS GIVE YOU DAILY CASH

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Amazing, but true! The most sensational offer ever made! Can you imagine how much money you could make writing orders for wonderful nylons that actually cost nothing unless satisfactory? Is there any woman who would hesitate to wear beautiful nylons at OUR risk? Nothing like this has ever been heard of in the hosiery industry. Never before was it possible for any man or woman, young or old, to earn a steady income so easily!

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We don't care if you are 18 or 80—whether you have one hour or 50 hours a week to spare. How can you help make a lot of money? Women buy two million pairs of nylons every day. Just say "Kendex nylons are FREE unless satisfactory" and practically every woman will be eager to give you an order.

There is nothing for you to buy or deliver. You don't risk a dime. Pay nothing now or later. Just mail the coupon, that's all. We'll send you FREE SAMPLE STOCKING and complete money-making outfit postage prepaid. You write orders. We deliver and collect. Advance cash plus huge cash bonus that increases your earnings by 40%. No obligation. If you don't make more money than you thought possible, throw the outfit away! Need we say more?

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Send me, absolutely free and postage prepaid, your complete money-making outfit including free sample stocking. It is understood I am under no obligation and if I am not satisfied with the money I make, I will throw away the whole outfit.

Name .....

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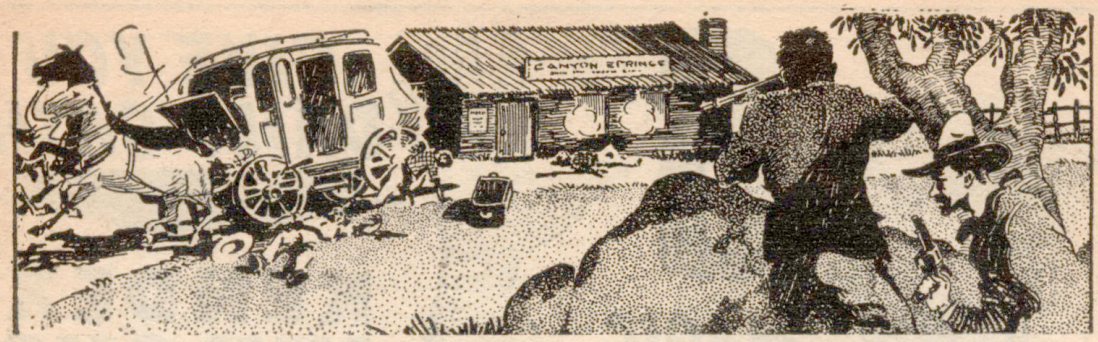

ROUGH GOING

By Bill Tench

You traded in your life when you bought a ticket for the old overland travel routes.

IF YOU lived in the 19th Century and decided to go West, you'd meet up with all kinds of adventure, no matter how you elected to travel. If it turned out to be via Concord coach, the trip would resemble one in a Halloween ghost story. In the first place, there were very real dangers from redskins and robbers to contend with. But, in addition, a large percentage of the drivers had the kind of ornery humor that delighted in filling the ears of scared tenderfeet with all kinds of deadly, imaginary dangers. They always concerned the viciousness of savages while driving along their very own trails. And, if a Western coachman had enough liquor inside him, he'd intentionally upset his travel-shaken coach in some pitch dark arroya on a coal black night.

Of course if a new 1850 mail coach were selected, you'd feel much more secure in a theoretical way, because there were as many guards on each one as passengers. Every one of these eight men took their jobs seriously. They packed all kinds of ammunition, including a revolving rifle for each man, which was installed in the coach, by the side of his seat. A long rifle, thrust in a specially made holster, swung beside it. What's more, each guard kept a Colt in his belt, alongside of his trusty hunting knife. All in all 136 shots could be fired before reloading a single piece of equipment. Consequently, the only dangerous feature about selecting a mail coach was that most of this impedimenta was generally put to excellent, very active usage between the start and the finish of any excursion.

If you elected to go along with a trader's caravan, you'd have another kind of worry. Because these business people were also well-chosen targets of highwaymen and Indians.

And although they were hard-headed, serious, and well armed, they couldn't protect themselves from the hazards of old Mother Nature. The most perilous of all was encountered when the tricky Arkansas River had to be crossed. For since the wagons were heavy, and the quicksand powerful, it often required as many as 50 yoke of oxen to yank out a half-sucked-in vehicle. Even these many animals weren't always successful.

The least dangerous form of locomotion was frequently the railroad. But that didn't keep it from being highly annoying, especially in the beginning, when there were no signals, and cars from two directions ran on but one track. When they both met on the road, the engineers stopped their trains, got out very calmly, then proceeded to do battle for the right of way. Frequently the passengers joined in the free-for-all. Later the drama was eliminated but the irritation wasn't, when some bright young employee dreamed up the idea of erecting a post midway between stations. The train that was farthest from the marker was supposed to back-track so that the other could go through. ■ ■ ■

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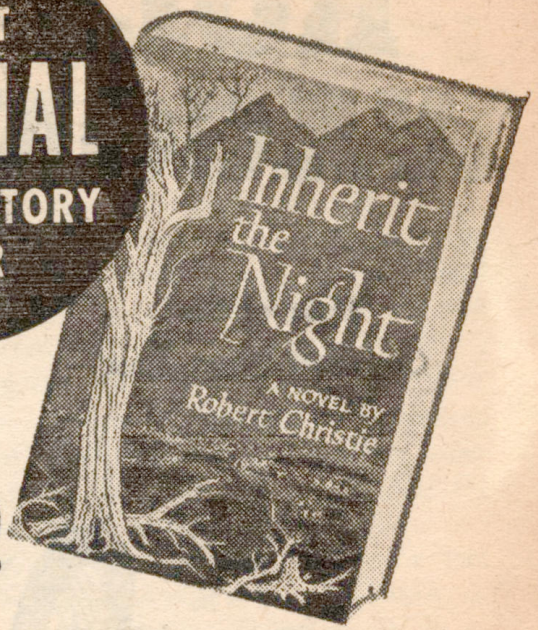

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ROLL THOSE WAGONS WEST!

Epic of the
Covered Caravans

CHAPTER ONE

Desert Crossing

A MAN was in hot country, Nadeen thought, when his shirt stuck to his back in the dawn. Beyond the starting wagon train, passing the point where he sat a damp and restless horse, the endless wasteland threw its glare against his tired eyes. The boiling dust from dragging hoofs and dry wheels rose heavily, never dissipating, twisting back across the break-of-land and giving Nadeen

Through lashing storm, deadly desert drought, past hostile arrows and hidden guns, it was Cleve Nadeen's job to pilot that helpless wagon train of greenhorns to far-off Oregon. . . . Though he win the undying hatred of every one in that beleaguered, mutinous caravan!

By Giff Cheshire

He had the unquestioned backing of but three men in the train. . . .

a stifled sense without really touching his nostrils.

As if seeking a daub of beauty on an ugly and empty canvas, Nadeen ran his glance along the tattered line of marchers, this side of the covered wagons and out of the dust. The line was formed of subdued children, herded along by worn women turned filthy beyond their enduring and by the men who were not needed to drive

the frayed draft stock. Nadeen sought a particular shape, a slim and supple figure, the body of Linda Dalton.

He spied her well down the line, somehow distinguished from all the others, and afterward he sat watching while she passed below him. A few days ago she would have felt his notice and been glad and would have waved at him. This morning she did not. Nadeen had wondered if she had changed and now he knew. Like the others in the emigrant company, she resented him now. He had got too tough with the party and few of them realized that, as wagonmaster, he had been forced to do it. More than any company he had ever guided, these people were getting out of hand because of a muleheaded agitator among them.

A man with a rifle held flat across his shoulders angled up the slope toward Nadeen. His name was Fry, and he was one of the few who had any friendliness left for Cleve Nadeen. As he came up, Fry said, "That man Morgan's spewing like a jar of spoiled pickles this morning, Cap'n." The man was red headed, and the sun had turned his whole face the color of a beet.

"He's worse than that," Nadeen said. "He's dangerous as a jug of nitroglycerine."

"He is that," Fry agreed. "Which ain't healthy for anybody concerned, on a stretch as hot as this'n. He even looks like a jug—all body and no head." A cheerful man, Fry laughed at his own joke and tramped on without waiting for a response.

The desert crossing ahead was not the only reason for Nadeen's having cracked down on the wagon company the night before. Now his gaze lifted above the toiling train and probed beyond. Something was shaping in the southern distance that he did not like; a pall of dust had climbed high into the sky. If it meant a dust storm, the company would be in a poor place to undergo it.

The day before, the wagons had pulled out of the long gorge of the Mary's to tackle the Black Rock Desert, which lay between the river and the Pacific Slope. It was open wasteland, endless, lifeless, worthless. But it was better when its sterile soil kept place than when it swirled on the hot winds that the long slope to the mountains could generate. Nadeen knew this country. This made the fifth company he had picked up at Fort Hall to guide into southern Oregon. . . .

Nadeen was watching the drag of the train now, the rest of it having pulled on past. Presently he saw a man come out of the dust and hand his ox-goad to the woman who trudged beside that wagon. The man was Morgan, and he cut a slant outward, heading toward Nadeen. He was a big, blocky figure, solid and stumping in motion. Nadeen scowled. He had laced Morgan down the night before and with him the bulk of the company.

In Fort Hall, Mulholland, who had guided the train that far, had warned Nadeen, "Watch that big he-bear they call Morgan. He'll know how to do everything better than you, and he'll sing loud saying so. He can do it better or safer or quicker. He's got most of the company persuaded he'd ought to run the train. First chance he gets, he'll brace you. Wait and see."

Now Morgan came up and halted, planting his fists on his thick hips. "Damn it, Nadeen!" he bawled, "I don't like our outguard. This is Digger country." Last night's run-in was forgotten, or else it had emboldened Morgan to try harder to dominate Nadeen when he realized his support in the company.

"The hell you say," Nadeen drawled in mock surprise. "I'm glad you told me."

"We need more men," Morgan stated, "and they'd ought to be farther out from the wagons."

"What for?" Nadeen asked. "This isn't the cavalry. It's an emigrant party."

Morgan swung and pointed to the south. "See that dust down there?"

"Wind," Nadeen said, "and you'll raise more if you don't close your mouth and get on."

"By gonies!" Morgan roared. "You're pretty high-handed for a hired man! Maybe you don't know you come close to getting yourself fired, last night, the way you tied into this company!" And there it was. Morgan had got sympathy the night before and it was crowding him hard today.

"Just a minute," Nadeen cut in. "In case you don't know, Morgan, a train captain on the crossing has the same legal status as the captain of a ship at sea. I wasn't hired. This company elected me captain at Fort Hall. It will have to vote again to dismiss me. As long as I'm in the office, I'll run it according to my judgment."

"Your what?" Morgan demanded. "I used to freight on the Santa Fe trail and—"

"I know," Nadeen cut in wearily. "And so does everyone else in the train. We've heard it a dozen times. Your wagon's getting ahead of you, Morgan, and it's a hot day to have to hustle."

Morgan swung and trudged on. *He's fixing to call for the showdown,* Nadeen warned himself again. In the wagon camp, the previous evening, Morgan had all but done that. Nadeen had ordered the loose stock corralled in the wagon-circle, and Morgan had objected because of the noise and the dust it would raise. Others had agreed with the man. Since Nadeen had rarely given an order that Morgan hadn't challenged, the train captain had known that he had to establish his authority once and for all. It was that or seeing a battered wagon company go to pieces in the worst possible of places where heat or aridity or Indians would finish it.

So Nadeen had let go with all the terse and biting savagery of an army sergeant: "Out of five companies, this is the most whining, contrary lot I've seen! Man'd think you'd been drug out here instead of coming voluntarily! What in blazes did you expect—a Sunday ride in a surrey? Well, let me tell you something. You think I'm too tough, but it's the country that's tough and it gets worse from here on. I mean that, and I didn't arrange it, in spite of the way you figure. You're weeks out from Oregon, with the hottest damned desert you've seen still ahead. You've picked me for this job. Well, I'll get you across to the mountains if I have to whip you all the way!"

Thereupon Nadeen had issued new marching orders, even tougher than before and maybe tougher than he had needed to make them. The stock was thinned to gauntness, sore-footed and sore-nosed. The wagons rattled like dried-out skeletons, with many a wheel on the verge of dishing. There were dry and fodderless marches ahead. So Nadeen had ordered all riders out of the wagons, save for the old and infirm and very young. He had set a higher mileage for each day's travel, cutting out the nooning halt. He had pointedly warned men who were carelessly tending to their wagons and stock. And above all, he had ordered water conserved to the last drop. This quick and driving aggression had silenced Morgan for the evening, but a mood of surliness had settled on the company that was even stronger this morning. Morgan had felt it, too, and was out to make use of it. . . .

WITH his train pulled on ahead of him, Nadeen took one more look toward the south. There was no question about it; the dust down there meant wind. When it struck the emigrant trail, as it probably would, it would be charged with sand that could cut through any barrier. It would wipe out all sense of direction, and Nadeen knew what that would do to punished nerves. It would leave respiratory trouble in the stock as well as the people.

Nadeen dreaded the next hours.

He turned his horse after the train but still over and out of the trailing dust. He was a tall, gaunt man with a reposed, copper-bronze face. At thirty he was already graying at the edges of his hair. His eyes were brown and wide-set, his mouth full and capable of mirth or of hard-bitten stubbornness. He looked shabby, as battered and worn as any man in the company. He had a right to do so. Most men crossed west but once, while a professional guide crossed continually.

But there had been purpose in Nadeen's five crossings. He was laying up a stake with which to get his own start on an Oregon ranch, and this would be his last trip. He reminded himself of that fact, now, regretting that the last one had to be under such unpleasant circumstances. Morgan was responsible for that and. . . . *"Sooner or later,"* Nadeen told himself grimly, *"we're really going to tangle. He'll make it bad for me at best. I've got to sidestep it, if I can."*

Moving up the length of the train, Nadeen came to a wagon where he reined in his horse. To the sullen ox-driver, he said, "Robinson, you've still got that squeaky wheel. Didn't I tell you to tar your axles last night?"

"You told me," Robinson said in a sullen voice. "But it happens that it's my wagon."

"And it's a dropped wagon if it breaks down," Nadeen spat. "I've printed it out in big letters that there's no place to lay up on the desert."

"Mebbe," Robinson muttered, "I'd have company."

"If so, you're welcome to it," Nadeen said, and he rode on.

Three wagons ahead was the one that was Nadeen's deepest concern. Within it and cushioned as well as possible against the jolt of the springless wheels, was a sick boy of four years. Some kind of fever had risen in him at the big bend of the Mary's, from brackish water or tainted food or—as some maintained—from a miasma in the desert air.

The lank and bearded man who walked in the dusty shade of the wagon was younger at a close look than he appeared from a distance. Nadeen slowed in beside him and said, "Once we reach Broken Wells we'll lay over as long as you need, Mulkey. There's plenty of water and by now there'll be fuel dried from the last train through. It'll give your boy a chance to rest."

"If he makes it," Mulkey muttered.

His wife moved forward in the wagon and looked down at Nadeen, the bowed canvas causing her to stoop. She was worn and sear-eyed, and the stamp of her ordeal was on her face. That morning she had begged Nadeen to let their wagon lay over by itself. Nadeen's warning that it would only invite death at the hands of the hostile Diggers had fallen on deaf ears. So he had ordered them on, and now he saw the woman's deep resentment in her eyes.

Looking up at her, Nadeen said, "If there's anything you need from the other wagons, ma'am, I'll get it for you."

She shook her head. "Nothing'll help. But thank you."

Nadeen touched his hat and rode on. He swung down at a wagon near the head of the train and threw the reins over his horse's head and began to walk, leading the mount. A young man with broad shoulders and curly black hair was managing the double span of tired oxen. But Nadeen's interest was mainly in the three people who walked abreast the wagon in the line of marchers, two young women and a man.

"How's the wheel holding up, Quincy?" Nadeen asked the driver.

Titus Quincy grinned. "Sound as a hickory barrel, Nadeen. You're a first-rate wheelwright."

"Man learns to do things in this country," Nadeen said pointedly, "or he dies."

"I'll learn, maybe," Quincy said, and

his smile lingered, but Nadeen thought that bitterness touched his mouth.

Nadeen fell silent. He had never seen a better pleased man than Quincy had been at his wedding at Fort Hall. Nor had Nadeen looked upon a prettier, more competent-appearing girl than Quincy's bride had been. But the weeks since Fort Hall had changed that. The trail, the everlasting, punishing, soul-trying trail that came down the Raft to the desert. The young Quincys were quarreling, already, and the emigrants said it was Eudora's fault, not taking to wifehood under trail conditions.

Nadeen knew that it was Eudora Quincy who was acting up, and not Titus. But her new husband expected too much from her, likely. Nadeen cut a slant toward the walking group out from the wagon. He took a direct look at Eudora's slim, smooth-moving body, noting the strength, the easy assurance in her walk. She was fair and proud-headed, and though she swung with the others to see who approached them, she gave Nadeen no greeting. What he had said the night before about the company's softness seemed to have offended her more than it had the others.

Linda Dalton was Eudora's sister, and she gave Nadeen a searching glance as he closed the gap and touched the brim of his old hat. There was hostility on her face, too. Her body was that of her sister, as lithe and slender. But she was a dark girl, and the prairie weeks had enchantingly bronzed her skin. Her eyes were pure black, her lips full, and she had a certain way of holding back her shoulders. . . .

"What don't you like about us this morning, Captain?" Linda asked.

"Nothing," Nadeen said promptly.

"Then you mellowed considerably overnight."

"I had to sound off," Nadeen said. "A company this big is helpless with too many bosses. There can be only one. You'd ought to know that by now."

"There seem to be too many things we don't know to suit you, Captain," Linda murmured. "We seem to be remiss for not being able to kill game for the train, maybe. And tan the skins and make moccasins. Do squaw's work."

Nadeen shook his head. "No. But you two women could learn to cook. And make camp and break it without holding things up. Maybe if you cut out acting so superior to such things, Miss Linda, your sister'd settle into her place with her husband. You two're riding on Titus's shoulders. It's turned out to be too much for him."

"Well!" Linda said sharply. "Is that part of a train captain's business?"

"In a sense," Nadeen said. "Also, it's plain butting in. But you seemed set on getting sparks from me, ma'am."

The man accompanying the two girls spoke for the first time. "He's right. You asked for it, Linda. And that's the way you and Eudora have carried on all morning."

He was young, light-complexioned, a man of pleasant mien. His name was Cheryl Sands, and Nadeen knew nothing about him except that he had been attached to the Quincy party since Fort Hall. Sands smiled at Nadeen and added, "Personally, it pleased me the way you told us off, last night. That man Morgan's out to undercut you. He did the same thing with Mulholland, all the way across. Until Mulholland sat on him good and hard, the way you did."

"Did that stop Morgan?" Nadeen asked.

"It did."

"But my scolding won't," Nadeen said. "This is Morgan's last chance to play Mister Big with the company. He means to do it."

"Morgan's a jackass," Sands said cheerfully. "But he doesn't know it, and there are too many others who don't know it, either."

CHAPTER TWO

Sand Storm

NADEEN swung into the saddle and rode on ahead. He had, he reflected, the unquestioned backing of but three men in the train: Fry, Quincy and this Sands. If Morgan managed to drum up a new election, there wasn't much question what the outcome would be. Nadeen's sense of responsibility to these emigrants was greater even than his pride in the matter. Set as Morgan was on getting the chance to try, he would have the wagon train in dire peril within a week. Bullwhacking on the Santa Fe trail was a far different chore than rolling emigrant wagons to Oregon.

Nadeen pulled forward to a wagon at the head of the train in which rode a woman who at any hour expected to give birth to a child. The couple's name was Rice, and they were becoming parents for the first time, the woman facing the ordeal in mortal fear. Approaching the vehicle, Nadeen recalled what a toothless granny in the company had said about Elvira Rice; "Some women look on it as a natural chore, which it is. And others get so worked up they figure the young 'un's going to kill 'em getting itself born. It can turn out that way in their case too. I ought to know. My first six nearly killed me. Then I got used to it."

Elvira Rice was one of the frightened, and Nadeen could think of places more conducive to confidence in such matters than a jolting wagon on the desert. But he had no more to offer this woman than he had for the Mulkeys with their sick boy.

Rice walked in long strides beside his wagon, his step light and careful as if he believed his own motion had some bearing on that of the creaking vehicle.

"How's the missus making it, Rice?" Nadeen asked.

The tall, shabby man shook his head. "She don't like any of it. But I don't see how she can get out of it, Nadeen. Old Missus Seymour's riding with her today. I reckon she can handle whatever's coming."

"If I can help," Nadeen said, "sing out."

He cut across the line of travel and swung down, assured that his train was moving in the best order possible considering circumstances. A nervous glance southward showed him that the dirty stain had climbed higher in the sky. But there was no wind yet. The stillness was an ill omen, for previous to a big wind the very atmosphere seemed to stagnate and die. Then came the dust with heavy thrusts that would mount to a steady stream of particle-laden wind, a veritable sandblast, that could rip away the wagon-sheets.

There was a chance that this one would die before it reached the trail or that it would pass ahead of the train or behind. Nadeen was afraid to hope for that. He planned his procedure as he trudged along through the hot morning sun. Once a severe dust-storm grew inevitable, the train would have to halt. Draft and driven stock would need to be placed in the lee of the wagons, while the people took shelter under the canvas. Then would come a spell of motionless horror within a wild activity, of screaming wind and choking dust that penetrated every barrier. It would leave begrimed and shaken people to stir again and take up the march.

Looking ahead of the train, Nadeen could see nothing but the seared, flat plain of the desert floor. The mountains signaling California and the Oregon Country were far beyond sight. The train was angling northwest now, striking for a pass in the first mountains. But at the end of this day's march the trail would bend due north. Thereafter, the wagons would parallel the eminences for two or three days, haunted by their cool aloofness, their promise of safety, yet held by topo-

graphical necessity to the lifeless sands. Nadeen had heard men curse the very mountains that marked the end of peril because of that fixed distance that never grew less.

Rarely able to still his brooding concern for his wagons, Nadeen halted presently to let them creep past him once more. He was aware of the stony indifference of nearly all the people trudging by him, men and women alike. Presently he spotted the Quincy wagon and noted that Cheryl Sands had taken the ox-goad in the dust while young Titus walked out in the cleaner air for a change. Nadeen grinned fleetly. Sands, for one, was trying to profit from Nadeen's reproof.

Titus Quincy swung out toward Nadeen. There was a new look of cheer on his face, and he said, "You should have had a go at my party sooner. Sands has decided to get himself dirty. And the girls are determinded to show you how wrong you are about them, too."

"I've got nothing against them," Nadeen said. "But they've come to new country and they'll have to learn its ways if they are going to make out in it."

Titus's countenance darkened. "That's the trouble, Nadeen. They don't know if they want to live in it."

"Then why in hell," Nadeen asked, "did they start out?"

"The girls," Titus answered, "have no immediate family. Since their parents died they've lived with some friends. These people were going up into the Palouse, and the girls had little choice but to come along. Then Eudora and I fell in love on the trail to Fort Hall and were married there. I'm heading to Oregon, so Eudora had to leave her friends there, too. Linda chose to stay with her sister."

"And Sands?" Nadeen asked.

"That's where the trouble's come," Titus admitted. "He's out here for material to write a book. He's going back. He wants to take Linda with him, and she's about ready to do it. Eudora's homesick enough to want to go with them. That's the quarrel between us, Nadeen. Eudora wants to go home, and I mean to stay. That's why she's so indifferent and independent. She's not really built that way."

"Why, I'm glad you told me," Nadeen said, and was sorry he had censured the two girls so severely. He watched Titus move forward to catch up with his wagon, recalling other cases of emotional upheaval among the people new to this strange, wild land. Someone had called the Rockies the emotional divide of the continent, as well as the physical division. Nadeen agreed with that. When the wagon started down into the Great Basin they were committing themselves to the unknown. There was no turning back. They had to get through or perish.

The first gust of wind flattened the clothes against Nadeen's side and fluted the broad brim of his hat. He heard the slatting of wagon-sheets nearby and felt the sting of grit on his sweating face. He looked south unconsciously, yet the sky hadn't changed discernibly since the last time he had looked. He mounted now and nearly lost his hat as the hot air brisked again. He rode down the length of the train.

Quietly he told the people what to expect and what to do: "If it turns steady, unspan where you are and get your stock in the lee. Put your people in the wagons. Cover your faces with something to breathe through. And keep your heads. It'll be miserable and a little scary but nothing to worry over."

Then he came to Morgan's wagon. The man was scowling as if personally offended by what Nadeen was saying over and over again.

"Man!" Morgan bawled. "If we'd hustle a little, we'd pull ahead of it. That wind's from the south! The dust's southeast!"

"If the wind gets strong enough," Nadeen said patiently, "it'll pick up new dust

and it won't matter a damn where we are."

"I'm for getting the lead out!" Morgan boomed.

"Go ahead," Nadeen answered. "But you'll kill your oxen and still wind up in the dust, if it's coming. Didn't they ever have dust storms on the Santa Fe trail?"

"They had everything," Morgan grumbled. "I know this kind of country. I know how to get along in it."

"You're free to prove that to your own satisfaction, Morgan," Nadeen said. "But I won't let you test it on people I'm responsible for."

Nadeen reached the hind end of the train with diminishing confidence. Morgan's braying voice had carried to the people near him in the line. Nadeen saw uncertainty and sudden confusion, and himself experienced a quick stab of dread. Panic in a thing as big and cumbersome as a wagon party was dreadful to see. And this one had already been turned unstable by hardships and dissensions.

The gusts of wind came stronger and more often during the next fifteen minutes. The sky due south was darkening, bearing out Nadeen's warning that the threatened storm could not be outrun. Nadeen now rode up along the train again, his manner easy, his mount unhurried. When he came to the head he halted the line and passed back word to carry out the instructions he had given.

He swung out of the saddle with a certain sense of satisfaction. All down the line he saw livestock, ox and horse teams, swing out to come in again on the protected side of the wagons. The loose band of driven stock came up and was halted, and by then the atmosphere had assumed a dirty brown color. Then suddenly the shrieking wind was full of violence, and the last people, save for a pair of mounted herders, fled for the wagons.

Then Nadeen grew aware of movement far down the line. A wagon swung out, still hitched to its oxen, and he knew without needing to see that it was Morgan's wagon. The man had got into the wagon for protection from the wind and was whacking at the wheel animals, goading them to a clumsy trot. He kept flailing as he passed up the line of halted wagons.

Nadeen swung into the saddle with a short bitter curse. He had little concern for Morgan's personal safety, but this raw breech of orders, with its panic suggestion, couldn't be allowed to pass. He drove toward the lumbering, oncoming wagon. He pointed his galloping horse straight at the lead oxen.

Morgan was yelling something at him, but Nadeen couldn't hear. Morgan kept flogging his animals with the ox-goad. But Nadeen's charging horse halted them. Swerving, Nadeen pulled up at the front wheel. The wind was roaring, splitting on the big wagon, causing the canvas to shiver. Morgan's wife was inside somewhere.

Nadeen gripped his pistol, lifted it and yelled, "Unhook or I'll kill one of your steers!"

Morgan's answer was to swing toward him with the ox-goad. Nadeen didn't hesitate. Chopping down with the pistol, he shot. The nigh wheel ox went down slowly, turning onto its side, its neck twisting in the wooden yoke. Nadeen swung away, then, weak from the anxiety of the moment and yet raging. He saw now that men had scrambled out of their wagons to hook up and take off with Morgan. They stood in the wind, staring. Then, one by one, they disappeared back under the canvas.

Nadeen wagon-wheeled his horse and tramped slowly up the train, a handkerchief over his face. Dust particles now ground painfully on his exposed flesh. At each break between the wagons he had to bend heavily against the wind. The wagon sheets cracked like rifles. Oxen and milk cows began to low, the horses to stir nervously. If they stampeded, Nadeen knew, they would scatter themselves beyond re-

covery out on the outlying desert. . . .

It was then that Nadeen heard the high, agonized scream of a woman.

The sound electrified Nadeen, at the same time striking cold through his bones. It came again, and he recognized the wagon of the Rice couple just ahead of him. Nadeen bolted forward and heard once more that abandoned scream of terror. It had an awesome effect, mixed with the shrieking, cracking wind and the grinding rattle of the sand on the sides of the wagons.

Nadeen came to the hind end of the Rice wagon. The back canvas was battened tight. He yelled, "In the name of heaven, what's wrong?"

Rice stuck his head through a slit and instantly shut his eyes against the blinding air. "It's the missus!" he yelled back.

"She giving birth to an elephant?" Nadeen demanded. "Shut her up!"

"I can't! She just can't stand this—"

"Shut her up!" Nadeen roared. "Or I will!"

Rice muttered and withdrew his head. Nadeen hoped that the storm racket had contained the fool woman's abandoned screeching. Probably it had, except for the people in the closer wagons. But Nadeen was deeply worried. This was sheer hysteria, and after Morgan's display of panic, it could create a horror.

Nadeen forced his eyes open and saw Linda Dalton running toward him. Her clothing, her hair, were whipped into streaming disarray. She would have passed by Nadeen had he not grabbed an arm and pulled her to a stop.

"What're you doing out?" he thundered.

"We heard her!" Linda answered, panting as from exhaustion because of the vacuum created in her mouth. "Rice's wife! She needs help!"

"She needs a whipping!" Nadeen snapped. "Get back to your wagon!"

Linda's head came up, her dark eyes flashing her scorn and anger. She struck Nadeen's hand away and cried, "Mrs. Rice is alone! Granny Seymour went back to her own wagon! Don't try to stop me, Cleve Nadeen!"

"Go ahead, then."

NADEEN followed as the girl ran on. Her wind-tangled skirts tripped her as she raced forward and she fell headlong. But she scrambled to her feet and went on. The battened canvas of Rice's wagon stopped her, and she called to him. When Rice unfastened the ties, Nadeen helped Linda up. Hearing another woman's voice, the hysterical woman, in the wagon, cut loose again.

With a frown, Nadeen planted a foot on the coupling pole's end and went up after Linda. It was all he could do to squeeze himself into the wagon. Rice had moved his belongings forward in the big wagon bed, piled high so as to leave space for a pallet behind. Rice had dropped to his knees beside his wife. Linda was across from him. The Rice woman had grasped Linda's hand with both her own and was pulling the girl down to her. Like a drowning person, eyes wide with terror, tight throat whimpering pitifully. It was self-pity at its ugly worst, and Nadeen had to stop it.

"You poor woman!" Linda cried. "Of all the places to have to be in—"

"Shut up, you fool!" Nadeen roared.

Linda flung him a look of astonished disbelief. But the damage had been done, the show of sympathy to the hysterical woman that was like a spark in the midst of gunpowder. The Rice woman opened her mouth and resumed her screeching, trying to rise from the pallet against the pressure of her husband's hands, her last shred of self-control swept away by Linda's well-meant but foolhardy compassion.

With a rough sweep of the hand, Nadeen brushed Linda aside. Though he tried to hold his wife down, Rice himself looked stricken, close to the breaking point. Panic could do that, and to stronger men than

Rice whose natural feeling for his wife was an added handicap. Nadeen bent above the woman and glowered at her, not having much acting to do to achieve the expression.

"Shut up!" he spat.

When she only rolled her eyes, Nadeen slapped her. It was a hard, splatting blow on the cheek that made the woman shut those wild eyes. Rice let out a growl, but Nadeen slapped again. The woman moaned but that time she went limp, as if in a faint. The whimpering stopped. The color began to return to her cheeks, and it was not from the sting of Nadeen's palm.

Linda pushed herself forward. Her enraged eyes held Nadeen's steadily. "This is your day for fun, apparently!" she cried. "I saw what you did to Morgan's poor ox! You wouldn't let us lay over today for the sake of the little Mulkey boy! Oh, no!"

But Nadeen wasn't listening. The Rice woman had opened her eyes again, and they were as nearly normal as a frightened woman's eyes could be. Nadeen smiled at her.

"That's a lot better, ma'am," he told her. "Nothing very bad can happen if you'll just be quiet. And it'd be a site better for that baby you've got coming. Maybe you could call him Sandy."

The woman's mouth tugged at a corner, and she almost smiled at Nadeen.

Nadeen dropped out of the wagon into the dust-storm. He thought that its intensity had lessened a little. He waited outside the Rice wagon but heard no more from the woman. He grew certain that the wind was losing some of its force. But he knew he was in for more trouble when the storm stopped. There was the ox of Morgan's he had shot. The men would demand an accounting for that.

Nadeen knew that he dared not have trouble with the man, not an open ruckus. Morgan had too many sympathizers, not because of his personal qualities but because there was so much resentment of Cleve Nadeen. It would have to keep, Nadeen told himself, until the train was off the desert.

The wind began to die. The harried stock still held together, and now the herders had dismounted to stand in the lee of their horses for protection. Dust stood heavily upon them, and Nadeen knew that it blackly coated himself. All through the company there would be sore eyes and some respiratory trouble, but nothing worse. That was Nadeen's primary responsibility, and about that he began to feel good.

Then at last the air was almost still and almost fresh from its violent scouring. Nadeen passed the word down the line for the company to span up and prepare for the march again. It was a dark and tousled company that began to stir. With the drying wind halted, sweat began to stand on every face, runneling the dust into a plaster of mud. Nadeen watched carefully that nobody robbed water from the barrels to wash, for the temptation was great. Then he saw Morgan stumping up the wagon row toward him.

Others saw Morgan, too, and turned to watch in interest. The sun-reddened Fry, who was packing out to the California mines and had only a saddler and four pack horses to worry over, rode up to Nadeen. Fry said nothing, and Nadeen realized he was simply showing the company his backing of the wagonmaster.

Morgan's fists were balled and he was pumping his thick arms as he strode up.

"Well, Nadeen!" Morgan intoned. "I reckon you've got a good excuse for downing my steer."

"That's right," Nadeen agreed. "I didn't drop it for your sake, Morgan, but for the sake of a couple hundred others. So you're short a steer."

"And stalled!" Morgan bawled. "By damn, Nadeen—"

"Take it easy, man," Nadeen murmured.

He looked at Fry. "Could you spare one of your horses if he took the pack into his wagon?"

"Not to him!" Fry said heartily.

"If you can spare a horse," Nadeen said patiently, "I'll buy it for him. I shot his ox and I'll replace it the best I can."

Fry looked no more astonished than did Morgan, himself. Morgan's lower lip protruded and he started to splutter. But the shrewd Fry said, "For you, Nadeen, I'll sell a horse. But that orey-eyed cuss is lucky he ain't out all four steers. He'd have run 'em to death in that dust, and if he's got his senses back, he knows it. Morgan, since it was Nadeen that asked, I'll loan you a horse. Let's see if we can harness the critter in with your steers, somehow."

Morgan gaped, wanting to crowd it, but Nadeen's quick offer and Fry's cooperation had taken the wind out of his sails. He turned and followed Fry down the line of wagons. But Morgan wasn't satisfied, Nadeen knew. The man had an open grievance now and he would make the most of it.

They were rolling an hour later through what was no longer more than a breeze. A couple of times Nadeen had to reprimand a woman for trying to sneak water from the barrel strapped on the wagon's side. Privately, he sympathized, for he would have given much to clean up, himself. The dust, driven through everyone's clothing and besmearing every face, was an added harassment in the heat. The continual sweat of walking only made it worse. But the water in the barrels had to last both people and stock until the train came at last to Broken Wells.

The rest of that day was grinding, punishing, and Nadeen made camp where the trail bent north. There were mountains in the far distance now, barely seen, but cool, aloof rises that broke the monotony of the desert floor. Yet the trail bent away from them, pointing north, as if desert environs were preferable and deliberately sought. This turning was due to the terrain, Nadeen knew. There was no water due ahead and no pass through the mountains.

The big train made a circle, jaded, weary, the people dreading the hot dry-camp. Some of the wagons carried small supplies of fuel, branches gathered farther back and slung beneath the wagons on rawhide stretchers, together with animal droppings gathered with patience and foresight. A few supper fires sprang up in the gathering dusk, bringing less cheer than a sense of added heat, while most families were contented with cold food from the grub boxes. Then beds were spread out on the hot sand, and the exhausted ones turned in.

Nadeen had thrown in with the red-headed Fry, since the man had no family. They ate cold biscuits and bacon from their saddlebags and drank sparingly from their canteens. Nadeen had posted sentries and taken a final look at the night-herders assigned to the livestock when the brusk Morgan stumped up.

"Nadeen," Morgan said, "where do we hit the mountains?"

Fry looked up from his blanket and drawled, "Here we go again, Nadeen. Round and round. Funny, ain't it, that a square head can only move in a circle?"

"I'm talkin' to Nadeen!" Morgan bawled.

Nadeen pointed vaguely to the northwest. "We hit the mountains up there. Three days march, with luck."

"Then why do we head due north?"

"The trail heads due north," Fry cut in. "So we do."

"Like sheep, huh?" Morgan said derisively. "Why don't we show we got sense and cut across?"

"We go north," Nadeen said, holding carefully to his patience, "to reach water quicker. Morgan, there's cold, sweet water comes out of a boulder field two days ahead of us. Lots of it. They call it Broken

Wells. From your vast experience on the Santa Fe trail, I assume you realize water's important to draft stock, as well as to dried-out people."

"What do we hit at the mountains?" Morgan inquired.

"A big green valley where we'll rest and feed up our stock. That's essential because we've got mountains to cross after that."

"You see, Morgan," Fry drawled, "it's been done before and worked out according to what's called common sense."

Morgan made a derisive gesture with his hand. "We go north two days before we start west to the mountains. But if we went a little longer without water, we could hit that valley sooner by cutting across. That right, Nadeen?"

"If we also went without a proved trail," Nadeen answered.

"Hell's bells, man, what could go wrong between here and the mountains?" Morgan's voice showed excitement. "Diggers could hit us on the trail as well as off of it. This desert's so flat a wagon could go anywhere it wanted. Nadeen, I just wanted to hear you agree to my reasoning." Morgan swung abruptly and walked off into the dusk.

"He's fixing to make an issue out of that," Fry said. "Before we break camp you're going to have to show this company why we've got to go the long way round to get where we're going. As a matter of fact, Nadeen, he's got me wondering. Why do we?"

"Water and a broken trail," Nadeen said.

"Morgan says that's being in a rut. Ain't it?"

"Not in this country. Out here you follow water. Game does, and so do the Indians. I honestly couldn't tell you whether we could cut across. I nor any other man has scouted the whole of this desert."

"You better think up some better reasons before morning," Fry said, and he chuckled.

CHAPTER THREE

Death in the Desert

NADEEN had a better reason but was too tired to go into it. This section of the trail had been laid out by the Applegate brothers after weeks of patient searching of the desert. They had brought the first train, out of Fort Hall, over what they had found to be the best route. Now the ruts were worn deep, and there was nothing sheep-like in clinging to them. It was plain common sense. This was big country, perilous in every way, and only the very experienced or the very foolish struck out to follow their own noses.

Fry's voice was more somber when he added, "You know what can happen in politics. A skunk can ride into office simply because the voters are sore at the one already in. Not that I see any resemblance in you, Nadeen. But that's the way it is when a man's job depends on public favor."

"I don't give a hang whether I'm popular," Nadeen said. "But while I've got a job, I'll do it."

"You don't care about popularity," Fry taunted, "even when there's a black-eyed Susan along a man's got his eye on! You like that Dalton girl, Nadeen, and now she thinks you ain't fit feed for hogs. But she liked you, at the start. She was right nice to you till you had to start whipping the company."

"You talk too much," Nadeen snapped.

Fry chuckled. "Helps me work up spit, and we're short of drinking water. Why'd you take up this thankless business, Nadeen? Man like you could have made more money in the mines, where I'm going."

Nadeen shook his head. "I dunno, Fry. The mines won't last. But the country will. I'd like to see it peopled, and I'd like to

grow up with it. I can help, and get a stake for my own land, and I guess that's why I'm doing this kind of work."

"Sentiment," Fry grunted. "But I like it, Nadeen, and I wish Linda Dalton had heard that."

"She's going to marry Sands and go back East," Nadeen retorted.

"Is she, now?" Fry asked.

Someone was coming up to them. Nadeen turned to see the father of the sick boy moving down the curved line of the wagon circle. Mulkey's gait was casual, steady, and Nadeen dismissed a quick concern. Then Mulkey came up and muttered, "The boy, Nadeen. He's gone."

Fry sat up quickly, in silence. Nadeen could only stand there for an instant and stare at Mulkey. It had been expected. Everyone was resigned to it. But it was a shock that went to the deepest nerve in a man's being. The only thing about Mulkey to show his own feeling was his voice, a thin and tired and slow voice coming out of the heart of him.

"I'm sorry, friend," Nadeen said then.

"The missus," Mulkey resumed with careful effort, "she'd like to take him on to that valley Morgan's been talkin' about this evening. At least as far as the springs, if we go that way."

Nadeen had dreaded that request. He had been through this experience before. He knew what came into grieved souls, and it was in his own, a protest of this desert's harshness, its unremitting ugliness, its impersonal cruelty. A little grass, a little shade, a little of beauty . . . Nadeen shook his head.

"Mulkey," he said gently, "it can't be done. Not in this heat. She'd regret it, and so would you. It's got to be here. It can't even wait till morning."

"Oh, no," Mulkey said, shaking his head dazedly. "No."

Fry climbed to his feet and went to Mulkey. He put his hand on the man's shoulder and said, "Nadeen don't do anything without a good reason, Mulkey. He's right."

"Well, then," Mulkey said on a long sigh, "all right. I'll try and tell her." He turned and walked back into the starlight.

Nadeen moved off, heavy with the new duty that had been dropped upon his shoulders. To put down the sudden rebellion in his nerves, he forced his mind to deal with the practical duties. He would have to find materials for a coffin and set men to digging the grave. Somebody would have to say the parting words. Somebody, and Nadeen doubted that it could be anyone of this earth, would have to bring some kind of comfort to the child's mother and father. He thought about that awhile, then moved down the line of wagons to get the job started.

Nadeen approached a dark shape that came across the circle toward him. Belatedly, he recognized Cheryl Sands from the Quincy wagon. The man was a tall and somber shape in the darkness and when he spoke his voice seemed strange.

"Linda," Sands said. "She wants to see you, Nadeen. She asked me to find you. Will you come?"

"Not now," Nadeen said. "There's been. . . ."

"I know," Sands said. "It's about that, Nadeen."

Silent, Nadeen fell into step with the man. They cut across to the far side of the wagon ring. The livestock had been corraled within, so that the men were obliged to pick their way through the massed figures. Linda and the young Quincy couple were standing motionless beside their wagon. Nadeen noticed that they had shown the energy to make a decent camp for once. They were learning, but Nadeen didn't care about that now. He looked inquiringly at Linda, a grave man with a grave face that seemed almost cruel in its iron discipline.

Linda said, "Cleve, can't they take the boy on to a better place?"

"No," Nadeen said.

"I've got something," she said, "that I hoped might make it possible. Come see if you think it would." She turned hastily, moving in a swift walk toward the rear end of the big wagon.

A lantern hung there, and Titus had put up the steps. Nadeen followed Linda up into the wagon. He saw that the load lately had been shifted. Linda dropped to her knees before a big chest. Nadeen looked at it closely, a carved, polished and handsome piece of furniture. Linda lifted the lid, and Nadeen saw how carefully and how tightly it was packed with things dear to a woman's heart.

"It's well made," she said, her hand stroking the wood. "Maybe it would do for him?"

"Yes and no," Nadeen said. "It's impossible to carry the boy with us, Linda. It's out of the question."

"The word's gone around, Cleve, what you say about that. The people don't like it. They're angry now because you wouldn't lay over for just a day for the boy's sake."

"A half day's heat," Nadeen said, "and Missus Mulkey would be sick of her choice. Your chest—nothing—would change that. But it's a beautiful thing, ma'am. Your hope chest?"

Linda nodded.

"Odd, isn't it?"

"Can the boy have it?" Nadeen asked.

"Of course."

A smile broke on Nadeen's face then. "It'll make Missus Mulkey feel a lot better."

Linda fell to her knees and began to empty the chest, careless of the contents, only trying to empty it. Nadeen stared down at her dark head, regretting their differences, regretting Sands and the salvation from this country that he offered Linda, regretting himself as every man must at times regret the exigencies of his own character.

NADEEN dropped out of the wagon, his load a little lightened. Returning to his own camp, he learned that Fry had already taken a man and shovels and gone up the trail a short distance. Now Nadeen had to go to the Mulkey wagon, and this he dreaded worse than anything, of a different nature, that could ever lay ahead for him. He thought desperately, *We'll take the chest over right away.* It might help if the Mulkey woman saw how pretty that chest was, how fine . . . .

When Nadeen reached the Quincy wagon again the chest had been emptied and was on the ground in the waxy yellow lantern light. With Eudora's help, Linda was padding and lining the interior with something Nadeen suspected had come out of the hope chest, a piece of fine, soft silk. Sands stood watching, his yellow head canted forward. Titus leaned against the wagon, a repressing scowl on his young face.

Nadeen looked at Sands and, without knowing why he thought the man could answer, said, "What can a man say to a woman like Missus Mulkey?"

Sands tipped his head toward Linda, his eyes softening. "She's saying it, I think. At least I hope so."

Eudora, bride of only a few weeks, looked up at Nadeen. "I'll tell you what you can say to her. That she can take her baby on. At least to some tree—some rock—something different to this empty awfulness!"

"Eudie!" Titus said quickly, "Nadeen's right!"

"Of course!" Eudora breathed. "Right for this country! Where you can't have feelings! Where you can only have efficiency! I'll tell you what you can say, Cleve Nadeen! That you're sorry you didn't wait and give her boy a chance to live!"

Linda looked at her sister and said, "Hush," on a sharp and final note.

Sands said softly, "Nadeen isn't God,

Eudora. Nadeen's only a man with a load. Like all of us. He carries it well. Some of the rest of us don't."

"But we can learn," Linda said, and she was still watching her sister.

Sands readily agreed to help Nadeen carry the improvised coffin to the Mulkey wagon. They walked side by side, the chest between them, silent men and reluctant. The Mulkey camp was on the east side of the circle. At wagon after wagon Nadeen noted that the people were still up, watching and waiting. No one spoke to Cleve Nadeen as he trudged past with Sands and the small coffin.

Mulkey stood at the end of his wagon, a stolid, motionless man whose weariness cried out from his sloped shoulders. His wife was resting on a blanket spread at the side of the wagon. There was a woman with her, and the three were the only ones at this desolate campsite.

Turning to stare at the approachers, Mulkey tipped his head but said nothing. The men and the chest came into the lantern light. The Mulkey woman's first reaction was to cover her face with her hands, the other woman reaching to pat her shoulder. Nadeen and Sands placed the chest on the ground, and Nadeen opened the lid. The boy's mother looked then, and perhaps it was the clean, soft whiteness of the silk or the rich gleam of the carved wood, but suddenly she rose and came forward. She stared down, then dropped to her knees beside the chest and let a roughened hand slide over the silk, then along the carvings. She looked up at Nadeen and in her eyes was nothing now of her resentment. Even her despair was lessened. Her throat worked as she spoke to him.

"Where'd you get it?"

"From a woman," Nadeen said softly. "From another woman with a mother's feeling."

"I thank her. It's got to be like you say, Nadeen?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"All right, then." The hand ran again across the silk, across the carvings. Tired eyes looked down again, and the others turned away from her.

Mulkey glanced at Cheryl Sands, then lifted himself into the wagon. When he emerged he carried a gold watch, which he held by its chain. He extended the watch to Sands. "Thank you kindly, Sands. It gave him a great deal of pleasure. He never let go of it once."

"Then he shouldn't now," Sands said. "Put it back in his hand."

"It's your'n," Mulkey said.

"No, sir," Sands answered, shaking his head.

Slowly the tightness eased in Mulkey's face, and slowly he turned and ascended the steps, still holding the watch. Sands walked away, with Nadeen wanting to follow. But Nadeen could not. He was the wagonmaster, and his were duties no man would choose voluntarily.

Nadeen waited for Mulkey to emerge, then drew him aside. He said, "There can be no congregation, Mulkey, and no hymns. Just you and your wife and one or two others. It'll have to be before day breaks."

"Why?" Mulkey asked. "We sort of hoped . . . . "

"The Diggers," Nadeen cut in. "We've got to figure we're being watched all the time. If they guess there's been a funeral, they'll dig. Hunting trinkets. We don't dare risk that. We don't dare leave any sign."

"All right," Mulkey said. "When, then?"

"I'll be here with a man an hour before daylight. Don't tell anybody when it'll be. We'll hope they're all asleep by then."

"All right," Mulkey said, "and we thank you, Nadeen."

"You understand, then? And why we couldn't lay over?"

Mulkey nodded. "You've got two hundred people to think about. Not just one. But the other people are right riled . . . . "

"They don't matter," Nadeen said, and now he took his own departure.

The camp was quieting, and Nadeen saw that the people were finally going to bed.

Nadeen and Fry went to the Mulkey wagon in the last hour of darkness. They carried the small coffin out of the wagon circle, Mulkey and his wife coming behind. They went forward a hundred yards beyond the westernmost wagon. The grave was waiting there, dug squarely in the trail. Nadeen pulled off his hat and said the words, then watched Mulkey lead his wife away. He and Fry completed the duty.

THE blocky Morgan failed to make his play that morning, against the red-headed Fry's predictions. The thoughts of the emigrants were on deeper things than Morgan's chronic fretting, and the man seemed to sense that. The train rolled out within an hour after dawn, each wagon untracking at Nadeen's orders so as to pack the fresh earth in the trail and obliterate all signs of a fresh grave.

Mulkey strode stolidly beside his wagon, his wife not in evidence, and only Mulkey turned out of the line so as not to cross the grave. Nadeen sat his horse nearby, watching the work of obliteration, having to be certain that it was done thoroughly. His features showed no expression, but his mind was steadily on his awareness that this action consigned the Mulkey boy to an unmarked eternity in the desert confines. . . .

Nadeen judged that they had made at least eight miles by noon, which pleased him.

Two hours before they reached the rock outcrops ahead, Nadeen made a note of them. The rocks marked a change in the nature of the country and suggested the oasis of Broken Wells, still far in the for-

ward distance. The changed terrain spoke of yet another thing to Nadeen. No longer was the wheeling flat a clearly visible expanse of many miles. The rocks offered concealment, close in, and the Diggers knew how to take advantage of them. But Nadeen did not speak his brooding thoughts to anyone, not even to Fry, his camp-mate.

The wagons entered the scabby stretch in late afternoon. Though it meant the loss of a few more miles that might be gained, Nadeen ordered early camp at a spot where the approaches could be watched for a considerable distance all about. Withal, he was satisfied with the day's progress. Given no extraordinary trouble, yet another day would likely see them at Broken Wells. An additional march, after that, and the wagons would reach the first valley, in under the Warners. Dangers, difficulties and even disasters still lay ahead, but in the valley the train could rest.

It surprised Nadeen when, after the wagon circle had formed once more, Titus Quincy sought him and said, "Nadeen, the girls say you've eaten out of your saddlebags too long. They want you to come over and have supper."

Nadeen looked at him, pleased and embarrassed. "Why, thanks," he answered. "But this is no time for them to bother."

"It's exactly the time," Titus retorted. "They want to remember we're still civilized. And maybe to heighten their growing opinion that you are, too. Confidentially, Nadeen, Eudora's sorry she shot off her face at you, last night. She wants to make amends."

"Does she, now?" Nadeen asked.

"Didn't I tell you they've got it, Nadeen?" Titus asked.

"They've got it," Nadeen agreed. "Tell them it'll be an honor and a pleasure."

He found Fry and informed him that they wouldn't be eating together that evening. The amiable redhead hiked his mouth into a wise and wicked grin, nodding as if confirming something within himself. Nadeen scowled at him. He would have given much to clean up, to shave and change clothes, before presenting himself as a supper guest of the Eastern girls. He comforted himself with the knowledge that their own grime would distress them more than his would.

But always there was responsibility, and Nadeen hadn't investigated the Rice family that day to see how close the stork was to overtaking the train. On his way to the Quincy wagon, he stopped by at the Rice camp. It surprised him to find the woman out of the wagon and moving about for the first time in days. She gave Nadeen an embarrassed look when she realized his intention of stopping, then nodded. Rice, however, looked guarded and unforgiving of Nadeen's roughness in bringing the woman out of her hysteria.

Nadeen grinned at the woman and said, "Ma'am, this is the last bed camp we'll have. And after tomorrow it'll be possible to stop anywhere we need to, day or night. When you say the word, we'll lay over for the big event."

"Getting soft-hearted all at once, Nadeen?" Rice inquired.

His wife flung him a look of reproof. "Harry, you could do with a little of the captain's understanding, yourself." To Nadeen she added, "I promise not to say the word till I have to."

Rice looked astonished. Nadeen grinned at him and went on.

He cut across the wagon circle, dusk coming in to cut down the bright glare of the sun but bringing no coolness. Nadeen nearly laughed at the two girls working at the cook-fire on the shady side of the Quincy wagon. They had changed their dresses and combed their hair, but their faces were dark with sweat-runneled dust. The food was to be simple, he saw, but far better than he had been getting: dried beef and dumplings, with biscuits and coffee. Sands was off somewhere, and

Titus was busy checking over his wagon.

"That mud," Nadeen said to Eudora. "Is it some kind of beauty treatment?"

The embarrassment he had seen rise in her at his approach was swept away by her quick giggle. "I'd have to chip it off to see," she answered. "It's not for publication, but I'm wearing the same stuff all over me."

"Might bring your hide off with it," Nadeen warned. "Campers sometimes bake birds in mud, peeling off skin and feathers when they're done."

"I'm rolled in mud," Eudora said worriedly, "and I've baked all day. I wonder how Titus will like me in my bare bones?"

Linda was smiling, and Nadeen knew that the resentment against him had quit at least this one camp. "Hungry?" Linda asked casually.

"Plenty. Let me help."

"Keep out of this," Linda said hastily. "You're going to eat food Eudie and I cooked from start to finish with our own dirty little hands."

"Still ringy, are you?"

Linda smiled again. "Not really, Cleve. A little spiteful is all."

Nadeen seated himself on a box and pulled out his pipe, which he had neglected for a long while because of the heat. *But she's going back with Sands,* he thought, watching Linda. *Titus as good as said so, and that hasn't changed.* The reminder pulled gravity onto Nadeen's brown face. He liked Sands. While he might feel jealousy, he could muster no animosity toward the man.

Titus came over and fell to talking with Nadeen, full of questions about Oregon and its available land. His was the zeal of the true frontiersman, who came as often from cities and high cultural levels as from farms and overcrowded settlements. Nadeen noted that Eudora was listening in, showing a real interest in her husband's questions and Nadeen's answers. When she asked about the school situation, Nadeen knew she was not going to quit her new husband for a long while yet.

That left Linda in doubt. But when Sands returned, presently, to join the party it drew no damper over Nadeen's keen enjoyment of the evening. He liked the man, sure enough. Presently the meal was ready and, talking steadily, they ate. Sands left immediately thereafter, it being his turn on guard. The dishes could not be washed, and the girls put them away.

Then, with an open grin, Titus said, "Eudie and I promised to visit the old Seymour couple, this evening. Eudie'll be questioning Granny about young ones the way I've gone at you about land. Wheat and offspring. That's what we aim to raise in Oregon."

Nadeen caught Linda's quick, protesting sign to Titus and knew she had been taken by surprise. Titus gave her a bland smile and turned away. Then all at once Nadeen was alone with Linda at a dying campfire, the night now closed about them.

"You've got the makings of a frontierswoman," Nadeen said. "Too bad you aim to waste it."

Linda looked at him quickly. "How do you mean?"

"You're fixing to go back East."

"Maybe."

"If you do it for love," Nadeen drawled, "that's one thing. If you do it out of cowardice, that's another."

"You've got eyes like an Indian, haven't you?" Linda asked softly. "I am a coward, and if I go back it'll be partly because of that. But not entirely. Men don't come any finer than Cheryl Sands."

"You're right there," Nadeen agreed. "But that's not enough for you."

"It might have to do," Linda said. "A person's capable of just so much. He's got to be contented with whatever that is. Look at it my way, Cleve. You're an attractive man, yourself. If I stayed out here, you're the kind of man I'd marry. And I'd make him a miserable wife."

"Now, who'd be miserable?" Nadeen retorted. "Him or you?"

"Both. You're brutal. I know you've got to be. But I'd never get used to it. That, or I'd turn hard, myself, and that would be the end of me as I am now. The same as dying, Cleve Nadeen. And no man could be happy with a wife like that."

"No man," Nadeen said, "could be happy with a wife who remains a child. And that's what you've tried to do. Look at Mrs. Rice. She was beside herself yesterday. But I bet she comes through what's ahead of her like an old hand."

"Thanks to you," Linda said grudgingly. "You were right about that. I'm sorry for what I said."

"Thanks to my brutality," Nadeen drawled. "Is it so bad?"

"I don't like it. I don't want to live where it's necessary."

"All right," Nadeen said, preparing to rise. "I made my try."

"Is that what it was, Cleve?"

"As if you didn't know." Nadeen grinned, then suddenly shoved to his feet.

From out of the night there had come the spiteful crack of a rifle shot. Nadeen saw Linda close her eyes. There was that one shot and no more. But Digger arrows and Digger knives were silent things. Nadeen judged the location of the shot and left on the double, cutting between two wagons and drawing his pistol. Other men were running, too, across the wagons and inside the circle. Then a second shot came, one of the guards probably having reprimed his rifle.

Nadeen reached the guard, which wasn't Sands but Sands' watch-mate—the truculent Morgan. Now Morgan was thumping his ramrod anxiously into his rifle barrel again. Nadeen could see nothing lying out from them except for great patches of shadow on the desert floor.

"What was it, Morgan?" Nadeen yelled.

"Something moved," Morgan muttered. "But it ain't moving now."

"Show me where it was, and we'll take a look."

They walked out, Morgan openly reluctant. Nadeen doubted that the man's feeling was fear. They found nothing where Morgan claimed to have seen movement, nor close to there.

Nadeen turned to Morgan, and in a soft voice said, "You wouldn't be trying to throw a scare into the company, would you, Morgan?"

"Now, why'd I do that?" Morgan asked, in an equally soft voice.

"Maybe to spook it into taking your cut-off with you."

"I wouldn't need to scare anybody," Morgan drawled. "They hate you. If I give the word, they'll follow me."

"Try it, Morgan, and I'll beat the hell out of you. For the sake of the people. And for my own satisfaction."

Morgan laughed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Desertion

OTHERS were coming out now. Walking back toward them, Nadeen spat, "Morgan took a shot at a figment of his imagination. Been more of those shot up than anything else in this country." But Nadeen was disturbed. The shots, the dramatic reminder that this was Digger country, would play hell with nerves already overwrought. Nadeen was convinced that Morgan had fired the shots and raised the scare deliberately.

A sense of warning had risen in Nadeen. Morgan's words, his manner, had indicated that he would welcome a fight. An open break would give Morgan a chance to call for an election on the matter of leadership. Morgan was big and tough, an ex-freighter, and probably figured he could win both the fight and the election. But if he lost the fight, he might still win the election as the underdog personalizing the resentment

against Cleve Nadeen. Now Nadeen began to regret his wrathful threat to Morgan. He didn't dare risk a showdown yet.

For the company's reassurance, Nadeen doubled the guard. Even so, there would be a nervous, restless night, with the emigrants left in a mood Morgan might find useful on the morrow. Nadeen cursed the man silently.

Morgan was at Nadeen's camp the next morning before Fry and Nadeen had finished their breakfast. At least three dozen men stumped along behind the man, all looking as hostile, as resolute, as Morgan. Nadeen climbed to his feet, a cup of coffee still in his hand.

The blocky Morgan put his hands on his hips and bawled, "Nadeen, we had a kind of meeting. These men figure like I do, that we better get out of this blasted Indian country fast. We figure a day and a half, cuttin' across, would put us in that valley you been telling about. One camp and a half a day saved from the way you want to do it. Considering what happened last night, my way's the smart one."

Nadeen took a sip of coffee, then removed the cup from his lips. "What happened last night," he said, "was for the sheer purpose of setting this up, Morgan."

"Meaning what, Nadeen?" Morgan growled.

"That you never seen hide nor hair of a target when you shot." Nadeen realized instantly that he was making a mistake. Satisfaction crept onto Morgan's fleshy mouth.

"That's a damned lie, Nadeen!" Morgan roared. "And told by a chronic liar!"

Nadeen slowly put down his cup, knowing that he couldn't have stopped it. The red-haired Fry had bounced to his feet, his eyes smoky. A lot of men had heard Nadeen called a liar. Fry knew, as Nadeen knew, that one way or another Morgan would have hurled an inescapable challenge.

The coffee cup touched the sand gently, but Nadeen came up in a spring. A quick step took him to Morgan, and a quick right fist drove out at Morgan's chin. Morgan had expected more preparation, more quarreling. The blow caught him wholly off-balance, and the thick body arched back. Nadeen followed it up, and Morgan hit the ground backward, shoulders first.

Nadeen stood back. He had to beat this man slowly, methodically, with Morgan given every chance. Morgan rolled over, lifting his head dazedly, staring up at Nadeen. Then he pulled his knees under him and shoved to a stand. His head rolled from side to side as he studied his foe. Then, grunting from his own exertion, he bored in.

The next seconds told Nadeen that he had a fight on his hands. Morgan drove him back and yet farther back, his heavy arms going like pistons. He bloodied Nadeen's mouth and caught him once across the eye, nearly blinding him. People were yelling all about, and Nadeen realized dazedly that the bulk of the party was rushing up to watch. He fought Morgan off, and he caught him in the belly hard enough to drive wind from the man. Then he brought the fight back to Morgan, and he brought it hard and fast.

Morgan tried to fight through a fifty foot retreat but he was off-stride, defensive, and Nadeen never let that change. Morgan scraped backward through Fry's breakfast fire, sparks and smoke rising about him. He jumped hastily and, as Nadeen stepped around the fire, Morgan had his chance and grabbed the initiative.

Fists like oak knots swung again and again into Nadeen, at his belly, his throat, his head. Morgan on the drive was a vicious, inexorable force. Now Nadeen could only try to defend himself, to stand up in it. Once, twice, Morgan's whacking fists nearly dropped him. But Morgan was a contrary man. Given a suggestion, he would marshal his will to oppose. Nadeen had been harassed by that trait, and now

he considered how to use it against Morgan.

Dust boiled about them, dry and choking. Sweat and blood drenched Nadeen's face, and sweat and blood smeared Morgan. Slowing his assault, Nadeen began openly to display distress. Twice, three times, he left himself wide open, inviting Morgan's onslaught. The man turned wary, refusing it. Nadeen tangled his feet and went down on a knee, and Morgan refused that, too. Nadeen shoved up and came in feinting. Morgan, almost contemptuous, declined to duck. Nadeen's next feint changed character and smoked in. Morgan's stubbornness held him still too long. Nadeen's fist made a splat on a fully exposed chin, and Morgan went down in dead weight.

When Morgan didn't rise, a voice bawled, "That was a damned trick! He had you beat, Nadeen!"

"Line out!" Nadeen answered, sweeping his blurred gaze over the crowd. "It's time to roll!"

It surprised him when he was obeyed with almost too much alacrity. But two men helped the dazed Morgan to his feet and supported him in a staggering walk toward the man's wagon. The same two hooked up Morgan's oxen, together with the horse Fry had loaned. Fry, silent and somber, packed his remaining horses while Nadeen saddled up.

The train rolled at once and without the starting command from Nadeen, who watched in rising wonder. Morgan's wagon pulled out of line, pulled forward to the west side of the wagon circle, Morgan now recovered enough to drive it. It went on, pulling off the worn trail, heading northwest, other wagons falling in behind. Nadeen sat his saddle, dazed, a battered and awesome figure of a man. They weren't showing him the courtesy of an election, a hearing; this was their contemptuous dis-

missal of him. The company was taking the short-cut behind Morgan's wagon. Morgan, in defeat, had become a martyr, a symbol of Cleve Nadeen's brutality.

Nadeen identified the wagons that remained motionless: the Mulkeys, the Rices, the Quincys. And there was Fry, the packer. It hit Nadeen hard, and he thought, *Five crossings learning to take care of people like that, and there they go with their thumb on their nose. . . .*

Fry's cheerful voice said, "Cap'n, we've shook down to a right good company. Do we get on with it?"

Shame and guilt wormed through Nadeen. He had let this happen, he had let a stupid ape of a man crowd him into it. But he wasn't going to ride after the company that had disavowed him and plead with them for sanity. They were following Morgan less, he knew, than they were defying Cleve Nadeen, venting the piled-up resentments of too many hardships and worries and too many stern orders from their leader.

It was Rice who brought Nadeen out of his bewilderment, Rice who at last encounter also had held resentment of Nadeen. Now Rice said, "The missus lost Granny Seymour and might have to have her young 'un by herself. But she wants to stick with you, Nadeen—and I reckon I do myself. If you'll let us."

"Then let's go," Nadeen said, and he grinned.

It wasn't that easy to throw off, but with an outward show of cheer Nadeen led his pitifully diminished party northward on the established trail. Maybe Morgan could get the rest through safely, ahead of this party, and Nadeen hoped so devoutly. Guilt still nagged him. He should have swallowed Morgan's bald insult, laughed at it, and avoided the showdown.

The small party pressed for Broken Wells through another scorching day. Its size had greatly increased the danger of Indian attack, though Nadeen kept silent about that. To offset that a little, it could make better time, for these wagons and the livestock were in better shape than the average in the full-size train. And the people were completely loyal, obedient, proved. By midafternoon Nadeen was certain that they would raise Broken Wells by night.

Shortly thereafter Fry pointed to the rear and said, "A lot of dust back there, Nadeen. We going to get more wind?"

Nadeen looked and scowled. Fry was right about the dust, which twisted up on the trail behind, from across the bend-of-land. There was no other train that close behind, and by now Morgan's party would be well west of the point.

"War party?" Fry asked softly.

"Never heard of the Diggers traveling in force," Nadeen said. "We'll watch and keep still about it."

No one else observed the dust, yet through the next hours it stayed behind them, still without dots at its bottom to disclose what caused it. That kept Nadeen uneasy until Rice took his mind off of it by dropping back to speak to Nadeen.

"The missus," he said. "She's doin' her best to hold off. But she said to tell you maybe she can't make it to the wells."

"Good lord!" Nadeen said. "Does she want to stop?"

"No," Rice said, and he tramped on.

NADEEN spoke to the drivers, and the straining oxen moved a little faster after that. He was completely baffled, completely helpless in the face of what was to come next. The two girls would know nothing of childbirth, but there was Mulkey's wife, the grieved mother of the dead boy. It would be up to her and Nature and God, Nadeen decided and let it go at that.

When dusk began to run in, Nadeen spoke quietly to Fry: "The wells hadn't ought to be over two-three miles ahead. Want to ride on and get a fire going and water hot? It's a lot to ask a man to do

alone in this country, but—" Fry had already moved forward at a pace faster than the wagons'.

Full night let them see Fry's fire well before the wagons reached the desert oasis. Rice, when he saw the blaze, let out a yell of elation. Thereafter the wagons rolled even faster. And then they were pulling in at Broken Wells.

Fry had unpacked his horses, spread his camp equipment and started the fire from dried droppings he had gathered. His blackened kettle and coffee pot were on rocks against the fire, both steaming. Rice, who had disappeared into his wagon, emerged at once to bawl, "Missus Mulkey! Missus Mulkey!"

The Mulkey woman ran toward that wagon, Linda and Eudora following. Fatigue hit Nadeen then, and he was glad to let someone else take charge of things. Somebody else got a lantern going in the Rice wagon, Sands carried water in. Rice was here and there, walking in circles when there was nothing else to occupy him, while Fry, Mulkey and Titus Quincy took care of the livestock.

Then Linda was running from the wagon, toward Nadeen, crying, "It's a boy!"

"So soon?" Nadeen yelled.

"It was all but born when we got here!" Linda said. Something stood in her face Nadeen had never seen there before. "I'm glad I saw it, Cleve! I've seen life end, but now I've seen it start! It's wonderful!" There was exultation in her voice. "Nothing's as bad as we think!"

Sands, listening from across the fire, smiled at the girl. "You'll be happy out here, Linda, I think," he said.

"Yes," Linda answered absently.

Nadeen's eyes widened, his mouth opened, but at that moment Mulkey came running in. "Something's coming on the trail!" he yelled. "Wagons, and a bunch of 'em! It couldn't be anybody else! It couldn't be!"

The man was right. Fifteen minutes later the lead wagons showed themselves at Broken Wells. Morgan's wagon was no longer leading. The wagons toiled in and made the old, familiar circle about the springs and Fry's small camp. It was as natural, as matter-of-fact as that.

But a deputation came up to Nadeen. It was led by Seymour, the company midwife's aged husband. Seymour said, "Nadeen, we've been a bunch of damned fools. But we only stuck with Morgan a couple hours. That desert looked some fierce without any wagon tracks. It was rough, and we hit more washes and rock fields than a man ever dreamed of. Me, I got to honing for wagon tracks. I turned back, and bedamned if the others didn't turn and follow me. Morgan too, stuffy, but with his tail between his legs."

Seymour cleared his throat and said painfully, "Wasn't only wagon tracks we missed, Nadeen. We were short of anybody who knew how to handle things."

Nadeen dropped a hand on the old man's shoulder. "Supper time," he said.

Linda, no more able to stay away from the Rice wagon than Eudora, came at last to Nadeen. "I'm staying out, Cleve," she said. "Did you guess?"

"Yes. I'm glad. And you'll marry, and it'll be a man like me. A brute."

"A man like you," Linda said. "But not a brute. A man."

Cheryl Sands walked up into the firelight. He saw the look on Linda's face and only smiled. But Nadeen would have smiled for him, had it been the other way.

Watching them walk away, Nadeen pulled in a slow breath. His last trip, and it was a fine one. There seemed to be a supper fire starting at every wagon, and now there was laughter and loud talk and friendly bickering. Music struck up in the distance, the first the train had heard in weeks. Because of water, because of new life—yes, and maybe because of a leader who could make the company feel secure. . . . ■ ■ ■

Ran wasn't dead; he had passed out. . . .

MISSION TO MONTANA

By Clifton Adams

What price the bright honor of a law badge, if you must bring in, with your captive, two broken lives? Jeff's job took something far beyond the ordinary manhunter's courage. . . .

IT WAS in July that they first began to suspect that Ran had gone to Montana, and one blazing day a ranger corporal came down on the Brazos where the company was camped and told Jeff that the major wanted to see him. It was something Jeff had known would come sooner or later and he had been waiting for it and dreading it. But he told the corporal it was all right, and that night he rode with him back to San Juan, where the Texas Ranger headquarters was.

The major was a squat red rock of an Irishman named Hilligan, and he was standing in front of a big wall map when Jeff came into the office.

"Captain Reeves," he said, "have you even been to Montana?"

"No, sir."

"How would you like to go?"

"I like Texas fine, sir."

Hilligan raised his head and looked at Jeff for the first time. "You already know what I'm going to say, don't you?"

"I think so, sir."

The major took a crayon and marked a red circle on the upper lefthand corner of the map. "He's there," he said. "He has to be. The last we heard of him was in Nebraska where he killed a United States marshal. Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska—they're after him from three sides, so he has to head north."

Jeff said nothing. The major studied briefly a sheaf of printed papers.

"Listen to what's been going on in Montana—this is from the U. S. Marshal's office. In December a bank was robbed, one bank clerk dead. In March the cattlemen began to complain that their stock was disappearing. April and May, more cattle gone, an express coach held up. The man who leads the raids hasn't been seen but once or twice, and then he had a mask over his face, but they do know he's young and sudden death with pistols. . . ."

He sat back, looking at Jeff. "It's him, all right. One of the bank clerks recognized his pistols as .36 caliber Prescotts, and you don't see guns like them every day."

The damned fool! Jeff thought. There weren't ten of those Prescotts in the whole State of Texas; faulty and outmoded pistols that the Army wouldn't touch. But Ran liked them for some reason. He liked to give away weight and then beat you at your own game.

Uncomfortably, the major riffled the papers and tried to think what to say next. "I know how you feel about him, Jeff," he said finally. "Maybe he was all right once . . . I don't know about that. But now he's on a one-way trail. There's nothing for him to do but go on killing until somebody stops him." He sighed deeply. "The United States Marshal's office wants you to help. You know him better than anybody else. If anybody can get him, you can."

There wasn't anything Jeff could say to that.

He sat there listening as the major rambled on . . . and on.

IT WAS that blazing, scorching year of 1881, in the same month of July, that Jeff started for the forlorn-sounding territory called Montana. It was the year of great trail drives to Kansas, the laying of railroads, the general migration to the Northwest. It was the year Ran O'Connor added a few more notches to the butts of his two Prescott revolvers and Jeff went after him.

He told himself that he had to forget personalities. He had to forget that Ran O'Connor was his friend, almost the same as his brother.

It wasn't that easy or that simple. For one thing, there was Martha.

A ranger's life was much the same as a cavalryman's. There was not much privacy, the men putting up together in one big bunkhouse, and the officers, when they weren't on detail, living in one of the six little 'dobe shacks called Officer's Row. At San Juan they had a small parade, just like the cavalry, and a flagpole where the Lone Star was raised every morning, and the whole thing was enclosed with a 'dobe wall.

It wouldn't be long, he knew, before talk of his going after Ran would go beyond the wall, to the crossroads where old Matt Kirkpatrick and his daughter Martha ran a general store. And there was no avoiding her, for he had to go to the store to catch the stage for San Antonio.

"Take care of yourself," Major Hilligan said, shaking his hand. "I guess I don't have to tell you what you're going up against."

"No, sir," Jeff said.

"I guess that's all, then. Good-by and good luck. There's a hack waiting to take you down to Kirkpatrick's."

The hack left him at the crossroads. Old man Kirkpatrick was standing on the front stoop of his clapboard store, watching him.

"Hear you're goin' travelin," he said.

"That's right," Jeff said. And he thought, Here it comes.

"Goin' after Ran?"

Jeff set his traveling case down. "That's what the orders say. I'll take a sack of tobacco, if you've got some."

They went inside the store. The place had the clean smell of leather and coffee and new cotton drygoods. "Martha," the old man called, "reach Jeff down a sack of that Durham, will you?"

Mr. Kirkpatrick went out the back door and Jeff was left alone with Martha—exactly what he hadn't wanted. She seemed slightly pale as she handed him the tobacco, took the nickel and dropped it into the change drawer.

She attempted a smile that didn't quite come off. "I see you brought your traveling case," she said.

"Some business in San Antonio," he answered. But he saw that it was no good. "I guess you've already heard."

She nodded.

"Well," Jeff said heavily, "I guess there isn't much to say, then."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Jeff thought, She was never more beautiful. . . . And I guess she never hated me so much. He rolled a cigarette to give his hands something to do, and she busied herself with a bolt of gingham. He heard himself saying, "I'm sorry this is the way it had to be."

She looked up, her eyes appearing a bit too wide. "I don't suppose it would do any good if I asked you not to go."

Luckily, he didn't have to answer her, for the stage was on time for once and old man Kirkpatrick came hobbling back through the store.

"You better get ready, Jeff. They're changin' horses already."

As he walked toward the front door with his bag, she called to him. "Jeff . . ." He turned. "Jeff . . . be careful!"

What she meant, of course, was "Be careful of Ran." The stage driver was shouting that he was ready to go.

He tried to get things straight, as the stage creaked and jolted its way toward San Antonio. The beginning, Jeff guessed, had been when his father had taken Ran O'Conner in to raise after Ran's family had died in the fever epidemic during the war. Almost as long as Jeff could remember, Ran had been as close to him as his brothers, and people said, "Isn't it nice that the Reeves took the O'Connor boy in; they treat him just like one of the family."

Maybe it would have been better if they hadn't said anything. If they had just passed it by. Still, if Ran ever had the feeling of not belonging, Jeff had never noticed it. Only later, after they had stopped being boys and had begun to be men, did the difference show. Ran had a restlessness inside him, a dash and daring that Jeff had never known.

Later, of course, there had been Martha. It was inevitable, it seemed, that both of them should fall in love with the same girl —and just as inevitable that Ran should win her. Ran had formed the habit of being first in everything, including the affections of women.

At San Antonio Jeff boarded the train which would take him north across Texas, through Indian Territory, Kansas, Nebraska. From there it would be hit or miss with the local railroads and stagelines until he got to Montana.

Jeff began to believe that he had never actually known Ran O'Connor, even though they had been as close as brothers. Jeff had been with the Rangers ever since they had taken over the duties of the State Police. Ran had laughed at him.

Two years ago Ran started by killing a ranger corporal in a gambling house at Crawford's Settlement—about the time people were expecting Ran and Martha to announce their engagement.

All that seemed long, long ago, Jeff thought, and not quite real. He had been relieved when the United States Marshal's office had taken the job after Ran killed one of their men in Nebraska.

Now it was his job again.

In Cheyenne a U. S. deputy met Jeff and gave him what his office had on Ran O'Connor. "We guess him to be some place around here," he said. He marked a place on a map where the Tongue and Powder forked. "It's almost impossible to find him if he's hiding in the hills, but a man has to come out of the hills some time."

Ran would come out of the hills, Jeff knew. He had to be where there were people and whiskey and plenty of laughter.

JEFF took a stage north, skirting the Big Horn range, rolling into the land where the memory of the Custer massacre was still fresh in the minds of the settlers. At a place called Hooker's Rock, Jeff left the stage and rented a livery horse and saddle. He took his cartridge belt and Colt's revolver out of his traveling case and buckled them on. The traveling case he lashed behind the saddle. He headed north.

Two weeks he spent in the dark hills, visiting the scattered settlements, talking to the ranchers and bankers who had lost cattle or money in the raids.

At a place called Cooper's Bend, a settlement where the one-room bank had been robbed two months before, he ran into luck. The town marshal had jailed a drunk cowhand who claimed to have been with Ran on a rustling raid.

"You're welcome to talk to him," the marshal said. "Personally, I think you came a long way for nothing, though. O'Connor's skedaddled out of the Territory, you can bet on that."

The cowhand was bitter. He looked at Jeff's ranger's star and spat into the corner of his cell. "If it's O'Connor you want," he said, "I hope you get him! Sure, I helped him on the Box-22 raid. We rounded up maybe fifteen cows and sold them to a crooked Sioux agent for the Indian beef issue. I never saw any of the money, though. O'Connor took it and lit out."

The next morning Jeff saddled up and rode north again.

July slipped into August, then September came clean and sharp and Jeff could almost smell the snow that would be coming soon. The days were almost unbearably quiet and the nights were cold. Jeff put on an extra shirt under his thin Texas brush jacket.

It was in mid-October when he rode onto the place called simply Moffort's Store. It was a frontier conglomeration of general store, dance hall, and saloon that you sometimes find in the cattle country away from the main stage roads.

There was only one man in the place, Moffort, when Jeff got there. A long-faced man with sleepy eyes, the storekeeper leaned behind the bar, gazing with vague interest at Jeff's brush jacket, mentally pegging him as a Texan. Without being asked, he set up a bottle of rye and a glass.

"I'm looking for a man," Jeff said, when he had finished the drink. The procedure had become almost automatic by this time. He described Ran O'Connor briefly.

"Friend of yours?" the storekeeper asked.

Jeff looked at the man. ". . . . Yes. Yes, he's a friend of mine."

Moffort did not believe him. He picked up a rag and began swabbing the bar. "Never saw anybody look like that," he said. "Maybe down south. Ranchers are hirin' on new men."

Jeff knew that his search was over. Exactly how he knew he couldn't tell. Perhaps it was Moffort being a little too anxious to head him off in another direction. But Ran was here, or would be here. He could see it in Moffort's eyes.

"You mind if I put up for the night in your livery shed?"

Moffort didn't like it, but there was little he could do without causing a scene. Jeff turned his horse into the corral, then fed the animal some shelled corn that he bought from the store. Inside again, he got the reluctant storekeeper to cook him a steak and a pan of hoecake.

"You run this place by yourself?" Jeff asked.

"Except on Saturdays, I get the Larmer boys to help."

"You must do pretty good on Saturdays, the cowhands coming in to stock up."

Moffort looked at him. "I don't get rich."

Only four people stopped at the store that day, one lone cowhand, a man and his wife in a covered wagon who had failed at homesteading and were heading south before winter hit, and Jeff. He made his bed in the shed that night and, as he lay listening to the nightsounds of that lonesome country, he thought of Ran. And Martha. He was suddenly furious as he thought of the misery Ran had caused her. "Whatever he gets," he thought, "he's got it coming to him."

SATURDAY came a cold October day, but crystal clear and not quite time yet for snow. Hacks and wagons began coming in around noon from nearby ranches and homesteads. Now and then a cowhand who had wangled a day off came riding in on his best pony, the animal curried and brushed, the saddle leather soaped and glistening. The cowhands wore flat-crowned hats and sheeplined coats, and they looked curiously at Jeff's brush jacket and peaked hat. But, like most cattlemen, they were close-mouthed in the presence of strangers and said nothing.

Jeff could feel that this was the day. If Ran was around, he would be here. By four o'clock the store was well filled. Moffort had a pair of squatter boys working behind the bar and another one helping him with the drygoods and groceries. Around nightfall Moffort closed down everything but the bar and a couple of the low-stake poker games. By the simple act of pushing some cans and barrels and other oddments against the wall, Moffort's store became a dance hall.

Jeff sat near the back of the room, a bottle before him and an untouched drink. A few of the squatter girls stayed over to listen to the two fiddlers and guitar player who were tuning up in one corner. As night came on the girls' giggling seemed to flutter like small birds above the general noise in the place.

"How long will I wait?" Jeff wondered. "When will he come?"

The store was an uproar now. Whiskey loosened tongues of solitary men who had spent weeks with none to talk to but their horses. Fiddles scraped and a few, but not many, of the squatter girls had been coaxed onto the floor to take part in the stomping dance. A shortage of dancing partners prompted some of the men to tie handkerchiefs around their wrists, in the time-honored custom of the near-womanless West—and become "ladies" for the dance.

It was near midnight when the front door opened and a tall man with a sheepskin collar turned up about his face came in. Jeff felt himself stiffen. He could not see the man's face—he didn't have to know that it was Ran.

Moffort had been standing near the door when it opened. Grasping the man's arm, he spoke something hurriedly and the head seemed to duck deeper into the collar. After a moment's hesitation, the door had opened and Ran had disappeared.

Jeff was pushing his way through the dancers, but Ran was gone before he got halfway across the room. He shoved Moffort away from the door and flung it open, hearing the quick, excited clatter of hoofs. After a moment the horse settled down into what Jeff knew to be a long, ground-eating gait.

Pointing toward the sound of hoofs, Jeff took hold of a drunk who had wandered outside. "What's over in that direction?"

"Hills," the drunk said amiably. "Old Sioux country on the other side of the pass."

Jeff left the man mumbling to himself, hurried over to the shed for his saddle and then to the corral where his horse was. It was just as well that there hadn't been trouble in the store, he thought, with all those people there.

It was only a matter of a minute getting saddled, but by that time he could no longer hear the sound of hoofs. Jeff found himself thinking, I'll never catch him now. There was a feeling of relief inside him, and he knew that he had been hoping all along that a showdown could be avoided.

For a moment he wondered if he was afraid of Ran. Was that the reason he hadn't pulled on him the minute he walked into the store? Maybe it was, and everything else was window dressing.

He wouldn't believe it. He swung up to the saddle and rode to the south, directly toward the hills.

The pass was one the Sioux had used only a few years ago when they had swept down from the hills to lay waste the valley of the Powder and the Tongue and the Little Big Horn. He reached it shortly before dawn, in the bitter cold of early morning. After he had crossed to the other side he stopped to let his horse blow, knowing that there was no use going any farther until it got light enough to track by.

A few minutes passed and then he could see that the tracks were there, fresh and undisturbed in the cold new light. Jeff saw by the tracks that Ran's horse was favoring his left foreleg. A stone bruise, he thought. He couldn't go much farther on a horse like that.

The going got rougher. Jeff got down to lead his horse up a rocky slope, and when they got to the top there was a grassy plateau perhaps a mile long and a half a mile wide. Almost in the exact center of that high grassy rectangle a horse stood unsaddled, grazing. A man squatted by a small fire. A sheer white tube of smoke rose up from the fire and reached for the sky.

Jeff stood still for a long moment, not

thinking anything, not wanting to think. Then he drew his revolver and walked toward the man and the fire and the horse, still leading his own animal.

"Hello, Jeff."

Ran had his back to him, didn't even bother to look around. There was a tin can straddling two rocks with some water and coffee in it. Ran poked lazily at the fire, then turned slowly, grinning.

"My horse went lame," he said. "I got this far and then decided what the hell. Want some coffee."

"No, thanks."

Ran shrugged. Suddenly he laughed. "You're a long way from home, Jeff. What's a ranger doing up in this God-forgotten country, anyway?"

"You killed a ranger," Jeff said. "I've got to take you back, Ran."

Ran grinned, as if he hadn't a worry in the world. "Can I drink my coffee first?"

He hadn't changed, Jeff thought. Sitting there long and lazy-looking, blowing into the tin cup. His fur-lined coat was open and Jeff could see the wooden butts of those old Prescott revolvers.

Ran took a swallow of the coffee, swore softly as it burned his tongue. "Jeff," he said, "I've been thinking about something." He looked up. "How's Martha?"

" . . . She's hurt, I guess."

"You were always sweet on her, wasn't you, Jeff? Well, after you take me back to Texas and they hang me, maybe you can kind of. . . ."

"That's enough," Jeff said sharply.

Ran shrugged. "I was just thinking." He stretched his long legs and scratched himself. "I acted pretty bad by Martha," he admitted, "but I'll bet she's crazy about me. Isn't she?"

Jeff's throat tightened. " . . . I guess so."

"That's what I thought," Ran said, not laughing but looking as if he might. "Now I've got an idea, Jeff. If you take me to Texas you're going to have to kill me first. Do you think you can do that? Do you know how Martha would hate you if you did it?" He waved Jeff down before he could speak. "Anyway," he said, "you wouldn't kill me, Jeff. We're just like brothers."

Jeff said tightly, "Get up, Ran. We're going."

"Kill me if you want me."

Jeff's hand tightened on the butt of his pistol. He couldn't do it. Not this way, with Ran asking for it.

Ran said soberly, "I know when I've had enough; I've been hounded by the law for two years. Jeff, I'm going over to the Oregon country and get me a piece of land and settle there. You'll never hear of me again."

He looked like a small boy, Jeff thought. He looked tired to death, tired of running.

"You wouldn't kill me, would you, Jeff?"

And Jeff knew he wouldn't. He couldn't. He had traveled a thousand miles to do it, if he had to, but it wasn't in him. Slowly, as if his hand had a mind of its own, Jeff put his gun back in the holster.

"We're friends," Ran said softly. "I knew you wouldn't do it. Why don't you have some coffee, Jeff?"

Jeff rubbed his face. He couldn't think of anything to say or do. They don't make rule books to cover situations like this, he thought. Dumbly, he stepped over to the fire, turning his back to Ran. He didn't want to look at him.

"Of course we're friends," he heard Ran saying again, softly.

Then there was a click.

It wasn't much of a sound, but it was enough to freeze a man's blood if he heard it. Jeff wheeled, seeing that Ran had pulled one of those old Prescotts. The revolver had been pointed directly at Jeff's back when Ran pulled the trigger.

But the Prescott had misfired. Ran's face was a horrible thing to see, full of hate and jealousy as he jerked the hammer back again. Jeff lunged to one side, fell to the

ground as the pistol seemed to explode in his face.

There was no time for reasoning. Jeff only knew that Ran had tried to murder him, might still do it. Somehow, Jeff clawed the pistol out of the holster as he rolled on the ground.

The gun exploded once. Twice.

That's enough, he thought. . . . That's enough. Ran wasn't dead; he had passed out.

A few minutes later he lay sobbing, and holding his right arm which seemed to twist crazily in the sleeve of his coat. Jeff took off the coat and looked at the arm.

"Get up," Jeff said, and he hardly recognized the voice as his own. "We're going."

OVER the rise and through the dust kicked up by the stage team, Jeff could see the gray 'dobe walls of the Ranger headquarters.

The stage stopped at the crossroads, in front of Kirkpatrick's store.

"This is it, Captain," the driver called.

Reluctantly, stiffly, Jeff got out of the coach, caught his traveling case as the driver dropped it down.

"Thanks," he said, and the stage rolled away.

What now? he thought. Could he tell Martha that he had turned Ran over to the Federal officers?

Could he face her?

It has to come some time. It might as well be now.

He picked up the traveling case and walked slowly toward the store. Old man Kirkpatrick came out to the stoop, squinting into the sun, trying to make out who the traveler was.

"Martha," Jeff heard him call. "Martha, you better come here."

She appeared in the doorway, hesitating for a moment as though she didn't actually believe what she saw. She moved out of the store, down the steps.

Jeff said, " . . . I'm sorry, Martha."

He saw that she was crying and that made him feel worse. "I had to do it," he said, "there wasn't any other way." He felt that he had to say something else, so he said again, "I'm sorry."

Her reaction stunned him. "Don't say that again," she said sharply. "All your life you've been sorry for things Ran has done. You've made excuses for him and coddled him and spoiled him. It had to come to this some time. Don't blame yourself for it."

Jeff stood dumbly, not knowing what to say.

"Can't you see," she said, "that somebody had to stop him? Jeff, didn't you know that I was afraid he would kill you? That's why I didn't want you to go after him."

Somehow, then, he had his arms around her.

"Hush," he said softly, "it's all over now."

He hadn't known that a man could be so blind. Ran had always had his own way, with women as with everything else. It had never occurred to him that she hadn't loved Ran—that she had been in fear of him.

Awkwardly, he said, "I have to report to the major pretty soon."

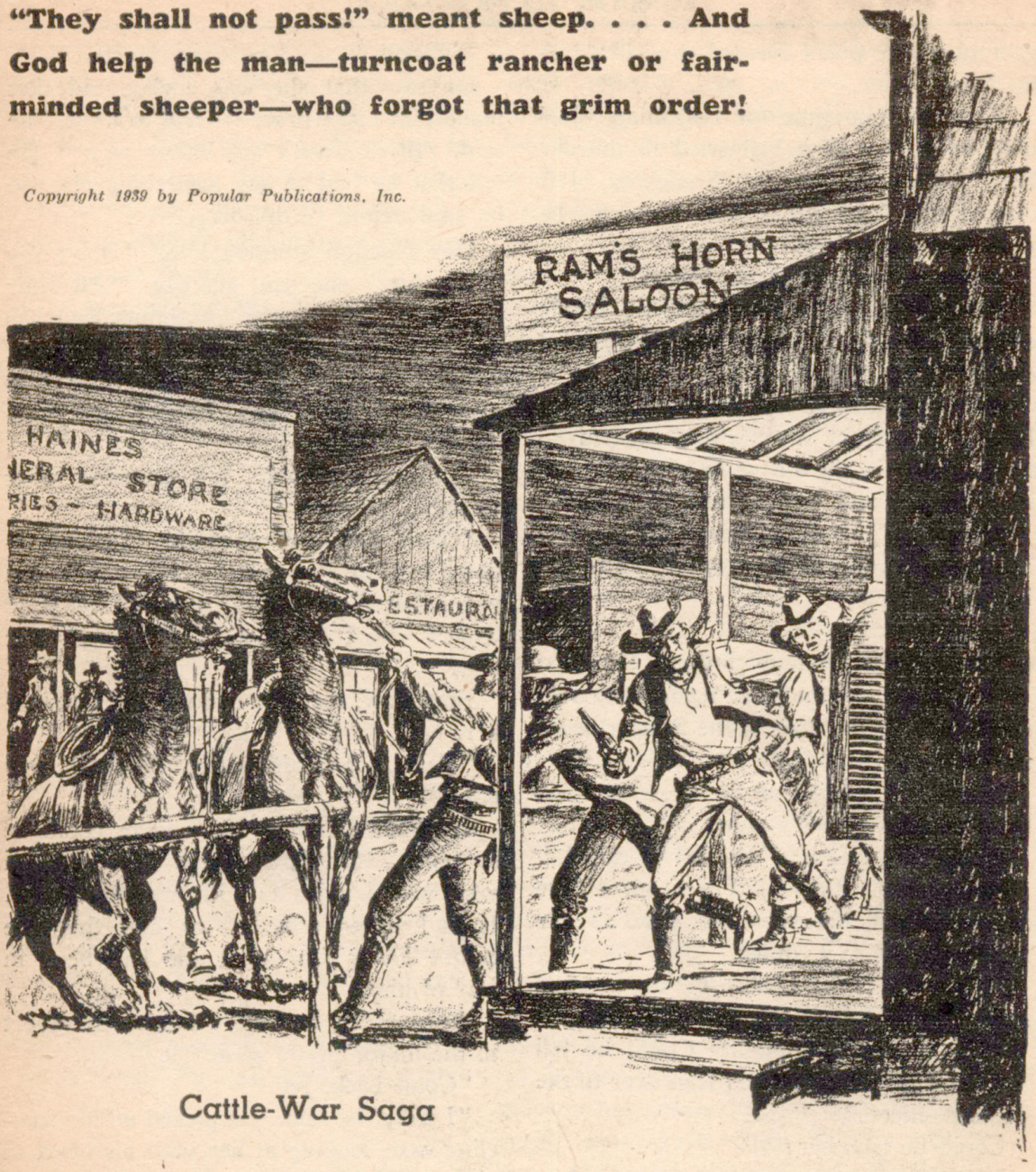
"Come back, Jeff."

"I will," he said. He picked up his traveling case, looking at her with his heart in his eyes. "I will."

He started walking up the red clay road toward the San Juan headquarters. The 'dobe walls shimmered in the Texas heat, the Lone Star hung limp atop the flagpole. He walked heavily, as a man walks who is tired to the point of exhaustion. But, for the first time in many days, he accepted his weariness for what it was—an honest weariness.

There was no shame tainting that weariness. He filled his lungs and walked erect. ■ ■ ■

"They shall not pass!" meant sheep. . . . And God help the man—turncoat rancher or fair-minded sheeper—who forgot that grim order!



Cattle-War Saga

CHAPTER ONE

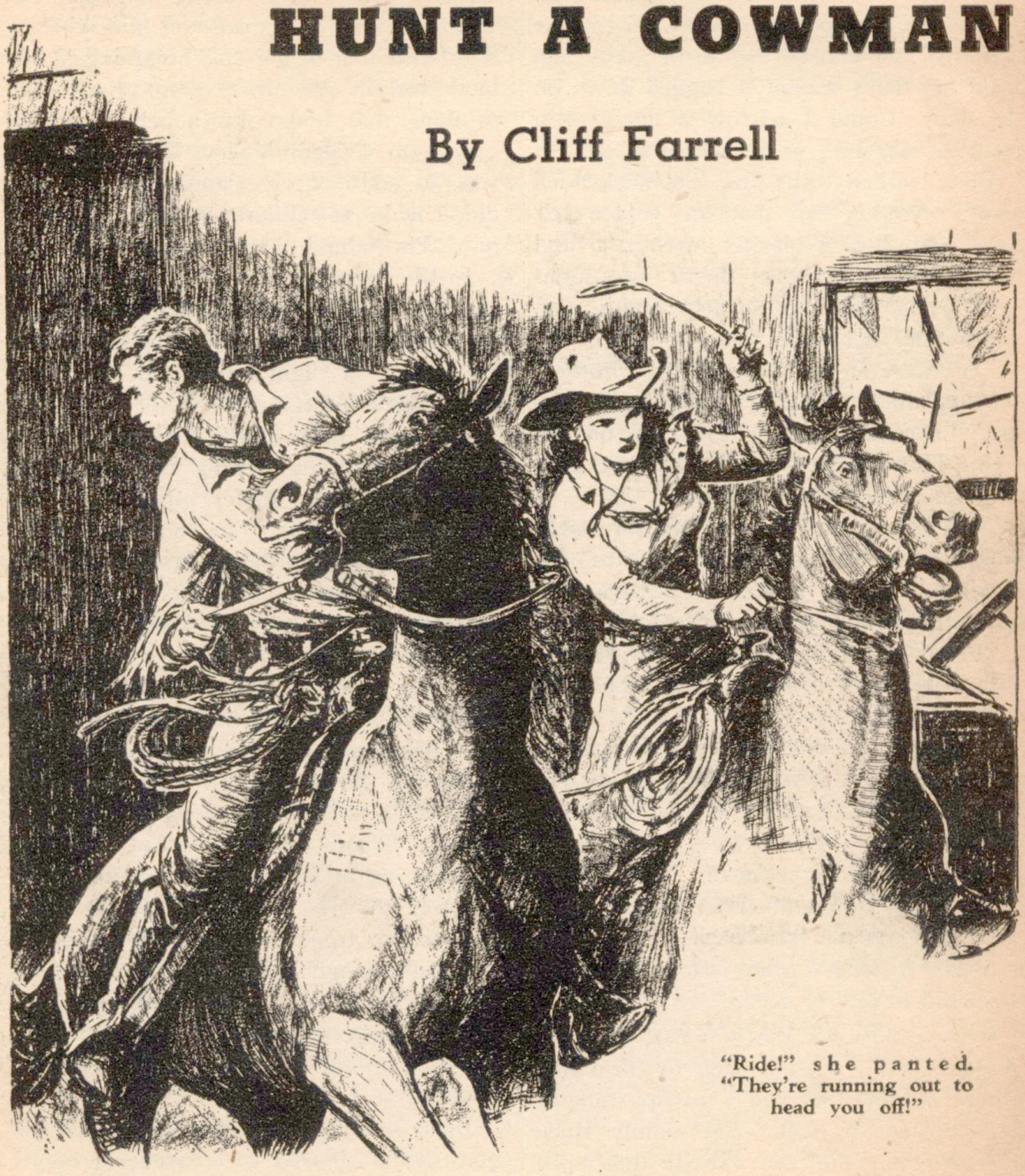
Cowmen, Beware!

THE TRAP that Buck Coldiron fell into that stormy fall night, had a tempting bait in the form of a dashing, blond, blue-eyed girl.

Cold, sleety rain, driven by a moaning wind, beat against the chinked walls of his squatty ranch house. Beef roundup was over, and his four punchers had gone to Laramie to get rid of their wages. Buck, alone at the ranch, could hear the steady drip from the eaves, and the dismal voice of the gale in the pines outside. His slicker and saddle clothes were drying back of the cookstove in the kitchen. He was sitting before the ruddy fire in the little main room, his lank legs stretched

WHEN NEIGHBORS HUNT A COWMAN

By Cliff Farrell



"Ride!" she panted. "They're running out to head you off!"

languorously to its warmth, when he heard that alien sound above the wailing of the storm.

He came to his feet, listening, the slackness gone from his saddle-lean body, his dark eyes intent in a rawboned face. He was wondering if that had only been the lament of a cougar. The big cats sometimes sounded like a weeping woman when they gave voice. It came again. And this time there was no mistake.

He jerked open the outer door. The glow of the fire and the table lamp bored into the rainy wall of darkness, revealing a sobbing girl. She had a slicker wrapped around her shoulders, and hooded over

her head. It framed a woebegone face.

"I—I hate to bother you on a night like this, sir," she choked, her teeth chattering. "But my dad's wagon is bogged down on the trail. Could I borrow a horse or a team to help drag us out of the mud?"

Buck led her to the fire. The slicker fell away, revealing hair that was golden yellow. She wore a blanket mackinaw, and heavy woolen breeches thrust into high-laced boots. She was shapely, and young, and mighty attractive.

"We were on our way to Three Forks," she explained, huddling gratefully by the fire. "But darkness overtook us on the trail. Then we got stuck. We'll be glad to pay for the use of a team."

Buck made her stay by the fire. He took the harness team out of the barn. By lantern light, he located a big, canvas-hooded boomer's wagon, down to its hubs on the trail. A wizened, thin-nosed man with faded eyes was puttering around it, cursingly helplessly.

Buck dragged the heavily laden prairie wagon out of the bog hole, and insisted that the travelers camp at his house for the night.

The man gladly accepted. "I'm Harley Teal, from Ioway, mister," he explained. "We sold out the farm back there, aimin' to move to Idaho where we hear there's new land to be had cheap."

Buck Coldiron's ranch house, there in Trigger Valley, wasn't lonely or silent that night. Harley Teal had a gossipy tongue, and he kept it busy. But mainly Buck kept watching the trim-waisted, full-lipped girl. Flora Teal didn't have much to say, but she looked at Buck often and smiled.

It wasn't more than an hour before Buck was certain that he had fallen in love with Flora Teal. He kept trying to think of witty, brilliant things to say, but all he could utter was monosyllables. He was wishing that he had shaved a little more carefully that night, and had put on his white shirt instead of the gray flannel one.

After they had turned in, he lay wrapped up in soogans on the kitchen floor, listening to her soft breathing in his bunk bed in the other room. Buck was thinking that Idaho was a hell of a long way from Trigger Valley, Wyoming. She was a sod-buster's daughter, but that didn't make any difference the way he felt now. He wanted to keep her in this range.

In the morning, Flora looked fresh and alluring in a low-necked blouse, and the peg-topped breeches which fitted her to perfection. A night's rest had made her cheeks pink and full and soft.

The rain had ended, and the clouds were breaking up, letting the sun come through. Trigger Valley glistened in the clear morning light. The snow-clad peaks of the Minarets to the west stood out like a crystal bulwark. The lush, rich flats along the creek were dotted with fat, grazing beef.

"Purty country," Harley Teal marveled, staring from a window. "That soil along the crick looks like it's grown wheat an' alfalfa to a fare-you-well."

"This is all cow country," Buck corrected. "There are five outfits, includin' my own, in the valley. We work in a pool. Between the five of us, we own all along the stream, from the mountain to where it drops through Long Gorge there to the north. Ownin' the water rights, we control all the graze from the bald hills off to the east, to the rimrock of the Minarets to the west."

Buck saddled up gentle horses for his guests, and showed them over his range. Harley Teal became more interested, the longer he looked at those rich flats along the stream.

"How much bottom land do you own, Buck?" he asked.

"Four miles on both sides," Buck explained. "I was born in this valley, weaned an' turned out to grass here. The Coldirons helped pioneer this place, but I'm the only one of the breed left."

"Four miles," Teal marveled, and clucked his lips. "I'd give my right leg to sink a plow in that black soil. I could git a crop of winter wheat in yet this year. I've lost my interest in Idaho after seein' this. Maybe you'd like to sell a farmer a dab of that land? About two hundred an' forty acres. I've got ready cash, if the price is right."

Flora turned, her lips parting in an eager smile. She clapped her hands, pleased. "How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I'd love it here."

Buck shook his head reluctantly. "Don't see how I could do it," he muttered. "Us brand owners have an understanding that we won't sell creek frontage, except to each other."

"You mean they don't want farmers in this range," Harley Teal challenged, disappointed.

"It ain't exactly that," Buck said uncomfortably. "It's sheep we got to think about. There's a big woolly outfit, the other side of the Minarets, that's greedy to shove us out of here. It's owned by four Nichols brothers. They'd like nothin' better than to sheep us out. As long as we control the water frontage they can't do a thing."

"Sheep," Teal snorted. "I hate the smell o' mutton. I'm a farmer, not a sheepman. I aim to raise alfalfa, an' wheat an' corn. As a practical stockman you know that a handy hay ranch is mighty valuable a thing to have around."

"It sure would be," Buck agreed. "Feed comes high when you have to freight it a hundred miles from the railroad."

"Then you will sell dad enough land to farm?" Flora spoke up eagerly. She pulled her horse closer, laying a hand on Buck's arm, smiling up at him with big, pleading eyes.

Buck couldn't hold out. He found himself nodding, and Flora, with a little scream of delight, leaned from the saddle, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "That's for being so agreeable, Buck," she told him.

* * *

An uneasy qualm struck Buck after he

had come down to earth a trifle. He wondered what the other ranchers in the pool would think about it. Crusty old Sid Zeigler and seamy Pony Miller would hit the ceiling, he feared. And there was Ruth Webb, his nearest neighbor to the north, who was running her little Leaning Tree spread single-handed since the death of her father. He flinched as he thought of having to face Ruth Webb's searching gray eyes.

But he had given his word. Harley Teal brought a surveyor from town the next morning. They staked out a level stretch of land west of the creek, a mile above Buck's ranch house. They arranged the reconveyance that same afternoon, in Three Forks, for Teal explained that he was in a hurry to break soil.

Buck was secretly wishing that Teal had preferred the east side of the creek, instead of the west. It was to the west, over the Minaret rim, that the big sheep empire owned by the four tough, range-greedy Nichols brothers lay. Those rich benches on the west side of the valley furnished the cowmen with their only source of winter feed. If sheep came in there before snowfall and grazed off those sheltered draws and flats. . .

As he left the recorder's office after the sale of the land, Buck's eyes narrowed as he watched two men who lounged in front of the Pug Nose Bar, across the rutted cowtown street. It wasn't often that any of the Nichols brothers came across the mountain to Three Forks. They had their own stronghold in Shotgun, a sheeptown in their own territory.

Gar Nichols was idly picking his teeth. He was an underslung bulldog of a man, with stringy roan-colored hair and pale, shrewd eyes set in a brown, fleshy face. Oldest of the four brothers, he was said to be a hard-headed businessman, and handy with fists or a gun in a fight. With him stood the youngest of the four brothers. Sul Nichols, who was about Buck's age, stood an inch over six feet, and weighed two hundred and twenty pounds. He was all bone and gristle. In spite of his size he was light-footed and quick. Men said that Sul Nichols could have been heavyweight champion of the world, had he gone into the ring. Instead, he had become a past-master in the art of barroom fighting.

The two Nichols looked at Buck and Harley Teal, and at the blond, dashing girl. Sul grinned coldly. He and Buck had traded punches more than once as young buttons. They were grown men now, and hadn't clashed for fifteen years, but they remembered that boyhood feud.

Then the two sheepmen mounted flashy, half-thoroughbred saddle horses, and loped out of town, heading for their own range.

An increasing uneasiness filled Buck's mind as he rode back to his ranch, but he felt like a traitor whenever he looked at Flora Teal.

CHAPTER TWO

Sheep Across the Deadline

BUCK was corraling the horses, and Flora and her father had gone into the house, when a rider came out of the early twilight.

"Howdy, pardner," a musical voice challenged him.

The dark-haired girl who rode up on a shaggy cow pony had clear gray eyes, and a straight, frank mouth. Wearing a duck saddle jacket, divided denim skirt and spurred half boots, she had a well-worn saddle rope coiled in front of her knee. She wore gauntlets and leather cuffs.

Ruth Webb could rope and tie a calf about as neatly as the average top hand. Her Leaning Tree brand stacked up as prime and clean as any in the pool. She could cook, and she could dance. And she could shoot a gun. Buck had seen her knock over a running coyote at two hundred yards.

She and Buck had grown up together in Trigger Valley. They had ridden range together, fished and hunted deer more times than he could remember. But he had never really looked at her as he would at a woman. Only as a pal. Someone to josh and hooraw around, or to turn to for advice on cooking or fixing up a house.

"Where've you been keeping yourself?" she asked with easy comradeship. "You missed the schoolhouse dance last night."

"Dance?" Buck said vaguely.

At that instant Flora came out of the house. She retreated hastily when she saw that Buck had a feminine visitor. Ruth Webb stared after the blond girl. Her gray eyes turned swiftly to Buck, and for that instant there was a deep, vast pain there. But Buck didn't see that.

"It's Miss Teal," he explained. "Her an' her dad are stayin' with me a few days. They're pilgrims from Iowa."

"A rather pretty pilgrim," Ruth Webb commented. "So that's why you forgot the dance last night, Buck?"

"I been showin' them around," Buck admitted.

Ruth's cheeks carried more color than usual. There was a glow of impatient anger deep in her eyes. She was carrying a paper bag that contained a cherry pie. It was fresh-baked by her own hands, and she had ridden five miles to deliver it to Buck, because she knew cherry pie was his favorite dessert.

She started to dismount, balancing the bag precariously. Her spur seemed to catch in the rigging. She gave a gasp, and in an apparent effort to avert a fall, she threw away the pie. It struck Buck squarely in the face. It squashed, and the paper bag burst. He was blinded by gooey juice and red cherries. The mangled pie slithered down his white shirt. He was a sight.

"Oh!" Ruth said calmly. "I'm so sorry. Perhaps your taffy-haired visitor will clean you up."

She swung back into the saddle, whirled her horse and spurred away. Buck scraped crust and cherries off his face and shirt. "Blast her hide," he blazed. "She did that on purpose."

Flora Teal came from the house, her eyes glittering in resentment as she stared after the departing girl. "Your friend wasn't jealous of me, I hope," she said.

"She's a little hell-cat," Buck snorted. "For half a cent I'd round her up, an' rub her face in the mud. I'd—"

He turned. Three more riders were loping out of the dusk. Buck stiffened. There was old Sig Zeigler in his beaded Indian vest. He was a grizzled beanpole, with a gray-stubbled chin. With him was Pony Miller who had a drooping longhorn mustache. The third man was Jeb Dexter, lean, hard-bitten, who owned the last spread at the north end of the valley.

They dismounted without invitation. Sid Zeigler looked at Buck with keen eyes, and turned to appraise Flora Teal. With a mumbled excuse, she hurried back to the house.

"The county clerk rode out to the place this afternoon, tellin' me some wild yarn about you sellin' crick frontage to a stranger, Buck," the old rancher said, clearing his throat, "me'n Pony an' Jeb figgered we'd better ask you about it."

"Yeah," Buck said. "I thought a hay ranch in the valley would be an asset. I've sold a few acres to Harley Teal, a pilgrim from Iowa."

There was a moment of tense silence. "If you was in need of cash you could have come to us, Buck," Sid remarked.

"It wasn't that," Buck returned, beginning to steam up. "Why are you lookin' at me like that? There's no harm in havin' one settler in the valley."

"It was sort of understood that nobody would sell water frontage unless all the others, includin' Ruthie Webb, had first refusal," Sid snapped. "Who is this man, Harley Teal?"

"I told you he was a settler from Iowa.

He had sold his farm back there, and wants to settle here right away."

"If this pilgrim was to sell out to the Nichols brothers, you know where we'd be," old Pony Miller grated. "Busted. They'd sheep us out in a hurry."

"Teal's an honest man," Buck said doggedly.

He could see that they were worried and enraged, as they rode away. In his heart, he couldn't blame them. In the early days they had fought off sheep, and only by frugality and hard work had they been able to buy up or preempt all the land along the creek, to insure their grip on the valley. Once they controlled the water with their thin chain of land ownership, the pressure from sheep interests ended. Controlling the creek, the cattle pool also controlled the adjoining benches and back range which was public domain.

Now, because Buck Coldiron had fallen under the spell of a dazzling pair of blue eyes, there was a weak link in the chain.

Buck didn't sleep any too well that night. He kept trying to convince himself that everything was all right. But in the morning, he had a feeling that Flora's smile had chilled considerably. And for the first time he noticed that she used considerable paint and powder to enhance her flashy beauty.

Harley Teal also was in a sudden rush to break away from Buck's hospitality. "We'll camp on my land," he said. "I'm in a lather to begin breakin' sod."

Teal drove away in the wagon with his daughter, refusing Buck's offer to help. And the girl even forgot to look back and wave good-by to Buck as they headed up the creek.

Buck had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He puttered around the ranch most of the day, but he couldn't get his mind off of Flora Teal. Her allure had acted on him like a drug. His infatuation was the sudden, unreasoning emotion of a man who had not given much serious thought in the past to the opposite sex.

HE SADDLED up in the afternoon and rode up the creek, hoping to talk to Flora. The big covered wagon was sitting out in the land that he had sold to Teal, with the horses picketed on the graze nearby. But there was no sign of Teal or his daughter, or any evidence that Teal had started laying out a farm.

Buck was frowning as he rode back to his ranch at dusk. As he swung down at the corral, he heard a rider coming at a fast clip. It was Ruth Webb. She pulled up on a lathered horse.

"Buck," she said sharply, "you'd better race over to Sid Zeigler's place—pronto."

"What's up?" he asked.

Her answer came after a moment's pause.

"The Nichols brothers are shoving a big bunch of sheep through Bucktail Pass tonight," she said slowly. "This man you know as Harley Teal sold that creek frontage to the sheepmen this afternoon. It belongs to the Nichols brothers now."

Buck stared at the trim, tanned girl. He uttered a bitter groan of despair. "Played for a sucker," he burst out.

Ruth Webb offered no word of sympathy or condemnation. "Pile your top horse, Buck," she urged again. "The boys are talking wild. It's war. They aim to stop the sheep as they come out of the pass. They know they're beaten legally, but they figure to trade some lead with the sheepmen anyway. They'll need every fighting man."

Buck caught up the fastest horse in his string. He accepted the six-shooter and rifle that Ruth brought from the house. "God!" he said miserably. "An' it was me that sold you an' the rest of the outfits out to sheepmen. I fell for a pretty face, like a baby for a stick of candy."

"You're not the first man that's been taken in by a blond cutie." Ruth shrugged. "Don't be reckless because you blame yourself. Stopping a sheepman's bullet won't do any good now."

There was a catch in Ruth's voice. And there were tears in her eyes, as Buck sped away. She caught up a fresh horse from his remuda, and followed him five minutes later.

Self-reproach overwhelmed Buck as he headed for Sid Zeigler's Twenty Bar ranch house. Like a man emerging from a daze, he saw how easily he had been taken in. The stage-setting had been perfect. A stormy night, a flashy girl in distress, and a lonely and unsuspicious young cowman.

Buck hated to think of facing his neighboring ranchers. They didn't have a chance of beating off this sheep invasion. The Nichols brothers had legal access to the creek now. The valley would be sheeped out relentlessly. Woollies would descend on the west benches like grasshoppers, leaving nothing for the more choosey horned stock. Cattle could not exist alongside sheep.

Men were grouped in Sid Zeigler's ranchyard as Buck rode up, talking with loud desperation. A dead silence fell as they identified him. Sid Zeigler towered among them. Pony Miller and Jeb Dexter were there, and eight or ten punchers from the various outfits. All had rifles jutting from their saddles.

Buck slid to the ground. "Count me in," he said grimly.

Jeb Dexter uttered a snort of rage. "So you kin sell us out to the sheepers again?" he jeered.

"I'll take that from you, Jeb," Buck said tonelessly, "because I've got it coming, I reckon, an' because you an' me was always good friends."

"We ain't friends no longer," the hot-tempered rancher shouted. "Go back to your sheep-walkin' pals. You don't belong here, an' ain't wanted."

Old Pony Miller, who had been an Indian fighter in his younger days, stepped forward. "He ain't goin' back to his pals tonight," he said ominously. "No tellin' how long he's been standin' out there and listenin' to us. I'd hate to walk into an ambush up there on the mountain."

And Pony Miller jammed a six-shooter into Buck's stomach.

"We'd better tie him up an' leave him here," he added.

There was a rumble of assent. Buck was white-lipped "You don't really think I'd do a thing like that?" he breathed, aghast.

"We ain't takin' any chances," Jeb snapped. "Maybe you didn't know that little blond susie was really Dude Nichols' girl. Or that this Harley Teal wasn't her father at all, but only a ham actor the Nichols brothers picked up to help run a blaze on you. Then ag'in maybe you knew all about it from taw, an' was workin hand in glove with the sheepers to run us out'n the valley."

"I won't take that, even from you, Jeb," Buck exploded, and sent a fist crashing into the cowman's face.

An avalanche of men descended on Buck, then. He fought back, but it was mainly to protect himself, for he was appalled by the knowledge that these men were the ones he regarded as his best friends.

They overpowered him, and tied him hand and foot. Sid Zeigler glared down at him. "We're doin' this to make damned sure you don't go runnin' back to that girl, warnin' her that we're on our way to blast some of them sheepers to kingdom come. Killin' off a few of the Nichols brothers is about the only satisfaction we'll ever git out of this rotten deal you handed us, Coldiron. Our ranches are as good as gone. We'll be sheeped out of this valley by spring."

The gaunt cowman turned away. "Let's roll, boys," he said.

They dragged Buck into the shadow of the bunkhouse, piled their horses, and thundered away toward the mountains.

The disgrace of it lay on Buck with damning weight. He held no rancor to-

ward the ranchers for their actions. He accepted full blame, and lay there torn by self-reproach and regret.

He heard the faint hoofbeats of a lone rider somewhere out in the brush. The sounds receded. It suddenly occurred to him that the sheepmen might have had a spy hunkered out there, listening to the angry war council the cattlemen had held. If so, the chances were that the ranchers would find themselves in an ambush on the mountain.

Buck began to fight his bonds frenziedly. But they had been tied by expert hands. After an age, a rider loomed out of the darkness. It was Ruth Webb. She dismounted with a gasp.

"What happened?" she breathed. "Why are you—"

"They tied me up, fearin' I'd betray them," he said bitterly. "Cut me loose, Ruth. I got a hunch they're heading into trouble. I heard someone ride away after they had pulled out. It might have been a Nichols man, listenin' in on their plans."

She ran to the ranch house, brought a knife and freed him. "They said she was Dude Nichols' girl." He spoke tonelessly, as he came to his feet. "I was played for a fool all right."

"Don't let this poison your mind," Ruth protested. "All women aren't cheats, Buck. Nor all men. You've always been a fool where women were concerned. You set them on a pedestal, and think there's nothing but good in them."

"I've learned my lesson," he said bitterly, as he swung into the saddle and touched his horse with steel.

He sped across Trigger Creek, and up the rising benches. The night was clear, and the luminous glow of a rising moon etched out the wall of mountains, and showed the notch that was Bucktail Pass. He had cleared the timbered hills to the east, when he eased down his horse to listen. A mile ahead, he could see the needle buttes, guarding the shallow draw that came down from the high pass. The soft night wind brought a faint, distant murmur. Sheep! He stirred his horse, and rode ahead again.

Then gunfire broke the silence of the mountain bench, far ahead. He could see the flash of guns, tiny and distant, and hear the faint reports. He spurred faster, but after a minute or two he pulled to a stop again.

CHAPTER THREE

Outcast Cowman

RIDERS were coming down the bench toward him at a wild gallop. The shooting had ceased. The horsemen came nearer, and in the moonlight he made out Sid Zeigler's tall form in the lead. Sid was clutching a bullet-broken arm. A wounded puncher from Ruth Webb's ranch was sagging in the arms of a comrade who rode double behind him.

Buck stared at two riderless horses which clattered along with the cursing, wild-eyed man. He rode up to them, shouting his name. Sid Zeigler's head lifted, and Buck saw the insane fury in the old man's eyes.

"So that's how the trap was set," Sid screeched. And he jerked a gun and fired at Buck. His sudden motion spooked his horse, and the animal reared as he tripped the trigger. That saved Buck's life. The bullet went wide.

Before Zeigler could steady himself for another shot, Buck had crowded his horse alongside, and knocked the gun aside. "You fool," he panted. "I was only coming to help you. What happened back there? Where's Pony Miller?"

It was Jeb Dexter who answered that. "Back there," he snarled. "Dead! Killed by them damned sheepmen. An' Swede Johnson from Ruth Webb's crew went under too. We run into an ambush. Somebody tipped the Nichols brothers that we

was comin'. They shot hell out'n us. I reckon we didn't tie you up tight enough, Coldiron."

Buck stared at them, stunned. "You don't really think I warned them, do you?" he breathed.

They were fanning out to surround him. He saw the unreasoning glare in their eyes. Recognizing his danger, he whirled his horse away. It was death to stand there. They were in no mood to listen to explanations. They had walked into a trap, seen their comrades go down under the fire of hidden guns, and they believed Buck was responsible.

"Shoot down the damned traitor," Sid Zeigler bellowed.

They opened up on him, but Buck's horse carried him into the gloom of the timber, before they could bracket him with their lead. They came racing in pursuit, but in the gloom of the trees, they lost him. Buck veered away, outdistanced them. After a time, he reached a canyon higher up the mountain. He was safe now.

Safe! Safe from his own friends. Safe from the men he had grown up with, and who had suddenly turned on him like avenging demons, believing that he had betrayed some of them to their doom.

Buck's eyes were dull with bitter remorse. He hated himself, and held no one to blame but himself. He had brought this disaster on Trigger Valley.

He thought it over as he gave his horse a rest. The Nichols brothers owned the land that he had sold to Harley Teal. There was no legal way of forcing them to give it up. But there might be other methods. Buck recalled what he knew about the four brothers. He was remembering their arrogance, their conceited ways, and their fighting reputations of which they were so proud.

There was only one way to regain possession of that strip of creek frontage that was being used as a noose to strangle the entire cow range below. The Nichols brothers must sell it back. He saw clearly that to make them sell, he must shatter their pride, destroy their reputations as fighting men, break them to his will.

It was a big order. Buck rolled a cigarette as he thought it over. The flare of the match showed a queer, harsh smile on his mouth. "I'll break them," he said aloud. "One by one. I'll break them or they'll break me."

Sheep came rolling over Bucktail Pass in gray hordes, beating a trail to Trigger Creek, through the strip that Buck Coldiron had sold. They watered there, and were then turned out to graze on the benches. The cowmen watched the flocks creep into their winter grazing reserve, and they began making plans for moving out of the range, abandoning it to sheep.

In Shotgun, the sheeptown on the west flank of the Minarets, the Nichols brothers were celebrating their victory.

Sul Nichols bought drinks for the house in the Ram's Horn Bar, which was crowded with leathery-faced herders, shearers and pasture bosses. A big, lithely gray range hat hung carelessly on his mop of rust-red hair.

"They're yellow from brisket to backbone," Sul repeated, pounding the bar. "Cowmen! Bah. They folded up like wet rags when the showdown come."

Two more of the brothers were present in the honkytonk. Dude Nichols, the handsome, natty member of the sheep-ranching family, sat at a table, his arm around the waist of a flashy blond entertainer. The girl was Flora Teal, though that was only one of the names she had used in a checkered career, in cowtown and sheeptown honkytonks throughout the West. Dude Nichols was said to be a knife man, preferring cold steel to bullets or fists in a fight. Conceited and vain, he always dressed in expensive saddle clothes, and strutted for the benefit of the opposite sex.

Playing poker at another table was Lute

Nichols, thin-nosed, slit-eyed, and wearing rough saddle garb. Lute Nichols had a cedar-handled six-shooter hung on his thigh. He had killed three or four men in gun duels in the past. He was a saturnine, cold-tempered man, dangerous to cross.

Only Gar Nichols, the brawny elder of the family, was absent.

At the bar, big Sul was enlarging on his sneering opinion of cattlemen. Whiskey always made him ugly-tempered, and he was spoiling for a fight. He loved to maul a man to pulp with his fists. He enjoyed his reputation as a bruiser.

"I'd as soon shoot a cowman as I would a coyote," he was declaring. "They're all same in the long run, an'—"

He became aware of a sudden silence. Turning, he found a lean, wiry six-foot man moving to the bar at his elbow. It was Buck Coldiron. Buck was cleanly shaven, and wore a fresh, white cotton shirt. He was not packing a gun.

"Kinda taking in a sweep of territory, ain't you, Sul?" he asked. There was a thin, hard smile on Buck's straight lips.

Sul shoved a whiskey bottle away, and greedy anticipation showed in his tawny eyes. "Damned if it ain't our heart-bustin' heel-dawg from Trigger Valley," he guffawed. "You sure did us a good turn, Coldiron, when you fell so damned hard for Dude's gal. We all owe you somethin'."

BUCK'S icy smile remained fixed. "I figure you boys will be wantin' to sell that water frontage back to me before long, Sul," he said. "What do you think?"

"Sell?" Sul uttered a chuckle of derision. "Not 'til they turn hell into a church, feller."

"Suppose you an' me go into the back room and talk it over?" Buck proposed tersely.

Sul's grin faded. He looked at Buck closely. "Talk it over?" he questioned, significantly.

"Or maybe see who's the better man," Buck added. "You an' me had trouble as buttons, Sul. We never found out which one of us was tops. How about settlin' the question now?"

Dead silence had fallen over the honky-tonk. Flora Teal was staring, a scornful smile on her lips, but Buck never even glanced at her. Sul was blinking a little. He took another look at Buck. They were of the same height, but Sul was twenty pounds heavier, and he had wide experience as a rough and tumble fighter. His eyes lighted.

"Come on, feller," he snarled. "I'm goin' to enjoy this."

Sul tossed his gunbelt on the bar, and led the way into a private poker room at the rear. Buck bolted the door behind him as he stepped in. There were two windows, but no other door.

"You're goin' to take a man's size mauling, Coldiron," Sul promised. "This is to a finish."

"To a finish, Sul," Buck agreed. "I'm going to put the fear of God in you. This will be only the first lesson. Some day, you and your brothers will be damned glad to sell that Trigger Creek frontage back to cow people, at their own price."

They circled each other warily for a moment. This grudge dated back to days when they were striplings, when Sul had tried to ingratiate himself with the gray-eyed, slim-legged Ruth Webb, only to have her spurn him and seek Buck Coldiron's company. Sul had never given up hope of winning Ruth Webb. He believed Buck was the man who stood in his way.

Sul closed in with lightning speed, feinting with a left, weaving low and smashing for the solar plexus with a right. Buck rolled aside, the punch doing no damage. He snapped Sul's head back with a right cross that sent the bigger man back on his heels. Sul retreated until he had shaken the cobwebs from his brain.

He came in, leaping, and aiming a boot

at Buck's body. Buck caught his leg, upending him with a crash that caused the listening crowd outside the door to wince and stare at each other.

Sul rolled, snatched up a chair, and rushed in, panting. Buck could not entirely evade the chair. It glanced from his head, and he reeled back into a corner, his head spinning dizzily. He dove at Sul's legs, bringing the big man down, but he took fearful punishment as they rolled over and over on the floor. They crashed into the poker table, upending and crushing it, and fought fiercely amid its ruins.

Buck tore away from Sul's thick fingers which were seeking a gouging grip on his face. He came to his knees, and drove four punches into the man's face. Sul's broad features became a bloody, bruised shambles under that trip-hammer attack.

They staggered to their feet. Buck took a blow to the mouth, and caught Sul with a body punch that brought a wheeze of agony. Sul began to bend. Buck straightened him with a punch. Then he knocked him cold with two more blows.

Sul Nichols fell forward on his face, tried to rise, but slumped down, limp and unconscious.

Buck's shirt was in ribbons, and he was weak and giddy. Hands began to pound the door. "Sul!" That was the voice of the gun-fighting Lute Nichols.

Buck smashed the glass from a rear window with a chair leg, and crawled through. He knew that Lute would shoot him down if he attempted to walk out by way of the door. The fighting reputation of the Nichols brothers was at stake now.

Buck had left his horse at the rear of the honkytonk, in anticipation of just such a hasty departure. As he ran unsteadily toward it, he discovered another rider standing ready.

A firm little hand helped him into the saddle. He found himself looking into Ruth Webb's face. She wore male garb.

"Ride!" she panted. "They're running out to head you off."

She used a quirt on the horses. Together, they sped through the shabby back areas of the sheeptown, and into the darkness of the mountainside. Shouts arose behind them, but faded away as they built up distance.

"I located your camp in that canyon we found, when we were fishing for trout," she explained. "I followed you this afternoon when you headed for the sheeptown. What are you trying to do, Buck, get yourself killed?"

Buck grinned crookedly from a bruised face. "Just a little pressure to make the Nichols brothers see things my way. That's only the first move in the game of checkers."

She forced him to stop at a stream where she bathed his bruised face with her handkerchief.

He rode with her until she was safely over the rim and within striking distance of her own ranch. Then he pulled up.

"Thanks, Ruth," he said slowly. "I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. I'm hoping to right one of them now."

There was a sob in her voice. "You can't do this alone," she protested. "It's hopeless. You'll never break them. They're too many for you, too tough and dangerous."

"I'm goin' through with it," he said grimly. "Until they stop me, at least. I owe that much to you an' the other ranchers that I betrayed."

He turned and left her there, a forlorn figure, while he turned his horse and headed back to sheep country.

CHAPTER FOUR

Breaker of Men

THE story of Sul Nichols' defeat in that locked room was still being whispered around the range, whenever none of the brothers was within hearing.

Three nights later, the prestige of the Nichols brothers received another terrific jolt. It was after dark when a fast-moving rider, carrying a limp form over his arm, swept into Shotgun. He came spurring down the street, forced his animal on the plank platform in front of the Ram's Horn. And into the gaudy door of the honkytonk, he tossed his prisoner.

The victim was the fastidious, handsome Dude Nichols. The Beau Brummel of the range was now a ludicrous-looking object. He had been stripped of his fine linen and whipcord, and coated with axle grease and chicken feathers. He had been given a fancy haircut with a pair of sheep shears. All that was left was a little black topknot of sleek hair.

Dude Nichols crouched there while startled faces stared at him in the honkytonk. He was screaming with rage and humiliation. "It was that damned devil, Buck Coldiron," he frothed. "He roped me on the trail, an' did this to me."

Bystanders didn't dare laugh as they looked at the man who had been the range dandy. It was death to show amusement, for Lute Nichols was present. Lute's face was livid with fury. He had always been contemptuous of his vainglorious brother.

He shoved the grease-smeared Dude out of the honkytonk.

"Git out sight," he snarled. "Why did you have to come to town so everybody could take a look at you? You've made a laughin' stock out'n all of us."

Lute Nichols went back into the honkytonk. "I'm killin' the first man that mentions this," he said coldly. "An' I'm shootin' Buck Coldiron on sight."

"No, yuh don't, Lute," growled Sul, who was present, wearing the bruises of his encounter with Buck. "I deserve another chance at that bucko."

Big Sul got his chance sooner than he expected. He was riding back toward the sheep ranch at midnight that same night, accompanied by one of the pasture bosses, when a shadowy figure rose up from a boulder in the faint moonlight.

It was Buck, with a gun in his fist. "Lift 'em, Sul," he commanded. "An' you too, sheeper."

He disarmed them, and tied the pasture boss to a tree. The bound man was a witness to what followed. Buck gave big Sul a chance to put up his fists once more. And, there in the moonlight, he took Sul to a second, merciless trimming. Sul Nichols was a broken, frightened man before that fight was finished. He was whimpering for mercy and seeking to crawl away.

"How do you feel about turnin' that valley land back to cow people, Sul?" Buck kept asking as he battered him.

"Anything," the dazed, beaten man mumbled. "Only don't hit me ag'in."

The pasture boss was a witness, and he couldn't keep the secret. The word got around that Sul Nichols had eaten crow when put to the test.

Sul didn't have the courage to show his face in Shotgun after that. And Dude Nichols, turned down by Flora Teal, and knowing that the whole range was laughing at him behind his back, could not face it out either. He pulled out for Cheyenne, where he began drinking harder, to drown the memory of his humiliation.

Lute Nichols, and the elder brother, Gar, were awake to what was in the wind now. Gar Nichols, big, heavy-joweled, with brawny shoulders and a thick powerful body, cursed like a madman.

"We got to stop this night-riding devil, Lute," he raged, pacing the room at their sheep ranch. "He's out to break our nerve. No tellin' what he'll pull next. Lay for him. Rimrock the country until you get him under your gun sights. Then let him have it an' leave him for the buzzards."

Lute Nichols patted his gun. "I'll take care o' him," he promised, with a sneer at big Sul, who sat dispiritedly in the room. "Now that Sul and Dude have got their

tails between their legs it's time for the men to take hold."

The thin-eyed Lute saddled up, and pulled out for the Minarets within an hour, taking with him a dark-skinned half-breed trailer who knew every game path in the mountains.

As Lute and his half-breed companion rode away from the sheep ranch, a watching man in the timber, two miles up the benches, put a pair of battered field glasses back into the saddle pocket of his horse, and withdrew into deeper cover. Buck Coldiron had been watching the sheep ranch every day from that vantage point, and had kept track of the movements of the four brothers.

He knew Lute was on his trail now, and he knew that, if they met, the story would be written in gunsmoke and hot lead.

Buck sight-trailed the pair of riders for an hour, keeping to cover, scanning the country ahead. And at last he found the setting he wanted for his next move.

A small stream curved through a grassy boulder-strewn flat ahead. There was a ten-foot cutbank at one point. Below the bank was a stretch of dry sand along the margin of the stream. It was an ideal camp site, partly masked by the cutbank on one side, and willows on the opposite margin of the stream.

Lute Nichols and the breed had vanished into cover of the lodgepole pines on a high hogback ridge which commanded a full view of the flat from a mile's distance. Buck rode out into the open flat, crossing it toward the stream. He did not even glance toward the hogback to the north, though he kept turning in the saddle, looking over his backtrail like a man afraid of pursuit.

Buck dropped into the creek bed, and pulled up below the cutbank. The highest point of the distant hogback jutted up so that it overlooked this hide-out. Buck caught the flash of field glasses in the sun, and knew they were watching him.

He went through all the motions of a man throwing off for an hour's rest in this shelter. He picketed his horse and stretched out on the sand.

He lay there, giving them time to leave the ridge and begin stalking him. Then he arose, climbed the cutbank, and pulled himself cautiously over the top into the shelter of a boulder, just over the rim.

HE LAY there motionless in the grass. Long minutes passed. Then he heard the faint rustling of grass nearby. He flattened lower. The sounds advanced to his left. Presently Lute Nichols appeared, ten yards away. Lying on his stomach, Lute was working his way forward, like an Indian, toward the rim of the cutbank. He had a cocked six-shooter in his fist.

Lute was so sure his quarry lay dozing there, on the sandbar below the cutbank, that he never even glanced around.

Buck lifted his head. "Howdy, Lute," he said with cold irony.

Lute's face jerked around, and the shock of his mistake was there in his sharp, pale eyes. Lute had set a trap, and had fallen into one instead.

But he was quick, and a desperate man. He threw his body around, so that he was facing Buck. His gun gushed flame. And Buck was triggering at the same time.

Lying flat as they were, facing each other in the deep grass, they had little target to shoot at. But felt one of Lute's slugs nick the muscles of his shoulder. His own slugs missed three times. But the fourth one was true.

He saw Lute's head jerk back queerly, and he had a glimpse of the bullet hole that appeared between the man's eyes. Lute Nichols' body contorted in agony, then straightened out. He was dead!

It was long seconds before Buck stilled his own jangling nerves. He rose cautiously to his knees, peering over the boulder. He glimpsed the half-breed darting away across the flat, from rock to rock,

heading for the pine-clad ridge where they had left their horses. Buck did not fire. The man had been near enough to witness Lute's death. He would carry the story back to the sheep ranch.

Buck arose and stood over Lute's body. "They say that Gar is the toughest of all," he muttered. "We'll see. . . ."

He mounted and rode away along the benches, veering late in the afternoon up a dark, brushy canyon. Mounting higher, he rode into a little, hidden swale, masked by brush and granite ledges. Here was the rude camp where he had slept and eaten for the past ten days.

Ruth Webb stepped out of the trees as he dismounted. She had been bringing food to this hidden camp at intervals. She looked at the red-stained bandage he had wrapped around his arm.

"You've—you've not met Lute Nichols?" she asked anxiously, for she knew the plan he was following relentlessly.

"Yeah," he said tersely, and gave no other explanation.

She turned and beckoned. Two more figures emerged from cover. They were Sid Zeigler and Jeb Dexter. Their manner was hesitant as they came up, for they were remembering how they had sent hot lead speeding after Buck.

Sid Zeigler coughed uncertainly. "Ruthie brought us here, Buck," he said. "We figgered it was time we apologized to you fer what happened that night after the fight at the buttes. We know now that you had nothin' to do with that ambush. Likely, there was a spy listenin' to our powwow, who set the trap for us. Ruthie told us how she cut you free."

Buck extended his hand to them. "But it was me that let the sheep come in in the first place," he reminded them grimly.

"A man makes mistakes," Jeb Dexter demurred. "Now that we've had time to cool down a little, we ain't holdin' that in our craws any longer, Buck. Fightin' the Nichols brothers single-handed ain't a coward's chore. Every cowman has heard what you did to big Sul, an' to his fancy brother. An' now, Lute?"

There was a grim question in Jeb's eyes.

Buck said slowly, "Gar Nichols is the only one left for me to work on now."

"I don't savvy your plan," Jeb admitted. "I admire your courage, Buck, but I don't see any point to it. You're makin' an outlaw of yourself."

"I've only fought in self-defense this far," Buck denied. "Except maybe when I greased and feathered Dude. At that, he flashed a knife on me. But I kicked it out of his hand. It's this way, Sid. I aim to convince the Nichols that they'll live longer, an' a lot more peaceful, if they sell that water frontage on Trigger Creek back to cow folks. I've already convinced Sul that it's better to drop Trigger Valley like a hot potato. Dude has quit the country, an' I reckon he won't stand in the way if the others decide to sell. Lute is dead. There's only Gar to win over to my point of view."

"Gar's the toughest of the lot," Sid Zeigler warned. "Fight him with guns if you fight him at all."

"We ain't lettin' you tackle him alone," Jeb Dexter growled.

Buck shook his head. "I started this, Jeb. I aim to finish it alone. I'm riding over to the sheep ranch after dark. Maybe I'll get a chance to talk to Gar, an' see if he's as tough as he's labeled."

They argued, but Buck stood steadfast against any offer of help from them. "You're both married men," he said. "When I tackle Gar there's likely to be trouble. Maybe the law will have to take a hand. Keep clear of this, all of you. I won't stand for any interference."

They mounted reluctantly, and pulled out. But Ruth Webb didn't go with them.

"I'm not leaving you," she told him positively. "You're a stubborn fool for not letting them help. I suppose you think your pride is worth more than your life. Gar Nichols isn't dumb. He must know that

he's next on your list. He'll be ready for you."

"I don't figure Gar will expect me so soon, after what happened to Lute this afternoon," Buck said. "You won't be needed there tonight."

He framed more arguments, but the words died on his lips as he saw the soft brightness in her eyes. He gave a gesture of futility.

"I've been a blind fool in more ways than one, Ruth," he burst out. "Falling for a feather-brained flirt like the one that played me for a sucker. When all my life you've meant so much to me."

She colored. "Buck! Do you mean you're actually telling me you like me? After all these years?"

"Like you?" he said, and swallowed hard. "That don't begin to describe it, Ruth. How I could have been near you for so long without realizin' how much I cared, is—"

She moved up close, ran her arms around his neck and kissed him. "You don't really believe I'd have let that blond hussy take you away from me, do you?"

RUTH WEBB rode at his side when Buck pulled out of the canyon after dark. They crossed the benches, heading toward the tiny window lights that marked the sheep headquarters on the flats below.

Buck left Ruth at a distance with the horses. She kissed him fiercely, and for a moment almost refused to let him go. Then she stepped back, and went silent.

Buck circled the sheep ranch on foot. He could hear herders in the bunkhouse. There were lighted rooms in the low, sprawling main house. Ranch hands were moving about the yard, and he caught snatches of their talk as he hugged the shadows back of a shearing shed. They were still talking about Lute Nichol's death. He gathered that Lute's body had been brought in, and that the funeral had been held at sundown.

The light went out in the cookhouse lean-to at the back of the main house. The cook came out, and headed for his sleeping quarters in another building.

Buck believed that Gar Nichols was in the ranch house. Awaiting his chance, he reached the door of the kitchen. He stepped into darkness inside. Crossing an inner room in the ranch house, which was dark and unoccupied, he moved silently to the opposite door. Light cracked beneath the portal, and he judged that beyond it was the main living room.

He heard the gurgle of a whiskey bottle, but the silence otherwise suggested that there was only one person in the room. He squeezed the latch slowly, and opened the door.

The main room was big and low, with cedar beams festooned with cobwebs. Saddles, spurs, and range gear crowded the walls, and the bare floor was scarred and splintered and blackened by the cast-off cigarette stubs of many years. It was a disorderly room that only men had occupied.

Sitting in a scuffed leather chair was Gar Nichols. He was staring into the fire, his heavy face flushed and moody, and he was drinking whiskey neat, from a quart bottle.

He looked up as he heard the door creak. Then he came to his feet with a startled oath. "Damn you," he snarled. "So you've even got the gall to come here—right into this house?"

Buck held a cocked six-shooter in his hand. "Keep your voice down, Gar," he said thinly. "You know what happened to Lute today. He brought it on himself. Don't make the same mistake."

"What do you think you can pull on me?" Gar spat. "You ain't dealin' with Sul or Dude, or even Lute now. You can't make me crawl like some of 'em did."

"Have you got the deed handy to that strip of frontage I sold your dummy settler?" Buck asked.

Gar's heavy jaws widened in a mirthless grin. "So that's it," he sneered.

All the time Gar's eyes were on that cocked gun in Buck's hand. Gar's own six-shooter was hanging on a peg on the wall. He had unbuckled it, never dreaming that Buck would have the daring to come to the house to hunt him down. He was only waiting, praying for a chance to leap at Buck. He was willing to talk, stall for time, hoping for a break in his favor.

"I've got the money in my pocket that Harley Teal paid for that strip," Buck said. "I'll hand it back to you, Gar, when you deed that land back to some cow ranchers in the valley pool."

"I'll see you in hell first," Gar sneered.

There were inner bars on the two doors that served this room. Buck, keeping Gar covered, barred both entrances. He searched Gar for weapons, taking away a knife, and a pair of brass knuckles.

"You was aiming to have the edge if anybody asked you to show how good you are in a ruckus, wasn't you, Gar?" Buck commented dryly. "An' just how good are you?"

"Git rid of that gun an' I'll show you," Gar breathed hopefully.

Buck walked to the mantel, tossed his gun on it. "Come on, Gar," he rasped.

Gar came at him like a ponderous, moving boulder. And he had the same inexorable strength. He wasn't as much of a fist fighter as he was a wrestler. He ploughed through the punches that Buck drove to his heavy face, and his thick arms closed around Buck's waist. He braced his feet, and then Buck felt the full, terrific power of the man's strength.

Buck tore an arm free, and ran his thumb into Gar's eye. It was that, or have his spine snapped by those crushing arms. Gar uttered a scream of fury, and his grip relaxed an instant. That was long enough for Buck, by a despearte effort, to wrench free. He retreated as Gar came lunging after him, and now he struck quick, chopping punches at the heavy man's face.

But Gar shook them off like raindrops. He rushed Buck against the center table. The table went over, and the lighted oil lamp crashed on the floor. Instantly, there was a flare of flame and smoke as the spilled kerosene ignited.

Gar paid no attention. He was too intent on taking care of the man who had humiliated his brothers. He rushed at Buck, but Buck went low, diving, and came up beneath him, his arms around Gar's knees. He surged to his feet, and Gar went over his head. The big man hit the puncheon floor with a solid, jarring impact. He came to his feet unsteadily.

The smoky flames, from the burning pool of oil, licked at a bearskin rug, and climbed to an Indian blanket hung on a wall. Buck stepped in, driving his fists to Gar's jaw. The big man reeled again, and tried futilely to close with his opponent.

Gar suddenly became aware that the flames were spreading up the wall with fierce speed. He cast a startled look over his shoulder. "God!" he gasped, through puffed lips. "The place is burnin' up. We got to git out'n here."

Buck stepped in, and knocked him down again. The flames had taken savage root now. Heat and smoke filled the room. From outside came a hoarse, startled voice. "Fire!"

Men came to pound on the outer doors, but the heavy bars held them back.

Flames were licking along the beamed ceiling. Someone smashed a window, but a blast of heat drove them back. The ranch house was doomed. Gar Nichols felt the breath of the flames, could feel his shirt scorching, and his hair shriveling in the sudden furnace-like heat. He began fighting with demoniacal fury, seeking to reach the rear door which was now the only hope of escape from the room.

But Buck stood in front of the door, fighting him off with fists and boots. "How

about selling that farm, Gar," he kept chanting. "Do you sell? Do you pull your flocks out of Trigger Valley?"

Buck could feel his flesh beginning to scorch. "We're burning up," Gar screamed. "Let me out."

"We're stayin' here, until you cave, Gar," Buck yelled. "Both of us. This is your last chance."

"God!" Gar Nichols sobbed, as Buck shoved him away again. "You devil! I'll sell. That deed is in the bank in Three Forks. I'll turn it over to you. Anything —anything! Only let me out of here."

Gar was swaying, overcome by heat and smoke. And Buck was nearly out also, but he had the strength to open the rear door, and drag Gar Nichols through the house and out into the starlight, to safety.

Buck bent beside Gar, who was beginning to revive. "I'll give you twenty-four hours to sign that land back to me, Gar," he whispered.

Gar Nichols had no defiance or fight left. "You devil," he kept muttering.

Ruth Webb was waiting for Buck, as he slipped away from the glare of the burning ranch. She uttered a cry of dismay when she saw him. "Oh, my dear, what did they do to you? You've been burned."

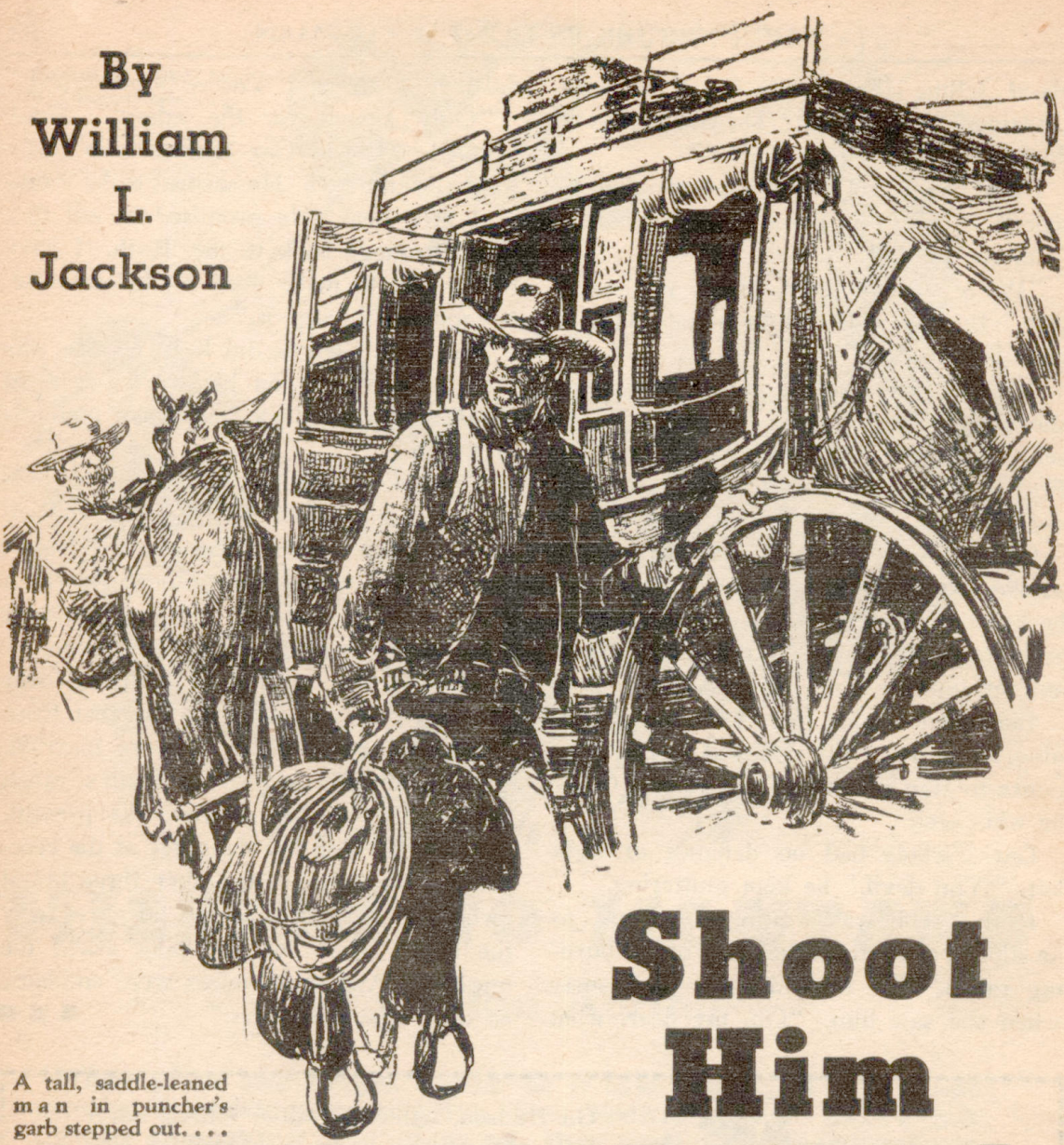
"Only singed on the edges." Buck grinned. "It was Gar Nichols who really went through hell. He seemed to be afraid of a little heat. He promised to sell that creek frontage back to me, Ruth. I gave him a day to make good on his promise. I figure he'll keep it."

And Gar Nichols did keep it. He was afraid to go back on his word. He had seen enough of Buck Coldiron's methods of fighting.

Three days later, the last of the Nichols sheep passed out of Trigger Valley, back to their own range. The woollies hadn't been in the valley long enough to do a great deal of damage, and cowmen quit thinking about abandoning their range.

The day that the last flock drifted over Bucktail Pass was the same day that Ruth Webb and Buck Coldiron were married. The wedding was held at Ruth's ranch house. Though her mother was present, standing up with her daughter at the ceremony, it was really the other three brand owners in Trigger Valley who gave away the bride, when the sky pilot asked the question. And their voices were emphatic as they answered "yes." ■ ■ ■

By William L. Jackson



A tall, saddle-leaned man in puncher's garb stepped out. . . .

Shoot Him Down!

A man who stands between a nester and a hangrope is likely to find himself standing on nothing but a platform of thin air!

BEN GOODMAN'S Three Forks stage station lay in an isolated bowl formed by the jutting hills, a spot offering little more than another taste of the prairie's heat and drabness. From here a man could strike north, south, or west, and his choice would make no difference to Goodman. He sold meals and lodging, not advice.

It was after sunset and the oppressing

heat of the day had faded, but still Goodman sat on his small porch. His big body was slack in his chair as he watched the crest where the southbound stage would soon appear, and he was thinking of trouble.

This indefinable uneasiness which was now with him had first come to him at two o'clock that morning, and again at three, when he had been awakened by the drumming of hoofs in the hills. He knew that such late riding was never done in this country for fun, and on top of that the riding was being done by four men, one leading three others by little more than an hour.

Toward dawn he had been awakened a third time, and this time his patience had disappeared with his hope for more sleep. The horses were fidgeting and restless in his corral, and he could have sworn that he heard a man crossing the yard. He dressed and went outside, but the hard dirt of the yard revealed not so much as a boot track.

There were no stage passengers in the house, and he could find no sign of entry into any room in the place, but the feeling that someone had been there persisted. Uneasiness dogged him all day, and a dozen times he caught himself looking across the flats for sight of the riders he had heard.

It was nester trouble more than likely, he told himself. The government had opened up miles of range beyond the hills which Big John Rabbers and other cattlemen had called their own for years, and the squatters had flocked in. At times during past months their wagons had dotted the flats while they stopped at Three Forks for water.

Goodman had seen them come, and he had seen them go. The sight of them coming West with their families and belongings in a wagon and their hope in their eyes was bad enough, but the sight of them leaving John Rabbers' range was worse. The sight of them then, bought-out, burned-out, and scared-out, turned a knife deep inside Goodman, who knew what contentment the right piece of land could bring a man.

He tried now to put these thoughts out of his mind as the stage at last came into sight at the top of its descent from the hills. Red-bearded Dan McHugh was at the reins, putting on his usual show with the whip. The stage came into the yard, axles smoking, throwing up a great cloud of dust as McHugh hauled back on the reins and broke his team's stride.

Only one passenger stepped from the coach, a tall saddle-leaned man in puncher's garb. His clothes were hard used and worn and for luggage he carried only a faded cloth grip. Goodman thought, "Too poor to even own a gun," and turned his eyes away.

The traveler's gray eyes were smiling and his sun-cracked lips grinned at Dan McHugh. "Man," he said, "you're crazy, but that was some driving. This where I change coaches?"

McHugh nodded with pleasure at the compliment, and the puncher began to unfasten a scarred saddle from the luggage boot. "Supper in fifteen minutes," Goodman said. "Pick any room along the hall and wash up."

The puncher nodded, dumped his saddle on the porch, and went inside. Goodman stepped forward to help McHugh with the lead mare, and he heard the sound he had waited for all day, the hard and fast drumming of horses on the flats. He lifted his head and saw three riders drawing near, wasting no time.

Goodman recognized Big John Rabbers and two of his hands, saw the rifles on their saddles and the handguns on their hips. He nodded his greeting and watched them pile from horses which were hard-ridden and all but beat.

Big John Rabbers was a huge man with a deap seated authority carried flagrantly on his broad face and in his stamping stride. He strode toward Goodman, and his two hands fell in behind him. They were both tall men, but they followed Rabbers as children might trail an adult.

Goodman had never had any personal

antagonism toward Rabbers, but now he thought of the nesters he had seen returning from Rabbers' range. He faced Rabbers solidly and voiced his, "Howdy, John," without deference.

"Ben," Rabbers said, "I won't beat around the bush. We're hunting a nester for a hanging. He gunned down one of my hands yesterday and we've been trailing him ever since."

"I thought I heard somebody running in the hills last night," Goodman said.

"Yes, damn him, all night." Big John nodded at the tallest of his two men, his voice edging with sarcasm. "We'd have had him, too, if Ren, here, didn't like to ride so well. He led us right by a switch in his trail. When we gave up and backtracked this afternoon we found the nester's horse not three miles from here, run to death."

Goodman gave him a level look.

"So naturally you decided that he'd head for my place."

"Right," Big John said. "Anything queer get off this stage?"

"Just a cowpoke," Goodman said.

"That sounds okay," Big John said. "Mind if we take a look through your place?"

"I don't see any reason for it," Goodman answered evenly. "I've been into every one of those rooms today and seen nobody." He thought of the noises last night and clamped his mouth shut.

Big John's men edged forward at Goodman's reply, this pressure combining with the fact that he was unarmed. Rabbers grinned and said, "We'll just look anyway. No harm in it."

GOODMAN led them to the house, going to the kitchen where he had food on the stove, fuming silently as they started their search. Rabbers and one man climbed the stairs, and the man called Ren walked down the hall. He had reached the room where the puncher was washing when Goodman carried the first plate of food to the front room.

Angry words floated down the hall: "By God, you won't," and "Do I look like a nester?" Goodman did not see the blow land; he only saw Ren flung across the hall by the force of it. "Now get the hell out," the puncher yelled, and his door slammed.

Goodman could hardly stifle his glee when Rabbers returned from upstairs and saw the livid welt rising on Ren's face. "Now what's happened?" Big John asked.

Ren jerked his head sullenly as the puncher came out into the hall. "I had trouble with him."

"You look it." Rabbers swung on the stranger. "What happened, man?"

The puncher faced him squarely. "My room, that's all," he said. "I ain't hiding any nester."

"As any man with brains could see," Rabbers addressed Ren angrily. "That's twice you've twisted us up today. I can tell you I'll be glad when this Danner gets here. We could have had that sod-buster by now."

The stranger's eyes widened slightly. "You mean Cleve Danner?" he said. "Is *he* coming into this part of the country?"

Rabbers nodded with sly pride. "He is if he's smart. I sent him word he could name his own price."

Goodman chewed on these words, and he saw just how far Rabbers was carrying his nester baiting. The stage drivers had brought in tales of Cleve Danner, and his name was beginning to carry weight wherever it was spoken. It was a name associated with names like Doc Holliday and Billy the Kid. Danner was a gunslick, it was said, with seven killings behind his rep.

"I've seen him in action, down on the Panhandle," the puncher said. "I'll take no part of that man. He could wreck that room and I wouldn't lift a finger."

Rabbers turned to Goodman, as if reluctant to say more. "Is there a chance for some grub?" he said.

Goodman nodded, and as they ranged about the table he brought food in from the kitchen. He picked up the dollar from each man and yelled into the yard where Dan McHugh was hitching his fresh team. McHugh soon joined them and they began to eat.

Midway through the meal a part of the rising resentment in Goodman came to the surface and he said casually, "How'd this nester happen to gun one of your men, John?"

Rabbers tucked a mouthful of food into his cheek. "Touchy, that's all. Some of my hands were driving a bunch through to the Flat Rock bend and this squatter wanted to argue boundaries. When the boys tried to drive the stuff on through, the old man hollered and his son opened up from the cabin. He got Bob Keene and winged Lefty Wild. The boys didn't even know he was there until too late."

Goodman knew this couldn't be how it happened. The nesters never fired on cattlemen unless their backs were to the wall. Any nester knew of the swift and merciless retaliation following an unprovoked shooting. This knowledge fanned the flame of Goodman's resentment higher.

"Flat Rock bend, eh?" he said. "Isn't that where a nester was burned out a month ago? Never did find out how that happened, did they? I guess some of the nesters must have been feuding with each other, huh?"

A dull, consuming rage made Rabber's eyes ugly now, and the heavy veins along his nose darkened with his anger. He swallowed as if choking, and his two men stopped eating. Goodman felt the force of his anger across the table, but Rabbers glanced sideways at Dan McHugh and the puncher, and his reluctant decision against this time and place was almost a visible thing. He began to eat again, silently, and the rest of the meal was finished without a word across the table.

After eating, Dan McHugh looked at his heavy watch and said, "Time to be rolling on, I guess." The puncher slapped his shirt pockets. "Left my makings in the room," he said, and he, too, went away.

Goodman felt the tension again building across the table, and then the spell was broken by the puncher's sharp yell from his room.

"There's somebody out there by the corral! Looks like a nester!" Rabbers and his two men were on their feet instantly, pounding down the hall and bolting through the back door.

Goodman sat still, hearing their quick feet

PROSPECTORS' DREAM

ALTHOUGH many folks believe that the fabulous gold mining days of the West are a thing of the past, nothing could be further from the factual truth. Because plenty of wealth can be dug up there today—if a person is smart enough to locate it. Nobody knows this better than the relatives of Douglas McLean, an Easterner who had come to Colorado for his health all the way back in 1895. He went hunting one afternoon, got lost in the vicinity of Hicks Mountain and Mount Bergen, and happened upon a formation of rocks. He chipped off some pieces, found his way back home finally, and had the specimens assayed. This proved that the rock had $1000 worth of gold to the ton. Anybody who wants it can mine it, however—if he can ascertain the exact location. Because McLean never rediscovered the place again, despite persistent efforts to do just that.

Another fortune that's waiting for the man who can find it is located in Nevada, near the Quinn River Desert. It seems that pure silver in heavy slabs and loose lumps was picked up here by a band of emigrants who were on their way to prospect for gold in California. Naturally, they didn't want to tarry over "ordinary" silver, especially since the Indians were hot on their trail. After reconsidering the matter they returned—in vain. For the place seemed to have vanished from the map.

—By B. Ritter

in the yard and cursing them. Then he heard another quick scrambling in the hall and saw a slight figure in denim bib overalls, and low shoes leave the puncher's room. The nester's face was dead white, and behind him the puncher was quieting him with words, speaking as a man might speak to a frightened animal. The nester was carrying the puncher's worn traveling bag now, and the puncher wore a .45 in a low-cut holster thonged down on his thigh.

The puncher grinned recklessly at Goodman, caught up in the tension of this moment, and Goodman sat still, stunned. He barely heard the hurried words which drifted in from the yard before the stage door slammed and Dan McHugh loosed his first bellow at his team. The stage rattled and the team ran free, and soon its sound was a noise growing faint along the road to the south.

The puncher returned. "Gunned down one of his men, Rabbers says," he spat disgustedly. "You saw him. A sixteen-year-old kid. He was trying to keep them from beating up his pa. You know where he hid all day? Under the bed!"

The puncher made another hawking sound of disgust and sat down by one side of the door. "You don't need to get in this, friend," he said. He laid his gun in his lap and said no more until Rabbers and his men stamped back into the house.

"Nester, hell!" Rabbers blurted. "You must have—" He stopped abruptly as he saw the gun in the puncher's hand, felt the pressure of the muzzle on his stomach.

"Keep coming," the puncher said. "Let your boys in, too." He smiled thinly at the fear color which crept up Rabbers' cheeks. "Drop 'em, slow." He tilted his gun at Rabbers' middle, and Big John's gun hit the floor first.

He kicked their weapons into a corner of the room. "Outside," he said, "easy." They walked before him, and he stopped them ten feet from their horses. He flung their rifles to the ground and jerked his gun barrel at their saddles.

"Get going," he said. "Ride north, and while you're riding think of the nester you were running sitting comfortable-like in that southbound stage." He jerked his gun again, and they put their horses into motion.

The realization that he had been duped mottled Rabbers' face, and at the edge of the yard he gave a meaningless shout of rage. Then he rode on helplessly.

The slim puncher listened until their noises faded into the night, and then he crossed the yard to stand beside Goodman. The faintest of sighs escaped his lips and he said, "Now I'll be buying a horse from you."

"You won't have to buy one," Goodman said. "I'll send you out of these parts on the best you want."

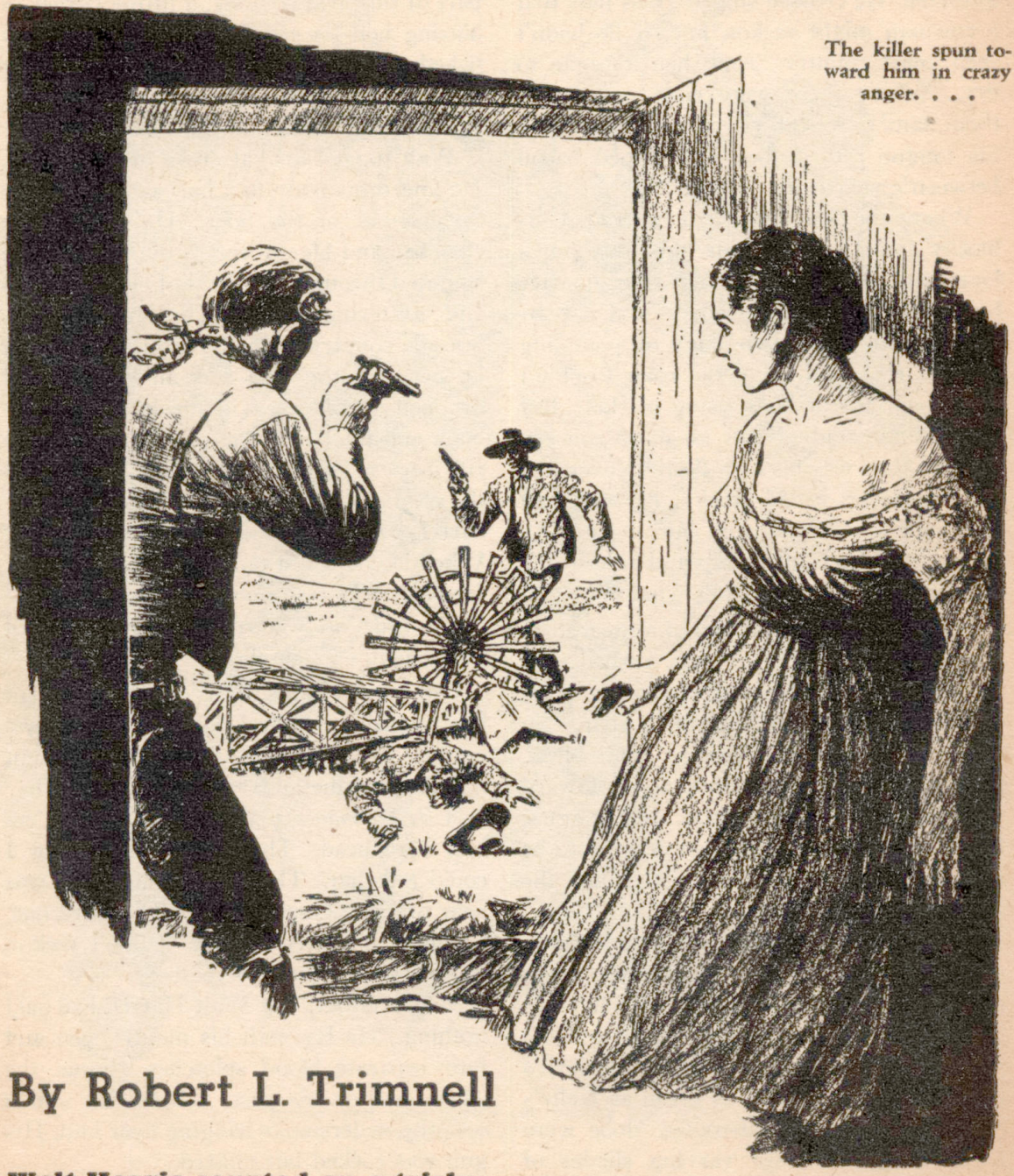
"No need of the best," he said. "I'll only be riding to Juniper Bend."

"But that's Rabbers' town," Goodman protested. "Almost all his. He'll even have this Danner there soon."

"Sooner than he thinks," the slim man said, and Goodman sensed rather than saw his thin smile in the darkness. He knew suddenly who this man was. He also knew that Danner had to be right when he said almost wistfully, "Friend, a man ain't always as black as he's painted." ■ ■ ■

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of .44 Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1951. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600. Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County. My Commission expires March 30, 1952 (Seal) —Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

END OF THE GUN-TRAIL



The killer spun toward him in crazy anger. . . .

By Robert L. Trimnell

Walt Harris counted on a tricky, dangerous, part-time outlaw to back the sheriff's son against a score of blood-hungry renegades!

LITTLE Walt Harris had been riding four days when at last he came in sight of the windmill.

He came from the wet lowlands where a herd looked legless in the fat, high gramma grass. He'd ridden west and found that Texas was like a tilted board, with every

drop of water flowing back toward the gramma. He crossed singed grass flats that a cowman might reckon fine, if he hadn't seen lower country. And then it began to dry. Where there were rises, nopal had them, until it was all rise and all nopal, and his tongue rattled like dry crisped bacon between cracked lips.

Where the brasada began he traded his blocky quarter horse for this rawboned, long-coupled roan. Though the quarter horse had been near dead, it was a poor trade. Now after two days of pounding brasada rock and sand, the roan wouldn't make poor tallow on a rising market. But smart horse trading was no more concern to Walt than was his own flesh. Never big, but sometimes called stocky, he was now just bone and leather and burning eyes, a man with a Colt on his hip and rifle in the boot, riding to Bridgeman's windmill.

It stuck out of the bottom of a great dish. You wouldn't know it was dished, the country seemed so completely flat, but that the contours were outlined by a change in color. A soft, subtle change from bleak, gray garambulla candelabra down toward what looked like honest grass. It was grass, blotched with mesquite, but a lot of the mesquite was dry and dead, as though the shrubs had been girdled.

And right by the tall, angle-iron skeleton of the windmill was green such as you never saw in the lowlands because you hadn't any garambulla to compare it with, and no weesatch spikes like tines of the devil's pitchfork. It was grass as green as Kelly's hat. Alongside the flat-roofed 'dobe were hard straight lines of varying shades of green, some brighter than the grass. A vegetable garden, and the little nubs sticking up out of it must be fruit trees. A blotch of purple clamped to a corner of the house looked like bougainvillaea.

He hadn't thought Bridgeman's would be like that.

A frown twisted the weary, burnt square of his face. No, Bridgeman's should be different. It should be the most desolate part of this arid country, a fitting corner of blazing hell for men to die. A 'dobe in a baked gully, perhaps. A place for powder to burn and blood to drip.

Bridgeman's was far too nice.

Walt tugged his hat down over his eyes. He kneed his pony to a halt and jerked the carbine out of the boot. He opened the chamber and blew through the barrel, then squinted through the spiral of clean grooves and glittering lands. The dust of this brasada country seemed to go through tight leather, but the rifle was all right. He'd dropped an old sock in the bottom of the boot, and the barrel was clean.. He slid the rifle back in. He broke his Colt, unwrapped the cleaning brush, and ran it through the barrel, without looking. It had to be dirty. When he looked, it too had glittering lands. He replaced the gun and he was ready.

He rode at a hard trot down toward Bridgeman's windmill.

Old Joey Dennis, the Wells, Fargo agent had gasped out, "They said, meet at *Bridgeman's*. They thought this hole in my gut had finished me and I couldn't hear. They said *Bridgeman's,* plain as day. One of 'em was a redhead. They was masked, but I could tell that. The hair on his arms was near orange. One's a Mex. The third one, I dunno, it moved so fast. I don't reckon he's very big. But he's the boss."

Walt's father, Big Walt Harris, had said nothing. He lay with his mouth open and four separate blood splotches around the silver star on his vest. There was still a veil of powdersmoke hanging over him. His gun was cocked but unfired.

Little Walt carried that gun, and he meant to burn off those bullets his father hadn't gotten a chance to use. He meant to do it like they'd done it to his father. He pictured Big Walt racing through the dark to the Wells, Fargo station where the shooting was going on, leaping in the doorway and running into a blast of lead that killed him before he hit the floor.

Walt rode now to Bridgeman's, because in the voluminous files that Sheriff Harris had kept, was the record of Frank Bridgeman, released from prison four years ago after serving his time for robbery of a stage west of Pecos. That same Frank Bridgeman had since ranched here in Wells County.

There the record ended.

AS HE looked at the entry, Walt had seemed to feel his father's finger pointing to it. Deputy Sheriff Donny Walker had figured otherwise. He busied himself shaking down all men in the vicinity of Vaca Verde who had at one time or another wide-looped the law. Too, Walker was checking the other possible Bridgemans. There was a Bridgeman's Mercantile Store in Brownsville, and a town called Bridgeman up toward the cotton country. Nobody knew how many other Bridgemans there might be.

But, alone, Walt had taken this trail. And now he'd found it was not the crude outlaw hangout he'd reckoned on.

He was riding through mesquite now and saw a few fat Hereford crosses grazing. A lot of the mesquite was dead and he could see girdle marks. Grass raised beneath the naked branches.

As he closed on the 'dobe he croaked out a "Haloo, the house!"

There was movement out from the doorway. A soft, fluid movement in blue.

The pony seemed to sense the end of the trail. Its hoofs lifted in a clean trot and chopped the thickening turf hard. Perhaps it knew windmills, Walt thought. There was a great tank of stone and mortar next to the mill and the overflow slope away from it was mushy lush green. The pony's hoofs slapped through it. The mill blades were not turning, though angled at forty-five degrees to catch the nearest breath of wind.

Walt climbed down. The ground seemed to jolt him. His legs were burning with pain from the spines and thorns. He scooped his hat full of water from the tank and gave it to the pony. When its throat was wetted he too drank a mouthful and then led the animal over toward the house.

A girl was walking slowly toward him. The blue dress reached only to her knees. Her legs and feet were bare. She was brown limbed, buxom, seemed to walk softly as an Indian. Her hair was coal black and her eyes dark and lustrous.

"Es su casa," she greeted him in Spanish. "It is your house."

"Gracias, Señorita," he said, touching his hat brim.

"Señora," she corrected. *"Señora* Bridgeman." She smiled nicely. Fine white teeth, the kind you got from eating tortillas all your life. Mexican. Her hair was very neat, he saw now, braided and coiled behind her head. Her head was held high, her back flat. That from carrying things on your head. A Mex girl from a family that had to work hard.

She watched him, smiling softly, as he walked the sweat-spattered horse around the overflow grass. The roan didn't grab at the grass. It wanted more water. He gave it another hatful at the tank. He wanted this horse to come back. It had heart, this big-boned roan, though himself he thought little of a long-coupled animal. So he took it around the grass patch again, its barrel still heaving. The kind of treatment you afforded only to a good quarter horse. On the third round he let it drink its fill and then unsaddled and turned it loose. The roan had sense. It went uphill a way to some drying grass among the dead mesquite.

"You are limping," she said. "You should never traverse the brasada without chaparajos of greased leather. You've got needles in your legs."

"Yes, I'll have to take care of them."

She led him to the 'dobe. She asked nothing, even of a man so foolish as to ride without chaparejos in the brazada, half killing his horse, and wearing himself to

leather. The unquestioning Texas hospitality, some said, was learned from the Mexicans.

Inside, she set a bottle of mescal on the table, with the gusanos, the mescal worms, lying like lees in the bottom. She poured him half a tumbler full and then went to the Mexican tile stove in the corner and put on a pot of beans and laid tortillas on the hot tiles.

The soft darkness of the 'dobe was visible to him now, as the scorching sun receded from his sight, but left red rings wherever he looked. He saw the table was sanded clean, the room neat, a red and gold serape hanging over the entrance to the next room. The floor was 'dobe, and half of it was tiled, as though it was intended that the rest be done when time or materials or money arrived. The whole place was like that. Inch by inch, it was growing. Damn funny place for a thieves' hangout.

He gulped down half the mescal. It went through him like an electric shock. In an instant he was smiling. He hadn't eaten in so long. He felt the warmth spread through his burning legs, a kind warmth, after the hooking blazes of the chollas.

"There are beans and tortillas, Señor," the girl said.

"Gracias." He laid his hands on the table, flat, and leaned on them, smiling.

He saw the serape covering the doorway move to one side and a long blued barrel slide through, and after it a rawboned, brown hand.

"Sit down," a voice said from behind the gun.

Walt kept his right hand flat on the table and took a stool with the left and slid it under him. Then he laid the hand flat by the other.

"Take his gun, Juana," the man behind the serape said.

The girl's bare feet pattered over the tiles behind Walt and then thudded softly on the 'dobe. She lifted his gun out and left him.

Walt saw the man's eyes now. Narrowed, hard on him, over a sharp big nose. He moved through the doorway and stopped against the wall, the gun barrel slanting down now in his hand. He was tall and thin, perhaps thirty, with his hairline receding at two points. His face was the color and jaggedness of a mask hacked from a mesquite stump.

"Did Sedge send you?" the man asked Walt.

Walt drew makings from his shirt pocket. He built a cigarette while he turned the question over.

"You're Frank Bridgeman, aren't you?" Walt asked.

"Yes. I'm Bridgeman. And I want to know, did Sedge send you?"

"No. Sedge didn't send me. Bridgeman, you done any traveling lately?"

The man studied him intently. "No," he said at last.

Bridgeman's wife brought a bowl of steaming beans and a stack of hot tortillas and put them before Walt. He said, "Thanks, ma'am."

The girl murmured, "It is of nothing," and her bare feet pattered away.

Walt picked up a tortilla and folded it. He glanced to the left, out the door at the windmill and the water tank and where he could see the edge of the garden. This place, and the hospitality—he thought he understood about Bridgeman.

"Put that damn gun down," he said, and dipped the tortilla into the beans.

The beans were blistering *picante,* burning with chile. The tortillas were pliable and mealy tasting. Walt realized he was suddenly very hungry. He dipped up more beans with the tortilla and in a minute it was gone and he reached another off the stack.

He heard the girl's feet patter out to the doorway and then go off in the yard. He glanced out and saw that she was going to the tank with a clay water jug balanced on her head.

"You have a fine wife there," he said.

Bridgeman sat down in a chair and titlted it back against the wall. He showed the ghost of a smile. "Yes. Juana's a fine girl. I guess without her in mind I wouldn't have been able to make this place—livable. I worked alone a long while. Then last year I thought it was in good enough shape and I could ask her to marry me."

"Other things, I don't envy you so much," Walt said.

"What like?"

"The guests you're going to have. The ones I outrode."

"You know a damn lot!" Bridgeman's smile had died and the gun tightened in his grip.

"My dad was a county sheriff, Bridgeman. In Vaca Verde, way east of here. Four days ago—four and a half—it happened at night—he got in the way of those guests you have coming, and they killed him. They shot him with his gun cold. Well, it was overheard that they were meeting at Bridgeman's. I figured they'd split up and come here, rest, and probably go on. I don't say you're on the owlhoot, Bridgeman. I think you knew them back in the days when you flung a wide loop. And now you're going to be paid for holing them up for a while."

Bridgeman's gun was trembling in his fist, leveled across the table at Walt.

Walt laughed. "There were days, I reckon, when a man wasn't safe to look into your gun very often, Bridgeman. I think those days are past."

The girl came in with the water jug.

Walt said, "I'd like to sleep, if you don't mind. I'm dead beat."

Bridgeman stared at him for a long moment.

At last he said, "Juana, *muéstrale la cama.*"

The girl led Walt through the doorway, past the serape. In that darkened room was a broad double bed and over against the wall, a cot.

She pointed to the big one. He shook his head. He went over to the couch and unbuckled his gunbelt, kicked off his boots, threw his hat on the pile. He was asleep immediately.

HE AWOKE with Bridgeman shaking him roughly.

He came staggering out of sleep and the first thing he remembered was the thorns and cactus spines in his legs. His legs were on fire. He sat up and tore his pants off. Then he began picking thorns out of his swollen and lacerated calves and shins.

"I said you're going to clear out of here!" Bridgeman growled.

"I didn't hear you."

Bridgeman cried, "I've worked here four years! I've built this from a sink hole to a place to live, I've taken nothing and made something! My wife—"

"Send your wife away."

Bridgeman shouted, "What d'you think, I'm going to fight them? All they want is fresh horses and rest. Then they'll be gone!"

"And their sign will be marked right across your place. It's no good, Bridgeman. Look. You're a little older than me. But my dad was law all the time I was growing. I run a string of cows, but whenever dad needed me I hooked on as deputy. I've seen my dad tell a lot of men they can't fling a loop too wide for him. I've seen how it came out." He stood up now, his eyes lifting to the taller man's. "Play it their way and you'll see bars again."

He pulled on his pants, stepped into his boots, picked up his hat and gunbelt, and strode out to the kitchen. Juana had been staring out the doorway. Now she turned, her eyes wide. Walt stepped up beside her and looked out. There was a dust banner coming in from the southeast. It split into two boiling towers and then they closed again. They were riding with the late afternoon sun in their faces, coming straight for the windmill. The dust towers were fall-

ing apart. Rolling toward the north. He heard the creak of the windmill gears. An evening breeze was coming.

He watched the dust banners until the solid speck-forms of two riders were paused on the edge of the bowl. Then their horses tore up dust again. Walt walked slowly back to the house.

His Colt was inside on a shelf. He went in and got it and holstered it.

"There were three, weren't there?" he asked Bridgeman.

"Yes."

Walt looked up at the windmill. It was a patchwork of scrap angle iron. It was the débris of a dozen mills, and Lord knew what else. Like all the rest of Bridgeman's place, it had been put together bit by bit, strung together with the angry tenacity of a man who had once been in big, fast money, and now wanted to forget it, to start from scratch and turn his back to anything too smooth and fast to trust.

"Listen, Sedge knows I'm wanted in Kansas," Bridgeman said, pleading. "It was a rustling deal there. I was an awful kid then. I paid with time for a mess in Texas here, and Texas law isn't after me. But Sedge knows—"

The two riders were cutting across the grasslands now. They galloped up to the tank, flung off their horses, and drank. Smearing water from their mouths, they turned quickly, stripped saddlebags off the horses, and hustled toward the house.

One was a chubby-looking Mexican with a wispy black mustache dropping around his mouth corners. The other was a redhead with a narrow little face that jerked to look back over his shoulder, three times, as they came to the 'dobe.

And the Wells, Fargo agent said the three killers had included a redhead and a Mexican. Walt's hand trembled over his gun.

"Bridgeman, who's this?" the redhead snapped, gesturing at Walt with the heavy saddlebags.

"A drifter; he's passin' through," Bridgeman choked.

"Howdy," Walt said. His hand was itching for his gun. Yet, he didn't want to risk drawing now. A shot might scare off the third member of the gang, if he were close. He'd wait until they went inside and then watch for his chance.

The Mexican had stopped and was squinting at him. "Theese little man seems known to me," he muttered.

"He's all right, Gonzales," Bridgeman said hurriedly.

Glowering at Walt, the two pushed on inside. Walt heard Juana give a little cry, and heard the Mexican giggle. His hand dangling over his gun, Walt turned in the doorway after them.

A heavy saddlebag crashed into his face. It jarred his neck as though it would snap. It knocked him down by its sheer weight and then there was the little redhead leaping out and catching Walt's wrist in the crotch of his high bootheel and sole. It stripped skin as Red threw his weight on it and pinned it down. The Mexican barged out with his gun drawn and cocked. It was pointed down at Walt's face.

His head was whirling in blackness. He was in the shade of the cabin, but the upper halves of the two were not. They loomed like blazing images in the sun.

"I seen 'im somewheres, Gonzales," the redhead snapped. He was still clutching the heavy saddlebags in his hands. Gold-heavy saddlebags.

The ground against Walt's ear seemed to pulse. He saw their eyes lift. It was the quick clatter of a horse moving fast, and they were seeing the banner.

"It is time for the arrival of Sedge," the Mexican said slowly. He reached down and snatched the gun out of Walt's holster. "Up, hombre," he growled.

The redhead moved aside. Walt sat up, swaying. Gonzales' gun was a blue arc catching the sun at the top of the swing. The barrel smashed Walt behind the ear.

He stiffened and collapsed. The Mexican caught him up in big paws and heaved him inside on the half tile, half 'dobe floor. He lay there, partly conscious. His head seemed to expand and push against the two bruises, his smashed forehead and the cut behind his ear.

The others stood quiet and unmoving for a while. At last the redhead said, "It's Sedge. Like hell was after him."

Walt heard them demand tequila. He heard Gonzales gasp and belch after a drink of it. Other than that, they just stood there waiting for Sedge. As the blackness cleared from his head he could see them again. Gonzales had his gun leveled at him. He scrunched up against the wall and sat glowering up at them.

The hoofs rattled down into the bowl, coming frantically. They hit the soft ground and there was no lessening of pace. The rider was passing the tank. The horse came right up to them and then there was a thud as of a man landing on the ground, beyond Walt's vision.

He burst into the room.

"There's a posse on my tail ten miles back."

He was a stocky man, little bigger than Walt. Tightly built, in a gray suit that must have looked very fine four days ago, at the time of the Wells, Fargo robbery. But four days of hard riding had shredded the pants legs and there were splotches of blood from brush rips. He was light haired and with pale, very pale, blue eyes, in a squat, mobile face.

"I stopped in a cowtown called Fawcett last night for grub," he said. His whole face seemed to jerk as his lips moved. "I ran flush into a law hound I tangled with once up toward the Nations, and I had to leave town fast. I don't know if he got wind of what we did at Vaca Verde, but he set on my tail, him and a posse of five or six, and they been on it all day."

"We said we wouldn't stop in no towns!" the redhead snapped.

Sedge's cold blue eyes bit at the redhead. The redhead fell away before the look.

Sedge glanced quickly at Walt. "Who's this?"

The redhead mumbled, "A drifter, Bridgeman says. We don't like his looks."

"He looks like that lawdog we burned in Vaca Verde. Only he's a runt," Sedge pronounced.

"Dios!" Gonzales swore. "That's the one, that one!"

Sedge said, "Bridgeman, who is he?"

Bridgeman tried to back away, but could not without leaving his wife. He mumbled, "A drifter—he's going through—"

Sedge whirled on the girl, jerked her away from Bridgeman and his stocky hand forked the nape of her neck. "Bridgeman, be smart," he said low in his throat.

"I don't know him, I never saw him before today!" Bridgeman cried out.

Sedge kept his hand on the girl's neck.

"I—guess you're right," Bridgeman blurted. "He's the son of a sheriff, I think."

Sedge flung the girl aside. "Watch him, Gonzales, I don't want him dead yet. I want to know what they think about us in Vaca Verde."

"He don't talk much," the redhead said.

Gonzales grinned and his hand climbed down to the gun barrel. "He talk better Spanish than English, mebbe. Talk with Gonzales, anyhow."

Sedge said, "Sure. After. Bridgeman, you go knock down that windmill."

Bridgeman's mouth fell. His eyes widened, not understanding.

"The posse won't be in sight of the windmill before dark," Sedge said. "Unless they know the country perfect, they'll lose themselves without the windmill. It's the only landmark in these blasted cactus flats for twenty mile. I don't think they know about the Vaca Verde deal; if they got to wander around lost all night, I figure they might just go home and forget they saw me. So we're goin' to knock the windmill down. Get yourself a wrench and take the

bolts off. Knock her down right now."

Bridgeman's jaw stiffened and a strange hard light came into his eyes. Juana was back at his side, her grasp on his arm seeming to lend him strength.

He grated, "I scrounged every scrap heap in West Texas for the uprights in that mill, Sedge. I dug to surface water by hand, until I could afford a deep one driven. It's come inch by inch. Everything here, a little each day, I've fought and worked—"

Sedge laughed. He ripped open the saddlebags that Gonzales had brought in. It was filled with wads and rolls of bills and heavy little sacks. He threw a wad of bills on the table.

"There's a thousand dollars, Bridgeman. You can buy a couple windmills with that. Now get that wrench."

Bridgeman looked at Walt. His eyes were desperate, begging for help.

Walt thought, I've convinced him that he can't play their game. But it was a victory that was empty before the guns of Sedge and his men. Bridgeman had to do it. Both their eyes strayed to Juana. The girl was helpless before Sedge. They had no choice. Knock down the mill. The posse that luck had thrown their way would be lost without the mill to guide them.

Walt's fingernails bit into his palms.

"I'll do it, Sedge," Bridgeman said.

He went to a toolbox in the corner of the room and opened it. He took a spanner wrench out and went outside. Walt watched him walk across the yard until he was lost to sight. Walt moved a little to the side until he could see the windmill. The blades were turning nicely, and the already full tank was brimming over and the flooded grass glowed pink in the fading light of day. Bridgeman crotched the wrench on the first nut and twisted it. Spun the wrench around until the rig creaked. He did not take the nut all the way off. He went to another and did the same. He moved surely, expertly, like a mother undressing her baby in the dark. The whole rig was his handiwork and every nut of it had a familiar feel to his wrench.

"Hurry up!" Sedge called. He and the redhead had stepped outside and stood watching the work. Gonzales sat on the stool with his gun pointed at Walt.

THE MILL was creaking against the loosened bolts. All four uprights were loosened now, some four feet above the stone and mortar base into which they were sunk. A spit of wind caught the blades and a groan tore from the bolts.

"No!" Bridgeman shouted. "You can't make me!"

Sedge strode toward him, angry, but not reaching for his gun. "Bridgeman, the money is layin' on the table. I said knock that scrap iron skeleton down!" He walked full into the shadow of the mill, like a dog with its hackles up, pounding toward Bridgeman.

With a cry of anguish, Bridgeman stripped off a nut and flung it to the ground and knocked the bolt through with the wrench. Then another.

Walt's belly was tight, coiled like a spring ready to burst, and inside he grated, "Drop it on him, Bridgeman, drop it on Sedge—"

Bridgeman reached up and jerked the blade shaft.

The blades turned to flat and the breeze caught them and the mill began to lean toward the house. Sedge halted, then backed a step as the mill veered toward him. Bridgeman leaped to the other side and knocked out a third bolt. As though his hand were guiding it, it leaned, and like a great finger, pointed at Sedge.

Bridgeman howled, "There it is, Sedge, there's the mill going down for you!"

Sedge and the redhead backed more, then broke into a run, screaming. The mill hovered over them like a great tree falling, twisting off its base and gathering terrifying speed.

Walt dared not even look at Gonzales.

But the Mexican must be looking at the mill. He thought, Bridgeman, you've given me a chance. And he leaped.

He was hurtling through the air as the Mexican's eyes flicked back and he jerked the trigger of the gun he held. Flame blasted into Walt's hair and the roar deafened him but he hurtled on and loosed a wild swing with his right arm and felt the knuckles smash the Mexican's mouth and the jolt rip back at his shoulder. He piled over the Mexican and as the man tumbled flat, he seized the gun and wrenched it away. Gonzales screamed at the pain of torn fingers. Walt plunged on and out the door.

He saw the mill slam down with a breaking roar between the two running men. Great billows of yellow dust exploded around it. The blades burst apart like shattered glass and one chopped the redhead in the back like a thrown meat cleaver and he fell shrieking.

Sedge was clear and already had turned and blasted a shot through the thick yellow dust at Bridgeman. The rancher stood at the mill foundation shouting and waving the spanner wrench. A bullet smashed into rock and mortar beside him and spurted dust over him.

Walt shouted, "Sedge!"

The killer spun toward him with his teeth glistening, gritting tight together in crazy anger and a shot broke from his gun and slashed through the yellow dust and ripped up into the sky as he turned.

Walt felt it was his father's gun in his hand; he knew that feel and he too fired on the throw and the kick rocked his hand back. Through the puff of powder smoke he lashed out another, took the kick, lowered his sights and fired again at the killer's gun flashes, like red sparks through the dust cloud. Then the dust settled and the fourth shot was high and took Sedge's hat off and part of his head with it. He collapsed onto a pile of twisted steel.

Walt flung himself around to the doorway where the Mexican would be coming out. He saw Gonzales pawing for the girl, trying to bring her around as a shield. She flung herself down at his feet and he stood exposed to Walt's gun, his own still holstered, and his torn fingers plucking at it. Slowly his hands raised.

Walt looked over his gunsights at the man and wished he could shoot him down, as they'd done to Big Walt. But that wasn't in him.

"Juana, let's find a rope and tie Gonzales up," he said wearily.

They built a mesquite bonfire to attract the posse that had been trailing Sedge. Walt smiled as he thought how surprised they'd be when they found their man had already paid the penalty for a more recent crime than that which had set them after him. The redhead too was dead, from the chop of the blade that had flown off the falling mill. There was only Gonzales, tied up and lying in a corner, for the law to take in hand.

They sat around the table. On it were the saddlebags with the money packed neatly back into them. Bridgeman had packed in the thousand dollars that Sedge had set out for him, saying, "I don't want the count to be short."

Walt said, "There's probably some sort of reward out for these hombres. That'll help build you a new mill."

"It would help," the rancher admitted. "But if we have to, we'll rebuild the old one."

"Yes!" the girl exclaimed. She jumped up from her chair and hurried over to the stove. "I make some coffee. The posse will want coffee, eh, Señores?"

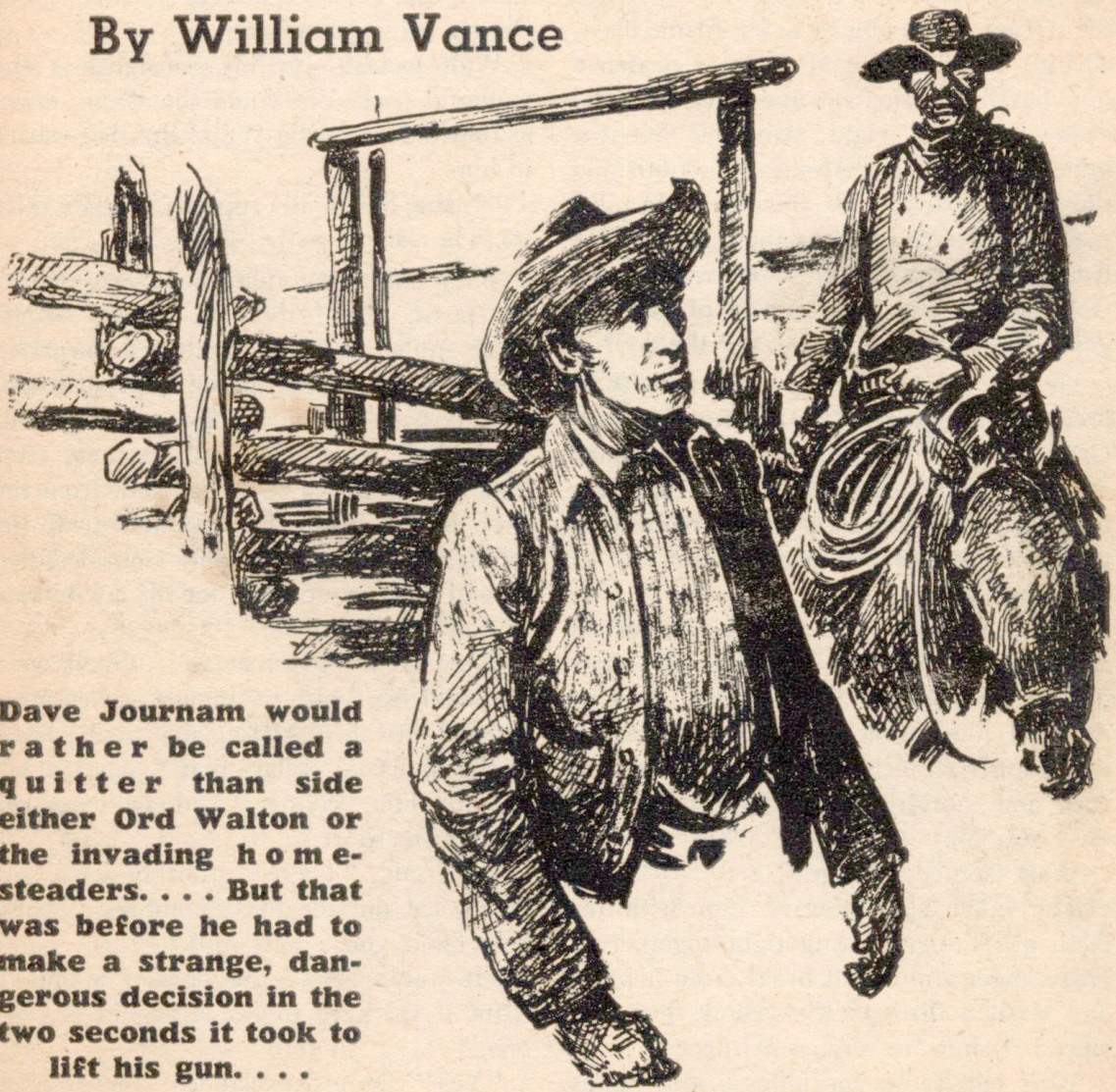
"Yes, Juana," Bridgeman said. He smiled at Walt and slouched comfortably into his chair.

Walt grinned and hunched down to make a smoke. He was thinking, now he could close out his father's record of Frank Bridgeman. After the entry, "Now ranching in Wells County," he would put a period. ■ ■ ■

Bunch Quitter

Cattle-Empire Novelette

By William Vance



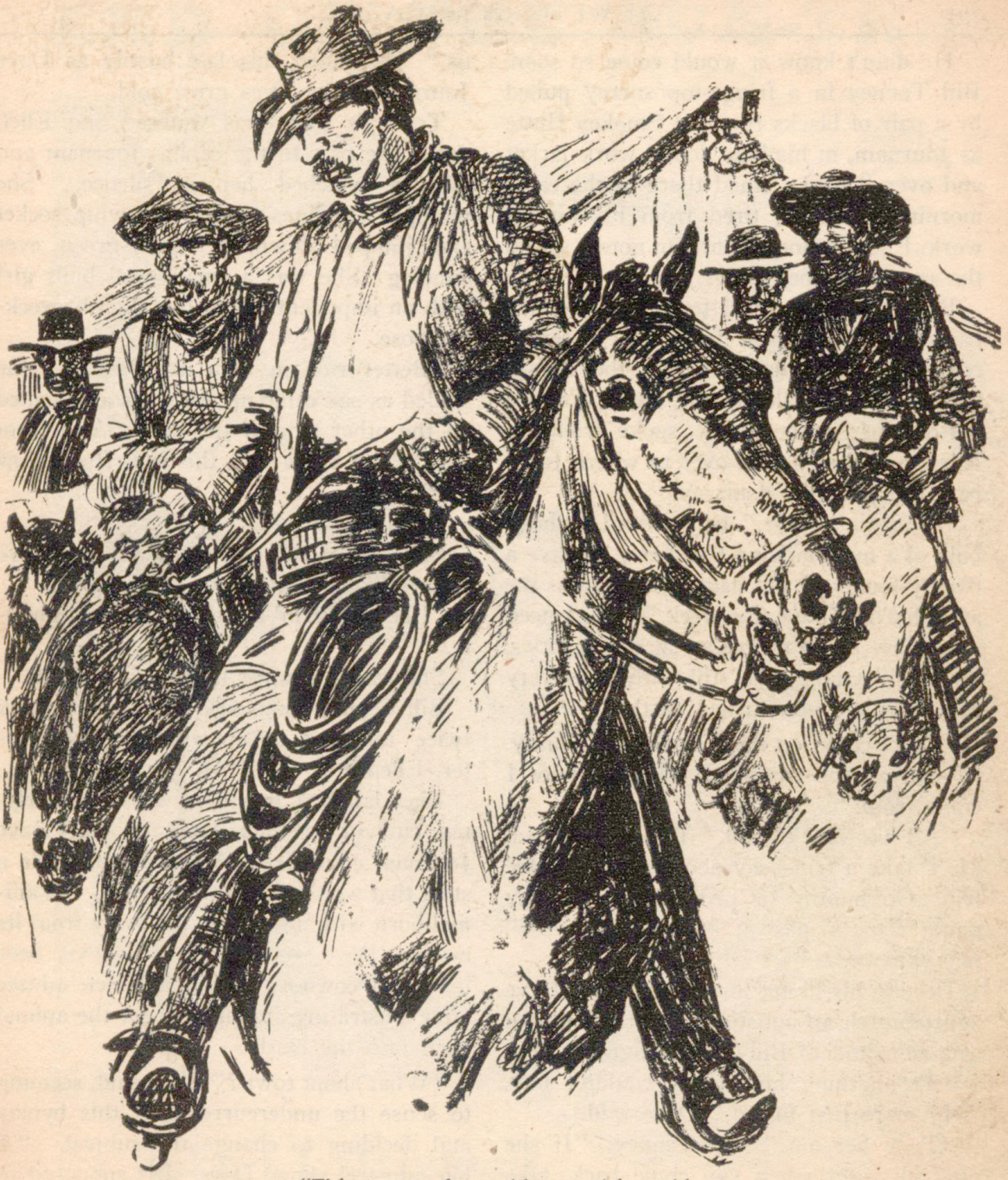
Dave Journam would rather be called a quitter than side either Ord Walton or the invading homesteaders. . . . But that was before he had to make a strange, dangerous decision in the two seconds it took to lift his gun. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

"I'm Staying Out of It"

IT WAS seven o'clock in the morning before the mare foaled a springy-legged tawny-furred colt. Dave Journam felt the strain of working with her through the long night, as he threw fresh hay in the stall. He put away the fork and stepped out into the thin chill mountain air. He watched the yellow shafts of sunshine spearing the valley from their beginnings over the purple Henry's for a moment. The colt had the makings of a fine horse and he felt good as he made his way toward the cabin on the aspen-groved knoll above the barn.

Dave Journam was thirty-two that fall. He'd owned the Spade two years; the



"Either you take a ride, or pick a side right now!"

Spade was a smallish outfit made up of the triangle separating the huge Slash W on the north from Bill Tierney's Tumbling T on the south. Journam was there by common consent of Bill Tenney and Ord Walton. They realized at the start it was better to get along with Dave Journam than to fight him.

But now, down there in the valley, barb wire was going up. The thick black loam was being turned and smoke from a dozen hastily erected shanties rose on the thin air. Journam, a medium-sized compact man with sandy hair and blue eyes, frowned down on the valley that morning. He was troubled by things he knew would come.

He didn't know it would come so soon. Bill Tenney in a fringe-top surrey pulled by a pair of blacks rounded Smokey Butte as Journam, in his blue denim work jacket and overall pants, stood there in the early morning sunshine, tired from his night's work. Ellen Tenney, Journam noted, sat on the seat beside her father.

Both of them waved to him as Tenney hauled the team in at Journam's watering trough at the corral. While the horses buried their muzzles in the water, Tenney got down from the surrey, spoke briefly to Ellen, and then strode over to where Journam leaned in the doorway.

" 'Mornin', Dave," he rumbled, a huge bulk of a man, looking too young to have a twenty-four year old daughter. "Guess me and Ord'll be busy this week." He glanced meaningly down the valley at the shanties, the fresh-strung wire still with its silvery glint and the new-turned earth.

"Don't count on me," Dave said bluntly. "I had all the trouble I wanted where I come from."

"All we want o' you," Tenney rumbled, "is t' take a trip—say about a two weeks' trip. Go huntin' or prospectin'. Go any damn place y' please. Me and Ord, we'll pay you wages."

Despite his liking for Bill Tenney, Dave Journam felt an impatience for the big man at that moment. Bill Tenney figured there wasn't anything his money couldn't buy. "My mare just foaled," Dave said.

"Turn her out," said Tenney. "If she ain't all right when you come back, take two o' my best."

"Twenty of your best ain't worth one of her," Journam said coldly.

Tenney scowled, knowing it was the truth. "We want you out o' this, Dave," he rumbled. "That's all we want."

"Don't worry," Journam said sourly. "I'm just watchin'."

"If we could be sure." Tenney's voice was troubled. "We don't want no trouble with you, Dave. It'd be bad for you—and us." He added this last hastily as Dave Journam's blue eyes grew cold.

Tenney's team was watered and Ellen drove the pair to the cabin. Journam and Tenney watched her in silence. She wrapped the lines around the whip socket and jumped down, her gray-green eyes dancing. She was a small, well built girl with an impudent tilt to her slightly freckled nose.

"Better ride in with us, Dave." She smiled as she came up the steps and leaned on the other side of the door frame from him. "Big show—all the way from New York."

"Can't," he said.

She looked off down the valley. "I've always liked your view." She sighed.

"I been offerin' it to you," he said glumly.

She leaned against him for a moment.

Bill Tenney rumbled, "You want t' think twice 'fore you tie up with a bunch quitter, Ellen."

They laughed, but there was an underlying current in their laughter that Dave Journam could feel. A bunch quitter is a steer that won't stay with the herd. An animal born with an urge to get away from its mates. Dave Journam had known bad-tempered cowboys to kill a bunch quitter after frustrating attempts to get the animal back into the herd.

"What about town?" Ellen said, seeming to sense the undercurrents of this byplay and deciding to change the subject. "A big minstrel show, Dave. It's supposed to be good."

"Sure like to," Journam said. "But Lady just foaled. Don't want t' leave her alone."

"She did? Can I see the colt?" Ellen could get excited about Lady's kind of horse and Dave forgot everything else in this consuming passion of his that Ellen seemed to share. They walked down to the barn together, their arms touching and Dave Journam, scenting the perfume of her, glancing

down on her soft roundness, felt the poignant yearning that had been his almost from the first time he looked at Ellen Tenney.

Inside the barn, Ellen gazed ecstastically at the spindly-legged colt as it stood beside the mare. Dave felt some concern for the droopy-headed mare. Lady hardly looked at them when they entered the stall.

"Got its mother's legs and chest," Ellen commented. "You're doing all right as a breeder, Dave."

He glanced swiftly at her. "Thanks," he said. "I'm sort o' worried about her. She's had a tough time of it. I was up with her most o' the night."

Ellen turned around and faced him and the thing that had been with both of them came out. "What is it with you, Dave?" she wanted to know. "Ord was over last night. I heard him and Papa talking about you. They quarreled."

He said stiffly, "Don't you worry about it, Ellen."

She shook her head, smiling at him. "Don't say that, Dave. You might's well tell the sun not to shine."

They walked slowly to the barn door and stood looking down the valley. "That's the trouble," Dave said, pointing. "Down there."

"But you're up here," she said lightly.

"That's what Bill told me," Dave said. "But Ord don't think so. He don't want me settin' on the fence—that's the way he put it. He wants me on one side or the other." His voice took on a bitter note. "That's why I'm a bunch quitter."

She looked up at him, facing him squarely. "You'll do what you think is right," she said slowly. "That's why I lo—like you, Dave. One reason, anyway."

His spirit took a lift from that. He laughed and got her small hands in his brown one. "I wish it was more than liking," he said earnestly. "I— I—"

"Ellen!" Bill Tenney's bellow reached them and caused them to break away, startled for a moment.

They walked back to the cabin and Dave helped Ellen up into the surrey. She gave him a smile that was suddenly shy, and Tenney grunted and they drove off into the beginning of the morning heat. Dave watched them somberly out of sight and then turned into his cabin. Tiredness was on him like a cloak but he was hungry, too.

HE PUT coffee water on the stove and sliced cold potatoes and cut thick slices of bacon. He threw all of it together in the smoking fry pan. He stood there turning the bacon and stirring the potatoes, with the odors filling the air, when he heard the sound of shod hoofs outside. He slid the fry pan to a warm spot on top of the stove and went outside, not even bothering to look at the pair of six-guns hanging on the wall. That was behind him.

A tall, thin, gangling man in bib overalls, calico shirt and manure-covered work shoes sat bareback astride a tired plow horse. The man, with his watery blue eyes and sandy mustache looked as tired as the horse.

He said, "Mister, I'm looking for my cow." He had a thin twangy voice that didn't apologize for anything. He added, "I'm Knute Rocklan and I'm farmin' down the valley."

Dave Journam said, "Sorry, haven't seen her. Haven't been off the place since yesterday mornin'."

Rocklan looked at him keenly. "Had her staked out. Rope looked like it'd been cut with a knife."

Journam thought that Rocklan's troubles were only beginning. He felt his irritation at Bill Tenney and Ord Walton rise in him and it served to keep him in stony cold silence.

"Know where I might look?" Rocklan was persistent.

Journam shook his head negatively and said, "Lot's o' country a cow could get lost in around here."

"But not enough," Rocklan grinned crookedly. He became grim. "Gotta have

that cow. Three kids t' feed, and that cow furnished a heap o' livin' fer 'em." He lifted the cotton plow line he used for reins, and pulled the bony, tired horse around. "If you see a brindle cow, I'd thank y' t' let me know."

Journam nodded and turned back inside his cabin. The room was filled with a gloom deposited there by Knute Rocklan, and Journam was disturbed. He pushed the fry pan back over the fire and stirred the potatoes. His hunger suddenly deserted him, as he remembered the look on Rocklan's face when telling about his three kids depending on the cow for a major part of their food. Journam cursed softly and for the first time looked at the black walnut butts of the twin Colt .45's hanging on his cabin wall, in their worn leather holsters.

The guns had collected dust there for two years now, the day Dave Journam had kicked the dust of Cheyenne off his feet and headed northwest. Dave Journam was a word in Cheyenne, a bad word to some men, a good word to others. Those two 45 Colts, with their worn handles, had kept law and order in one of the wildest towns west of the Mississippi. Their spiteful bark was a thing that kept the peace, kept the holdups down and the bandits out and the rustlers moving on to greener pastures. But that five years had done something to Dave Journam. When he began wondering if a well heeled stranger could get his guns going first, he took tab on himself. That tab resulted in his coming to the Squawtooth Country, where he bought the rundown Spade for a song. He raised horses, fine horses, that had attracted the attention of British calvary purchasing agents and race horse people. His reputation had assured him range for Spade horses between two of the biggest spreads between the Snake and the Canadian border.

Journam had no intention of interfering in Terry's and Walton's plans. Much as he hated Ord Walton, he wasn't letting anything interfere with or interrupt his quiet uneventful life on the very edge of the Squawtooth. He had deliberately planned it this way.

He ate his breakfast and scrubbed out the few utensils he'd used. He went back to the barn and found the mare in poor shape. The colt lay on hay in a corner of the stall. He stroked the mare's velvety muzzle, feeling the hot dryness of it, wondering what he should do, searching his mind for what might be the cause of her trouble. She was a hot-blooded animal and susceptible, he'd found by experience, to things the hardier range ponies threw off with ease. He thought then he'd go back to the cabin and cook up a mash for her and try to get it down her. He was standing there with a troubled frown on his leaf-brown face when the sound of many hoofs brought him outside.

Ord Walton, keeping a tight rein on the spunky kind of horse he liked to ride, lifted a gloved hand. He was a handsome, dark-skinned man of Journam's age, with a slightly dissipated look about him. He wore flashy clothes, silver dollar buttons and a pearl-handled .45, tied down. His hardcase men, all gun toters, stood back from him, their hard sharp eyes on Journam. They'd heard of Journam, every man of them and they showed him a certain respect.

Ord said, "I saw Tenney on his way t' town. He says you're stickin'."

"I got a sick mare," Journam told him shortly.

"If you stay here, you'll get off the fence," said Ord with an arrogance that brought a thin flush to Journam's face.

"Right now, Walton," he said softly, "I'm goin' to the house and cook some mash for my horse."

"Let's have this out, first," Ord Walton said roughly. "Either you take a ride or pick a side. Now!"

Journam heard this and he moved toward his cabin on the aspen-covered knoll. Ord

kneed his horse ahead and laid a heavy hand on Journam's shoulder and tried to whirl him around.

Journam exploded with controlled rage. He grabbed the big man's hand and jerked him off his horse. Walton landed with a solid thump that brought a grunt of surprise from him. He scrambled to his feet, clawing at the pearl handled gun. One of his men yelled, "He's slick, Ord!"

Journam caught Walton's gunhand with his left hand and whirled like a big cat, his back on Walton, the panting rancher's gun arm between Journam's right arm and body. Journam wrenched and twisted and Walton dropped the gun. Journam kicked it a dozen feet away and stepped away from Walton and whirled facing the taller and heavier man.

Walton's face was twisted in rage. He said between his teeth, "You got a tough name, Journam. I'm gonna see just how tough." He leaped at Journam, swinging wildly. His big fist caught Journam high up on the forehead and stunned him. Journam stumbled back and went down. Walton, cursing savagely, leaped at him, his boots swinging. Journam rolled out of the way and Walton followed, trying to stamp him with his boots. Journam caught the enraged cattleman's boot and jerked hard, dumping the crazy-mad rancher on the hard ground.

Walton rolled over quickly, moving fast for a big man. He caught Journam around the neck and put a throttling half-nelson on him. He exerted all his strength and Journam felt his breath cut off.

In desperation, Journam put everything he had into a solid punch over Walton's kidneys, a blow that brought a pained grunt from Walton. The bigger man relaxed his strangling hold for a moment and Journam broke away, his hard fists flailing at Walton's head. The big cattleman's hat rolled away as the two men scrambled to their feet. They swung hard savage blows, moving back and forth, scattering the watching Slash W men and spooking Walton's horse.

Journam was bleeding and half blinded with sweat and blood. Walton's heavier weight and longer reach was telling as Walton slowly forced him back against the barn. Walton breathing gustily, said, "Gotcha now, damn y'!" and pinned Journam against the wall.

Journam brought his knee up and Walton dodged. Then Journam swung his right fist into Walton's belly, feeling his balled fist sink deep. The big cattleman turned purple, gasping for breath, bent forward helpless with pain. Journam used the same rock-hard fist and the blow landed on the point of Walton's chin. Walton's head snapped back and he staggered backward a dozen feet before he fell.

"Get him out o' here," Journam jerked out. "Tell him, by God, I ain't runnin' one way or the other."

CHAPTER TWO

A Man to Tie To

THE Slash W men gathered up their boss and put him on a horse. A rider got on behind, holding him up. They moved away in a heavy silence, broken only by the sound of hoofs and the creak of leather and jangle of bit chains and spurs.

Journam staggered over to the watering trough and ducked his head. His jacket and shirt were in tatters and he stripped them off and splashed cool water over his upper body. Utterly exhausted, he laid his chest across the trough and put his head in his hands, too weak to move.

Journam was lying like that when he heard a sound. He raised his head quickly and saw Knute Rocklan sitting the old plow hose, looking at him impassively. "Quite a fight," the homesteader said without admiration or derision. "You licked him."

Journam stood on his feet, still weak and with the anger drained out of him. "I got a sick mare," he said. He started for the cabin. "Got t' take care o' her."

Rocklan slid to the ground. "Lemme look at her," he said. "I used t' vet a little back in Vermont."

Journam considered that. He said, "If you're a horse doctor, I'll appreciate your help."

He led the way into the barn.

The mare was down now, her head flat on the hay in the stall. She didn't move when they stood over her. Rocklan gathered up the colt and brought it over to the mare. He put it down before her and she didn't move. Rocklan carried the colt into the next stall, then, and came back to stand with his hands jammed deep in his overall pockets. "Finest horse I seen in a long time," he said. He looked at Journam. "Gotta get her on her feet. If we don't, she'll die."

Between the two of them they pushed and lifted and coaxed. The mare was without spirit and without the will to live. Journam crossed to the horse, urging her up, begging, pleading, threatening and lifting. At last she heaved a snort and got tremblingly on her slender thoroughbred legs, shaky, her head hanging.

"You keep her up," Rocklan said. "I'm goin' up t' yer place and fix some stuff. You got sugar and corn meal?"

Journam had his bare shoulder under the mare's neck. He nodded and said urgently, "Hurry, man, hurry. She's dying." He stroked her silken neck, feeling the tremors that shook her.

Rocklan looked pityingly at the mare. "I'll do what I can," he said and left the barn, hurrying. He was back in ten minutes and besides the big dishpan full of some gruel, he had a bottle of whiskey. "Gonna try'n get a drink down her," he said. "Ain't never tried it before."

Journam was silent and Rocklan added, "At least 'twon't hurt 'er."

He uncorked the bottle and slipped the neck of it between the mare's teeth, held her muzzle with his two hands and used his shoulder to raise her head. She struggled weakly and Journam smelled the sourmash whiskey he'd bought two years before, the day he left Cheyenne.

Rocklan grunted with satisfaction and said, "That'll stir up her blood." He began forcing the gruel in the dishpan into the mare's mouth. She resisted and Rocklan expertly opened her mouth and shoved it in with his hand. He forced her to eat until the pan was near empty and they could see the strength go back into the sleek-haired animal.

"She'll pick up a leetle," Rocklan said, "but 'less we do somethin' she'll go right down again."

"What's wrong with her?" Journam's voice was hard.

"Had a bad time with th' colt, didn't she?" Rockland's rough hands were on the mare's quivery flanks. "First one, too, I reckon?"

"I was with her most o' the night," Journam said. "She had trouble."

"I gotta open her up," Rocklan said. "She might not live. Want me to?"

Journam was silent.

"She'll die anyhow, if you don't do somethin'," Rocklan said. "I got m' tools down valley. I'll be back. Keep her on her feet."

"I'll pay you well," Journam said. "I want that mare."

Rocklan looked at him keenly. "Some things," he said, "you can't buy a-tall. Not with money, you can't."

Journam was so occupied with the suffering mare, he hardly noticed the passage of time it took Rocklan to ride down into the valley and return. The tall gangling farmer lost little time in performing the operation. He acted like a man who knew what he was doing. When he tied the last stitch in place, he methodically cleaned his equipment and told Journam, "Best thing

t' do now is leave her be. She's gonna be all right."

Journam drew in a deep breath and relaxed. "Maybe I can pay you back," he said. "She's a real valuable mare. The bedrock of my plans up here."

Rocklan grunted and put his gleaming scalpels in a black bag. He said, "Seems t' me you're worryin' more about th' mare than that Walton feller. From what I've seen he's a bad injun."

Journam felt his anger rise as he said briefly. "He's used t' havin' things his own way. Wait'll I saddle up. I'll help you find the cow."

It was late afternoon when Journam picked up the sign of Rocklan's milch cow. He followed the sign up the valley, noting the fact without telling Rocklan, that the cow was being herded by a rider who carried a split shoe.

The trail wasn't hard to follow, and Journam smiled grimly. It was plain the cow thief wasn't expecting to find an expert trailer among the homesteaders. His brow wrinkled when the trail suddenly cut back into a small canyon that he knew emerged on the heights above his own ranch. He turned his mount up the canyon and as he and Rocklan climbed silently, the canyon narrowed. The scrub oak gave way to scabby pine and stunted cedar and the creek dried to a trickle.

They found the cow in a clump of buckbrush near the head of the canyon. She had been shot between the eyes with a big caliber gun, probably a .44-40 rifle, Journam thought. She lay where she'd dropped when shot.

"Why didn't they just shoot her down there?" Rocklan's voice was bewildered.

Journam knew why but he kept his silence. The meanness of a man who'd steal a man's cow to keep him looking for her made him momentarily ashamed of knowing Bill Tenney and Ord Walton.

Rocklan stood looking down at the animal with a bitterness in his gray eyes. He said, "Whoever done it, done my kids a big hurt."

Journam cursed mentally as he watched Rocklan stand there staring at the wanton slaughter.

"Guess maybe I better take what meat I can. She ain't bloated yet."

Journam felt the bitterness of the gaunt farmer as anger surged up in him. He kicked his horse on up through the narrow defile, to where the canyon spread out in a big high meadow. Other canyons branched out from the meadow, which was criss-crossed with steep beginnings of canyons. He saw where the broken-shoed horse joined the tracks of several others and the group together moved down the canyon adjoining the one up which Journam and Rocklan had climbed.

JOURNAM waited there, smoking, as the sun dipped below the far mountains. A chill wind blew down from the peaks above. He heard the sound of Rocklan's horse and he called, "Over here."

Rocklan came up out of the dusk and he was leading his horse loaded with beef. He said, "This won't keep, ain't cold enough yet. Guess I'll split it amongst m' neighbors."

Journam said abruptly, "Terry and Walton are fixin' it so's you won't have any neighbors."

"We been warned," Rocklan said stubbornly. "But they can't run us all out. Not if we all stick together."

Journam thought differently, but he was silent. He said gruffly, "We'd better get on down before it gets any darker. We'll ride double and lead yours." He disengaged his foot from one stirrup and Rocklan got on behind him. They moved down the canyon.

An hour later they broke out of the canyon behind Spade. They saw the fire then, a leaping, yellow-tongued mass, far down below in the valley. Journam felt Rocklan's body stiffen against his and the

farmer's breathing suddenly became loud.

"Hope it ain't mine," and there was a prayer in his voice.

Journam's sudden pity turned to bitter anger at Bill Tenney and Ord Walton's ruthlessness. He said, "You take my horse and go on down. I'll catch up another and get there soon's I can."

Rocklan's voice trembled. "Don't want y' t' git in any trouble, mister, on my account."

Journam got the horse into a lope, because now the ground was familiar to him. They got to Journam's cabin and Journam got off. "I'll do what I can," he said shortly. "An' you won't owe me nothin', either."

Rocklan still sat there and Journam added, "There's a gun in there if you want it."

"Ain't never shot a gun." Rocklan's voice was stolid. The stolidness gave way to despair when he added, "Guess I'm too old t' l'arn now."

He rode off into the darkness, on Journam's horse, leading the beef-laden plow horse. "Better fer you not to come down, mister. Some purty hot- tempered fellers down there. Even if they are farmers."

Journam stood there in the darkness, looking down in the valley at the play of flames. He could barely make out men, small at this distance, frantically scurrying around the burning shanty or barn. He thought of the gaunt farmer riding through the darkness not knowing whether it was his own home burning, or whether his wife and kids were safe. Journam was torn by his feelings as he stood there. He had a genuine liking for Bill Tenney. Not because he was Ellen's father, but because he was a man of bluff good nature, with a likeable personality. He'd gone out of his way numerous times to be a good neighbor to Journam. Ord Walton, on the other hand, was a man Journam took an instant dislike for because Walton was a natural bully. He was arrogant and assertive. Journam suspected, too, that a mean and miserly streak underlay his flamboyance. Journam had never been able to abide a two-faced man. Journam shook his head there in the dark, irritated at himself for getting his feelings aroused about something he was not going to have anything to do with; he wasn't allowing anything to interfere with his plans.

As if to bolster this resolve, he stamped into the cabin and found his lantern and lighted it. He went out to the barn. Eyes shone out at him from the darkness, reflected in the lantern light. A saddled horse stood just inside the barn door. It was the animal Walton rode, and it had spooked. Journam led the animal to a stall and tied it up. He stopped short, staring at the track the animal left. He leaned down and grabbed a fetlock and pressed with his fingers and lifted the horse's hoof. The shoe was split. He dropped the hoof and straightened, remembering the pitiful attempt of Rocklan to salvage something from his dead milch cow. He swore softly as he went to the next stall.

The mare was standing with her head turned expectantly. She whickered softly when he came into the stall. He hung the lantern on a nail in the wall and went to her head and stroked her muzzle. He could tell she was greatly improved. She nibbled at his fingers. There was a shine in her eyes that hadn't been there before. He went into the next stall and wrestled the wobbly-legged colt around to its mother. He saw the mare caring for the colt as he got the lantern and went back to Walton's saddle horse.

He unsaddled the animal and swung the ornate saddle over the bulkhead. He removed the bridle and gave the horse a measure of grain. He stepped out through the barn door and stopped short. A light burned in his cabin.

Journam lifted the lantern chimney and blew out the light. He set the lantern against the barn and went toward the house, circling the woodpile and easing

stealthily up beneath the uncovered window. He took off his hat and peered over the window sill. At first he didn't see anything. Then his eyes drifted toward the stove and he froze. Ellen Tenney was slipping bits of dark and pitch wood into his cook stove.

He went around, noisily now, and entered, shutting the door behind him and leaning on it. She was standing there by the stove, a piece of bark in her hand, her lips parted.

"I thought you'd never come," she said with a rush of words and came slowly across the room and put her hands on his shoulders, looking up into his stony face.

He didn't betray his racing heart. He said, "One of the farmers was here. Name's Rocklan. He saved the mare for me."

She tilted her head at him, half-smiling. "Then you're going with them?"

He tensed and she felt his muscles harden through the soft calico shirt. "I'm staying clear," he said.

A shadow crossed her face, but he wasn't sure. She said swiftly, "That's not what Ord told Papa. He said you held a gun on him and beat him." She saw the look that crossed his face and she exclaimed, "I knew he was lying, Dave. But Papa doesn't. He told Papa you'd lined up with the settlers. Hoping there'd be a big fight and either way it went you'd come out. He's getting men together to clean up the homesteaders, run them out—and you too, Dave."

Dave Journam's eyes grew cold and went to the dusty pair of six-guns on his cabin wall. His lips thinned out as he gently removed the girl's hands and went swiftly across the room. He lifted the gun belt from the wall peg and with one swift motion buckled it around his lean hips. He was bending over, tying the rawhide thongs to his legs when he felt her hand on his shoulder. He looked up to find her gazing down at him with wide eyes.

"What're you going to do, Dave?" Her voice was tense.

He shook his head. "Nothin'—if they leave me alone. You better pull out, Ellen. I don't want you to get hurt."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I don't want *you* to get hurt!" she cried. "Oh, Dave, I don't know why it has to be this way! I can't understand why Ord has so much influence with Papa—"

He said, "Ord is greedy as sin, Ellen. There's plenty for everybody out here but he's got t' have it all. He's so sure in what he wants and he's so certain how he's goin' t' get it, he's bound to pick up people who'll go along. Good people, who mean right well, but who're not sure of what t' do. That's how Ord does it. Now you light a shuck out o' here, honey. I ain't so sure but what maybe I'll line up with the grangers."

CHAPTER THREE

The Avenging Horde

SHE WAS silent and he finished with his tie-down thongs and straightened. "That makes a difference, Ellen?" he asked gently.

She shook her head. "No, Dave, no. I'm proud of you," she said quietly. "I don't want you and Papa to hurt each other—and you won't, I know. I—" She broke off as glass tinkled to the floor and the reverberating *spang* of a rifle reached their ears.

Journam was across the room with a bound. He placed his hand over the chimney top, plunging the room into darkness. He felt Ellen brush against him and his arm encircled her waist. He said, "These walls are thin, honey. Better kneel down on the floor in front o' the stove." As he spoke another spiteful bullet whined into the cabin and the report came from a different direction.

He said, "I'll tell 'em you're in here. They'll give you a chance to get out."

"Don't do it, Dave," she said.

He went to the door and opened it. He let out a thin, clear yell.

A cry up the mountains answered him. "What d' y' want, nester?"

"Ellen Tenney's in here," Journam yelled. "Hold your fire and let her out."

A bullet whined into the door frame by Journam's head. "Full o' tricks, ain't you?" Ord Walton's cold brutal call came out of the night. "Y' don't get away with it, Journam."

Journam slammed the door as a hail of lead swept the cabin and guns went off on all sides. He ran to the window, a six-gun in either hand. He fired at flashes from each of the cabin's three windows. The firing settled down to an occasional shot after the short but terrific bombardment.

He crept back to the stove, bumping into Ellen. "You all right?" he asked.

He felt her warm hands on his wrist as she whispered, "Yes, Dave. Thank God, Papa isn't with him!"

Journam didn't tell her he'd heard Bill Tenney's protesting voice just before Walton's men began firing. He said, "I've got to go out there, honey."

She moved against him, her hands clutching at him in the darkness. "No, Dave, no!" she said. "They'll kill you!"

"They'll kill us both if I stay in here," he said grimly.

Her arms were around his neck and he felth the warm softness of her body against his. His arms went hungry around her, pulling her against him with a fierceness that threatened her ribs. He said, "Honey, you know how I feel about you? I can't stay in here."

With relentless fingers he loosed her arms and stood up. A bright flare lighted the room and he could see her face. She gasped, "Your barn!"

"The mare!" He thought he shouted the words, but they were a mere croak. He whirled and dove through the shattered window, head first. He landed on his hands and knees and crouched and ran, zigzagging toward the barn as bullets kicked up the dust and rock around him. He fired with both hands, at the flashes and at the indistinct figures outlined against the leaping flames of the burning barn.

A man loomed up in the light of the barn and in Journam's path. The gun in Journam's hand flamed with that of the gunman he faced. They both went down together and as if by common consent the guns of all were silenced as one.

Journam rolled over and sat up, the rock that had tripped him showing plainly in the light of the burning barn. The guns set up another staccato and he heard the bullet's whine of death as he scuttled into the open barn door.

Inside, the heat was unbearable as the flames crackled fiercely at the dry boards and caught at the hay in the loft. A few burning wisps of hay fell through from above as he went to the first stall and untied the hackamore holding Walton's mount. He led the snorting trembling animal to the door of his feed room and tied it up, while the guns hammered outside and stray lead whistled and whined through the barn. He ran into the feed room and came back lugging a hundred pound sack of oats. He threw this across the horse and roped it quickly and securely to the snorting animal. Then he jerked one of the rawhide thongs off his left leg and ran it through the band of his hat and hastily threaded the end through the loose weave of the oat sack.

He turned the horse loose then, and slapped it all the way to the door. The maddened animal bolted. Journam watched it for a moment as it galloped wildly out of the circle of light, and the guns outside set up a murderous blast.

Journam turned and ran back to where the mare was snorting and stomping, wild-eyed with fear. He untied her and tried to lead her out. She planted her legs and wouldn't move.

In desperation he scooped up the colt and started for the door. He slipped outside, and keeping close to the wall, went out on the dark side of the barn, running crouched, panting, his heart nearly bursting with the effort of hurrying. He reached a dry gully. He put the colt down there.

He went back toward the barn as the fire broke out on the dark side, the red-yellow flames leaping high in the air.

Then he made it inside of the inferno, his breath coming in short gasps.

He got out his bandanna and slipped it over the mare's eyes and his fingers closed around her nostrils. She leaned against the wall and dropped to her knees.

He pulled her up with superhuman strength as the end of the barn gave way with a roaring crash.

THEN he was outside, hauling and tugging at the faltering mare with one hand, while he fired with the other. Suddenly the night was quiet, except for the crackling roar of the burning building. Then the night was split with a hideous yell. Men afoot, in surreys and buckboards and bareback came streaming into the bright lighted area, brandishing pitchforks, shovels, firing shotguns, muskets pistols and rifles. Away from the fire, at a distance, Journam watched in awe as the overalled farmers went berserk.

The Slash W crew scrambled for their horses and the relentless grangers followed, screaming invective and firing like an avenging horde.

Journam heard Ellen's terrified cry and he looked up as a horseman swept down on him, a six-gun spitting flame and lead. Ord Walton's hate-twisted face was screaming something at Journam and the horse slammed into him, knocking him down. Walton whirled the horse, the animal's agonized scream adding to the uproar as Walton sawed the Spanish bit and spurred the animal cruelly, intent on riding Journam into the ground.

With the threatening hoofs pawing the air over him, Journam could feel their steel on his body, when the mare moved across him. Journam rolled clear as the two horses came together. The gun in his hand flamed and Walton rolled into the falling horses wih a horrible scream.

Sick and shaken, Journam stood there as the horses scrambled to their feet, trampling Walton into the dusty ground. His bright, pearl-handled gun lay beside a bloody hand. Then soft firm arms were around Journam and he put his own arms around the shaking, sobbing girl.

A weaving figure came out of the night and Bill Tenney croaked, "Ellen, Ellen, honey, you all right?"

She raised her head, looking at her father as he lumbered up to them, his face covered with blood.

"Aw, I'm all right," he grumbled. "I started raisin' hob with Ord; he belted me over th' head with his gun. I'm sorry, honey, I tried t' help y'."

Rocklan came riding up on Journam's horse, followed by the settlers. His grim gaunt face was merciless as he gazed stonily at Tenney. "One more, fellers," he said quietly. "Then I reckon we can live in peace."

Journam said quietly, "There ain't no more, Rocklan. There's room enough for all here. What we got t' do is learn t' live together. We can do it, too. Can't we, Bill?"

Bill Tenney's face relaxed into a smile. "You doggone betcha," he said. " 'Specially when a doggone bunch quittin' critter turns out t' be a point steer."

Ellen smiled at Journam. "That's what I always thought," she said happily.

Rocklan got off Journam's horse and critically inspected his handiwork on the mare. "Looks like everything's gonna be all right," he said.

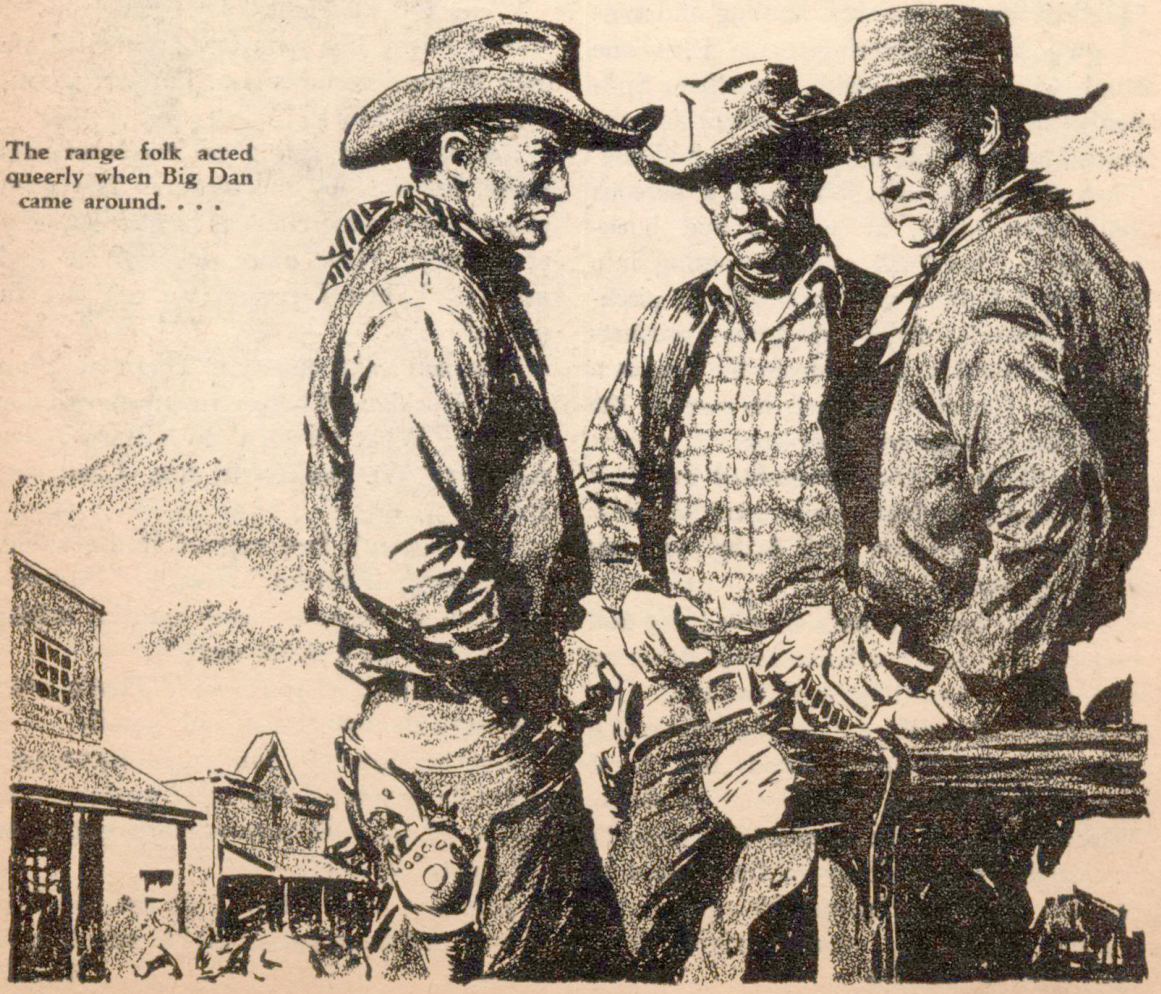
Journam smiled briefly at the gangling farmer and then turned all his attention to Ellen. ■ ■ ■

THE MEANEST MAN ON THE RANGE!

A Gripping, Human Novelette

By Oliver King

Dollar Dan was born with the golden touch, a self-made frontier Midas, with ice for blood, a stone for a heart, and his only friend the well-oiled .45 on his hip!



The range folk acted queerly when Big Dan came around. . . .

He told himself that they were constrained and awkward because they knew he was grieved over Jimmy Walton's death.

CHAPTER ONE

Poison Trail

THE RIDER on the lathered paint horse plowed to a stop in front of the corral and quit the saddle in a hurry.

"Say, Dan," he broke out almost before his feet hit the ground, "loan me a horse, will you? I just run across Cree Caton and Banty Stevens. They're hittin' the Swayback Mesa trail over into the Red Mountain country! I want to ride into

town and git the sheriff and a posse, but this bronc of mine is about blowed."

He was a clean-cut young cowboy around twenty, and just now his features were alive with excitement.

Big Dan Carter whistled softly. "Are you sure you saw Cree Caton and Banty Stevens, young 'un? Why would they be trailin' through here, right after that bank killin' down to Hurley?"

"I seen 'em as plain as I'm seein' you now," Jimmy Walton told him excitedly. "I was outa sight in some brush, and they passed within fifty yards of me! They musta laid low until they figgered it was safe to snake through here and hole up around Red Mountain."

Big Dan nodded, his eyes suddenly thoughtful, and the kid rushed on. "There's five thousand dollars reward on 'em, and I'm shore aimin' to git my cut of it. Mebbe Horse Anderson will let me ride with the posse, since I'm bringin' him the word. You reckon he will, Dan?"

Big Dan Carter smiled good-humoredly. "Mebbe," he allowed. "Go ahead and catch out that blaze-face sorrel. He'll carry you plenty far and fast."

He knew it wasn't likely that Horse Anderson would let a kid like Walton ride with the posse, but there wasn't any danger of Jimmy's not getting his share of the head money in any case. The sheriff would see to that. The thought came to Big Dan that he wouldn't mind having a slice of that reward money himself. Five thousand dollars was a lot of dinero. Why, half of that would let him buy the upper range he wanted for summer pasture.

He paused suddenly in pulling tight the cinch on the black he had been saddling and looked out toward the hills, struck by a new idea.

Before him, in the distance, lay the summer range he wanted. The fork of Curley Y Creek was up there. From where he stood, he could trace its progress by the line of willows and cottonwoods along its banks. One branch swooped away into the neighboring range, but the other came down straight through Big Dan's land. If he got the upper pasture, he would not only have good summer grazing land, but water rights clear on past the fork of the creek. Twenty-five hundred dollars! His eyes narrowed, intent, calculating.

The black horse took advantage of his hesitation to swell himself up against the pull of the cinch. Big Dan kicked him in the ribs to make him let go his wind, and pulled the cinch tight. Then he turned sharply on Jimmy Walton, who was leading out the bald-faced sorrel.

"Look here, young 'un," he said, his eyes hardening. "Why split up that money with a posse? There ain't but two of those gents. You and me could handle 'em, easy."

The kid's face lighted with interest but his eyes were doubtful. "You think we're enough for 'em, Dan?" he asked. "That pair are shore plenty poison."

"Don't let that git yore tail down," the older man told him. "These bad hombres ain't never so mean as they let on to be. In a saloon fight, where they kin git the advantage of a man, they're bad medicine. But out in the open, they're like anybody else. We'll hold high hand in this deal, because we know where they're goin' and what we're lookin' for, whereas they won't have no notion that we're hangin' to their trail."

"You don't think the sheriff. . . ."

"Time you got into him, they'd have too much of a start. Might never catch up with 'em. You ain't goin' to coyote on me, are you? This here's a big chance."

Jimmie Walton flushed. "Hell, I'm not yellow," he answered. "If you're willin', I am."

Big Dan Carter's eyes flared. "Now you're talkin'. We'll either git our ropes on them two, or make bunch quitters of 'em—one or the other. Throw yore hull on that bronc, and let's go."

The latter sentence was added hastily, because Big Dan saw his son, young Dan, driving a bunch of lean stuff in the south pasture. The kid was only fifteen, and too young for a job like this. If he found out what was in the wind he'd want to go along, and Big Dan would have to tell him he couldn't. Somehow, he didn't want to make a point of that, right now.

After he had spoken, though, he had a moment of hesitation. Then he shook himself impatiently. Five years made all the difference. Young Dan was only a button, whereas Jimmy was practically a man.

AS THEY rode off at a high lope, Big Dan could see the upper range that twenty-five hundred dollars would buy, and the sight of it ended at once any doubts he might have had.

"How come you was up that way, to see 'em?" he asked Jimmy Walton.

"I was ridin' over to talk to you," the kid told him. "Dad and me has been lockin' horns over some new breeder stock he's fixin' to buy. He leans toward Durhams, and I figger that Herefords is the best stuff for this country. We couldn't come to no agreement, so I reckoned I'd come over and ask you about it."

Dan nodded. "You're right about the white-faced stuff," he said. "They'll stand the country better, and give you more beef in the end, is what I figger."

The kid's eyes sparkled. "That'll put a spoke in dad's wheel." He grinned. "He sets more store by what you think than any man on the range."

Dan Carter unconsciously straightened in the saddle. Somehow, what the kid said brought back all his confidence, banished the last scruple that he had about leading him on a dangerous journey like this. He'd see to it that Jimmy Walton came to no harm. After all, Dan had always succeeded in everything he started out to do, hadn't he?

There was hardly a man on the Curley Y range who would have disagreed with that. Big Dan Carter was, by all odds, the most popular and respected cowman in the country. He had fought his way up from nothing to where he had as nice a small spread as you'll find within a hundred miles, and he had done it without making an enemy. He had done it by hard work and saving and looking ahead. But even more than that, he had done it by being a top-hand at everything he had tried. And his success hadn't aroused the envy and hostility of the other ranchers. Big Dan's warm smile and honest friendliness had taken care of that.

They picked up the trail of the outlaws near where Jimmy had seen them. From then on, Dan Carter's mind was tight-fixed on the job in hand. Cree Caton and Banty Stevens were killers. If they were caught, they would hang. They would be on the alert, and ready to deal death at an instant's notice, selling their lives at whatever price their flaming guns could get.

The sign was fresh, and for trail-wise Dan Carter, it was easy enough to follow at first. After an hour's steady riding, however, the trail began to run over rocky country, and the sign became fainter and more difficult to follow. They were getting into the badlands beyond Swayback Mesa. The country grew more and more contorted. Ridge after ridge revealed a new confusion of upheaving lava, of gullies and ravines twisting down between grotesquely carved cliffs, or turreted battlements and upthrust pinnacles eroded into fantastic shapes. Beyond and above this rising sun-washed desolation stood the great metallic bulk of Red Mountain, brooding and ominous in the distance.

Nothing moved in this barren waste. There was a hot silence which seemed to have been beaten into the very hearts of the rocks themselves. The hoofs of their horses sounded loud, frighteningly loud against that heat-blasted quiet.

Dan Carter instinctively slowed his pace. His heart had suddenly began to pound in his big chest, and his nerves were taut with sudden foreboding. In that moment it seemed to him that death waited for him here in the hot afternoon. Death, silent, grinning, and sure, biding its time, lurking always ahead of him, as elusive and persistent as the shimmering heat waves which danced and disappeared above the rocks.

He shook himself impatiently, cursing himself under his breath for an old woman. But his glance grew more alert and his examination of the faint sign along the trail more careful. It was hard to tell in this country just how fresh the tracks were. There was nothing to guide him other than a faint scrape of iron against rock, visible only when the light struck it at a certain angle, a dried, broken twig, a blurred impression in sand, or a bruised bit of cactus or mesquite along the edge of the trail. It was these latter,, in the absence of droppings, which gave him his surest clue to the nearness of the quarry.

Yet even these were not enough, other than to tell him that it was a matter of minutes now. He knew that no trailer was good enough to say whether a bruised branch was five or fifteen minutes old. And he knew too that this country offered deadly opportunity for an ambush. The men ahead of him would be watching their back trail as a matter of habit.

It came to him that the thing he had begun was foolhardy. For the sake of the youngster at his side, and for the sake of his own wife and boy, he ought to turn back. But his pride objected to that. And pride was strengthened by the vision of that summer range which would round off his spread.

He rode on, with his glance ever keener, and his progress always more cautious. Yet even so the thing happened when he was least expecting it. His eye was fixed on a point ahead where the trail ran over a ridge between two high rocks, and which seemed to him the point of nearest danger. It was by the merest accident that he caught the glint of a gun barrel in some brush and rocks by the side of the trail just ahead.

The glint was followed instantly by the double crash of guns which shattered the hot silence into a bedlam of echoing sound. Lead snarled past Dan Carter's ears as he swayed sideways. Only the lightning speed with which he had quit the saddle at that first glint ahead saved his life. He hit the ground, ducking toward some nearby rocks, his head lashing toward his holstered gun.

In the same instant that he had flung himself sideways, he had shouted, "Down!" to Jimmy Walton. Now he sent a swift glance over his shoulder and saw the boy still sitting in the saddle. His head was down a little bit, and one hand was on the pommel as though he were about to dismount. But in the same fraction of a second, the blaze-faced sorrel whirled, and his rider toppled limply from the saddle.

Big Dan had no time to see any more. His six-gun was bucking against his palm, pumping lead at the rocks ahead. At the third shot, a man stood up there—a spidery, bandy-legged, small man whose distorted face showed a kind of surprised vindictiveness in that clear light. Then the man sat down suddenly and slumped forward.

Dan rolled to the other side of the rock. There was a dry, shallow wash there, which would hide him if he were on his hands and knees, and he slid softly into it. Cautiously he moved forward, stopping from time to time to listen. For long moments there was no sound other than the barely audible scrape of his own progress. Then the noise of a rolling rock brought him tense.

He lifted his head swiftly over the rim of the wash and saw Cree Caton crouched behind a mesquite bush, not fifteen yards

away. The half-breed saw him at the same time. His long face twisted in a sudden snarl as his gun came up.

Dan shot almost without willing it or knowing it. Caton spun, and staggered, his shot going wild. Cold-eyed, Dan took his time, aiming carefully. With the blast of his second shot, the outlaw froze, jerked convulsively, and then pitched forward on his face.

Big Dan Carter shoved fresh loads into the hot cylinder of his gun, and got cautiously to his feet, his glance shuttling between the prone figures of the outlaws. Neither moved. He walked over toward Caton, rolled him over with his foot, and saw that his second shot had hit him squarely over the heart. He was dead. Grim-jawed, Dan went to the other outlaw. Banty Stevens was lying slumped over on his face, with a hole the size of a man's fist in the back of his head. He, too, had done his last killing.

Dan Carter drew a long breath, and strode back toward where Jimmy Walton lay in the center of the trail. His heart was hammering hard, and a sense of disaster was on him. Involuntarily, he covered the last of the distance at a run.

Jimmy Walton lay with his head on his arm. His face looked pale, and somehow heartbreakingly young. It was as though he were no more than a button of fifteen, say, who had fallen asleep before the day's work was done. A kid the age of Big Dan's own. . . .

Dan Carter leaned down with caught breath, and felt with his hand for some beat of the heart. But there was none. His hand came away smeared with red, and he knew that more than one slug had smashed through the kid's chest. No doubt one or both of those bullets had been intended for Dan himself. The kid had been just behind him, and hadn't moved fast enough.

The sweat on Dan Carter's forehead felt suddenly cold, and his hand gripped the butt of the six-gun he still held, as though his fingers would bite into the wood.

CHAPTER TWO

Shadows of Death!

BIG DAN carried Jimmy Walton's body back home, himself, and alone. Part of that was because he felt he owed it to himself to face the boy's family without trying to slide out of any of his share of the responsibility.

Kame Walton wasn't there, and that made it harder. Dan had to break the news to the boy's mother.

When he rode away, he was still trying to tell himself that the thing hadn't been his fault, but it was hard for him to get the look in Sarah Walton's eyes out of his mind. Jimmy had been her only son.

Later that night, Dan Carter was trying to forget the look in his own wife's eyes when he told her the story. It was the first time he had ever seen a look even of disapproval on Mary Carter's face. This time there had been both horror and a stricken unbelief in her eyes as she had cried, "Oh, Dan, you didn't take a boy like that after those men, did you?"

Big Dan Carter had flown out at her angrily, his nerves already rasped beyond endurance. "Good God, what's the matter with you? The kid had got his growth. It was an accident, I tell you!"

And then young Dan had turned the knife in the wound innocently by saying, "Gosh, Dad, why didn't you take *me?*"

A week or so later, Sheriff Horse Anderson sent out word that the reward for Cree Caton and Banty Stevens was ready. Big Dan set his jaw and went in after it. It was a damn shame to profit by that boy's death, but still, refusing the reward wouldn't bring Jimmy back.

In town, the people he met acted a little queer. There was a kind of coolness in the

way they greeted him which Dan Carter had never felt before. It wasn't very marked—just a queer kind of restraint, an awkwardness. He told himself it was because they knew he felt bad about Jimmy Walton's death.

He found the sheriff in his office. Horse Anderson had a long, lantern-jawed face, and prominent, observant brown eyes which had a habit of crinkling humorously. His eyes were not humorous now, though. They were steady, non-committal, almost cold.

"Here's the money," he said a little grimly. "Five thousand dollars."

Big Dan looked surprised. "Reckon you've made a mistake, Horse," he said. "Only half of that goes to me."

Sheriff Anderson shifted his tobacco from one cheek to the other, sent a spurt of brown juice accurately to the spittoon two yards away, and said dryly, "Kame ain't takin' Jimmy's share, so I reckon it's all yores." His protuberant brown eyes fixed themselves on Dan's with a kind of hard significance. "You did the job. I reckon you might as well git as much as you can out of it."

Big Dan flushed, and a kind of impotent anger flared up in him. He put it down the best way he could, and when he spoke his voice was fairly steady.

"There ain't no sense to that," he said. "Kame's got to take his share."

"That's for Kame to decide," the sheriff told him. "I'm just tellin' you what he said."

"He's in town?" Dan asked quickly.

Horse Anderson looked over into a corner of the room, his expression veiled.

"He's in town," he said judicially, "but I don't know as I would see him if I was you. He ain't feelin' altogether good about this thing."

"Kame's one of my best friends," Dan told him stiffly. "I don't know as I need any advice of yours, when to see him and when not."

Sheriff Anderson's manner had gotten under his skin.

Horse Anderson's mouth tightened. He tossed the packet of greenbacks over to Dan. "It's yore business," he said curtly. "I ain't ridin' herd on you."

Dan put the money into his pocket and went out. He found Kame Walton in the town's main saloon, the Ace High. There weren't more than a dozen men in the place. Kame Walton was standing at the bar with Hank Boggs, a neighboring rancher, and another one of Dan's friends.

Dan didn't hesitate. He went up and said to Walton, "Look here, Kame, I can understand how you feel, but I think you're wrong about this reward. You know how bad I feel about Jimmy—like he was my own son. But he earned this reward money, and he'd want you to have it."

He said it reasonably and warmly, and in a fairly low tone of voice. But he had the impression that everybody in the saloon had heard what he had said. The conversation had stopped everywhere when he had come in, and the silence still held while Kame Walton turned toward him slowly.

Walton's eyes were dead and cold. They had something of the expression of a man who looks at a strange insect that has crawled into the room. He looked at Dan deliberately for a long moment before he spoke. Then he drawled, contemptuously. "I never did care much for blood money, Carter. You seem to be willin' to do a lot for it. Mebbe you'd better take it, and see if you can forget that my boy's blood's on it."

His voice shook a little with the last words. He had spoken in a low tone of voice, but it seemed loud to Dan Carter. It was as though the room reverberated with it, as though the walls echoed it back and forth. After that, there was silence, and he was conscious that the eyes of the other men in the room were turned on him curiously and without any sympathy at

all. It was as though he were a stranger who had somehow made a bad break and had been called down for it. He felt his face getting hot with the tide of color sweeping up from under his collar. He stared at Kame Walton a long moment, and then turned on his heel and walked out.

AT FIRST, Big Dan had not intended to keep more than his half of the reward, but there didn't seem to be anything to do with the other twenty-five hundred dollars, and he ended by shrugging and deciding to hang onto that, too. If Kame Walton changed his mind, he could always have it.

He did not let himself feel bitter about Walton. He told himself that Walton's grief had warped his judgment, and that a lot of people had just fallen in line, sheep-like, the way people do.

He bought the upper range that he wanted, and the pleasure of feeling that his spread was squared off, the way it ought to be, did a lot to help him forget Jimmy Walton. After a while he began simply to feel that he had earned that summer range. After all, he had risked his own life for it, hadn't he? What was the fuss about?

He began to feel that so much that at last when Kame Walton didn't claim his share of the reward, Dan used the money to buy new stock. Having a bigger range gave him plenty of room for expansion.

After a while, people began to forget about the way the Walton kid had died, and some of Big Dan's popularity came back. It wasn't until later that he began to be called Dollar Dan, and that, he thought, was really just bad luck, if you looked at it right.

Ben Runnell came to him for a loan. Ben had a nice spread, but he had had some hard luck because of a heavy winter for which he had not been able to store up enough dry feed.

"Zeke Harker, down at the bank, says he's gone as far as he kin with me," Ben explained. "You know what a skinflint Zeke is. If I kin just git the money to pay the interest, I'll come out all right this year. Hell, with the price of beef the way it is now, I can't lose."

Big Dan looked at him with concern. Ben was a good friend of his, and he'd like to help him out. He had the money in the bank all right, and his first impulse was just to say yes, and let it go at that. But a natural sense of caution stopped him. Ben always had had hard luck, and somehow Dan couldn't help distrusting him for it.

He remembered something a crotchety old-timer, Jacinto Jake Parker, had once said to him: "Hell's hungry hoppers—but I hate an unlucky man!"

It occurred to him suddenly that the price of beef might go down. In that case, there wouldn't be much chance of Ben's paying up that year, if ever. And the moment he thought that, he had a shrewd idea that the price of beef would go down.

"I'd like to help an old friend, Ben," he said easily, "but I'm shore tight myself right now. I can't see how I can cut 'er."

Ben Runnell lost his spread. It was put up for sale at auction, and that year being one which had followed on a hard winter, the bidding was low. Big Dan was able to buy in most of Ben's stock and a part of his range at a good low price. He felt kind of bad about it, but after all it wasn't his fault. He had acted according to his best judgment, without in the least wanting to ruin Ben or to profit by his misfortune. The fact that he had been able to profit by it was more or less accidental, if you could call it an accident that a man had brains and foresight enough to take care of his spread, and keep some money in the bank. The fact that nobody else had been willing to lend Ben Runnell money was proof enough that Dan's judgment had been right.

It turned out to have been wrong, though, about the price of beef. Prices went up in the fall and what with Ben Runnell's cattle, Big Dan had a pretty good year of it.

Yet, somehow or other, he felt that he wasn't so well liked as he had been. It was known that he had refused to lend Ben Runnell money, and the fact that he had profited by it made it seem like pretty sharp dealing, if you wanted to look at it that way.

People that he met in town had a queer, cynical look in their eyes when they saw him, and the way they spoke to him lacked warmth. It stiffened his own manner, even toward those who were enough impressed by his prosperity to fawn on him.

Once or twice it had happened to him that his friends broke off conversations when he came in, as though they were saying things they didn't want him to hear. It cut him, but he thought maybe he was imagining it, until one day he overheard a conversation between Slim Dewey and Sam Dixon, both of whom owned spreads on the west of his range.

Dan had stopped and spoken to them on the street, had turned a corner, and then remembered something he had forgotten to say and gone back. Before he got to the corner again he heard their talk.

"Big-hearted Dan," Slim Dewey said ironically.

Dan halted in his tracks, his face flushing.

"Yeah, big heart," he heard Sam Dixon answer, dryly. "About as big as a dollar."

Slim Dewey laughed shortly. "Dollar Dan," he commented sardonically.

Dan swung on his heel and went on his way, his heart hot and resentful.

But after he had a chance to think it over, he put their talk down to envy.

HE WAS doing better than anybody on the range, so it was natural for jaspers like Slim and Sam to begrudge it to him. He told himself bitterly that he might have known better than to trust men's good feeling about a thing like that. As soon as a man got up in the world, the pack was always yapping at his heels, trying to pull him down.

He thought that, even after he found out that Mary, his wife, knew about the Runnell business. As a rule, he didn't take her into his confidence about business matters, so he was surprised when she said one night, raising her faded blue eyes to his gravely, "Dan, don't you think we ought to do something for the Runnells?"

For an instant, Dan had felt impatient. Then he said, "I offered Ben a loan, but he wouldn't take it." It was true that he offered Runnell a hundred dollars or so, to give him a new start somewhere. It had been all he could afford, what with buying in the cattle at auction.

"Don't you think it would have been better to lend him the money he asked for in the first place?" Mary asked him directly.

Anger flared up in him, but he suppressed it. He could feel his son's eyes on him, across the room, and he had a sense that his answer had to be right.

He forced a tone of good nature. "That was a matter of business," he said. "If I lent money to everybody that got into a tight, we wouldn't have any ourselves. Don't forget that I got you and the boy to think of, as well as myself."

Mary stared fixedly at her sewing. "Maybe you're right, Dan," she said gently. "It seems kind of hard, though—somehow."

"This is a hard life, honey," Dan told her. "A man's got to look after his own. Why, look at all the years you and me have spent buildin' things up. We're just at the turn of the trail now, where we can begin to pay out on what we put into things."

"Sometimes I think that maybe we think too much about that—about getting

ahead," Mary said. "It's always in the future, and there doesn't seem to be any end to it. Maybe it would be better if we didn't try so hard to get ahead, and just lived as much as we can, while we can."

Dan looked at her with his interest suddenly arrested. It came to him sharply that she wasn't as young as she had been. The years had left their mark on her—years in which she had toiled patiently by his side without any help, uncomplaining, endlessly faithful, and missing most of her share of pleasures which those years might have brought. He had been so busy himself in the long climb from a thirty-dollar-a-month cowpuncher to his present state that he had neglected her, forgotten, sometimes, her very existence.

"The time's comin' soon, honey," he said, with a sudden rush of warmth. "I'm plannin' a trip for us. We're goin' up to Denver and paint the town red. You're goin' to have the purtiest clothes them dude stores has got to offer. I allus did mean to dress you as purty as you are. Just you hang and rattle awhile. We're gittin' there fast."

Vaguely, he was aware that there was a queer look on Mary's face as he said that, and that the grave, direct question in young Dan's eyes was not answered. But it did not occur to him to think that he had missed the point, entirely. He just made up his mind that pretty soon he was going to do something to make things easier for all of them.

Yet, somehow, the time didn't come. A year rolled by, and things were going so well that it seemed to Dan only common sense that he should put all his profits back into the spread. There was new range to be gotten, and new cattle to be bought. It would have been foolish to take advantage of all his opportunities.

As the months and years drifted by, he got to be a really big man on the range. When he had first started, he had been smart enough to choose as his brand the Curley Y, which was the name of the range itself. But now he began to see that the day might come when the Curley Y brand and the Curley Y range would be one and the same thing. The vision of that didn't give him much time for anything else. After a while, he even forgot to talk about the new clothes for Mary, and the trip to Denver.

Still, with all his prosperity, something gnawed at him more than he was willing to admit even to himself. The smiles which greeted him were without warmth, and, just as often as not, there were no smiles at all, but merely the cool, veiled hostility of men who did not wish to make an open quarrel with anyone as powerful as Dan was getting to be. That canker ate at him secretly, but also it hardened him in his purpose to make power serve in place of his former warm friendliness.

What hurt more than anything, perhaps, was the fact that young Dan seemed to be taking his place in the affections of the range. The smiles which greeted his son were those which had once been his own.

But what puzzled him and hurt him even more was the fact that young Dan seemed to take little or no interest in the prosperity of the Curley Y.

Big Dan said nothing about it. Young Dan was twenty-one now—old enough to take his own path. Sometimes his father told himself that it was only youth which made him careless of the more important and serious parts of life.

Other times he thought, grim-lipped, that it was the way of the world, the way of the soft-gutted, sloppy men, who couldn't tear success out of a hard-handed country, to value a friendly smile and an easy-going attitude above the qualities it took to hew to the line, and make something out of a man. But always he clamped his lips tight on his secret thoughts and let young Dan go on his way while he went his. Some day, he told himself, his

son would understand, and come to him with an open heart instead of the veiled, cautious eyes which he seemed always to have for his father now.

And then the nesters came, and the shadow of death and destiny began to hover over Dollar Dan Carter.

CHAPTER THREE

Out of the Badlands

THE nesters came in a colony, led by a man called Red Ike Skinner, a lean, unshaven, sloppy-looking man with a tight, cunning mouth and malevolent eyes. They homesteaded in the land along the south branch of Curley Y Creek. For the most part, they were not on Dan Carter's range, although the section nearest the fork of the creek overlapped range which he had been in the habit of using.

Only Dan Carter, among the whole range, appeared to take nesters seriously. They were a poor, half-starved, shiftless-looking lot, and the land they filed on was almost worthless. Dan had already begun to get a vision of the possibility of owning most of the Curley Y Range. It went against his grain to see a lot of sod-busters move in on land and water which he thought might some day be his own.

He talked to Hank Boggs, Slim Dewey, Sam Dixon and the other cattlemen about it, but could not get them very worked up.

Meanwhile, the nesters went along, throwing up shacks to live in, and making only a pretense at cultivation. Their leader, Red Ike Skinner, lounged around town a good deal, picking up information in his tight-mouthed way, and giving out nothing. When he had found out what he evidently considered enough, he went back to his homestead with a faint, hard grin on his face. Later a shipment of barbed wire arrived, and the nesters began to string their fences. They strung them solidly, without any of the lanes between which would enable cattle to get to the creek water.

Hank Boggs went to see Red Ike Skinner and protested, not because he needed the water, but because the brass of the thing riled him up.

Red Ike, lounging on a broken-backed straight chair against the front wall of his rickety shack, sneered faintly. "We ain't interested in yore cattle," he said. "This here's good land and it's our'n, legal. We figger to squat here until somebody makes it worth our while to leave. If you wanted the water rights along the crick, why didn't you buy the land in the first place?"

Hank Boggs rode off fuming, but his anger was nothing to the profound sense of outrage which Dan Carter felt when he heard about it. Skinner had not yet fenced in his land on Dan's side of the creek, and Dan tried to tell himself that the thing wasn't any of his business until that part of the fence was built. But way down deep something kept telling him that it was all his business, and he ended by riding over with blood in his eye to see the nester leader.

"Don't think you're pullin' the wool over my eyes, Skinner," he said heatedly. "This land you've homesteaded ain't fit for farmin', and the government don't give you enough of it to run cattle on it. You've moved in here and took up water rights, just to hold up this range and make us pay you to get out. That's been tried before, but it ain't goin' to work with me. I'm warnin' you to keep your damned wire off my range!"

Skinner rubbed his stubbly jaw with a dirty thumb and forefinger, and drawled, "Sounds like tall talk. But we got the law on our side. Neither you nor ary other man is stoppin' me from fencin' my land the way I wanta."

Dan's jaw set. "Listen, sod-buster," he ripped out. "I didn't ride over to swap language with you. I ain't arguin'; I'm

tellin' you. You put up just one strand of fence on my range, and I'll ride over and shoot the belly off you. And not only that—I'll run the rest of yore damn scissor-bills so far off this range it'll take 'em ten years to walk back. You can tell 'em so for me."

Red Ike was on his feet, suddenly, his lean face red. "All right," he snarled. "You've spoke yore piece. Now I'll speak mine. You called the turn. This here's a hold-up, and that ain't all. It's goin' to work. We got the government of the United States behind us. Try somethin', and you'll find yoreself in enough grief to bog you down over them jackass ears of yores. You think you're king around here, but start anythin' with me, and you'll learn plenty different. And I won't stop with shootin'. I'll git that kid of yores, and yore woman too."

Dan Carter's face went white with fury; his hand lashed to the butt of his six-gun. "We'll settle this right now," he raged. "If you ain't heeled, go get a gun. I don't take talk like that from anybody."

THE barrel of a Winchester protruded suddenly from the cabin doorway. Behind it was the shrewish face of Skinner's wife. Her voice cracked out high and harsh. "Leave go of that smoke pole, mister," she shrilled. "I got this here thing trained on yore brisket, and I'm itchin' to kill you anyhow."

Red Ike Skinner leaned back against the wall of the shack with a hard grin wreathing his red stubbled mouth. "Git!" he clipped, contemptuously. "Git the hell offa my land, and stay off it."

Dollar Dan rode off, raging. He was still boiling with anger when the cattlemen's meeting was called.

Hank Boggs had gotten the stockmen together. Dan was asked to the meeting. He was too important to be left out, but he couldn't help feeling that nobody

wanted him much. It hurt him, and added to his anger at the same time.

He got to his feet, with his jaw set, and made a speech, advocating running the nesters off the range.

"They ain't even real farmers," he ended. "They're just a lotta tinhorn outlaws, tryin' to squeeze us for some cash. If we're men, we'll give 'em what they're askin' for—hot lead!"

His indignation infected some few of the others, and for a time the room buzzed with war talk. Then Horse Anderson got to his feet.

"Boys," he said, "I come here not as a sheriff but as a cattleman, me havin' a small spread of my own. But it's got to the point where I got to talk as a lawman. These here nesters may be all Carter says they is—" Here his protuberant eyes swept Dan with a dry look of skepticism. "But the fact is they got the law with 'em. If you boys is figgerin' to bust loose with fight talk, then I'll have to be leavin' you, and if there gits to be any proof that you've made war on the sod-busters, it'll be my duty to be ag'in you. I don't love nesters no more than you do, but the law's the law, and I took an oath to uphold it."

He turned and walked out of the room. The cattlemen looked at one another. Then Hank Boggs said, sober-faced, "And the hell of it is that Horse ain't bluffin'."

Slim Dewey grinned. "What of it?" he asked. "What's all the fuss about, anyway? Suppose them scissor-bills is all Carter says they are. If they're a-lyin' back, waitin' on us to kick through with some dinero, they got a long wait comin'. We got plenty of water without the crick, so we're holdin' high hand."

"Now you're talkin'," Sam Dixon exclaimed. "They can't hold out long. One summer's drought and a hard winter will put 'em outa business."

There was a murmur of assent, and Dan Carter could see that even those men who

had been on his side were beginning to waver.

That fact riled him somehow more than the thought of the nesters did. Every time somebody had called him "Carter" instead of "Dollar Dan," it had gotten under his skin deeper than he wanted to admit. Now the looks which had been merely without warmth had changed to something like secret hostility.

He had an impulse to get on his legs and tell the lot of them to go to hell, but he caught himself in time. Maybe it was a look in Kame Walton's eyes that sobered him.

It wasn't just that Kame's eyes were unforgiving; there was something else in them, some look that Dan Carter found it hard to take. It brought back certain memories to him too vividly—memories of an accident which had not been his fault.

Anyway, he couldn't act against the nesters alone, if Horse Anderson was against him. The only way to get away with it now was to have a united range behind him.

He got to his feet again, searching for arguments which would persuade them. "It ain't only these nesters," he began. "Mebbe a good drought would run *them* off. It's—" He paused.

Some idea had been in the back of his mind ever since he had first heard that word drought. Now when he himself used it, the idea came through to him like a sudden hammerstroke. "It's—I mean there might be more of 'em comin' along some time. We oughter take a stand," he ended weakly and sat down.

The decision of the meeting was unanimously against him, but Dollar Dan's mouth was grimly satisfied, and he left without making any other protest.

The next day he ordered his materials, and two weeks later he was at work on his dam.

THE fork of Curley Y Creek was on his own land, and he started building the dam just above the fork.

The nesters howled in protest when he first began work, but it did them no good. Dan had a force of a dozen regular hands by now, in addition to men he had brought in for the work. He kept the dam site heavily guarded, and the homesteaders were helpless. When the dam was completed, he built a concrete spillway which shut off the south branch of the creek.

Red Ike Skinner raged and threatened to have the law on him, but Dollar Dan merely laughed in his face. Finally, the nesters pulled up stakes and left. They couldn't stay without water, and the creek had been the only water on their land. Some of them set off in the direction from which they had come, but a number of the tougher ones, headed by Red Ike Skinner, drifted west.

Their direction led them into country which was scarcely suitable for homesteading, but nobody inquired much about their destination, or paid any attention to Red Ike's wild threats of vengeance.

Dan Carter was well enough satisfied with things now. He controlled the water in the creek and could use it in any way he wanted to. Moreover, that part of the range to which the south branch had run now had very little value. It looked like he'd be able to buy it up for a song when the time came. Then he could let water down into the south branch, and it would be as good land as ever.

Some of the cattlemen who had grazed along that range protested his dam. The idea of building it had gotten Dan some applause in the beginning because it was assumed that it was merely a trick for getting rid of the nesters. The range laughed, and men warmed up to the dam's builder. But when it turned out that Dan meant to keep the south branch dry permanently, it didn't set so well.

Why, even Mary had looked shocked when she learned that he intended to hold all the water. Still, she was only a woman. The men, at least, ought to have known better.

That year was a dry one. A good many of the water holes gave out entirely. A delegation called on Dan to ask him to run water into the south branch of the creek again. This he declined to do, but offered to let his neighbors water their cattle in his own branch of the creek at a small charge per head.

Some of them refused angrily, and there was even talk of a war for a while. But Dan carried too many hands on his payroll and he was too strong for that to come to anything. A couple of the neighboring ranchers paid his head charge for water, and what with that and the fact that the price of beef sky-rocketed the following fall, he won a nice profit. Most people didn't have beef to sell, and that which they had was stringy. But Dan Carter's cattle were fat, almost untouched by the drought, and he cleaned up.

To add to the disaster of the Curley Y range, the bank in town was robbed by a new gang of outlaws which had begun to operate in the country. Dan Carter suffered little from that. Some time before, he had transferred the bulk of his funds to a larger and stronger bank in another town.

Mary asked him if it wouldn't be a good thing for the crippled bank if he transferred his money back there.

Dollar Dan laughed grimly. He had no idea of risking his savings that way. He meant to buy new range and new cattle with the money that year, and he wasn't taking any chances with it.

But he looked at his wife queerly. Mary had changed a lot in these last few years. She didn't seem to take an interest in things the way she had done once. Maybe he ought to plan to get away some time next year and take her up to Denver.

Then the rustling of the leaves along the outlaw trails carried a curious rumor. And that rumor leaped out into the law-abiding world through a dozen shady barrooms. The Curley Y Bank had been robbed by Red Ike Skinner and his gang. Skinner had told it himself, and had boasted that that was just the beginning. Some day, he swore, he'd make a clean sweep of the Curley Y range.

The ranchers of the countryside laughed uneasily, and pretended to think there was nothing in it. But Dollar Dan Carter narrowed his eyes and set his mouth grimly.

He was remembering the malevolence in Red Ike Skinner's face; the cold venom in his glance when he had sworn that he would get not only Dan but his wife and son, too.

Quietly, the big ranchman made inquiries, and found out that Red Ike had gathered around him a formidable gang of desperadoes. They were men of Skinner's own caliber, wolves at heart.

Dollar Dan said nothing to anybody, but after a while it became known that he was hiring new hands—tough riders who packed their guns tied low—and it was whispered that they drew fighting pay.

That year was another dry one, and as summer drifted into autumn the range suffered.

Only Dollar Dan Carter felt comparatively at ease. The thousands of tons of water backed up behind that dam of his were enough for all the cattle on his range. He drifted in as many as possible to graze the ten-mile strip bordering the north branch of the creek. For other parts of the range where the water holes had dried up, he wagoned out tankloads or ran out water from the lake into the long ditches he had been foresighted enough to dig. The men of the range bought water from him as before. They cursed him; they came to him with hatred in their eyes, but they came.

A crowd of worthless, shiftless rangetramps, Dan thought, sore at any man who

knew how to take care of himself. The hell with them!

Meanwhile, he kept a weather-eye toward the badlands. In the desperate times brought on by the drought, the rest of the range had forgotten Red Ike and his threatened vengeance. But Dollar Dan had not. He made it a habit not to forget anything.

The event proved him right. Back in that scarred and twisted stretch of hell which was the badlands where Big Dan Carter had once ridden with an eager-faced kid of twenty, hatred and death brooded, awaiting their time to strike. And that time came soon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullets for Dollar Dan!

THE blow might have caught the range unprepared except for luck. One of Slim Dewey's riders, trailing some drifted stuff to the edge of the badlands, had come on a gang of twenty men with Red Ike Skinner at their head.

Word spread fast through the range, and a few hours later grim-faced men began to drift into Slim Dewey's ranchyard . . . Kane Walton, Hank Boggs, Sam Dixon, others. They made a sober-eyed crowd. With themselves and their riders, they could muster something like a dozen guns —only a dozen guns to guard a whole range!

"I don't like it any better than you do," Hank Boggs said at last, "but we got to go to Carter."

"Hell, he got us into this," Kame Walton flared. "Why shouldn't he help? We didn't build the dam. He did."

Slim Dewey shrugged. "That ain't what Red Ike Skinner thinks," he said. "From the talk he's been makin', he holds the whole range responsible for it."

In the end, they went to Dan Carter.

He met them, hard-eyed and hard-jawed. "You can take care of yoreselves, and I'll

take care of myself," he said curtly. "If Mister Red Ike Skinner tries to come on my range I'll bust him high, wide and handsome. What he does somewhere else ain't any of my business."

Hank Boggs glared at him. His mouth twisted scornfully. "I reckon we didn't expect you to do anythin' that might cost you somethin'. Everybody knows you aren't called Dollar Dan for nothin'."

Kame Walton's voice came quiet and bitter. "He always did know how to take care of his *own* skin," he said.

Dan's jaw muscles ridged out, and his big hands balled into fists, but he said nothing, and the group rode away. It had occurred to him suddenly that Skinner was just coyote enough to make his war medicine against the rest of the range, and leave him, Dan Carter, out of it. Skinner might hate him, but he knew also that Dan's outfit would be a tough one to tackle.

And when Skinner got through with the rest of them, Dan had an idea that there would be a lot of good grazing land for sale cheap.

* * *

It was not until morning that Red Ike Skinner struck, but when he did, his blow was shrewder and more deadly than anyone had expected.

Young Dan, who had been on night guard, raced into the ranch yard just after dawn, and flung himself from the saddle. His father had heard his boots pounding on the veranda, and went out to him. The boy's jaw was set, his eyes blazing. "That damned renegade has fired the range!" he burst out.

Dollar Dan stiffened, fists clenching. "Where?" he demanded.

"Just where Dead Man's Canyon fans out into the grass country," young Dan told him. "If the fire ain't checked now it means the end of the range."

Dollar Dan's eyes narrowed. "The end of the range," he said slowly. "Yeah, but

not the end of our range. This wind'll take it the other way."

Young Dan stared at him. "But great gosh, Dad!" he exclaimed. "It'll be the finish of everybody else!"

Mary Carter came out onto the porch. She had overheard the conversation.

"Dan, you've got to do something!" she cried.

Dollar Dan's mouth was grim. He shrugged. "What can I do?"

Young Dan whirled on him. "You can send our men out to help," he flared. "If something's done, quick, it can be stopped with a backfire."

"And Red Ike and his bunch will be there to pick off the gents that try to make the backfire," his father snapped.

"Not if part of our crowd are there to hold him off," the boy blazed, "while the rest of 'em are backfirin' and draggin' green beefhides over the backfire to put it out before it gets dangerous."

"And that's just what Red Ike Skinner wants," his father clipped. "If he can git our crowd busy down on another part of the range, he can strike in here, and take everything that ain't pegged to bedrock. Do you think I'm such a greenhorn as to fall for that? Let the rest of the range take care of itself. You fork leather, and carry the word to Ozark McGee to double the guards along our deadline. There ain't goin' to be no fire started on my range."

Young Dan stared at him, and then took a long breath. "I reckon not," he said finally.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean I ain't tellin' Ozark anything. I mean I'm ridin' out to help our neighbors who need all the help they can git."

"And make yourself buzzard meat for Red Ike Skinner?" Dollar Dan flared. "You're doin' nothin' of the kind. I'm tellin' you not to set foot off this range."

Young Dan did not answer. He vaulted into the saddle and rode off.

Mary Carter looked after him for a moment, and then she turned her eyes on her husband. And the look in them was one he had never seen before.

Wordlessly, she went down to the steps toward the barn. A moment later, Dollar Dan saw her wheeling out the light buckboard from the wagon shed. His voice was suddenly a little hoarse and strained as he barked, "Mary! What are you doin'?"

Mary Carter looked at him. "I'm goin' out to help my neighbors, Dan," she said.

Dan Carter stood there, red-faced and choked. His first impulse was to bellow at her, to command her to come back, but there was something in her expression which warned him that it would be of no use. He watched her lead out the ponies and hitch up. A moment later, the buckboard swung out around the barn and vanished from sight.

FOR minutes he stood there, staring at the empty spot by the barn where his wife had disappeared. After a little, he went back into the house. The hallway echoed hollowly to his footsteps. The big living room seemed uncannily silent and empty. He sat down heavily.

He suddenly felt more alone than he ever had in his life. He was more than friendless now. He was deserted by the two people he had ever held dear.

Was it his fault? What was the matter with him? What had gone wrong? He had a swift vision of earlier years when he and Mary had sat together in this same living room and planned their future. It had been a smaller room, then, but it had somehow been bigger than this one was. It had been big enough to hold all their dreams.

He had been Big Dan Carter then, the most popular, the most trusted man on the range, with all the world before him. And what had it come to? To this! To the emptiness and the grim desolation of a deserted house.

He had money and he had power. Nearly twenty gunmen, paid for by his own money, were ready to go where he ordered them to go; to fight whom he ordered them to fight. Yet neither they nor all his land nor all his stock nor bank credit could bring back Mary to him that night. Nor bring back young Dan. . . .

For an instant, Dan shut his eyes, as if to close from his mind a painful, searing memory. Once again he was seeing a fragment of the past, when he was still Big Dan, and welcomed anywhere on the range or in town. He was reliving the time when he rode out with young Jimmy Walton to get those two killers.

* * *

Out on the range, old Ozark McGee looked bug-eyed as his boss as Dollar Dan yanked his lathered horse to a halt, and Ozark's gaze fell on the load the pack animal carried.

To the south, beyond the creek, a long, leaping flame roared high, racing toward the dry south branch. Dollar Dan could see figures moving frantically and futilely along that line, trying to fight the flames. Faintly to his ears came the popping of guns, and in the distance, toward the mouth of Dead Man's Canyon, small white puffs drifted up from the ground.

"Git the men!" Dan Carter rasped.

His foreman stared at him. "They're all here," he said, "except those that is strung out along the line to guard the malpais."

"Git 'em in," Dan Carter snapped. "We're fightin' that fire." As he spoke, he flung himself at the double diamond hitch which held the boxes on the pack animal.

Ozark McGee looked profoundly bewildered. Then he jumped to obey.

His first thought had been to go himself, but at Dan Carter's next words he stopped in his tracks and sent somebody else.

"Grab hold of these boxes, some of you men!" Dan Carter had snapped, "and be careful. You'll be totin' dynamite."

He started off, with four men carrying the boxes behind him. Ozark McGee followed. After a while he found voice. "What the hell you think you're doin'?" he demanded.

"I'm goin' to clear that spillway," Dan Carter snapped, "and then blow up the dam. The water'll run into the south branch and stop that fire."

Ozark's eyes popped. "You gone loco?" he gasped. "Blowin' up that dam'll flood the north creek too. About half our critters are down there. If you ain't seen that many tons of water let loose all in a bunch, then I'm tellin' you, hombre. You're goin' to have more drowned beef than you or anybody else can skin in a month of Sundays."

"You damn mossy-horned fool," Dan Carter yelled. "What the hell do I care about my beef? Can't you see that the Curley Y range is on fire? Go git yore men! This water won't stop all of it, and we still got Red Ike Skinner to deal with."

The men of the Curley Y Range, desperate in the face of that advancing wall of flame, did not guess the significance of the double thunder which ripped the air, until the tons of raging water smashed down the dry bed of the south branch.

Even then they stared, bewildered, when Dan Carter's bellowing crowd of riders whipped down on them, dragging green beef hides to beat out any fire which the spreading waters had not reached.

Red Ike Skinner made his first mistake then. He waited too long to drive for Dan Carter's ranch house. He had barely set the torch to it when a smutty-faced, swearing crew of men with scorched eyebrows and lashes, raced down on him.

It was an irresistible combination. Before it, Red Ike Skinner's renegades melted away like driven rabbits. Skinner himself died with a half dozen slugs in him in the first blast of avenging gunfire, and what was finally left of his gang scattered out through the badlands.

The Meanest Man on the Range!

Dan Carter sat his horse and watched the house he had built burn to the ground. Back of him, the north branch of the creek was a great yellow lake in which the carcasses of his cattle floated. Back farther still was the wrecked dam. Dan Carter was a nearly ruined man.

He was no longer Dollar Dan Carter, with a cattle empire within his grasp. He was just Dan Carter, small ranchman, with the years before him. He was back almost where he had started.

Yet, his big shoulders did not slump as he sat watching the last of the flames lick at the timbers of the Curley Y headquarters. Instead, he sat straight in the saddle. And for the first time in a lot of years his heart was at peace.

The voices of the men of the Curley Y range were warm about him. The tones of Kame Walton's voice were vivid in his ears: "I reckon all this time I've had the wrong idea of you, Dan."

But counting even more than that was the blaze of pride in his son's face. And more than that, maybe, was the glory in Mary Carter's eyes. It was a long time since he had seen that glow, and that quiet, prideful smile about her lips. . . .

He drew a long breath, and his chin was suddenly high. What did a few cattle or a few dollars matter? He was Big Dan Carter again.

Dollar Dan was dead. . . . ■ ■ ■

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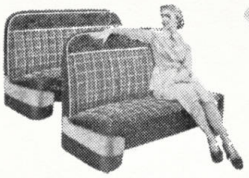

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