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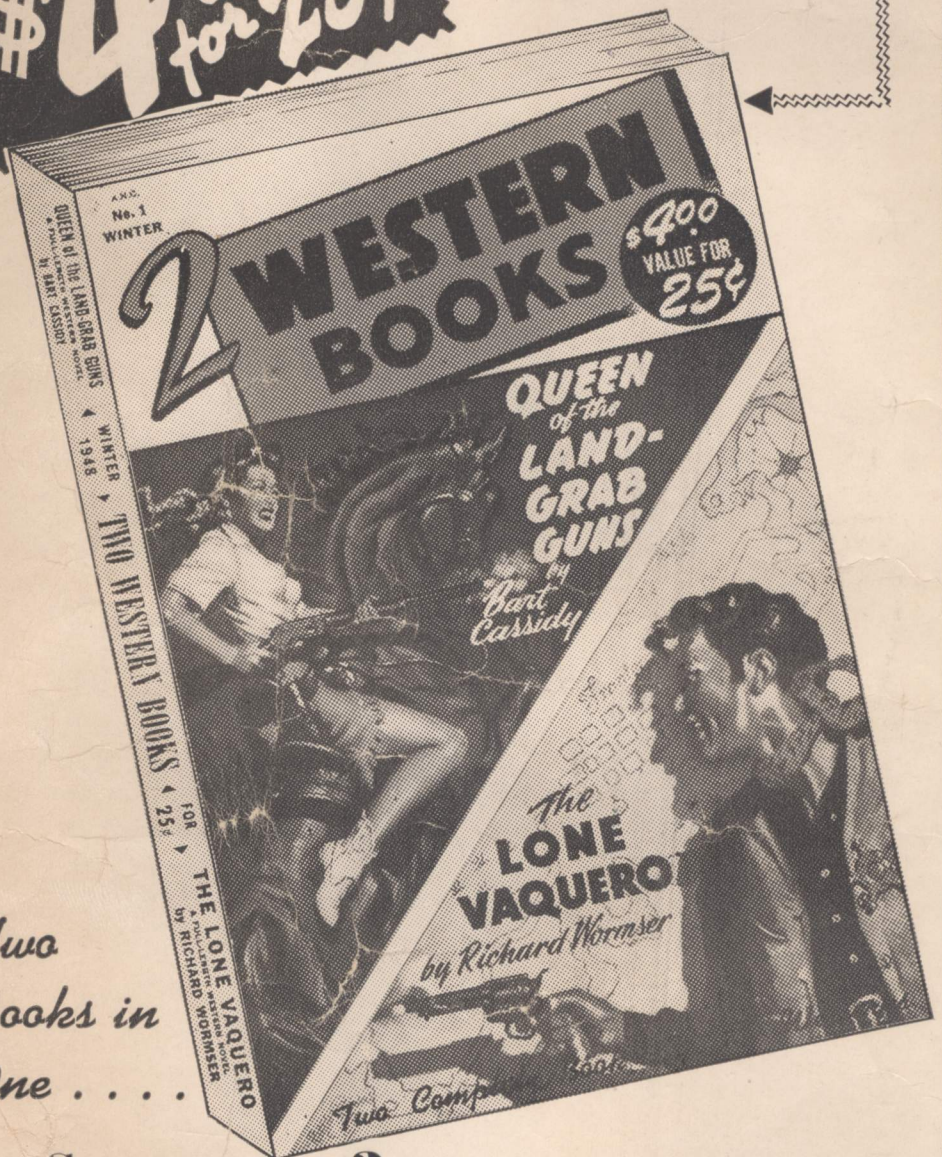


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SIX-GUN SATAN

By LEE E. WELLS

A Texican is a soft-talkin' hombre and mighty amiable, generally speakin'. But, if you want a Colt's-eye view of hell, just try rustlin' his beef!

ACTUALLY, HARWOOD WAS no different than any other prosperous western town, except for the troopers from the nearby army post. But Jim Macklin didn't see it that way. The thought kept running through his mind, like a monotonous dirge, that Les Hearn had been killed here and Jim had arrived too late to prevent it.

Not that it was his fault. He had been a hundred miles away buying beef when Hearn's letter had come. Even had he started right away, it was a long, long ride from Texas to this eastern Arizona country. Hearn had been buried a week ago in Harwood's cemetery, cut down by an unknown assailant.

Too late! That kept ringing in Macklin's mind as he paused on the canopied porch of the hotel and squinted out into the bright sunlight of the street. He was tall, a shade this side of stocky and his appearance bespoke Texan from the high crown of his black hat to the tooled, dusty boots with the blunt spurs. His face had known the sun and there were little wrinkles at the corners of the direct dark eyes. High cheekbones and a craggy chin gave him a grim quality, belied by the wide lips that seemed just on the verge of smiling.

He saw the sign down the street and on the other side. He hitched at his gun-belt and descended to the planked sidewalk with a long, loose stride. He glanced again at the sign as he approached the office.

BLAISE RANDALL
BUYER AND CONTRACTOR

The building was a two-room frame sandwiched between a saloon and a general store. Macklin stepped through the open door.

"Randall's busy now," a clerk told him. "You can wait."

Macklin lowered himself to a hard bench along the wall just outside the office barrier. This outer room was small, most of its space taken up by the clerk's desk. A door at the rear obviously gave entrance to the private office. A heavy man with a bullet head lounged against a far wall beyond the barrier and watched Macklin with muddy eyes. There was something antagonistic about the man, though Macklin had never seen him before.

The office door opened and a girl appeared, smiling over her shoulder at the man who followed her. She would take any man's breath, tall and dark, with large eyes and full red lips in an oval, tanned face. She would be probably a shade smaller than Macklin, he judged, a graceful girl with a striking figure. The man held open the barrier gate and she walked through. For an instant her eyes rested curiously on Macklin and he received the full impact of her beauty. Then she was gone. Before Macklin could recover, the lounge against the wall moved forward.

"Got something important for you, Blaise."

He took the man's arm and hurried into the inner office slamming the door behind him. Macklin patiently settled back on the bench and listened to the splutter of the clerk's pen. Macklin fiddled with his hat brim for a moment.

"Who was the lady?" he asked at last. The clerk's head jerked up in surprise and he glanced toward the closed door before he answered.

"That was Helen Edwards. Owns the big Rafter E spread west of here." He nodded toward the door. "I reckon she and Randall will be getting married before long."

"Oh," Macklin said flatly. The clerk's eyes grew dreamy.

"Some men have all the luck, like Blaise

Randall. She's not only pretty, but she's wealthy. Randall himself has made money and this marriage—"

He broke off sharply when the door opened and the stocky puncher appeared. He crossed to the barrier, opened the gate with a twisted, harsh grin at Macklin. He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder.

"He'll see you now, pilgrim." There was a noticeable shade of insolence in the man's voice that made Macklin look up, jaw tightening a little. Then he smiled frostily, nodded and arose. The hard-case remained by the barrier as Macklin went into the office.

BLAISE RANDALL swung around from his roll top desk, a questioning smile on his thin lips. He could be called handsome, Macklin quietly judged, certainly enough to catch the eye of any girl. Black hair sleeked back from a high forehead. The eyes were bold and glittering and it took a moment or two to notice how they narrowed at the corners.

He wore a long black coat, white shirt adorned with a string tie. Macklin caught the glint of a gunbelt buckle as the man wheeled back to his desk. He touched his mustache with a long finger.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"The name's Macklin, Jim Macklin."

Randall's brow arched and he looked puzzled. "I don't think I've heard..."

"Les Hearn's partner," Macklin said. Randall's eyes narrowed slightly and his face showed surprise that Macklin didn't completely believe. He stood up and offered his hand.

"It's a pleasure, sir. I didn't know who Hearn's partner was. He never said. His death was a shock to all of us. He was well liked here in Harwood for what little time we knew him."

"Les and me were like brothers," Macklin said. Randall toyed with a penholder.

"Word of his death must have travelled quickly, Mr. Macklin."

"I learned about it when I got here. Les knew something was wrong and he asked for help. I come too late."

"Wrong?" Randall asked. Macklin grimly nodded.

"Les mentioned no names—said he was

writing in a hurry and the letter might get stolen. It was something about the beef herd he brought in here."

"That's strange," Randell leaned back and folded his hands, resting his elbows on the chair arms. "Hearn and I had a straight out-and-out deal about the cattle. Best beef that's been offered to me in some time from Texas. He said nothing about any trouble."

"You bought the herd?" Macklin asked. Randall leaned forward.

"Do you think I'd pass 'em up? I usually sell to the army posts, but most of this herd I sold to the new ranchers for breeders. Here, I'll get the bill of sale."

He rummaged among the pigeon holes of his desk and finally brought out a sheet of paper that looked as if it had once been crumpled. Randall smoothed out the wrinkles as best he could and passed it to Macklin.

"Carried in my foreman's shirt pocket for awhile, but you can read it plainly enough."

Macklin could. The thing seemed to be in order except that Les Hearn's signature looked a little shaky. Macklin glanced at the sale price and his lips formed a soundless whistle. Randall smiled thinly.

"I paid extra for that beef—glad to." He took the bill of sale again and sighed regretfully. "I thought your partner and I could do a lot of business, Macklin. But he was killed less than an hour after we closed this deal."

"Where?" Macklin asked.

"At the edge of town, near Bailey's corral."

"Any idea who did it?" Randall's shrug was answer enough and Macklin's jaw tightened. "Les and me grew up together, rode our first round-up together, fought the damyanks together. We heard how the army posts out here needed beef and we formed a partnership. Les sold the beef to contractors like you, Randall. I bought 'em up on Texas ranches, formed trail herds and pushed them through. Someone killed Les. I intend to find the gent if I have to spend the rest of my life in Harwood."

"I understand," Randall said gently. He frowned. "But it's a hopeless job, Mack-

lin. Why don't you take the money from this last herd and buy up more Texas beef? I'll take every head you bring in, either for the army posts or breed stock. What's done is done and nothing can bring Hearn back."

"No," Macklin said and arose, "nothing can bring him back. But I can sure send a killing son to join him. Besides, Hearn left no money that I can find."

Randall stared at Macklin as though he couldn't quite believe what he heard. "Robbery! That explains why he was killed!"

"It could," Macklin nodded grimly. "But I'm not so sure. I aim to find out. When my job's done, I'll talk beef with you, Randall."

Blaise walked with him to the outer office. There he offered his hand and once again suggested that the trail of Hearn's killer was cold by now. He took the sting from his words with a smile.

"But you can count on me to help any way I can, Macklin. I liked Hearn."

MACKLIN accepted the man's hand and left the office. He moved aimlessly away from the building, mentally weighing all that Randall had said. Macklin recalled the stocky puncher and how eager the man had been to see Randall before Macklin did. He remembered what the clerk said about Randall making money and marrying more. He remembered Randall's thin lips and slightly narrowed eyes.

That was all impression, of course, nothing tangible. The man had professed a genuine liking for Hearn, an eagerness to do business with him. He wanted Macklin to bring in more of the Texas cattle and had offered what help he could in finding Hearn's murderer. Yet certain things worried Macklin, little things.

Hearn's signature looked as though the man had the ague when he had affixed it to the bill of sale. The terms of the bill had been written in a different hand and the whole document was crumpled. Randall's explanation might be all right, that it had been carried in a shirt pocket. Macklin's thought moved to the puncher who had been in the office. There had been something calculating and treacherous in the muddy eyes. He was employed by Ran-

dall or knew him well, the man's actions had proved that.

Macklin was in front of the saloon now. He ascended the three steps and crossed the canopied porch. Just as he touched the batwings he saw a buckboard pull out from a distant hitchrack, a girl driving the spirited team. The wagon came rolling down the street, passed the saloon. Helen Edwards drove and she held the reins with the confidence of a veteran. She looked up as she passed, saw Macklin. Her lips parted in a shadow of a smile and then she was gone. A throaty voice spoke beside Macklin.

"Pretty, ain't she?"

He turned. Short skirts and low bodice marked the speaker as a percentage girl. She had cool green eyes and red hair adorned in the Spanish fashion by a tortoise shell comb. Tiny freckles in a fair skin climbed up over the bridge of a short, tip-tilted nose. She moodily watched Helen Edwards drive away. Macklin grinned.

"Pretty," he nodded. "I could say the same for you."

Her eyes lifted to him, studied his face. "I think you can buy us a drink and we'll talk... about Les Hearn."

Macklin looked startled but the girl took his arm with easy familiarity and swung through the batwings with him. The saloon was a barn of a place, a long bar along one wall, a patch of bare floor for dancing and the rest of the sawdust area taken up with poker tables. Two soldiers hung listlessly at the bar. The girl held up two fingers to the barkeeper and led Macklin to a table in one corner.

Macklin waited, inwardly excited by her mention of Hearn but leaving the first move up to her. She talked aimlessly, smiling and laughing constantly, though Macklin noticed the merriment never reached her eyes. He understood that she acted for the benefit of the others in the room and that her cool green eyes shrewdly appraised him. The drinks came and Macklin paid. She lifted her glass, smiling.

"Here's to Helen Edwards—in tea." Macklin grinned, knowing she referred to the liquid in her shot glass. His own was

a fiery new whiskey. She leaned across the table.

"I heard you came last night. Learned anything?"

"You could tell me," Macklin said. Her red lips twisted in a harsh smile.

"Why should I, cowboy? I could give you some advice if you'll take it. Get out of Harwood."

"Why?" he asked.

"Your partner was killed and now you've come to find out who did the job. You're just asking for a slug. Ride out, cowboy, and forget the whole deal."

"I won't," Macklin said quietly. The girl sighed and sipped at her weak drink. Shadows touched her green eyes.

"I'll attend your funeral," she said at last. "No one else in Harwood will give a damn."

II

FORT HARWOOD WAS LITTLE more than a huge, heat-blasted parade ground, fringed by barracks, stables, depots and box-like officer's quarters. The flag drooped lifelessly from the tall pole and the sun had melted some of the military starch out of every soldier Macklin encountered.

Major Bland sweated profusely as he talked. He was much too aware of the Civil War campaigns of five years before and Macklin's Texas drawl made him brusque and withdrawn. However, he did answer Macklin's questions.

"We buy beef to supply the command here, sir. We also buy for the Indian Agency for distribution to the Apaches—what few of them remain peaceful on the reservation. Mr. Randall has proved very satisfactory as a contractor in the past two years and we have every confidence in him."

Macklin made a slight gesture of denial. "I'm interested in tracing a trail brand nothing else, Major. You bought this beef from Randall, not from Les Hearn?"

"That's right—through the regular channels."

"Randall has an exclusive contract?"

"Up to a point, Macklin. If our beef needs exceed the number of head stated in

his contract, then we are free to purchase where we like. However, in this instance, Randall had the extra beef on hand and we bought it. They bore your trail brand but there was a bill of sale to Mr. Randall. It was all in order. Anything else sir?"

"No," Macklin arose. "I reckon you've covered all the points."

He walked out of headquarters building and idly watched a squadron drill in the sun. On sudden impulse, he asked where he could find the commissary officer. Captain Poole was a younger man than the major and had none of his prejudice against a Texas drawl. He remembered the trail brand when Macklin mentioned it, and also recalled Les Hearn.

"The agency had called for an extra Indian ration on the theory, I suppose, that a well-fed Apache is a peaceful one. It's not always true, of course. Extra beef like that we can buy outside our regular contractor and Hearn had made me an interesting offer for his herd—below Randall's figure. I was surprised when the Major told me he had bought from Randall."

"Didn't Les make a bid to the Major?" Macklin asked and kept his voice level. Captain Poole shrugged.

"I don't know—apparently not. Randall evidently bought your Texas beef from your partner and sold it to the major. Even if he made no profit, Randall's a good business man, and he kept your partner from competing by buying him out."

Macklin learned nothing more and he soon left the fort, thoughtfully riding toward the town. He wondered why Les had suddenly stopped trying to make the sale to the fort, underbidding Randall. It wasn't like Les to pass up a better price for beef. It seemed strange that he should sell out to Randall and pass up the chance to become known to the army purchasing officers.

Macklin shook his head and his eyes clouded. It was strange, but there was nothing he could get ahold of. Hearn had obviously sold to Randall just before he was killed. What had happened to the

money? Why had Les written that he needed Macklin to side him in some mysterious situation? At the moment, there was no answer and Macklin dismissed the problem until he should have more information.

It was late in the afternoon when he reached town and the bank was closed. He returned to the hotel room, stripped himself to relieve the heat of the box-like room, and lay down on the bed, constantly reviewing what little he had learned. He sensed that it made a pattern somehow but his probing was futile and he had arrived at no answer by the time twilight began to break the grip of the heat.

He washed, dressed and had supper in the hotel dining room. He spent some time walking along the street, enjoying the slight chill of the night wind. He stopped aimlessly at the saloon, saw the red-headed percentage girl seated with a man at a far table. Because of the crowd, she didn't see Macklin. He asked the young cowboy next to him about the girl.

"That's Eve Farrell. You'd have to ride a long ways to see women any prettier'n her and Helen Edwards." The cowboy accepted Macklin's offer of a drink, grew more talkative. "Funny thing, Eve and Blaise Randall was mighty close for a while but not no more. I reckon now all of us has a chance."

Macklin left soon after, digesting this new bit of information, trying to fit it into the puzzle. He strolled up and down Harwood's street for awhile, noticing there was as many soldiers jostling along the planked sidewalk as there were cowboys. At last, tired, he turned into the hotel.

He opened the door of his room and groped in the darkness to the small table where the lamp stood. The place was still hot but a faint breeze came in the open window. Macklin found the lamp, lifted the chimney. He struck a match and held it toward the wick.

The thunder of the gun and the deadly whisper of the bullet came simultaneously. The slug whipped over Macklin's hand

and smashed into the far wall. He instantly dropped, his hand blurring to his holster. More slugs slammed into the room through the window, though Macklin no longer offered a target.

He caught the wink of gunflame from the shadowy roof of a nearby building. He hastily lined his own Colt and bracketed the spot with three fast shots. There was no reply but Macklin sensed that he had missed. Probably the bushwhacker had fired from over the ridge of the roof and had dropped below its protection. There were no answering shots and Macklin cautiously peered over the window sill. He heard alarmed shouts from the hotel and the pound of boots in the hall.

The door shivered under the thud of fists. Macklin searched the shadows of the roof, came to his feet and moved across the room. He opened the door, smoking gun still in his hand. The clerk and some wide-eyed men stared at him.

"No one hurt," Macklin said. He pushed through them and strode down the hall to the stairway before they could question him. He had ejected the empties and had reloaded his Colt by the time he reached the street. He walked with long strides to the building where the ambusher had lurked. It was a saddle shop, dark and locked for the night.

Macklin wasted no time at the front, cut between it and the next building. He struck matches and searched the ground, smiled tightly when he found the deep imprint of bootheels, five empty cartridge cases. The man had dropped from the roof above, paused long enough to reload. By now he was safely lost in the crowd that moved along the street.

WHEN Macklin returned to his room, the lamp had been lit. The clerk, sheriff and two or three of the curious stood around the room. Macklin paused in the doorway, sensing the truculence of the sheriff, the sharp interest of one of the other men.

"What happened here?" the lawman asked. Macklin looked at the smashed pitcher, the broken plaster on the walls,

the calendar with a bullet hole neatly puncturing the young lady pictured on it.

"Someone tried a bushwhack," he answered and came into the room. The sheriff, Lem Tucker, questioned him further and Macklin answered briefly and shortly, annoyed by the two men who listened to every word. At last Tucker realized he wasn't getting very far and anger flared in his eyes.

"You sound like a trouble-maker, Macklin. We don't like 'em in Harwood. If you're feuding with someone, get out of town. That's a fair warning."

Macklin said nothing and Tucker glared at him, then turned on his heel and strode out the door. The two onlookers followed one of them giving Macklin a cool, searching look. He had been bronzed by the sun, a wiry man with expressionless blue eyes and an angular face.

"Someone sure don't like you," he said mildly after a sweeping glance at the destruction of the room. "Me, I'd get a hell of a distance from the gent that did this shooting."

"That's you," Macklin said shortly. The man nodded and his lips moved in a thin smile.

"Texan, ain't you? I've heard it takes bullets to convince a Texan. See you around—maybe."

He was gone and the clerk started to follow after him. Macklin stopped the man.

"Who was that gent?"

"Art Collins. One of the best trail bosses in the country, I reckon. He works for Blaise Randall."

Macklin let the clerk go. He glanced at the open window and blew out the lamp. He undressed in the darkness, hanging his gunbelt on the bedpost close to his hand. At last he stretched out and looked up at the dark ceiling.

"A sheriff," he said aloud to himself, "that gets riled for no reason at all at the wrong gent—a percentage girl that Randall dropped for rich Helen Edwards—a funny deal in contracts out at the Fort—a trail boss that hints you'd better leave town like the lawman says."

Macklin shook his head. "I'm close to

something that ain't healthy for me to know about Les' killing." Suddenly he snapped his fingers in the darkness. "I bet that bushwhacker's a stocky puncher with muddy eyes!"

III

THE BANKER WAS A THIN rail of a man with white hair, precise manners and a dry voice. There was no warmth to him.

"Les Hearn did no business with the bank, Mr. Macklin. I understood he sold the beef he trailed in from Texas but he did not deposit the money with us."

"Any other bank close by where he could?" Macklin asked. The banker shook his head with a gleam of pride in his eyes.

"None, sir, as safe. Possibly Mr. Hearn was a man who didn't trust banks. There are many of them."

"He could have been," Macklin said dryly and arose. His horse waited outside at the hitchrack and he swung into the saddle with graceful ease.

He rode out of town, heading west. About a mile beyond he abruptly turned off and rode into the shelter of a big clump of mesquite. He patiently sat on his horse for a quarter of an hour or more, watching the back trail. No one appeared and, satisfied, Macklin took to the road again.

Not long after he came to the Rafter E line fence. It bordered the road for a long distance. The ranch spread West and northward into a series of broken ridges that were, in reality, the first low ranges of the higher mountains that stretched far along the horizon, hazy and uncertain in the distance.

After three hours of riding, Macklin drew rein before the gate that gave entrance to the Rafter E lands. He rolled a cigarette and lit it, wondering exactly what he would say to Helen Edwards. To this moment, he had assured himself that he was only investigating another angle of his partner's death. As he studied the ranch sign burned on the gate, Macklin grinned wryly.

Hell, he knew that Randall had sold some of the Texas beef to the girl! Ran-

dall himself had said so. Macklin recalled the vision Helen Edwards had made in Randall's office and later as she drove the buckboard along the street. Face it, he told himself. She's a damned beautiful woman and you want to see her again. You want to talk to her when there's no one around to interrupt. Macklin confessed to the charges and felt better for it. He flipped away the cigarette and turned into the ranch road, lifting the big bay into a tireless trot.

He topped a ridge and looked down on the home ranch. His eyes widened a little and he whistled in surprise. The Rafter E was as large a spread as he had seen in this country. The adobe ranch house was a rambling affair, surrounded by a cluster of buildings that made it look like a small village. There was a forest of big corrals, a huge vegetable garden, fruit trees, a bunkhouse like a dormitory. Macklin had an impulse to turn around and ride off. The thought of the girl deterred him.

She was in the yard when he rode up, having just come from the corral. She was dressed in white blouse and riding skirt, short boots encasing her small feet. A flat crowned hat shaded her face and her smile was a bright and warm thing as she came toward Macklin. He dismounted and jerked off his hat, suddenly feeling that he was all knobby elbows and kneecaps, red face and thick tongue.

"You're Jim Macklin," she said and held out her hand. "Dutch Williams said you were waiting, when I was in Randall's office."

"Dutch Williams? Oh, that would be—"

"One of Randall's hands. I understood Les Hearn was your partner and I know how you must feel. Won't you come to the house? I'll have the cook fix some iced tea. It'll go good after a hot ride

FIVE minutes later, Macklin sat in a long, cool room where every stick of furniture silently signalled wealth. In a short time Helen appeared with frosty pitcher and glasses. She poured the tea and Macklin gratefully sipped it. The tinkle of ice in his glass spoke of extraordinary luxury for this Arizona country

and he wondered what business a hard-working Texan had here.

Helen quickly put him at ease. She was more lovely than Macklin had thought. Yet with it she had a shrewd business head as her talk about beef, markets and prices proved. Several times she mentioned Randall but always by his last name. Macklin wondered if the talk about her and the contractor were entirely true.

The conversation turned to Les Hearn and Macklin found himself telling the girl about himself and Les, how they had gathered the first herds from impoverished Texas and driven them to New Mexico and then gradually had extended their operations.

"I bought some of your beef from Randall," she said. "In time our local ranches will take this business from you Texas men."

"By then I hope to have a spread of my own out here," Macklin smiled. "It's great country. Les sold the herd to Randall but the money has disappeared."

"Robbed," Helen said. "That's why he was killed."

"Probably. I've been shot at since I come to Harwood. I've been warned to get out of town by the sheriff. Someone sure don't want me messing around."

"Why?" Helen demanded, surprised. "Who could it be?"

"I don't know—only ideas. Les was dickering with the fort and then suddenly Randall sells the beef."

"Randall wouldn't do anything crooked!" Helen said in a shocked voice. It was such a complete dismissal of the charges that Macklin didn't press the point. The conversation lagged, Helen becoming perceptibly distant. Macklin knew his mention of Randall had not pleased the girl. Maybe the gossip was right, after all.

He took his leave soon after and, in the last few minutes, she returned to her former friendliness. She invited him to return again. As he rode out of the yard, he looked back over his shoulder. She stood trim and lovely by the gate and she lifted her arm in a friendly farewell. Macklin waved and settled into the saddle.

She puzzled him, and he wished he

knew for certain just what she thought of Blaise Randall. Then Macklin's wide lips parted in a soft smile. Wherever she stood in this puzzle, she was a damned beautiful woman. A man would have to go a long way before he found another like her.

HARWOOD seemed shabby and dismal after the Rafter E and for a few days Macklin tried hard to get some further line on Hearn's death. But he seemed to have struck a blind alley. For all his questioning, he discovered nothing more. Hearn had been shot, had been buried and there was nothing more to be learned. Two or three times, Macklin noticed that Art Collins and Dutch Williams kept an eye on him. Then they left town, apparently on some business of Blaise Randall's.

The contractor himself showed no sign that he was worried about Macklin's probing. He always greeted Macklin with a smile and a wave of the hand when he met him on the street. Once Randall came to the hotel and to Macklin's room. He made conversation about the weather and beef for a few minutes and then mentioned the real reason for his visit.

"Macklin, I hope you're about ready to give up a bad job and admit you're whipped.

"Why?" Macklin asked, a sharp edge to his voice. Randall shrugged impatiently.

"Hearn was killed for the money he carried after I bought his beef. His killer probably pounded leather out of the country and he'll never come back. I know how you feel about it, but it's a hopeless job.

"What's your interest?" Macklin asked. Randall chuckled but there wasn't much merriment to the sound.

"Maybe I sound like I'm afraid of something you might turn up. That's not so. The point is, I need beef and a lot of it to meet some of my contracts. Art Collins is out trying to buy up some right now."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Macklin, you know where to buy beef in Texas. Ranchers back there know you. I want a source of supply that's regular and that I can depend upon. I wish you'd

throw in with me on the same terms you had with Hearn. We could both make money."

Macklin rubbed his jaw and stared out the window. Randall hitched forward in his chair. "Consider Hearn's death a closed account, Macklin. You couldn't prevent it and there's nothing you can do about it now. Throw in with me. I'll meet the expenses back in Texas for a buying trip. Collins has the crew to push the beef through to Harwood and the other army posts. Now's the time."

Macklin sighed. "You're probably right, Randall. We'd both make money. But I can't forget Les. I reckon I'll keep trying a little while longer."

Randall irritably smacked his palm down on his knee and arose. "You're a damned fool, Macklin! When you're tired of butting your head against something you can't buck, come around. If I haven't changed my mind by then—or something hasn't happened to you—the offer will still stand."

He left, taking the sting from his words with that friendly smile and a handshake. Macklin sat by the window after he was gone and considered his proposition. Randall didn't sound like a man with murder on his mind and Macklin admitted to himself that his suspicions could very well be nothing more than just suspicions. Suddenly his eyes darkened as another thought struck him. If he threw in with Randall and returned to Texas, he could no longer search for Les' killer. Maybe Randall had that in mind.

TWO days later Dutch Williams suddenly appeared in town, though Macklin didn't meet him until that night. Macklin had gone to the Saloon and found Eve Farrell alone at a table. He pulled out a chair, signalled a waiter and grinned at the girl.

"Tea?" he asked.

"That's what I get, no matter what you order," she said. When the waiter left, Macklin hitched forward.

"Why did you warn me to leave town?"

She studied him, her green eyes veiled. At last she shrugged her white shoulders in a weary gesture.

"You can answer that. Someone threw slugs in your hotel window, didn't they? I just had a hunch something like that was coming."

"Hunches," Macklin said easily, "don't often come right out of the blue—especially when a stranger's mixed up in them. You've been pretty close to Randall."

"Mmm," she said. The waiter came with the drinks and Macklin paid him. He toyed with his glass, watching the girl. At last he shook his head.

"You're a funny one. You can't make up your mind about him." She looked up, her eyes flashing fire. Macklin set the spur. "I've heard talk about him and Helen Edwards."

"What do you know about Blaise?" she demanded in a tense whisper, leaning over the table. She looked like a beautiful tigress ready to protect her young. Macklin's tone remained light.

"What you've told me—what I've learned here and there. He sold Hearn's beef at the army post and some of it to Rafter E. The money disappeared somewhere."

"You're saying things without using words," Eve's eyes narrowed. "Suppose I told Blaise? Suppose he did have Hearn killed?"

"After he threw you over for Helen Edwards?" Macklin asked in faint surprise. She considered him a long minute and then sat back with a wry laugh.

"Texan, you've got a lot to learn—about women. The warning still goes. Get out of town—tonight. Go back to Texas and mind your own damn' business. Go back—" She looked up as a shadow cut across the table. "Texan, you waited too long."

Macklin looked up and saw Dutch Williams standing beside him. The man's muddy eyes were glittering and his thick lips held a mean, twisted smile. Macklin glimpsed two hard-faced men just behind him and then Dutch spoke.

"Stealing my girl!" he said in a loud, carrying voice. "Trying to cut me out!"

Macklin started to rise. "Friend, that's just—"

Williams' fist smashed the words back beyond his teeth.

IV

THE BLOW CAUGHT MACKLIN when he was half erect. It slammed him back, tangled his legs in the chair. He hit another table and it tipped with him as he crashed to the floor. He lay sprawled on his back for a moment, unable to direct his muscles. He dimly heard alarmed shouts.

Then his vision cleared. Dutch Williams waited, grinning down at Macklin, his big fists doubled. Eve Farrell stood to one side, her face set and hard. The two hard-cases watched the crowd, cold eyes cutting to Macklin now and then.

Macklin twisted to one side and came up on one knee. He felt a salty moisture on his lips and knew his mouth was bleeding. Dutch charged in before Macklin could get entirely on his feet and the puncher aimed a kick at Macklin's head.

The Texan saw it coming, dropped. His hands darted out and his fingers settled around Williams' ankle. He tugged and Williams sat down with a bone shaking thud. Instantly Macklin came to his feet, his attention centered on Williams. Eve's cry brought him wheeling around.

"Watch it, Tex!"

The two hard-cases threw themselves forward and Macklin caught a glint of metal on the knuckles of one of them. He realized he was in for a crippling, if not worse, at the hands of Williams and his two cronies. Macklin's hand dropped to his holster and the heavy Colt swept up. The two renegades stopped, tense and wary, but not willing to buck the levelled gun.

"Not this time," Macklin said thickly. "Not this time."

He caught a movement from Williams, still on the floor. The man's fingers taloned his gun from the holster. Macklin surged forward and his boot toe cracked on William's wrist before the man's Colt had cleared leather.

Macklin whirled as one of the renegades leveled a Colt at him, Macklin threw himself to one side as the weapon exploded, the slug whispering close to his ear. His own gun bucked against his palm and a look of stunned surprise came on the

stubbled face. The renegade took a halting step forward, the gun spilled from his fingers and he fell face downward to the floor.

Someone by the far-off batwings called, "The Sheriff!" and Macklin waited, pleased that the law would take a hand. Eve's fingers clamped on his arm and she spoke with a fierce insistence.

"Out of here, you fool! It's a gun trap! You'll get a hang-noose for murder. This is Blaise Randall's town."

Macklin saw the point. Williams nursed his wrist, his gun lying several feet from him. The renegade was dead. Only his partner waited, balanced on the balls of his feet, though his arms were lifted into the air. Macklin stepped forward and, before the man knew what was intended, the Texan's gun barrel rapped against his skull. Macklin turned, ran toward the rear of the saloon, the crowd hastily giving away to his rush.

He darted through the door, down a short hall, jerked open another door and stepped into the alley. He heard a swell of voices behind him. Macklin holstered his Colt and darted off into the shadows. Not far away, he came on a tree and quickly pulled himself up into the branches.

NONE too soon. The sheriff and Dutch Williams came rushing out of the saloon, the crowd stampeding out behind them. Macklin clung more tightly to the limb, his Colt held ready in his hand. The men fanned out, searching the shadows under the sheriff's shouted orders. They seemed to be everywhere below Macklin.

Tucker and Dutch Williams came toward the tree and finally stopped just beneath Macklin. They stood isolated from the rest of the crowd and Macklin momentarily expected them to look up. They didn't. Dutch still nursed his wrist and cursed under his breath.

"It worked," the lawman said in a low voice. "He'll scoot hell-for-leather out of town."

"Eve's a smart girl," Dutch growled. "She started him on the run. We've seen the last of that son unless one of these rannihans finds him."

"We can always make it a jailbreak

later, if he's caught." Tucker said coldly. "This worked but you tell Blaise he's cutting things too close. Another rustling like you and Collins——"

"Keep your shirt on," Dutch snapped. "You take out a posse and ride the wrong way. Macklin's gone and that deal's safe. Blaise marries the Edwards girl and he's all set. So are the rest of us."

A man came toward them and the sheriff stepped forward, giving brisk orders that gave new life to the search. Macklin clung to the limb but his whole body shook with anger and he had to fight to keep from dropping to the ground and calling a showdown right then.

What he had heard confirmed the ugly picture he had been building since he came to Harwood. He had been on the right track and Randall knew it. That explained the ambush at the hotel, Randall's offer of partnership, the warnings to leave and now the neat little trap that Eve Farrell had panicked him into. Macklin swore under his breath as he recalled the girl's smile and her statement that he had much to learn about women.

The search moved away from the saloon and finally no one was in sight. Macklin remained hidden, considering his next move. He had to get proof against Randall, proof that the man stole in one way or another every head of beef he sold in the district. Macklin recalled Williams' statement about a new raid. It would be too risky to rustle a brand known to the country hereabouts. A strange brand—a Texas brand, now that Lone Star cattle was being pushed westward in a desperate search for markets.

At last Macklin cautiously lowered himself to the ground. He eyed the shadows, searched the blank rear wall of the saloon. He would not dare try to get his own horse from the stable; a killer would undoubtedly be waiting for just such a move.

Macklin left the shelter of the tree and darted into the shadow of the building next to the saloon. He slipped into the dark passageway between the two building and cautiously edged his way along to the front. Few people passed on the walk. Macklin took a deep breath and holstered his Colt, stepped boldly out onto

the planks. The saloon's hitchrack was a few steps away. He heard excited voices inside the building and the men on the porch stared over the batwings.

He reached the hitchrack, moving without haste. A horse tossed its head but Macklin spoke a quiet word as he loosened the knot in the reins. He risked a glance at the saloon and the walk. No one noticed him. Every instinct cried out for him to vault into the saddle and bolt down the street, but Macklin fought against it.

He swung easily into the saddle, turned from the rack. The nightshadows, his unhurried movements effectively disguised him. He moved westward out of town, knowing that Randall's men would be watching for him at the stable or hotel.

It seemed miraculous that there was no alarm, but he reached the edge of Harwood without incident, though he was tense as a coiled spring each step of the way. Safely beyond the last lights, Macklin threw a hasty glance over his shoulder. None followed him, there was no alarm. He sank the spurs and rocketted away along the dusty road. A mile or so beyond, he started a wide circle that would take him around Harwood and headed east.

The next morning he stopped in a small cowtown, bought a hat and had breakfast. He did not tarry long and was soon riding toward the rising sun. About mid-afternoon he crossed into New Mexico and he knew that, temporarily at least, he was safe from Randall's lawman.

Macklin realized that he faced a hard job, that Collins and Dutch Williams might have rustled their cattle almost anywhere in a wide expanse of territory. But such a raid would be cow-country gossip, spreading fast, certain to be mentioned even to a stranger. Besides, Macklin was sure his idea that they had robbed a strange herd moving in from Texas was correct.

He bore to the south, avoiding a high range of broken country, knowing a cattle drive would seek the most level route. By night-fall the following day, he was deep in New Mexico and, so far, had learned nothing of recent rustlers. He began to wonder if he had made the right guess after all.

AT NOON the next day, he rode wearily into a small village and went into the saloon. There were only two men at the bar, a third who sat at a table wearily playing solitaire. There was a slight stir at Macklin's entrance; then, after a short pause, the conversation went on. Macklin froze, a whiskey glass half way to his lips.

"Them cows must've took wings. Wasn't hide or hair of 'em, or any trace," one of the men said. His companion nodded.

"Bad trailing country."

"Them Texans was sure ready for war. One of their bunch was killed when the rustlers stamped the herd into the badlands."

"What brand was that?" Macklin turned. He met the unspoken question in their eyes. "I'm a buyer in Arizona and I've been expecting a herd. It's overdue and I started looking for it."

That satisfied them. "It was the Dollar Mark. Gent by the name of Pirtle was trail boss."

"That's it!" Macklin exclaimed. "The herd was solen! Where can I find Pirtle?"

"They just got back from combing the badlands. I reckon they'll be at the hotel if they ain't already started for Texas."

Macklin hurried to the hotel just as a group of five men came out of the door. They were Texans, by the looks of them angry and on edge. Their leader was a stocky oldster, with a wrinkled, rock-hard face.

"I'm Pirtle," he snapped in answer to Macklin's question. "What's in your craw?"

"The Dollar Mark herd. I think I know where it is."

Pirtle stared at him as the other men crowded excitedly about. The old man rubbed his jaw. "We'd feel mighty bad if you're fooling us, stranger." He rubbed his holster in a significant gesture.

"You decide for yourself," Macklin offered. "We need a place to talk private—you and me."

Pirtle led the way to the weed-grown space between the hotel and the next building. There was no one within earshot on the street. "Unless you shout, stranger, this is right private. Now untangle your loop."

Macklin started by telling what had happened to his own beef and the death of Les Hearn. He rapidly sketched the events since then, bringing out the things that pointed suspicion toward Randall, ending with the conversation he heard under the tree. Pirtle listened with growing intentness.

"I think you've named it, Macklin," he said at last. "We'll ride to Harwood and take this Randall gent apart."

"You can't," Macklin stated flatly.

"There's nothing against him. If Collins and Williams stole the Dollar Mark beef, they'll sell it fast. We'll ride to the fort first. If there's nothing at the post, we'll look at the ranches. If we find your brand, then we can move in on Randall. Even his own lawman won't be able to side him."

"We're wasting time," Pirtle said shortly. "Let's git to Arizona."

It was a tight-lipped crew that circled Harwood some four days later and rode to the army post. Macklin went directly to Captain Poole at the commissary office. Poole shook his head at Macklin's question.

"We bought from Randall a little over a week ago but it wasn't a Dollar Mark brand. Collins had the bill of sale. Wait—here it is, Vent Eight brand from Ubeck, Texas."

Macklin and Pirtle looked at the bill of sale Poole had pulled from the files. The signature of the original owner was on it, and Collins' signature, selling it to the army. Macklin's hopes dropped and Pirtle swore under his breath. Macklin pictured a Vent Eight and his eyes narrowed.

"Any of that beef around, Captain?"

"Some—waiting for Indian distribution. I'll take you to the pens."

A single glance at the brand was enough. Dollar Mark used the single bar through the S, instead of the double. Someone with a straight-iron had changed the S to an Eight and Macklin knew the bill of sale was a phony. Pirtle blasphemously confirmed Macklin's surmise.

"Hell, that's my beef. The brand's changed. That brockle steer over there led the herd clean from Texas. Valloniz, Captain and not Ubeck. Macklin, I reckon we'd better ride to Harwood."

"Stolen!" Poole exclaimed. "That makes it our business."

"Not if Texas gets there first, Captain," Pirtle said tightly. "And I think she will."

V

AS HARWOOD CAME IN SIGHT, Macklin loosened the Colt in the holster and, despite all he could do, he felt his muscles tighten from an inner tension. He knew that he approached the end of the trail and that within the next few hours he would definitely know how Les Hearn had been murdered and by whom.

The little band of six rode into the main street of the town. Macklin's swift, sharp glance swept the street. He saw a buckboard before the General Store that he recognized as Helen Edwards'. He hoped the girl was not in Randall's office. Even more fervently, he hoped that the gossip of the town about her and the contractor was untrue.

"The sheriff's office first," Macklin said to Pirtle. "He's Randall's man and I'm wanted here. So let me make the play."

He moved fast and the Dollar Mark punchers were right behind him when he vaulted from the saddle, crossed the walk with two long strides and stepped into the lawman's office. Tucker and Dutch Williams were sharing a bottle of whiskey. The lawman saw Macklin first and he dropped his glass, his hands streaking for his holster. Macklin's gun covered him in a blur of motion.

"Hold it, Tucker," Macklin snapped. The lawman's taloned fingers froze a scant inch above his Colt. Dutch had been caught flat-footed in his chair, the arm-rests blocking a swift draw. He looked at Pirtle and the Dollar Mark men, and Macklin thought he caught a flicker of fear in the muddy eyes.

"You're wanted for murder, Macklin," Tucker said.

"Sure, one of Williams' gunslammers who drew first after Dutch started the fight. I'll surrender for that, Sheriff, and stand trial. But there's another matter you're attending to first."

Tucker started to protest but Macklin slightly shifted his gun and the man's lips

snapped together. Pirtle narrowly eyed Dutch Williams and his harsh frown deepened.

"Sheriff, my herd was rustled over in New Mexico——"

"Out of my jurisdiction!" Tucker snapped. Pirtle didn't seem to hear him.

"—and it was sold to the army post here, the brand changed. I'm looking at one of the gents that led the renegades right now and I'm calling the law on him."

There was a deep silence. The lawman's face paled and his eyes jumped to Williams. Dutch sat deep in his chair as though frozen there. He could get no help from Tucker; Macklin's six prevented that. Williams licked his lips.

"Arrest him," Macklin said quietly.

The lawman stirred uncertainly, sought some way out. There was none. Dutch threw a frightened look at the door beyond the silent Dollar Mark crew. Tucker arose but Macklin checked him.

"Shed the gunbelt. We'll like that better."

The sheriff obeyed. He moved his hands carefully. At last the gunbelt and holster thudded to his feet. He gave Macklin and Pirtle a last, searching look and then turned to Dutch Williams.

"I arrest you on a charge of rustling——"

Williams left the chair in a low dive, so fast that Macklin was hardly prepared for it. The puncher grabbed Tucker, whirled him half around as a shield. Pirtle yelled an alarm and his hand slashed to his gun. Williams' Colt was out and he fired around the sheriff's body. A Dollar Mark puncher spun half around as the slug caught him in the shoulder.

Pirtle's gun slashed and Tucker stiffened, slumped forward. Williams dropped him, turned his Colt toward Macklin, his thick lips pulled back from his teeth. Powder-smoke filled the room in a swirling pall that made vision uncertain.

Williams' slug whined close to Macklin and the man made a wild dash for the doorway. Macklin dropped his Colt on the uncertain figure and the weapon lanced flame. Dutch continued forward but his body sagged. He finally fell on his face, his outflung arm touching the door frame. He gave a shuddering sigh and was still.

MACKLIN jumped to the lawman's side. Pirtle's slug had caught Tucker in the right arm, breaking the bone but apparently doing no other damage. Macklin threw the dipper from the waterbucket standing nearby and dumped the contents over the wounded man. He sputtered and his eyes fluttered open. He grabbed his arm and groaned. Macklin knelt beside him, eyes hard and narrow, voice harsh.

"The game's finished and the round-up's started. You're in the same noose as Collins and Randall—rustling, murder, using your badge to protect lawbreakers."

"Not murder!" Tucker gasped through set teeth. "I never killed no one. I never stole a cow. That was Randall's game. I—I just covered."

"Then who shot Les Hearn?" Macklin demanded.

"Dutch. Dutch did that. Randall and Collins got Hearn drunk. They offered him a bigger price than Major Bland for his beef and gave him the money. As soon as he signed the bill of sale, Dutch did the bushwhacking."

Macklin looked around at the Texans. "You heard it? Good. We'll lock this hombre up an then make us another call."

"How about the Dollar Mark Beef?" Pirtle asked the lawman.

"Randall's plan," Tucker muttered. "I didn't touch it. You can't hang me for murder or rustling."

Pirtle disgustedly signalled two of his men who hustled the lawman back into his own cell block, where they patched up his arm with a crude bandage and a sling. They returned and a puncher handed Pirtle the cell key. The Dollar Mark puncher's flesh wound was swiftly doctored and the Texans ejected spent shells. Pirtle grinned at Macklin.

"Your trailing's been damned good so far. You lead the way."

Macklin grimly nodded and stepped out into the street. A crowd was gathering. He saw Helen Edwards and Blaise Randall was standing beside her. The contractor slipped away in the crowd.

"There goes our rabbit," Macklin exclaimed and broke into a run.

The crowd hastily cleared a lane for the charging Texans and, Macklin saw

Randall racing for his office. Collins appeared in the doorway. Pirtle fired, a hasty shot that splintered the wood beside Collins' head. The man hastily ducked back and slammed the door—in Randall's face!

The contractor cut sharply away and reached the corner of the building. Macklin sped after him but suddenly Helen Edwards moved in front of him her eyes wide and staring.

"What—?" she started, but Macklin shook his head and raced onward.

Randall had disappeared. Pirtle and the Dollar Mark rushed the office in a zig-zagging run to avoid any shots that Collins might throw at them. The crowd hastily scattered and the street miraculously emptied.

The Texans reached the door as Macklin raced around the corner of the building. He ran the length of the structure, down a narrow passageway. Randall was not in sight. As Macklin plunged out into the open, Collins came racing out the rear door of the office.

The two men saw each other at the same instant. Their guns lifted as one and fired so close together that it sounded like one shot. Collins' slug lanced a burning brand along Macklin's ribs as the Texan's bullet slapped into Collins' chest. The man spun half around and it looked almost as though he threw the Colt away. He dropped, his fingers clawing at the ground.

A second gun roared as Macklin whirled to meet the new challenge. He glimpsed Randall, crouched by the corner of the saloon. Macklin threw a shot at him and the contractor hastily ran to the rear door, plunged inside. Without thinking, Macklin raced after him.

He was within a few feet of the door when Randall suddenly appeared again. Macklin had no chance and he knew it. His Colt lined on the contractor, but Randall's gun blasted seconds before Macklin's. Randall's mistake was haste when he should have taken a split second to place the shot. The slug whispered by Macklin's cheek as he fired. Randall disappeared and Macklin plunged on. He plowed to a halt when Eve Farrell appeared, a gun levelled steadily at him.

"Far enough, Macklin," she said. "Drop that Colt."

She meant it. Her cold green eyes told Macklin, and the red lips set in a firm, hard line. He slowly opened his fingers and let the gun drop. Eve spoke without taking her eyes from Macklin.

"Can you make it, Blaise?"

The contractor appeared. His right arm hung limp and there was a spreading bloodstain on his coat. His face was white but his eyes blazed hatred at Macklin. The Texan realized Eve had scooped up the gun Blaise had dropped.

"We're riding out of Harwood," she said steadily. "We're leaving this country forever and getting a new start."

"He stole—" Macklin started but the girl's finger whitened on the trigger.

"Every cent Blaise has is in the office safe. You'll lose nothing—you or those Texans. I'm taking Blaise away. You'll have to kill me to stop us. To the stable, Blaise."

The contractor darted past her, clutching his shoulder. Eve moved to where Macklin's gun lay and picked it up. She smiled at him, a touch of regret in her eyes.

"You think I'm a fool? Maybeso. Someday you'll understand—if you ever savvy women. Maybe Helen Edwards can teach you. She's your kind of girl. Adios—and good luck."

She turned and ran after Randall, who had nearly reached the stable. In her short skirt, she looked like a long-legged colt. Macklin took a step after her and then realized he had no weapon. He stopped, scratched his head.

"A girl to ride the river with," he said aloud. "I reckon she's earned whatever Randall's worth."

THE Dollar Mark waddies came pouring out of the office. Randall and Eve were out of sight and Macklin knew that by now they would be racing away out of town. He told Pirtle Randall had got away. The Texan swore.

"Hell, we'll go get him."

"No need for it," Macklin said. "Wil-

liams is dead, and he killed my partner. Collins, the gent that stole your beef, is dead and the crooked lawman's in jail. Let's look at Randall's safe. I reckon we'll find money enough to cover our losses, there or at the bank."

There was. Macklin and Pirtle explained to Harwood's mayor what had happened, and it was confirmed by Captain Poole from the post. The sheriff's confession clinched the matter. The formality of a court order would pay Macklin and Pirtle for the beef that was stolen.

Macklin had his side bandaged and he sought out Helen. He found her in the general store, just getting ready to ride out to her ranch. Macklin jerked off his hat and suddenly wondered what he could say to her. Her eyes swept over him.

"Are you hurt?" she asked and Macklin's heart beat faster at the tone of her voice.

"No . . . I reckon I should explain—"

"About Randall?" She smiled. "We had business contacts only, though the town thought otherwise. Perhaps Blaise did, too, but I never encouraged it. I believe I have some beef of your brand. I'll make it right—"

"No need," Macklin shook his head. "Randall left enough to pay for that. You bought in good faith."

"Yes, I did." She frowned. "I would have sworn he was an honest man."

"It's over," Macklin said. He gravely studied her and there was only a faint touch of a smile in the corner of his mouth. "I aim to stay in Arizona, buy up a ranch in these parts. I—I reckon you could give me some pointers if you would."

Her eyes danced. "I'll be glad to, if you'll ride out sometime."

"It'll be nice tonight," Macklin suggested. She looked gravely out on the sun-drenched street and nodded.

"Yes, it will be. A full moon, too, I think. Do you have them in Texas?"

"I'll tell you tonight," Macklin said. He gravely bowed and walked out of the store. His cheery whistle sounded long after he had passed beyond the big windows.

ROPE FOR A RANGE BUM

By JOHN JO CARPENTER



The Stragglemark segundo never had a chance.

He was just a shiftless, driftin' saddle-tramp, too fast with gun or fist to knuckle under to any man. But in that wild North country he met a real lobo-tamer.

HARLEY JACKMAN deserted from the Army down in Arizona because he couldn't stand the boring grind of garrison duty.

That same fall he got stuck in the loneliest line camp in the world. It belonged to Bill Olds' Linkpin outfit, up in

the heart of the North Dakota cattle country, where they got their weather from the Yukon and their fall roundup hands from the dregs of the world.

Any man who felt the need to be missed somewhere else could usually find a stake and an easy hideout on one of the

outfits just then spreading over the Killdeer mountains, west toward Montana and north toward the Canadian line.

Harley Jackman had two places to stay away from when he rode into the Killdeers and hired out to Bill Olds, who was taking on all the hands he could get as the fall weather got set.

"Stolen horse, stolen gun. What the hell made you think I'd take a chance havin' a deserter around? Got trouble enough with the damn Government over land title," he grunted, when Harley hit him up for a job.

Harley needed a job the worst way, but he got back on his horse and tried not to smell the steaks bubbling in hot grease on the stove by the cook wagon.

"I guess you think your bald head and gray whiskers make it safe to talk that way," he said, calling old Bill a filthy name.

Bill hobbled over and caught the horse by the bridle.

"You can go to work, only get rid of that Army carbine. Habit like that is a dead give-away, soldier. So is the way you sit a saddle, like a sergeant. Wear off them Army habits!" he advised.

"Let the cook hide the carbine. Can you keep a tally-book? We'll meet the Stragglemark and the other outfits by Monday at least, at Bermuda Split. I can't get along with Ralph Alcott but maybe you can. Ever break in a new lieutenant straight from West Point?"

"I might know what you mean."

"You never let 'em cause you trouble, isn't that so?"

"Put it this way—if a man's worth his sergeant's stripes he might let a young officer *think* he was causing trouble. That's just a guess."

"I won't ask why you joined the Army or why you left it after stayin' long enough to get them habits," Bill said. "Let's see how you get along until we work up to Bermuda Split."

He let it drop there, but when the Linkpin crew came in that night he said, "Boys meet my new ramrod. He'll represent us, with the book. I got a lawsuit on in Big Gamble." That was the last they saw of him. He didn't even want to

see the paper Harley carried to prove he had bought the horse, and not just ridden out an unbranded Army remount animal.

He never said any more about Ralph Alcott of the Stragglemark. His last word was, "Keep your eyes on the Quinns. They're the two-bit scavengers you find everywhere. White trash, and it'd be a comfort to find some excuse to push 'em out of the country. See if you don't think our beef crop is too light for the size of the Linkpin. Good luck, soldier!"

IT WAS a one-eyed, tow-head kid by the name of Joe Kinelly who made the first trouble. He had been hired a month back and when he saw the tally-book in Harley's pocket he resented it. He was a cow-camp wit, too, and as the Linkpin laid over Sunday in Bermuda Split, waiting for the other outfits, he had quite a bit to say.

"Listen, you," Harley told him, when he could get the kid aside. "Listen, you! I've seen a few men who can talk and work at the same time, but most men have to stop one to do the other. You can't even spit over your own lip, bub, for a few years. One more crack and I call you."

"Help yourself," the kid said; but after that he shut up, after that he worked like a dog and took Harley's orders, even if he didn't answer with a smile.

Yes, he got off to a good start in the Killdeers, Harley Jackman did—just as he had gotten off to a good start in a lot of places. When the big Stragglemark moved in Monday afternoon with the other small outfits hanging on like barnacles, Harley handled Ralph Alcott like he was a young West Pointer and it went smoothly.

Ralph was only twenty-eight. He had inherited the Stragglemark three years back, and instead of ruining what his dad had spent a lifetime building, he made it still a better outfit.

He said, "You're Bill Olds' rep, I hear. Shake hands." He shook hands with Harley and said, "We swept the brakes down there as we came through but we noticed this summer most of 'em was driftin' through the Split."

"Cattle will drift," Harley remarked, "as the range fills up."

"That's what we're up against," Ralph said. "Boys, suppose we let the Linkpin rep run it. He don't know the country but dammit he'll be fair to all. I don't want it said again this year that the Stragglemark was too lucky on the maverick count."

Again Harley was getting off to a good start, because at least a dozen outfits were represented and it seemed like a good idea to all of them to let him run it. But again there was one man who didn't like it—Dean Stevenson, Ralph Alcott's foreman. He kept having things to say that first Monday afternoon.

Dean was a big man, somewhere close to the end of his thirties. He had a certain kind of hulking handsomeness and he'd ride ten or twelve miles to see one of his girls and be back on the job the next day. Harley didn't try to take him aside.

"Listen, you!" he said. "I didn't ask for this job but I got it, and I'll run it, and without benefit of incidental chin-music from a butte dude. I got a one-eyed kid on my crew that did more work the last thirty minutes than you did all afternoon—except with your chin. If you want to choose me, why don't you make it plain?"

"I was just about to do that," Dean snarled.

He came at Harley with both fists windmilling, and there were forty men to make a circle around them, leaving only two disappointed, angry ones to watch the cattle the two drives had swept up here so far.

Dean didn't have a chance. He had never been whipped around here and he felt pretty safe with a margin of forty pounds weight and two inches reach. He waded in blind with his own rage and Harley walked around him, flat-footed and not stretched very hard, and pounded him to a pulp.

Dean fell down on his face at last and Harley sat down and pulled off his boot and said, "Thought I felt a rock there!" He spilled out the rock and got up and went on, "Now, as I was sayin' this looks like the kind of proposition where the weather's the biggest worry——"

LATER ON, the tow-head kid came up to Harley and spoke his piece. He waited until night, when three big fires were going and this big bunch was having the last good time they'd have until snow flew. Tomorrow a nightmare of drudgery began.

"Heard what you said about me," Kinelly offered. "I guess I carry a prod, because of only havin' one eye. I guess I did sound my A, but I'm glad it's a Linkpin man runnin' the drive for a change. Kin you take a word of advice or would you call it just more chin music?"

Harley said he could take a word of advice, and Joe Kinelly went on, "You dressed me down private and I appreciate it, but you made Dean eat it in front of us, and he won't forget it."

"If I cleaned his plow in private he wouldn't forget that, either."

"So long as you know, then. I thought maybe you had him sized up that way but I wasn't sure. One thing more—I hope you don't let what old Bill said pizen you against the Quinns. Old Aubrey's shiftless but—well, I hope you keep an open mind."

"Joe," Harley said, "I got an open mind about everything but makin' sure Bill Olds gets his fair count on what runs out of the brush sayin' moo. I don't even know which one is Quinn."

"Over there playin' cards. The old fool can't afford to lose two bits and he ort to know what Dean Stevenson is hangin' around his daughter fer, an' I don't even see how he kin set there——"

The one-eyed kid raved on. Old Quinn was one of those seedy, garrulous, easy-going men who are always riding in where the work wasn't, because of a busted cinch or a sick horse, or something. Harley had shaken hands with all of them without trying to remember their names, but he pegged Quinn for a shirker at once.

Quinn was sitting on one corner of a blanket, playing cards with four other men, one of whom was Dean Stevenson. Dean showed the bruises of his beating and it was pretty plain he was in the game just to show he wasn't through with a certain matter. Just so there'd be no discussion of the fight.

"Jose," Harley said, "Quinn's debts and Quinn's daughter are Quinn's business, so far as I'm concerned. Thanks for comin' around."

The kid was his friend after that. Yes, he got off to a good start. He handled Ralph Alcott like Alcott was a young West Pointer just assigned, and he never gave an order unless he had to. Usually it went this way—

Three or four would bring in twenty or thirty beeves and Harley and the reps for the other outfits would decide who they belonged to and what to do with them. The three or four would put the beeves where the reps and Harley said they should go, and stop by the cook wagon for a quick fill. Then—

"Hey, Jackson or Jackman—sorry but I can't keep names straight—what's next?" one would shout as they saddled fresh horses; and Harley would say, "Why, somebody said that draw yonder was cleaned out but back there you'd see a formation runnin' off tords the north-east—"

"Yeah. I know. Hell, I mighta knowed I'd draw that tangled-up brush! Man, how some of them experts slide outa the work!"

That was how it usually went. At night there were always some unbranded stuff to be divided up and marked, and Joe Kinelly warned Harley that it was here that Ralph Alcott usually caused trouble. He just couldn't think that a critter didn't belong to the Stragglemark unless it had some other brand on it.

Harley treated him like he was a young West Pointer, and it was always Alcott who made the final decision, it was always Alcott who won the arguments, but somehow the others got their share, too.

Joe asked how he did it, and Harley said, "Why, between us you understand, I give him an argument only when it's pretty plain the critter's a Stragglemark. Th' others see I'm takin' their side, see, and they're for me, and then Alcott, he proves it's his beef and I give in fair and square. The next one in dispute, Alcott feels he can afford to be generous."

"I'm a son of a gun," Joe said, "if you ain't the most disreputable conniver I ever

worked for! Won't Ralph catch on, though?"

"They never do, Joe. They never do!"

It went along that way the first week, and the second, and the third. No trouble and lots of hard work. It *did* seem to Harley that Linkpin didn't turn up much for the market, considering all of the old Linkpin cows he saw. But neither did the Quinn brand show much, either.

THEN one night a girl rode into camp. Not everybody saw her and the language wasn't cleaned up in time, and Joe Kinelly lost his temper and made a few threats. He went straight over to the girl and held her horse and talked to her until someone found Old Aubrey Quinn. Aubrey was over at the Stragglemark wagon, playing cards by firelight again.

When Quinn came back, Dean Stevenson was with him. Harley couldn't see the girl from where he sat, except that when she got down from the horse and stood there talking to her father she looked young, and had a good figure in shirt and britches!

The next thing he knew Dean Stevenson had knocked Joe Kinelly down with a hard left-hand haymaker. The girl yelled, and Joe just laid there, and some man who was trying to sleep grumbled about noise and starting fights in front of women, and a man might as well try to sleep in the freight yards at Cheyenne.

Harley went over and at the time he had every intention of just asking Dean Stevenson would he kindly step over here and discuss something for a minute.

Then he got a good look at the girl's face in the firelight. She wasn't more than seventeen—nearly twelve years younger than Harley and less than half Dean's age. Not much of old shiftless Quinn showed in her face. She looked willful and headstrong and vain, but by George she had just about—she had eyes that—well, a girl with a mouth like that . . .

He said, "Excuse me, if you please," and turned to face Stevenson. "Any man," he told Stevenson, "that calls himself a man, won't hit a one-eyed man half his

size in front of a woman or anywhere else. But especially in front of a woman. Apologize or I'll whip you again, right in front of her."

"You never saw the day!" Dean blustered.

The girl's eyes sparkled, and Harley hit Dean for the same reason Dean hit Joe. It was the same reason that made two range bulls fight, or two stallions, or two timber wolves. She excited that kind of primitive competition, even if she was only seventeen.

He marched Dean backward into the dark, chopping him to pieces with his fists. It wasn't punishment for insulting a woman. It wasn't revenge for little Joe Kinelly. It was—and he knew it at the time—a brutal blood-letting to make a bright-eyed girl think he was the best man there.

Dean fought a different fight this time. He used his head and tried to make his advantage in weight and height mean something, but he had been licked once and he had a feeling he would be licked again. He was. Because Harley fought a different fight too.

This time, he didn't shuffle around Dean, taking it easy, tapping and poking at his pleasure until he could measure out the big one. He wrapped his jaw up in his shoulder and came in sidewise, with his left out. An old trooper with two oyster ears had spent quite a bit of time showing Harley the tricks he'd learned before boxer's jellybrains made it necessary for him to enlist if he wanted to go on eating.

He gave Dean the worst beating they had ever seen a man take, a lot of them declared. He could have knocked him out almost any time after that first minute, but he chopped him up, made some marks that would heal with scars, let him stand up there and get hurt. Dean never did lose consciousness. He just went down in a heap and knelt there when his legs and wind and arms gave out. Harley had to stop then.

Quinn wouldn't let the girl follow the fight. Didn't think it was quite right for a nice girl to watch a fight, he told Harley afterward.

"That's twice, Jackman," Stevenson said, when he could say anything.

"It should be enough, and it better be," Harley said.

He went over and apologized to the girl, and she said very demurely that it was very nice of him to stand up for her that way, and her eyes twinkled and sparkled and made him feel giddy.

Ralph Alcott had to send Dean back to the Stragglemark that night. He was hurt bad and needed a doctor, Ralph said. He never made any criticism but he lost his genial air. A few of the Stragglemarkers made remarks about the Linkpin, but Harley told his boys just let it flow over like the evening breeze.

They got the work done before snow flew, and then old Bill Olds offered him a job as winter line rider—the lonesomest job in the world.

"I don't care what's back of a man so long as he knows his business. I figger I was from a hundred to as much as four hundred head short this year. I wish you'd stay and just kinda keep an eye on things, get used to the country and watch for them spring calves," Bill said.

IT WAS time for Harley to be moving on and it was his nature to move on. Oh—he wasn't in any danger. There was a warrant for him down in San Bernardino County, California, for shooting a man. He had hidden from that warrant by joining the Army. It didn't mean much now because he had gotten over the woman who caused the shooting. In fact, he had thought he was over his old habit of falling in love with women and getting in fights over them.

No, the warrant didn't worry him; he could go back and say, "Look here, how have I got to square this?" and they'd let him off because it was buried so far in the past, and healed over.

Neither did desertion from the Army worry him, because he had enlisted under a borrowed name and the woods were full of men with Army guns who had jumped out of their bargain with Uncle Sam.

It was time to move on because he was a moving man who made his own trouble

as he went along. Seemed like every place Harley Jackman went, he got along for a while real well, and then sooner or later he got in a jam of some kind.

Like here. Everything was going fine until he beat up Dean Stevenson that second time. There was no call for that kind of a beating and too many people knew it.

Time to move on, but he stayed, because the Linkpin line camp was up there in the upper Killdeers, where three strands of barb wire twenty miles long wavered over the hills. The weather-tight cabin was up above Bermuda Split, the biggest gap in the range, and less than five miles from Aubrey Quinn's two-bit spread.

Her name was Roby—not Ruby but Roby, her mother's family name. Roby Quinn, seventeen and blue-eyed and not to well brought up when Harley, not even knowing her name, said, "All right, Bill. I'll take the job."

"Good!" Bill exclaimed. "And keep your eye on the damn Quinns!"

Aubrey Quinn meant well. Twice that winter he needed beef, and if he happened to sling up a Linkpin two-year-old it wasn't exactly theft. It was more laziness, since his own Q brand was hard to find. It was just hard luck that Harley Jackman happened to ride in once and see him pulling the hide from one of Bill Olds' steers.

Harley didn't say anything, because when snow is four foot deep in the hollows and a man must eat, he'll take what's at hand.

Harley rode over to "keep an eye on the Quinns," partly, and partly because he was getting garrison fever in the little line cabin, and partly because he kept remembering Roby Quinn.

Old Aubrey went to some lengths to explain how that Linkpin brand happened to be on that hide. Harley didn't pay much attention, and Aubrey thought Harley was taking in more than he let on. He was dead sure that was it, when Harley turned down a fresh cut of loin.

Old Aubrey could fool himself he had a right to that beef, that he had intended to mark one of his own critters for Bill Olds in exchange. He felt like a wronged man.

So when Roby came outside he sent her back in, and his anger kept on growing, and long after Harley was gone old Aubrey stayed mad.

When Dean Stevenson came over to see Roby that night, Aubrey talked his grouch out. By then he had forgotten it was a Linkpin steer—and the second one, at that. Dean brought a bottle, and old Aubrey drank and cried and praised himself for all the hard work he had invested in his little outfit.

Every time he mentioned Harley Jackman's name, Dean flinched a little. That second beating had done something to him. He woke up at night dreaming about it and choking over his own fear. He plied Aubrey with the bottle and then tried to corner Roby in the kitchen for a kiss.

Mrs. Quinn was one of those quiet, overworked ranch wives who had bitterness instead of beauty left, whose minds were as twisted by loneliness and poverty as their bodies. All she had left out of the dreams she had dreamed with a certain careless young Irish rider was her little Roby.

She came into the kitchen with a red-hot poker and laid it across Dean Stevenson's arm. It sizzled through three layers of cloth and burned a furrow in his flesh, and he howled and quick let go of the girl.

Mrs. Quinn thrust the poker in his face and backed him up to the wall.

"I'll shove this down your throat, I'll burn your heart out with it, if you ever lay hands on my girl again," she said, in a quiet voice that nevertheless had a hum of anger in it. "I'll kill you myself if I ever catch you here again."

SHE wouldn't even let him treat his burn. Dean had to ride out of there with that livid scar on him. Roby was headstrong. Mrs. Quinn remembered her own youth, her own headstrongness—and what it got her. She threw the poker in the corner.

"I've tried to bring you up decent," she said, advancing toward Roby. "I've tried to make a good woman out of you since I can't make a lady. But you draw men

like a beer-barrel draws flies and loafers, and you love it. If I had the nerve, I'd mark your face and spoil the looks that will be your ruination."

Roby stood her ground a little. Neither her mother nor her father had ever frightened her. Then she saw something new in her mother's eyes. Roby hadn't been shocked or scared when Dean tried to kiss her and Mrs. Quinn burned him with the poker. She had the same feeling of pride that she had when Harley Jackman beat up Dean. She felt no shame because of the things that happened just because of her.

"Now Mom, you just let me alone. I know what——"

That's all the farther she got. Mrs. Quinn's hand caught her face—hard. Roby's eyes flew open. She was shocked silly, and she was hurt, too. Before she knew what was happening, her mother had backed her all the way across the kitchen, slapping her right and left.

In the next room, old Aubrey was snoring over the table. At the crackling sound of the slaps he stirred a little, but that was all. The two women in the little ranch shanty surrounded by bleak snowing weather and veiled buttes might have been alone in the world, for all of Aubrey. Thus far had he slipped in abdicating as husband father and lord and master.

Roby felt the wall at her back and slid down like a child. Her mother put her hands on her hips and stared down at her, panting.

"Pick the man and pick him *now*, Roby," she said. "The minute I touched you with my hand, I knew. You're not safe to be left single. You've got the burn and urge to have a married woman's knowledge, and you'll have it, married or not. So pick the man. Who will it be?"

Roby didn't understand. Mrs. Quinn began crying. She stooped over and helped her daughter up. She went on crying but her face had that same strained, set look of iron determination.

"Pick the man. Pick a husband. Who's it to be? God knows there's been plenty hanging around. A week from today you'll be married to one of them. Just name a name, child, and if it's a yellow

dog you'll marry him. Just to keep the others away. Just to give you a name that somebody will feel obliged to protect."

Roby said the first name that came to her mind. She had never seen her mother this way and she obeyed like a child.

"Harley Jackman!" she said, and the mother's arms dropped. Her shoulders slumped. "That one?" she sighed, with a shake of her head. "I knew you'd come out with the one that meant the most and I hoped it would be that Kinelly boy. He's steady. But I won't argue. All I want, child, is to see you married, to have you guarded against yourself."

She said no more on the subject. She helped old Aubrey to bed, and what her daughter thought, before she went to sleep at last in her little room up under the eaves, only Roby knew.

The mother lay there listening to the howling northwest wind, to her husband's drunken breathing.

"Trash!" she whispered. "We're trash, and I've let us become that. I've got a trashy, good-lookin' girl, and men already ride over to the Quinns because of her. And my husband is so far gone he fools himself it's business—he knows otherwise but he talks his drivelling business to the men who—oh, trash, trash, trash, that's all we are!"

IT WAS Bill Olds himself who rode up when that particular storm broke, to bring supplies to Harley Jackman. He found Harley out along the fence, where the powerful northwest drift had laid over a jagged mile of posts. The fence lay flat. Harley hooked onto the wires one at a time, dallied around his saddle horn, and jerked them out of the snow. He propped up posts the best he could, and Bill Olds got down and helped him.

It was Bill himself who brought word of what people were saying. He came up there sore as a boil because Harley was neglecting his work to chase after that Quinn girl. He found Harley doing a good job of a hard one, catching up with storm-damage before the storm was over. He had been thinking of Harley in one light, and when he saw him he saw him

in another, and he remembered how Harley took hold of the fall drive and ran it . . .

"Somethin's on your mind, Bill," Harley said, after they had worked together for a while. "Out with it—what's eatin' you?"

"I'll tell you. It's like this," old Bill said. I sent you up here to do two jobs—to keep the fence up and watch the drift of my stock, and to keep an eye on the Quinns."

"Well?"

"Now I hear," Bill went on, "that you caught Aubrey Quinn skinnin' out a Linkpin steer and said nothin' to him, because you had your mind on that girl. I hear the Quinns are goin' to make you name the day when you'll marry that yella-headed girl. Your women is your own business, Jackman, but dammit, I gave you a job to do."

It was only a few days ago that Harley had been over to the Quinns, but it seemed like a long time to him. Already the pull of that girl had begun to assert itself in him again.

Because of this, he had a kind of guilty feeling, as old Bill looked at him. He remembered clearly enough seeing the Linkpin brand on that hide and now that he faced the Linkpin owner the excuses for it didn't seem to stand up quite so well.

A man needing beef with a storm coming on killed the first fat, young one he could drop his rope over—and so on . . .

But Harley had been watching things without, perhaps, knowing it. He had been up here above Bermuda Split for over a month now, and had begun to get the lay of the land.

BECAUSE he felt guilty, he got a little mad. "The Quinns are not the people you're after, Bill. Now you shut up and listen! When I'm through, you can do as you like, but you'll listen until I am through.

"The Quinns lift a beef now and then for the table. Maybe one or two doubtful calves catches a Q on the rump now and then, when the Linkpin belongs there, but you've done the same thing yourself in your time, until you got prosperous

enough so you could afford to be virtuous.

"But I'll tell you what I noticed, Bill, and keep this in mind when you try to dope out why your steer crop has been short lately. Keep in mind that you're short more than one or two steers—you're lookin' for a hundred critters and up, and a hundred critters sold for the Quinns would stick out like a sore thumb. If you'd visit their place you'd see how short money is, and that they'd give themselves away if they ever got money to spend."

He got down so he could make a mark in the snow. Bill dismounted to watch.

Bill Olds wasn't any more of a moral coward than the next man. He had built up the Linkpin a little at a time, while Old Man Alcott built the Stragglemark. What hard work could do, Bill had done.

And maybe he saw what was coming, and maybe it had been a nagging suspicion in the back of his mind for a long time. Maybe he dreaded the showdown it meant. Maybe he would rather blame the Quinns because it was easier to fight them.

"When did Ralph Alcott's father die?" Harley asked, squatting there in the snow.

"Three years ago."

"Ralph's done pretty well since then?"

"Oh, nothin' to set the world afire."

"But pretty good."

"I wisht ter hell I'd a-did half as good," Bill burst out. "Name what you're thinkin', soldier. It's trouble tween neighbors that never had trouble you're tryin' to sell me and I want to see the shape of the facts afore I'm prodded to the bad feelin'."

Harley twisted a cigaret before he drew a wavering line in the snow.

"Here's the Stragglemark, a careless brand, just a waverin' line as handy to make with a runnin' iron as with a stamp. Last fall I noticed it was bigger on some critters than on others. I finally ketch on—it's the old ones that carry the big, sprawlin' stragglemark brand, while the young ones have a more compact mark," he said.

"And while the mark has growed smaller it's changed its shape somewhat. Not much, but some. The old Stragglemark looks a lot like the Whipsnake brand down

in Arizona—almost a Lazy S with an extra loop. The new one has tightened up and one end almost comes back to meet the last loop."

"Go on," Bill said.

Harley drew another mark — half an oval with a straight, short line in the open end. Bill said, "My Linkpin, named for the couplin' of a railroad car." He leaned closer.

Harley's stick finished out the brand, adding two more half circles connected to the first, bringing the straight line back to catch the end of the first half-oval. Bill swore.

Harley stood up and said. "There she lays. Maybe he's got the West Point mind and maybe he's just a thief. But if it's like I figure it, most of Alcott's boys are in on it. I wondered why they let Dean Stevenson take that beatin' last fall. Ralph made 'em! He wanted your rep in charge of things to kill any suspicion you might have about his lucky count."

"His daddy was my friend," Bill said.

HE GOT up on his horse and rode away without another word. He was face to face with what he had actually known all along, and he liked it not at all.

He was a hard-headed old man who had done, in his long life, a few things that caused him regret to remember. But he had a kind of stubborn honesty that made him treasure his word.

Halfway home he met Old Man Quinn squeaking along through the snow in a buckboard. All of his past hatred of Quinn vanished as he saw the broken, worthless old man behind his sorry team.

He pulled up his horse and said, "Quinn, I've wronged you," and Quinn surprised him. Quinn wrapped his lines and jumped down and came over and stood there in silence a minute.

He was a different Quinn, somehow. He had suffered his wife's smarting insinuations until they burned deeply enough to find his lost manhood.

"You've tried to wrong me, Bill," he said, evenly, "but I'll take only so much. For the sake of decency I'll give that man of yours a chance to come over and ask for my daughter's hand like a man. I

don't know how long I'll wait. Then, if he ain't showed up, I'll kill him."

"Why, you gutless, misbegotten old fool——"

Quinn's hand came out with a gun in it, and he said, "Don't Bill. Jest don't, that's all! You've allus been a bad neighbor but I never thought my pore daughter——"

Maudlin tears came to his eyes but his wife's work was well done, and the gun did not waver. Bill Olds gave a snort that was half laugh, half anger. He rode on down the trail, and Quinn stood there with the gun in his hand a minute.

Then he put it away and got back in the buckboard.

Bill Olds disappeared around a hill, and Quinn took a small drink for his cold's sake and reached for the lines.

A gun cracked somewhere behind him. The team stirred uneasily but all of Quinn's horses were too beat-up to run off. Quinn sat there in the cold and listened but no further sound came.

"No doubt Bill got a crack at a wolf," he told himself, as he drove on.

He saw Harley Jackman, a small dot on the huge expanse of snow, working away at the fence. Quinn mumbled, but the encounter with Bill Olds had taken all of his gimp out of him.

Harley saw Quinn, too. He was too far away to hear the shot, but when, the next day, Joe Kinelly rode over and found Bill lying dead in the snow, he remembered seeing Quinn.

He rode back with little one-eyed Joe, and they carried Bill's body back to the Linkpin. They ran out the tracks as best they could, but three inches of snow had fallen that night, nearly covering Bill's body. There wasn't much they could tell. What happened was this—

Bill was boiling at old Quinn when he rounded that shoulder of hill and let his horse have its head.

He dreaded trouble with the Stragglemark and he had to face it at last. He kept wishing he'd brought that soldier down with him. . . . He kept thinking of old Quinn, who would skin out a man's cattle and then blame him because the soldier hung around his girl all the time.

When he saw Ralph Alcott and Dean Stevenson ahead of him he said to himself, "What the hell! Have it out now and get it over with." It wasn't smart but old Bill was too mad to be smart.

He hailed them. He had sense enough to keep his eye on Dean Stevenson, even as he talked to young Ralph.

"Ralph, Harley Jackman and me have just been doin' a little experimentin' with my mark up there in the snow," he said evenly.

At the deserter's name, Dean Stevenson blinked and turned white—something bad had happened to him since that second brutal beating. Bill wondered if it had addled Dean's wits or if it had just given him a bad case of broken nerve.

"Yes?" Ralph said, softly.

"I put up the drift fence and I maintain it, as part of the deal I made with your dad for this range." Old Bill was beating around the bush now, letting his indignation build up as he recalled how he had lived up to the bargain scrupulously. "Your dad and me allus figgered there'd be plenty for both here, and that we could push through the Split when it was needed."

"Yes," Ralph said, softly.

"And now, the last few years, it's seemed damned funny to me how your cows and my cows can run the same grass, and your increase and mine don't. Now that I've seen how the Stragglemark can be changed to a Linkpin, I think I——"

He stood up in his stirrups and tried to say, "Go ahead and shoot, damn you, if that's the kind of pup you are." But there wasn't time.

He had been watching the wrong man. Ralph leaned back like he was going to scratch his belly. Up came the tail of his coat and he fired without taking the gun out of his pocket. It was a forty-five and it lay in the pocket of a denim jacket under the coat.

Old Bill fell off, and Dean Stevenson's horse jumped, and Dean looked down at the man gurgling and bleeding in the snow. When he got his horse quiet again he saw that Ralph had beaten out the fire in both jacket and coat and was holding the gun in his hand.

"Don't!" Dean choked. "Don't you do it, Ralph. You—you shouldn't a killed the old man. No! No! I won't—"

"Git!" Ralph said. "Turn your horse and git for home." Dean's nerve was completely broken. He headed back toward the Stragglemark with his teeth chattering. He had worked for Old Man Alcott and he wished the old man could be here now . . .

THERE was a dance in Big Gamble that night—a New Years celebration held in the Auditorium, as they called the big building where court sat and evangelists held their meetings and the politicians spoke.

By the time Harley and Joe Kinelly got to town it was almost dark, and the crowd was there. The word was out that Bill Olds had been killed and a lot of people stopped to ask if it was true his brother back in Missouri would get the Linkpin.

Harley and Joe said over and over that Bill's lawyer had his will—that they just worked for him—they had brought Bill's body in for inquest and Christian burial and to see what the law had to say.

The Quinns got there late because Aubrey didn't get his chores done in time and there was no speed in the Quinn team. Because of the hard feeling known to exist between Olds and the Quinns, no one had stopped by to tell them what had happened.

Old Aubrey heard as he was tying his horse, and he wilted. He couldn't be sure in his own mind . . . He remembered pretty clearly having his gun out when he talked to Bill, and he seemed to remember Bill cussing him out and riding away, leaving him standing there looking foolish with that gun in his hand.

Mrs. Quinn and Roby got out of the buckboard sick at heart. They had heard, too, and they remembered what shape Quinn was in when he got home with that empty bottle and a list of groceries he had been supposed to buy. Mostly he forgot or got the wrong things.

It took nerve to show up in town, with the gossip about Roby that was going around, but Mrs. Quinn had it. "You'll go to the dance," she told her daughter,

"and you'll dance and laugh and be gay—but not too gay. Let them see a girl that's seventeen and hare-brained, *but not bad!* For that's what you are, and it's the curse of being a Quinn that makes it unsafe for you to even give gossip that much of a hold on your name."

"Yes, Mom," Roby said meekly. She still remembered her mother's hand on her face, and her mother's eyes, and how much it had meant to her mother. It had scared all the desire for fun out of her.

"Thanks to your father, you've got to live down a bad name you don't deserve."

"Yes, Mom."

Then they heard that Bill Olds was dead, and they remembered Quinn's condition when he got home, and they saw him fumbling with the hitch-reins and horse blankets with terror and bewilderment in his face. Mrs. Quinn saw the end of the world, but she had nerve; Quinn could go to hell if he had to but before a finger was pointed her daughter would be made safe.

Quinn tried to explain, but she said, "I don't care. I'm not interested. If you didn't murder him it's not because you're too good for it. Before the talk can center on you, you're going to have a showdown with Harley Jackman."

Quinn cringed. He knew his own daughter, knew she was wild because she suffered with shame. But he knew she was good, now that he had to think about it. He was dead sure his wife's way was wrong, but he had avoided questions of right and wrong for so long he was in a poor position to palaver with her now.

He went up to the door of the Auditorium like a doomed man and handed over the three coins that admitted them—fifty cents for himself and twenty-five each for the womenfolk.

They looked at him funny but they let him in. Ralph Alcott came toward them with his arms out. He had been drinking a little and he felt like the king of creation. Killing a man had an unexpected effect on him. It made his feel unbeatable.

He waltzed up, not very drunk, and met them at the door. He said, "Lo Quinn—Miz Quinn—'lo, Roby. Howsh

about this dance with me? Firshst dance of the evenin', and I saved it for you."

Roby remembered her mother's orders to show gaiety instead of shamed embarrassment, and she would have taken his arm. Only—Mrs. Quinn got between them.

"You drunken cur, is that any way to ask a girl for a dance?" she said, in a low voice that cut like a whip. "*You*—you saved a dance for her. No one saves dances for my daughter. Get out of the way!"

Roby choked back the tears as her mother, head high, led the way across the floor. Alcott turned, reeling a little on his heels, and watched them.

"Why, the damn trash!" he muttered, thickly. "The damn trash!"

He had never been drunk here in Big Gamble before. When he needed a binge, he went to Billings or as far as Cheyenne. The Alcott name meant something around Big Gamble and as far as Bismarck, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Only—killing a man had done something for him. It had made him feel unbeatable.

Harley Jackman and Joe Kinelly put old Bill Olds' body in the undertaking parlor and headed for the sheriff's office.

"I had a hunch it was time to move on and I paid it no mind," Harley said, morosely. "I wanted to shake the dust of the Killdeers from my boots forever, but I didn't play my hunch."

"This-here sheriff," Joe explained, "likes votes more'n anything in the world, and he won't lay down his ante until he's sure which way the frog will jump."

THE sheriff was an old man. He didn't think it was right, what had happened to Bill Olds. Anything like that happening in his district upset him. He was just as sorry as he could be and he had deputies out looking around and asking questions, and everything.

"You boys just stay there and take care of things for Bill," he advised them, in the friendliest fashion. "Bill's got a brother back in Missouri that will-inherit, and he'll probably want to find a good manager. Hates North Dakoty like pizen.

You boys just take care of things and maybe one of you will get the job."

They went out, and Joe said, "I told you about him," and Harley burst out, "You did and that's the truth! I never owed Bill Olds anything but I worked for him and he treated me white and I intend to do what is necessary."

A man ambled out of the saloon and placed himself in front of them with his arms out. He had left his coats behind and a big gun hung on his thick hip. He had steeled his crumbling nerve with drink and he intended that men look back at this New Year's Eve and remember it as the time Dean Stevenson had his showdown with Harley Jackman.

"Just a minute, just a minute!" he said raucously. "I told you I'd pick the third time."

JOE whined in his throat and faded to one side, expecting Harley would go for his gun.

Harley kept thinking of Quinn. He kept remembering Quinn on his buckboard seat, reeling slightly from drink, as the team crawled across that broad, snowy expanse. But he hadn't ruled out other possibilities. He was sure in his own mind where the Linkpin market cattle had gone and he knew the Stragglemark crew had to be in on it.

He had forgotten his own quarrel with Stevenson. He looked at the drunken man and tried to ask himself what had made him get this drunk.

But it didn't ring true, somehow—it looked more like Quinn. Stevenson was a hollow shell, filled with liquor. He hadn't the nerve to kill a man in hot blood, let alone cold.

"Ah, shut up!" Harley snarled.

He made no attempt to get at his gun. He doubled up his fists and started walking. Dean let out a kind of a moan and jerked at his gun with both hands. He kept walking backward until he tripped over his own feet and went down.

Harley reached down and took the gun away from him and threw it over into a snow bank and said, "Stevenson, I keep having trouble I don't want with you. Why don't you get wise to yourself?"

He caught Stevenson by the shoulders and stood him up and measured him. His right started to whistle over. Dean saw it coming and cringed. It caught him solidly under the eye, and he remembered the pain of that other beating and jerked loose and started running.

A man in the door of the saloon chuckled and said, "That takes Dean out of the play but that Linkpinner'll have his hands full with that Quinn wildcat once he's got a clear field."

"Who said that?" Harley asked. "I don't like to hear any girl's name used in the door of a saloon."

"Take it back. No offense!" the voice said hurriedly.

The man vanished, and Harley stood there thinking. Joe Kinelly came up and murmured in his ear, "Maybe you know how the talk got started but to me, it's more important than what happened to Bill, even. Bill's dead and that girl's got life ahead of her, and—and——"

"Let's go to the dance."

They had done their duty by old Bill. They had brought him in for burial and they had talked to the sheriff. They went to the dance and paid their fifty cent pieces and went in, a tallish man who walked a little straighter than most, thanks to the Army, and a sawed-off kid who carried his head a little to one side because having only one eye embarrassed him.

They both saw Roby at the same time, and Harley looked at her and said to himself, "Maybe I followed the right hunch, after all." Because there was pride in the way she carried herself—pride that was close to tears, pride that could have been shame, only for the agony she went through to keep it that way.

He saw Quinn and Mrs. Quinn on a bench by the wall, and he crossed between the dancers, paying no attention to the man who took the tickets and who kept telling him that no one was allowed on the floor with a gun.

It was the first good look Mrs. Quinn had ever had of him, and she wasn't impressed. She saw him a hard-headed, lone-wolf kind of a man, too old for her girl. But she had gone too far; she had started the talk purposely.

Quinn sat there wishing he had a drink, wondering if he had really killed poor old Bill Olds. He saw Harley coming toward him with the corners of his mouth turned down. He would have jumped up and faded back, only his wife caught hold of him surreptitiously and held him on the bench.

HARLEY tipped his hat and said, "Quinn, howdy. And hello, Miz Quinn. I beg to have the honor of the first open dance with your daughter, if she will be so gracious."

It was a formula, a polite string of words a man memorized, but it meant something because it was the proper thing to say here.

"Under the circumstances," Mrs. Quinn said coldly, "I think you are hardly in a position to dance with her."

Harley knew what she meant. He had the same warning feeling as when a rattler buzzed—that it was time to move, and move fast, because if he didn't he was through moving.

But just then the girl danced past him, high-headed and proud, with a sixteen year old buck-toothed kid from the other side of Bermuda Split. And he thought dammit, a man's got to stop moving on sometime.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but due to the death of my employer I have been prevented from seeking Quinn out to discuss another subject with him. Miz Quinn, if you will excuse me, I should like to ask Quinn for permission to ask his daughter to marry me."

Mrs. Quinn had a feeling that she had gone too far, that to rush her girl into marriage with this kind of a man might be more of a hell than to let her go her own way. But Quinn said, "You have my permission, Jackman," with considerable dignity, and things were out of her hands.

The music ended, and the girl came back, and she and Harley stood there looking at each other with the whole population of the Killdeers staring at them.

Tears came into the girl's eyes as Harley took off his hat again and bowed in front of her and said, "May I have the

honor, Ma'am." He felt the warning buzz again but it was too late. He wanted to dance with her and ask her to marry him no matter what happened. He didn't feel he owed it to her and he knew he was being railroaded but taking care of her seemed to be the most important thing in the world.

The music started and they danced out together. He could dance like a fool but he had never cared much for it before. There would be plenty of talk tomorrow! He had picked up steps at garrison dances that hadn't been heard of here, but Roby followed without missing a beat, pretty soon the tears started rolling down her face.

He thought she whispered something and he leaned closer.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. It's my fault. I—I can't do this to you," she whispered.

He threw back his head and roared with laughter, so they'd think she had told him a joke of some kind.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he whispered then. "You're my girl, Roby, and you're going to be my kind of a wife, and I think maybe I can amount to something if you take a jerk in my coat-tail the way your mother does your dad. Only—do it in time, Roby. Don't wait too long."

Something touched his shoulder. He shook it off, but it came again, and he looked around to say no one could cut in, and there stood Ralph Alcott.

He knew, then. He never could tell how he knew, but he was sure in his own mind. He stopped dancing and pushed Roby hard, and she fell and screamed and started back to him. Her mother caught her in time.

The dancers flew to the walls and the music stopped, and Harley backed up a few feet and laughed.

"You're kinda giving yourself away, ain't you, Alcott?" he said. "Kinda made a bad mistake or two, didn't you? But this ain't the place for it. Come outside, you four-flusher."

Alcott licked his dry lips and said, "I give you thirty minutes to get out of town." He wasn't sure what Harley

meant. He wasn't aware of any mistakes he'd made, but suddenly he saw old Bill Olds laying in the snow, gurgling and bleeding.

If he'd said, "I give you three minutes," or two minutes, or even ten—but he said thirty, he weakened his own bluff. Harley knew it was a bluff then. He said again, "Why, you poor, pitiful specimen of a bushwhacker, you don't think you're going to scare me, do you? I just met your friend Dean Stevenson down the street for the third time——"

Someone had opened the doors and a couple of windows and the women and youngsters had piled outside into the snow. Alcott heard Stevenson's name, and he remembered Dean's sick look when Bill died, and he *thought* he knew then what mistake he had made.

He had inherited a good property but he had always been under Old Man Alcott's domination, and the urge to prove he was a better man was strong enough to unbalance him. He thought he was bolder, smarter than all of them. He figured out how to iron over a small Linkpin and make a Stragglemark out of it, and when he got away with that it colored his judgment.

He knew he wasn't going to get away with this, though, because he had seen Dean Stevenson's nerve crack and he had had a peek at that Army carbine in the Linkpin chuckwagon and he knew the Army sergeants made good shots out of their men.

He broke out in a sweat and yelled, "It was self-defense! He drew on me first! He—old Bill didn't give me half a chance. I had to shoot through my coats and I got the burned coats to prove it. You kin ask Dean Stevenson. Bill drawed first——"

"Why, you lying pup," Harley said softly, "old Bill didn't even have a gun on him!"

He didn't remember whether that was true or not—but neither did Ralph Alcott. Alcott jerked out his gun, but Harley shot

him twice, taking his time, planting them where he wanted them. He knew he had all the edge he needed. He knew he didn't have anything to worry about with Ralph Alcott.

He put one in Alcott's guts and knocked him backward, and another one in the middle of his chest. They came together, a double drumming sound that filled the dance hall with stinking powder smoke.

Alcott fell forward, still holding his gun, and Harley holstered his gun and turned around to the men plastered against the wall and said, "I've killed Indians with Government bullets and felt a lot worse about it." But he went straight to the door and out into the dark.

He leaned there against a tree and was sick, and then the cold air cleared his head and he could remember he had left a job still undone.

IT TOOK him quite a while to realize it, but most of the big outfits were built by men with an itching heel, a restlessness, an urge to keep moving on. If they didn't have that urge and itch they wouldn't have been out here in the west to begin with, he finally decided.

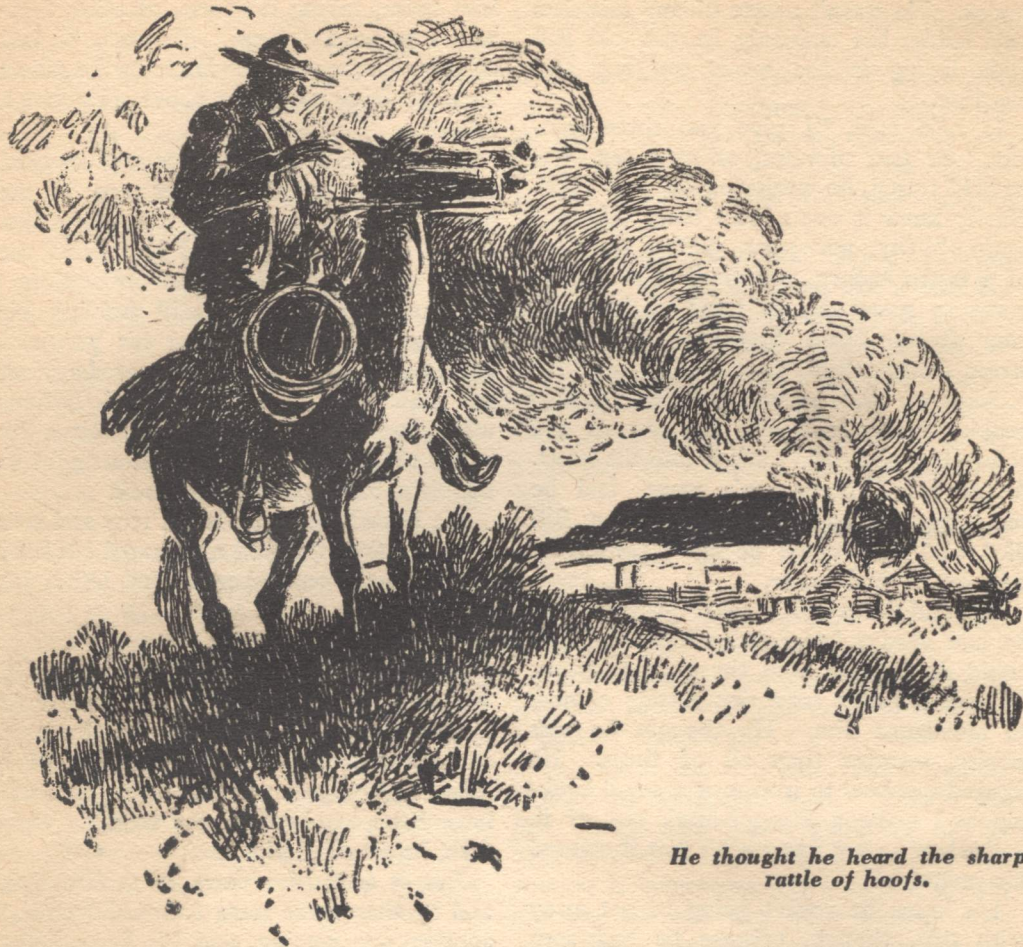
But it took him years to realize that, and by then there were four children and another one coming, and his Lazy J-Bar brand was burnt on more cattle than Harley Jackman ever thought he'd own.

In some way, bein' married and havin' a family and ownin' a lot of property and havin' all that responsibility was worse drudgery than the Army, he realized after a few years.

What happened to him after Ralph Alcott's death can be told in a very few words, because of one thing—every time he got that look in his eye he felt a good, firm jerk at his coat tails.

"Stay here, drifter!" it seemed to say. And Roby had a good strong arm—she held him!

Yes, that first hunch was the right one, but somehow he never regretted it. Not much, anyway . . .



*He thought he heard the sharp
rattle of hoofs.*

A LESSON IN HOT LEAD

By LEE FLOREN

Folks figgered George Martin had better larn somethin' afore he started teachin' on that range. Every man packed his own "teacher"—an' school was never out.

TWO MEN BROKE FROM THE Surcingle Saloon, fighting hard. They came out cursing and hitting, boots braced on the plank-walk, anger breaking from them in hard blows.

In the Single Ace Cafe Jane Werner was pouring George Martin some coffee. "George, there's a fight! It's your brother Randy—and Noel Brandt!" She spilled coffee on the tablecloth.

Tall George Martin got to his feet and ran out, scholarly face showing anxiety for his younger brother. Noel Brandt out-

weighed Randy—Brandt was a bar-room fighter, and tough. And Randy had Mary to consider—Mary and their baby-girl. George stopped at the edge of the crowd.

Randy was giving Brandt plenty of hell. He circled the big cowman, hitting hard and then stepping back. George saw Brandt's gunman, Eric Short, standing ten feet away, watching the fight.

Short looked at George, eyes probing and bold with challenge. But George did not meet the gunman's gaze.

Short's voice was clear. "Well, Randy's

got more guts than his big brother. Randy'll at least fight; the schoolteacher won't!"

Somebody laughed.

Color touched George Martin's face and turned it hard. He noticed that Jane Werner had pushed through the crowd and now she was looking at him. She'd heard Short's open challenge.

George stood silent. Anger roiled its muddy path through him but he controlled its dangerous flow. Noel Brandt and Short wanted him and Randy out of the way and George wasn't stepping into trouble right now.

Brandt got in two hard blows and dropped Randy Martin to the dust. He rushed in, his boot back, and Randy rolled over, the heavy justin missing him. Brandt kicked again but the town marshal had him, jerking him back.

"No boots," the marshal said. "A fair fight, Brandt."

Noel Brandt stood and breathed heavily. Then he lifted his flat gaze to George Martin, who was helping Randy to his feet. There was open challenge in his eyes, mocking and inviting, but George, although he read it, did not accept it.

Brandt growled. "He can't fight with his fists and he won't use a gun. And his brother won't fight at all."

George had his back to the cowman and he and Randy were going toward the doctor's office, with Randy leaning against him as the young man sobbed through beaten lips. Back of them a ripple of disgust swept the townsmen. And George knew it was directed toward him for not taking up Noel Brandt's open challenge.

The medico said, "Take him inside, George."

RANDY sat on the high table while the doctor worked on him. Brandt had started trouble with him, he said, and they'd started fighting in the saloon. He held his battered head in his hands. "Where will this trouble end, George?"

"I don't know."

Randy lifted his head. "Guns, that'll end it, George. That's the only end there is, I reckon."

George thought of Randy's wife, Mary, and the baby. He looked inquiringly at the doctor who said, "No, I can't let him go home yet, George. I'm putting him in bed at the hotel and watching him this afternoon. He took some hard blows around the head."

"Mary'll worry about me," Randy said.

George assured his brother he would notify Mary and went outside. Jane Werner stood on the corner and she fell into step beside him. He noticed that a frown played on her usually smooth forehead.

He asked her if she would ride out to the ranch and tell Mary about Randy's fight with Noel Brandt. She promised she would ride out immediately. They came to the livery-barn where she kept her horse.

She said, suddenly, "George, why didn't you fight? Eric Short called you in front of the whole town."

He was silent.

"Are you a coward?"

He spoke slowly. "Maybe I am."

She bit her bottom lip. "I don't think you are, George. Otherwise, I'd never be engaged to marry you. What held you back?"

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I am a coward." Now a thin smile played around his lips. "Maybe I'm just a school-teacher, that's all." He looked at his watch. "I'd better get back to my class."

His class was hard to handle that afternoon. For one thing, many of them had seen the fight, and had seen him back water from Brandt and Short. Those that hadn't seen it had heard their parents discuss it at the dinner table.

He had the seventh and eighth grade, thirty odd pupils in one room. While the eighth grade recited history, one of the seventh grade boys started acting up. He was the Kewar kid—cocky and impudent as his cattle-raising dad was tough and arrogant. George stopped class discussion and told him to remain silent. The boy was quiet for a few minutes, then started whispering loudly again.

George stopped his class again. "What's the matter with you, Jack?"

"Nothin'." A wide grin.

"All right, we'll make something the matter." George got him by the shoulder

and got him to his feet and took him to the principal's office. Behind him he heard another kid snicker.

The principal, a tired-looking old man, asked, "What punishment do you advise, Mr. Martin?"

Little Jack Kewar would spend an hour working for the principal and stay twenty minutes after school. George left him sweeping the floor. The principal cleared his throat. "I hope you'll pardon me, Mr. Martin. But I daresay your classes might be hard to control from now on."

George spoke coldly. "Leave that to me, sir."

But the principal was right. George's class was upset the remainder of the day. He was tired when he dismissed at three-thirty. Jack swept the floor and cleaned the blackboards while George worked over his grade-book.

"My old man says you're a coward." Jack blew dust off an eraser. He sounded half-accusing, half-questioning, for the kid was fond of his raw-boned teacher. They had always gotten along fine.

George looked at his watch. "You're excused, Jack. And tomorrow, if you're not behaving, you'll stay an hour."

The kid left and George put his head down on the desk. He remembered a day, not so many years ago, when, without a challenge, he would have stepped against Noel Brandt or Eric Strong. And he wouldn't have used his fists, either.

But those days, he hoped, were gone forever. He'd seen the folly of them that day they'd carried in the dead body of his father, Bill Martin. Big Bill's face had been serene in death, unmarked by hate and anger, the lines smoothing out under death's fingers.

And two bullet holes were in Big Bill's chest.

GEORGE had seen something else, too. Young Randy was ready to follow the gunsmoke trail of their father. So he'd sent the young fellow north into Montana after Randy had married Mary. Randy had settled there while George had gone east to college.

Back east, away from the raw frontier, he had found a new environment, almost

a new civilization. There men did not settle differences by guns or fists; they settled them in courts and each abided by that court's honest decision.

During his vacations he'd come home to help Randy on their ranch. And the marked difference between the East and this wild Montana range was clear to his eyes. Inside, he loved this country with its endless hills and high mountains, but he liked the East with its calmness and lawfulness.

And he saw, also, that inadvertently he had sent young Randy north into trouble. For Noel Brandt had ambitions, and his and Randy's little spread—the G-R Connected—blocked Brandt's growing Circle N herds from water at Sunken Springs. When Randy had moved in, Brandt had been small, running only a few scattered head. But ambition was strong in the big man and he wanted to control all this Surcingle range.

He'd offered to buy Randy and George out. George had wanted to sell, for he wanted to step around trouble, but Randy wouldn't sell under any conditions. Nobody was running him off his range, he said.

George had got his degree that spring and that same fall gone to teach in the Surcingle school. He liked teaching, strangely, although he did not like the stigma the rest of the range put on him—just a teacher, a "he-schoolmarm". He didn't go in saloons—not because of his job—but because he hated hard drink. He'd seen its effects on his father, Big Bill Martin.

Now all these conflicts, these troubles, surged in him. He'd schooled himself against violence and here violence was facing him. So far he'd dodged a decision one way or the other. But now, a voice inside whispered, "You can't dodge this, George. Randy won't move and Brandt and Short will go against him with guns."

He got to his feet and walked to the window. Dusk was settling early, for the fall was late, and snow would cover the sagebrush some day soon. But he had no eyes for the dark beauty of this range.

His thoughts roiled through him, turgid and dark. Maybe Jane was right—may-

be he was a coward. Maybe the soft years—the years in the eastern university—had taken something out of him?

Yes, they had taken something, he realized. They'd showed him that might did not make right and this knowledge had taken away all desire for violence in him.

He went down the gravel walk, heading for the main street. He met the doctor and asked how Randy was. The medico told him his brother was worse and that he'd hold him in town longer for observation. The slowness of the man's voice brought a touch of fear to George.

"He got quite a beating around the head," the doctor said.

George nodded.

Shrewd eyes, bright with time and its revelations, peered at the school-teacher. "This town expects you to do something about your brother's beating, George."

"What can I do?"

"You can go against Brandt. Or you can call Eric Short."

George rubbed his jaw slowly. "I'm not afraid for myself, sir. I think you realize that. But surely the law can settle this trouble."

"You're not in the East now, George."

The doctor turned into the saloon and, as the doors opened, George saw Noel Brandt and Eric Short at the bar. The doors swung shut and George went on down the street toward the hotel. There was no hospital and the doctor kept his patients in the hotel. He nodded at the clerk, climbed the stairs, and entered Randy's room. Randy lay in the bed and apparently was asleep.

Mary sat beside the bed, holding the baby. George took his nephew and whispered, "How is he, Mary?"

But Randy hadn't been asleep. He opened his eyes. "I'll get along all right, George." His tone was bitter. "I'll be out of here tomorrow." He closed his eyes.

The bitterness in his brother's voice made a deep mark on George Martin's calmness. Randy was just about openly stating he was a coward. And when Randy got out of bed—he knew Randy would get his gun and go up against Brandt.

George beckoned Mary out in the hall. He closed the door so Randy could not hear their low conversation. "When he gets well, Mary, we'll sell out and leave. We'll go into Wyoming."

Her gray eyes studied him. She shook her head. "No, George, Randy doesn't leave. We stay here."

"But Mary——"

Again she shook her dark head. "George, can't you see? Randy can't run. If he did, he couldn't live with himself again. He'd remember and remember, and that would eat his heart out. He's proud, George."

And George Martin found himself agreeing. Randy was proud—he had the Martin pride, the wild mad pride of Big Bill, who died with two bullet-holes in his heart. George found himself thinking, "I had that pride once—that same pride . . . Have I lost it back there in the shuffle of civilization?"

"He'll have to go, Mary."

"He won't go, George."

"But Brandt wants him to go for his gun. He wants to kill him, Mary. Then what about you—and the baby——"

Mary took her son from his arms. "I'd rather have Randy dead—I'd rather have him go down fighting for what he thinks is right—than to have him spend the rest of his life with me, with cowardice eating into his soul." Her face was a battlefield of strong emotions. "I know, that sounds brutal, and I hate to say it. But it's true, George, it's true."

George Martin went down the stairs, his knees stiff, and he almost walked by Jane Werner, who sat in the lobby.

"You haven't had supper," she said.

"I'm not hungry."

"You'll come with me—and you'll eat." He found himself smiling at her orders. "You can't walk around here and not eat. What's wrong with you?"

He grinned. "Okay, boss."

THEY went to her restaurant. He took a stool and she served him some clear soup good to his tongue. But his mind was not on his food. Nor was it on the girl who stood across the counter, openly concerned with him. His thoughts were on Brandt and on Eric Short.

Later the two men came in and took stools. Brandt was busy with his food but Short looked hard at George Martin and showed his slow grin. And George felt anger rip through him—a silent, deadly anger. An anger he'd thought dead for a long, long time. He went outside.

When the door closed behind him he got a part of Shorts words. "—yellow, he is—" The door shut the words off.

There in the dark, George Martin balled his hands into fists. He started to turn, then changed his mind and stood anchored, undetermined. He'd have to watch his anger. Brandt and Short wanted him to walk in there—they wanted to have an excuse to shoot him down—

He went down the street toward his room in the boarding house. He hung his hat on the hall rack and went to his desk and sorted out some papers he had to correct. They were English papers he would correct for spelling and punctuation.

Almost blind to them, he went through them mechanically, his pencil checking now and then. He added the grade to the top of each paper with a few comments and stacked them in a neat pile. Then he recorded the grades in his book, noting that Jackie Kewar was rather low in arithmetic—he'd talk to the boy's mother the next time he saw her. Jackie wasn't doing any home-study, he knew.

But these menial tasks did not keep his mind occupied. He worked at them by rote and long habit while his thoughts ran over the hills. He was suddenly hungry for a horse between his legs, for the wind against him. He put on his riding-boots and spurs and chaps and got his long sheepskin overcoat. He stopped at the door and then went back. He took his gun out of the desk drawer and put it in his big sheepskin pocket. He met his landlady out in the hall.

"The wind is sharp, Mr. Martin. Why don't you stay in tonight." Her motherly face showed concern.

George stood silent. Then he said, "Don't worry about me, Mrs. Remington. I am not going out to go against either Brandt or Short."

"I talked with the marshal," she said. "He had no grounds for a warrant against

Brandt. Witnesses say that your brother hit first and started the fight this noon."

George nodded and went outside. He had his horse in the barn behind the house and he saddled the buckskin and found the visalia stirrup and rose. He turned the horse into the wind and loped toward the G-R Connected ranch.

The cold wind whipped against his cheeks. More than the love of a bronc between his legs, the feel of the prairie wind, had taken him out this night. For he knew that the ranch was deserted.

The outfit was so small that he and Randy had no need for a hired hand. They did hire a few men during haying-season to ride mowers and bunch-rakes and run the stacker, but outside of that there was little need for another man on the spread. And Brandt was on the move.

He leaned back in his saddle and remembered his brother there in the dust, with Brandt's boot back to kick him.

BACK east this would have gone into court. A judge and jury would have decided Brandt and Short wrong and warned them against moving again toward the G-R Connected. And had they broken this order, they would find prison terms facing them. There would be no fists . . . or guns.

But this was Montana. True, there was a law here—there was a town marshal in Surcingle. But unless a fight was too lopsided, he stepped back and watched; he did not interfere unless some crooked work were being pulled. Better to let them fight, George'd heard him say, and get it out of their systems. 'Cause if they don't fight, they let that hate stay inside and poison them.

Let hate stay inside . . . He hated Brandt, hated his sneering, superior tone; he remembered Short's insolent look at him, and hate welled inside of him. He realized that this would poison his thoughts and make them biased. He tried to force it back but it laid there and leered at him.

Still, he kept remembering Randy, lying there beaten in the dust. With blood around his mouth and his sobbing curses toward Brandt. Randy would get his gun and go up against Brandt and Short . . .

The wind was colder when he rode into the G-R Connected ranch. Randy would have to feed hay soon, for this wind would bring snow. He remembered his class' sullen disobedience that afternoon and he remembered Jack blowing dust from an eraser and saying, "My old man says you're a coward."

Those kids were quick on the draw. They were quick to discover cowardice and, in their straight, boyish ways, they were quick to state their opinions. They had no use for him now and his discipline was gone. He knew it and they knew it. Without respect he could never hold them in line.

He'd quit teaching.

But what good would that do? Now everybody on this range knew he'd backed down in front of Short and Brandt. He'd walk down the main street and they'd look at him and he would know their thoughts.

He could leave this range. But Randy wouldn't go; neither would Mary. He couldn't leave them to face this alone.

The buildings lay along the base of an overtowering hill crowned by dark rock. The moonlight showed the long log building, the corrals, and the log barn. The dancing waters of Sunken Springs, coming bubbling from the earth, showed under the glistening rays. The creek ran down a quarter mile and sank into the sand and disappeared, all on G-R Connected property.

That spring was the cause of it all, George realized. Nature had placed it there and man-made laws had decreed to him and Randy the use of it. And because of these man-made laws they had incurred the hatred and greed of Brandt.

He looked down at the water. The moonlight sent dancing facets of light from its clear, moving surface. He went to the house and put a fire in the heater and sat in the chair and dozed.

He awoke a few hours before dawn, stiff from his position. He got his bronc and rode toward Surcingle Town. His precautions had been unnecessary and he had not needed to guard the ranch.

Suddenly, he pulled in and sat saddle, looking back at the ranch-buildings hidden behind yonder hill.

FLAME was coloring the gray sky and smoke was barely discernible. He whirled his bronc, something ripping through him inside, and loped back. Then he drew rein on the hill and looked down, face dark and terrible with his thoughts.

The log ranch-house was on fire. So was the barn. There was nothing he could do; he could not put out the fires—to waste time lugging water from the spring was futile. The buildings were doomed.

Somewhere, out in the graying world, he thought he heard the sharp rattle of hoofs heading out on the range away from the burning buildings. But the dawn had not fully arrived and he could not see very far.

Below, the buildings crackled, flames shooting high. Sparks and embers rose, red and shining; they spread out in a great, hot fan, and fell to the earth in ashes. George sat and watched.

He knew, without a doubt, that Brandt and Short had fired the ranch. They'd come in and saw him there and waited until he'd rode out and then torched the spread. But how could he prove it?

He couldn't. He knew that. It hit him hard, with sickening force, like a blow hits a man in the guts, driving pain into him and making him gasp for life. No, he could never prove that.

Of course, he had his suspicions—but who here on Surcingle range would not suspect these two? But for proof . . . He watched the buildings sink into redness, watched the red color leave and watched them turn to gray ashes.

Now, more than ever, Randy would move against Brandt, and Randy would have a gun in his fist. Brandt would kill him, for Randy was no gunhand; besides, Brandt would see to it that Short sided him, and it would be two guns against one in a red, mad showdown. And Mary would be a widow.

George Martin turned his horse. The wind was colder now, whipping in, beating in, pulling with cold fingers against his overcoat. He lowered his head and rode into it. He and Randy, if they stayed, would have to rebuild that house and barn. And that cost money and money was scarce. Brandt had hit them hard.

There was a little snow in the air when he rode into the barn behind his rooming-house. He left his saddler there after seeing the manger held bluejoint hay. He went down the alley to the livery-barn.

He walked down the darkened, narrow aisle, the smell of horse manure and sweat against his nostrils. Broncs munched in stalls and one horse stood hip-high, chewing on oats from the bin. George stopped beside a stall that held two broncs.

He stood there a while, then went between the horses. They were raw broncs and his smell was strange to them and they snorted. But he spoke to them and stood petting one of them, feeling under his mane. He brought his hand down and ran it across the scar of the beast's brand, running his long fingers almost idly across the scar, and he made out the Circle N brand. Noel Brandt's iron.

He went to the doorway. Dawn was brighter now, and he saw smoke come from the stove-pipe chimney of the Single Ace Cafe. Jane is getting breakfast ready, he thought. He turned as an old man came from the small room at the corner of the barn. The old man stretched and yawned. "A cold day, George."

George said, "Brandt and Short rode in about an hour ago, didn't they?" Aged eyes studied him. George repeated his question.

Again, evasion. Then, "Why ask that, George?"

"They burned down the G-R Connected buildings." There was a silence. "You hate them, old man, you hate them."

"They just rode in," the oldster stated. "They thought I was asleep, but I weren't. They looked in and Brandt said, 'He's asleep. He'll never know we was gone.'"

"Go down and look up Eric Short. Tell him his bronc is foundering."

The aged, sharp eyes rested on him, then the oldster left. George went back inside the doorway and leaned against the wall by the pillar, hidden from anybody coming in the front door. He waited ten minutes.

Randy had been right and Jane was right. There was no other way except through gunsmoke. That held the only solution, for men of Brandt's ilk, and men

of Short's type, knew no other language, obeyed no other edict but the law of force. They had been right and he had been wrong.

Now he saw that even his dead father, Big Bill Martin, had, in his clumsy way, understood this land, and these people. He had lost something back east in school. He had lost it among soft-handed, civilized people. He still had the Martin pride. But he had allowed his surroundings, his education, to smother that pride, that courage. He had not made the proper adjustment between two lands and two sets of peoples.

NOW that he'd made his decision, he had no fear. Fear had left him, although his belly muscles twitched under internal tension. That movement was only logical, he realized; it was muscle rebelling, as usual, against his will power.

He heard boots coming.

He heard the old man saying, "I come outa my room an' there was yore bronc, Short. Down an' groanin'."

"We'll drench him," a man stated.

George thought, "That's Short." He settled back with his gun in his hand. Short and the old man came in and Short did not see him there beside the door in the shadows.

"Short."

Eric Short stopped, turned. "George Martin, huh? You're up early."

"Your bronc is all right," George said.

Short looked quickly at the horse, saw it standing, then growled, "What is this, old man?" to the hostler, who was silent.

George spoke. "I just came from the G-R Connected. Somebody burned down the barn and house this morning. It was you and Brandt. Your broncs have been wet with sweat but you rubbed them dry. But they're still sweaty under their manes."

Short eyed his gun. "Can you prove that in court?"

George came forward. "This won't get to court." His face was dark. He brought his palm up and laid it across Short's jowls. He drove him back and he followed, cold and dead inside, and he took his gun up hard and lowered it. The first time he missed Short's head, knocking his Stetson off and smashing the gunbarrel

down on Short's shoulder. Short was cursing and reaching for his gun.

George hit again and Short went down.

The old man said, shakingly, "You—you must've busted his head in two! I heard it crack!"

George felt Short's wrist and got up. "He's just out, old man."

The old man grabbed his arm. "Look, George, I gotta pull out. When Short comes to—he'll want to kill me—"

THE teacher pulled the trembling fingers loose. "Don't worry about that, old man. When Short comes to he'll head out of here or this town'll hang him. These men don't want any firebugs on this grass. Brandt's bucking a few others, too, and when they see that he's burned down our spread—they'll move and move fast with guns."

"Where you going?"

"Where's Brandt?"

The tremble left the old man's bottom lip. "I shouldn't tell you. He'll—he'll kill you. But he's in the Single Ace Cafe."

"Jane Werner in there?"

The old man nodded.

That complicated things. Then George Martin smiled. As if anything could make this more complicated! He stuck his gun in his coat pocket, the handle sticking out.

"I'll get the marshal, George."

"We don't need the marshal."

The old man stood undecided. George walked into the dawn. He went down an alley and came in behind the Single Ace Cafe. He knew he'd have to act fast. Soon Short would come to and if Short and Brandt joined forces . . .

Jane was cooking. George asked, "Who's out in front?" and she said, "Noel Brandt. Nobody else." She saw the gun's handle, then. "What are you going to do?"

George smiled crookedly. "I'm going to give Brandt a liesson in hot lead." He went into the restaurant and Brandt, seated on a stool, saw him. He did not see the gun yet.

"You're up early," Brandt growled.

George said, "Not as early as you and Short. I saw you two when you rode

away from burning down the G-R Connected. I had the old man trick Short into coming into the barn and we worked him over. He's got quite a story to tell the marshal, Brandt."

"Short won't talk."

George smiled. "Seems like you gave yourself away, Brandt."

Brandt swung off the stool, big and tough. "No, I didn't give myself away, Martin. I'm not that ignorant, fellow." He had his hand on his gun. "I'm killin' you, Martin. Your girl just ran out the back door. I heard it slam behind her. Maybe she's goin' after the marshal. But when he comes you'll be dead."

George waited.

Brandt saw the gun, then. He said, "That makes it easier. I can claim I killed you in self defense."

George's gun caught on the corner of his pocket. Brandt's bullet hit him in the chest. The force turned the schoolteacher, who had his gun out. Sick with pain, he laid two bullets against Brandt.

One of Brandt's bullets had plowed into the floor. Brandt looked at it, slow on his feet, his gun falling. He went down, sliding against the stool to the floor.

George went to his knees. He was kneeling like that, sick inside, when the marshal and Jane Werner came, and Jane knelt beside him.

"George, George!"

He found himself smiling. "The lesson went over," he said quietly. Jane and the marshal got him to his feet. "My ribs are broken, Jane."

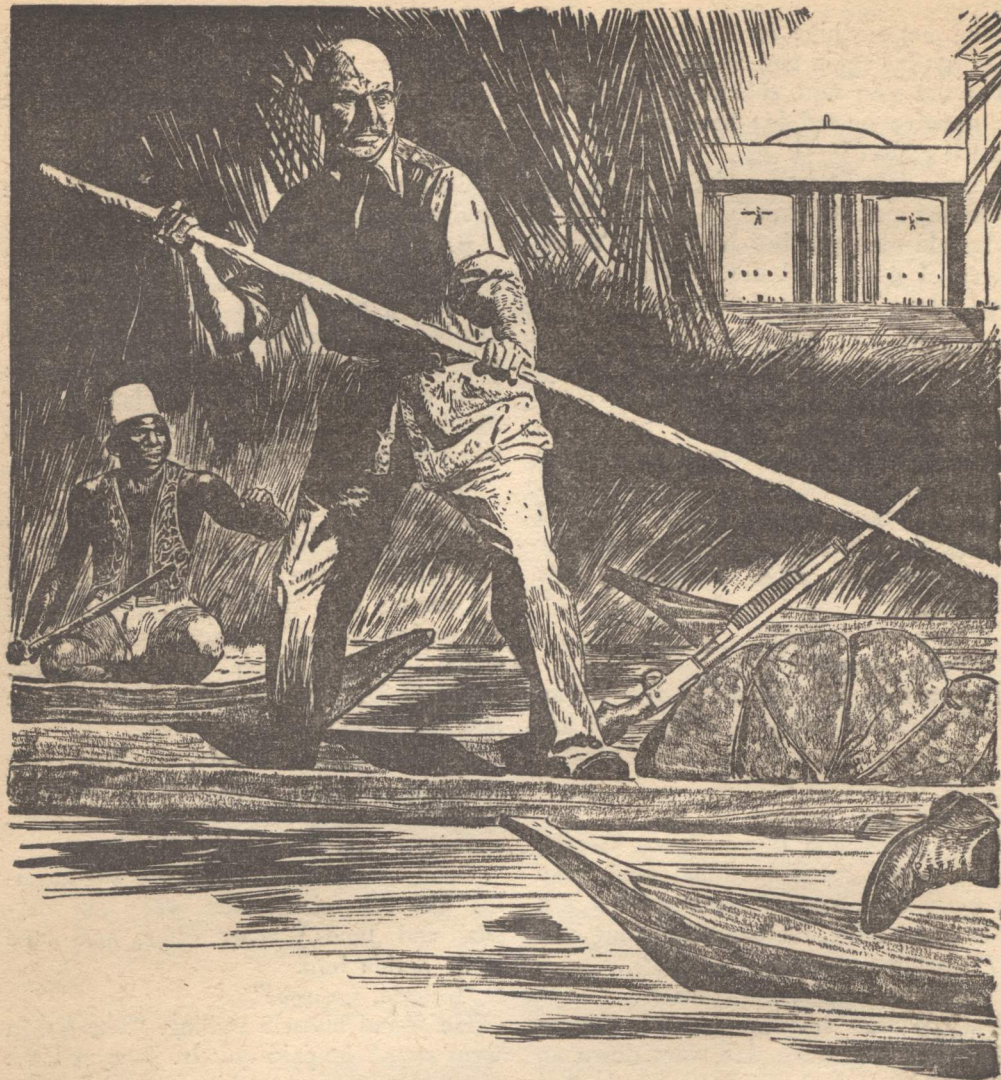
"Hush, here comes the doctor."

They got him on the table and the doctor cut away his shirt. People were gathering around and he heard a kid say, "Gosh, our teacher! Boy, he's got guts, he has!" He opened his eyes and saw little Jack. The kid's freckled face was shining with a wide smile and his eyes were bright.

"How are yuh, teach?" Jack asked.

George put his good arm around the kid and pulled him in. Jack was grinning and George looked up at Jane, who smiled down although her eyes held tears.

George said, "Almost time for school, Jack."



DAGGER OF THEBES

By DAN CUSHMAN

King Solomon's Mines! Dream of every fever-wasted, quinine-and-cognac soaked jungle adventurer. Now it was Armless O'Neil's turn to hack his way into the very nightmare heart of terror, seeking a glittering death buried in slime, guarded by monstrous evil . . .

THE STERNWHEEL BOAT, *Ibis*, had paused at a concession wharf during the brutal heat of African afternoon, but since then it had traveled steadily between solid walls of jungle that formed the Ubangi's banks.

It was exactly five o'clock by the mu-

latto mate's big, silver watch when bits of clearing commenced breaking through along the north bank. He put the watch away and said something to a native boy, sending him running topside where he rapped at the insect door of a stateroom.

"Kangala quick now," the boy said,



The pole smacked his chest, caving the breath out of him.

flattening his nose against the copper screen. "You hear me, O *bwana m'kumbwa?*"

A white man answered him and swung

his feet down from the hammock where he'd been taking late siesta.

The white man was a trifle shorter, and a good deal broader across the shoulders

than an average man. He was naked to the waist with skin turned the peculiar brownish-brick color that indicates years of the tropics — enough years to make most of his race go soft from the country's combination of heat, quinine and poor brandy, but this fellow still showed a quick resilience and strength in his movements. He had a face that was ugly as a Burmese idol's, and when he turned and walked to the water pitcher it could be seen that his left arm had been amputated just below the elbow.

He lifted the pitcher, dumped its contents over his head, and then, not bothering to dry himself, he started strapping on the steel hook that served him in place of a left arm.

"You see?" he grinned, shaking his hook at the pop-eyed native boy who was still watching through the screen. "It didn't sprout on me like so much devil-vine after all."

The Moyan boy exhaled and spoke, "Is it true, what men say, O *bwana* O'Neil? Is it true that you once split-em skull of Turk in Boma like machete splits ripe cacao pod?"

Armless O'Neil took time to put on a shirt and coat, to lift a blued Walther automatic from beneath the hammock pad and slide it in a belt holster. Then he answered,

"Sure. I used to split men's skulls and hang 'em up like helmets on a mess-house wall."

"Ay-ay!" the black boy chanted, believing every word of it. "Tell me, O mighty hook armed one, can I carry uniform can and duffle? Mebby-so—"

"No." O'Neil tossed him a franc-piece and told him to get the hell away. Wasn't he already paying one worthless native "boy," by name Bobolongonga, who, Allah forsake his soul, was probably full of *bangh* and sleeping it off on the lower deck at that moment?

"I get-em. I get-em *bondele's* boy damn quick."

The *Ibis* by now was pushing her nose up the lagoon channel of a backwater toward a couple of roofed piers. Beyond, hidden by palms and hardwoods, would be the town of Kangala.

HE STOOD by the rail, hand on his hip, looking at it—or as much of it as he could see. All of these jungle ports were the same. A dock, some palm nut and rubber storehouses thrusting their sheet metal roofs from surrounding palm trees, a rest house, a trader's, some stalls operated by Arabs and Armenians, and maybe a government building with its tricolor hanging limp as a strip of liver on its bamboo staff. One time or another O'Neil had seen practically all of the river ports on the Congo and its tributaries, and he held them in contempt, sweepingly and impartially, Kangala with the rest.

The boat had slowed and was fighting its way through water lemons that grew in thick masses along the lagoon. At last she stopped altogether while native crewmen swarmed over the paddlewheel to dig off the tangled, dripping tendrils with fingers and bare toes; then she plowed on again, and finally, after a dogged struggle, thumped to rest against the fermenting teak piles of the dock.

O'Neil turned, ready to suitably curse his native boy for not coming on time, but Bobolongonga was there, huge and erect in his flowing *kuftan*, an aluminum-painted uniform can, and a duffle bag atop his head.

"Thou art ready, O Master, to visit this crummy port?" Bobolongonga intoned, speaking like a true convert to Islam.

"I'm ready," O'Neil growled.

Ready for what? He twisted one side of his mouth in a laugh and spat at the Ubangi's brownish water. There would be nothing here for him. He would have gone to Fort Crampel, a fourth partner with Jean Vedrun on a six month's ivory hunt among those Sara villagers who always have a little to sell and government regulation be damned—but the letter had arrived from Lippy Leach, and of course there was no way for him to refuse.

A debt was a debt, and Lippy had once saved his life when they were rafting cedrelas logs out to Douela.

He strode down the landing stage, closely followed by Bobolongonga, past sleek Bakete natives and scrawny Azandas from the Soudan of the north, all of them staring at his steel hook. There were some

pointed, native huts, a few Arab slum stalls, and then the pointed pickets of a hotel compound.

L'Hotel Charbonnaire. O'Neil remembered the name after so many years. It had once boasted a garden with trimmed frangapanis and cape jasmine bushes, but there was nothing like that now. The jungle had moved in, and only the front door and a bit of the upper verandah were visible.

He noticed that the front steps sagged, and that the ant traps were dry of creosote. The place was going to hell like everything else.

He paused in the door of the big, main salon, thinking of that pretty Belgian widow, Madame Madelaine Charbonnaire, who had been running the place on his last visit.

Evening hung heavily inside the room. Only one person was visible—a ponderous looking white man who was reading an issue of the *Freetown Gazette*, turning it and squinting in the poor light that slanted through some open slats of the side jalousies. An oil lamp was burning over the counter. Evidently it had just been lighted, for it still swung gently to and fro.

The big man lowered his newspaper a trifle and was peering at O'Neil's back as he walked across, but O'Neil seemed to take no interest. He paused at the counter and waited while a woman, middle-aged and fat, waddled from a back room casting before her the odor of French perfume.

"M'shu!"

"I was looking for Madame Charbonnaire."

"I am Madame Charbonnaire."

Kingdom of Allah! But she was the same woman, all right. Madelaine Charbonnaire—the pretty, plump widow of the Belgian official. It's hell what the tropics do to a man—and more than hell what it does to a woman.

He kept looking at her, and she became nervous under his scrutiny. A grin twisted the saturnine lines of his face, and he lifted his hook to rap it gently atop the counter.

"M'shu! You are M'shu Armless

O'Neil!" she lifted her arms and let them fall. "*Bon Dieu* by his *sacre* flesh! I would not have known. After so long. So many years." She reached back to fluff her hair in a gesture of faded coquetry. "I should not speak to you after that las' day. No. I should drive you away from my door."

"I'd have been no good for you," O'Neil growled. "I'd have drunk up everything you owned, and you'd probably have ended by plugging me with that old Star pistol you used to keep under the edge of your bed."

Madame Charbonnaire sighed with a great heave of her bosom. "Thus fate, M'shu." She opened the big, leather guest book and dipped an ink-caked pen. "Your old room on the verandah?"

"You've been saving it for me?" O'Neil grinned.

"Oh-la!"

He signed his name, *O'Neil, Bangui, Dep. Chari, F.E.A.* Then he laid down the pen and said,

"I'm here looking for Lippy Leach."

THE WORDS seemed to jolt Madame Charbonnaire, making her eyes dart over and come to rest momentarily on the big man hidden behind his newspaper.

"M'shu Leach?" She was speaking loudly enough for the man to hear. "I have not seen M'shu Leach in these three weeks."

O'Neil drew Lippy's note from his pocket, unfolded it. It bore the return "Hotel Charbonnaire" and had been posted nine days before. He laid it on the counter and stood watching the woman's eyes.

He went on, speaking in a voice that was barely audible, "He wouldn't leave without a forwarding address. This is rather important—"

"He is gone, M'shu, and I am glad to say *adieu* to such a filthy, cognac-soaking swine."

O'Neil shrugged, wadded the note, and thrust it back in his coat pocket. He knew that the big man was watching from above the top edge of his newspaper.

Madame had moved over to be hidden from the man by O'Neil's broad shoulders. She dipped the pen and commenced

writing minute words on a bit of paper. She finished and slipped it inside the front of O'Neil's shirt. It was done swiftly, with a finesse one would not have expected from her. Then she reached to the rack behind her and flourished a key with a brass tag broad as her hand,

"Your room, *M'shu!* Verandah, *seize.*"

O'Neil dropped the key in his pocket and turned around. The big man was hidden from his waist up by the newspaper, but one could get an impression of his size by looking at his legs which filled his white trousers like grain poured into sacks. On his feet were short-boots of the type favored by British planters over in Tanganyika. His fingers, visible on the sides of the paper, were like small bananas, and on one twinkled a large, yellowish diamond.

O'Neil walked through the front door where Bobolongonga was waiting with his duffle and uniform can.

"Upstairs," O'Neil growled.

The sun had set, exactly at six o'clock as it always did there on the equator, and the last flare of its light turned the rainy season haze a reddish purple. Some stairs led to the second verandah. Deep twilight there, behind thick mattings of vine.

He remembered the location of his room and walked to it, unlocked the door. He struck a match. A D-C electric bulb hung on a fly-blackened cord, but it failed to respond when O'Neil snapped the switch. He struck a second match and lighted a candle.

Actually it wasn't a single room, but a suite of two joined by a draped arch. O'Neil glanced around, seemed satisfied, and drew Madame's note from the front of his shirt.

*Monsieur Leach—he is in room
6, lower verandah, rear. Knock
3-2-1.*

He wadded the paper, lighted it in the flame, watched it burn down to a feather of black ash.

"It is then a secret paper, O Master?" breathed Bobolongonga.

"*Message d'amour.*"

"From that cow? That water buffalo?"

"Thou art speaking," said O'Neil, "of the woman I used to love." Then he asked,

"Did you ever see the big man before?—the big man reading the paper?"

"No, *bwana.*"

O'Neil went back to the verandah. A breeze had come up, rustling through the n'gogi vine, carrying the sultry stench of cookfires burning thatch. Twilight was short, with black shadows already creeping in from the jungle. He circled to the rear, descended some rotting stairs, and was almost instantly hidden by the head-high orchilla overgrowing that portion of the yard. A path led through it to a row of *picinnin kias*. He left the path, worked his way through the orchilla, and reached a long disused side door to the lower verandah.

In the dark it took him two or three minutes to locate room number six.

There was a light inside, shining in dim, brownish slats through closed jalousies. He listened. There was no sound except for a kitchen rattle of dishes from the *cook-kia* out back, and repeated crashes of static as someone tried to pick up an evening newscast from the Stanleyville station.

He rapped. No answer. He'd forgotten—Madame Charbonnaire's note had said "rap 3-2-1." He did so, striking the panels lightly with his hook—three taps, two taps, one. Almost instantly there came a responding sound, a chair-thump and the whisper of shoes across floor mattings; a shadow hesitated a second and slid past the closed jalousies. A husky voice sounded just beyond the panels

"Who is it?"

"O'Neil."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

A BOLT rattled, and when the door did not move, O'Neil gave it a push. It opened. He stood for a few seconds, looking inside. Nobody in the range of his eyes. A rattan chair stood by the table, and a cigarette was lying in a chipped saucer, still burning. Beyond, the drapes to a second room were gently swinging back and forth, and he thought someone had just passed through, but they stopped when he went on inside and closed the door. Draught.

A movement at his left made him turn sharply. A hollow-faced, corpselike man was standing beside a teak cabinet, looking at him.

"Well, O'Neil," he said, letting his face break apart in a smile. "So you did come after all."

It took O'Neil a while to find any resemblance between this fellow and the man he'd known as Lippy Leach. Lippy had been a plump Englishman in his middle thirties when they'd safaried together across the Cameroons, but now he was chiefly yellowish skin stretched over skeleton. He showed the effects of quinine and liver complaint, and poor liquor had done something, too, judging by the huskiness of his voice. The jungle had taken him a long way down the skids, and if O'Neil was any judge, plain, honest-to-Allah fear was finishing him off.

Lippy came around the cabinet sliding a chrome-plated Luger in the band of his reeking, cotton trousers.

"I swear by the dirty old hell, O'Neil, if it hadn't been for the hook, I'd never have known you."

A laugh jerked O'Neil's shoulders. There it was again, first Madame Charbonnaire, and now this Lippy Leach. He turned without saying anything and walked toward a square of rusty mirror fastened above the wash stand. It was too deeply etched by tropical fungus to give back anything but a vague shadow of reflection. He went back to the table. A package of Khartoum cigarettes lay there, so he took one and stood on the chair to light it from the hanging lamp. It was Egyptian tobacco, considerably superior to the Inyorka he'd been smoking.

He dragged deeply a few times, and then asked, "What's wrong, Lippy?"

Lippy picked up a bottle. His fingers did a St. Vitus jump as he drew the cork. There was only a half-drink left, so he took it himself. Then he cursed. "Dammit, does there have to be something wrong?"

"You got me here, didn't you?—to this stinking hole in the jungle? You got me here when I might just as well have been up around Crampel picking up a cargo of scrivelo ivory that would pay my passage back to the States."

"Cool off, laddie. I'm your friend, remember? You'll swear I'm the best friend you've ever had, and scrivelo be damned when you find out what I'm going to tuck in your wallet."

O'Neil sat in the rattan chair, slid far down with his legs stretched, inhaling the Khartoum cigarette.

"What's the matter?" he repeated in a dogged tone. "Why the locked door, the gun? Why was Madame Charbonnaire afraid to talk in front of that big planter?"

LIPPY had been getting hold of himself, but mention of the "planter" started his nerves to jumping again. He fished a cigarette from the package, struck a match, and propped his elbows on the table so his fingers would stop jumping long enough for him to light it.

"Planter! Planter be damned. You know who he is?"

"No."

"Gutchinov."

"Who's Gutchinov?"

"You don't know who Doc Gutchinov is? I dare say you'll find out enough before you're through, but I'll start nearer the beginning. It's a long story, so maybe we ought to have something to wet our whistles."

Lippy got up, slap-slapped over to the wall and jerked three times on an old, green silk bell-pull. Far away was a tinkling response. He pulled a stopper from a hollow bamboo speaking tube and spoke the word, "Cognac!" Then he walked back and sat down, planting his skinny forearms on the table.

"Scrivelo ivory? That's peanuts as you Yanks like to say. Look at you, O'Neil. Fifteen years in the Congo and still flat on your financial *derriere* as the sayin' goes. Of course I got you here because I needed you, needed you bad, and you owed it to me one way of lookin' at it, but it's a favor to you, financially speakin' which is the only language you Yanks can understand. O'Neil, I'm going to give you a key. A key to more damn money than you'd get from all the scrivelo ivory between here and Timbuctoo. A treasure, O'Neil. A bloomin' treasure, and that's no mistake."

O'Neil grinned, and it had the effect of angering Lippy.

"Yes, damn it, a treasure, and stop showin' your jackal teeth about it."

"What now? The Queen of Sheba's mines?"

Lippy started to snort, then he stopped and sat back in his chair looking at O'Neil with yellowish eyeballs. "Why, yes. Damn it, that's likely what it is. The Queen of Sheba's mines."

"Now if there's one thing in the whole length of this malaria-rotten continent I'd like to get my hand on more than anything else, it's the Queen of Sheba's mines."

Lippy raised his voice, "Solomon's mines! The lost mines of Nubia."

"Come back and get your feet in the swamp, Lippy. That's the same thing they try to sell every Yank oil magnate and hippo hunter when he gets off the boat in Suez. There's a map that will take you right to the place, only there's one little hitch. It's in an Englishman's trunk locked up in the storeroom of the Wanderer's Hotel, and the Englishman's been dead since 1916. All you need is two hundred, sterling, to bribe the hotel manager."

"That's why it's newcomers that make the big finds—because you old jungle tramps are too damn smart for your own good. But just the same, someplace in that country between Khartoum and the highlands of Ethiopia, there is a mine where Solomon traded for gold, and where the old Nubian tribe in King Tut's time got it, too."

"All right. So you've turned up Solomon's mines. What now? Do you need my strong back to carry the bullion out?"

O'Neil had smoked the cigarette down to his fingers, so he lighted another. Lippy watched until he was through, then, without saying any more, he went down in a pocket of his dirty cotton pants and got a couple of keys. One was a hotel door key with a brass tab bearing the stamp "26"; the other was evidently made to fit a padlock.

"What are these?" O'Neil asked.

"The keys to Solomon's mines."

Lippy evidently considered this re-

mark quite a triumph, for he tossed back his head and grinned showing all the vacant spaces between his yellowish teeth. There was a sound along the side verandah, and a light tap. He stopped grinning abruptly, and stood up.

"Damn the nigger," he said, letting some of the stiffness go out of him. "I told him enough times not to bring my liquor around there."

HE LEFT O'Neil and disappeared through the drapes to the other room. A door there connected with the side verandah, and he could be heard fooling with the bolt. Night breeze commenced swinging the drapes to and fro, and O'Neil could smell a subtle perfume, like a mixture of the blossoms growing rank in the garden. Lippy whispered something and cursed; there was a thump like a bottle might make in falling to floor matting. After that, for a time, there was no sound except for the drape swinging, scraping its frayed edges across the palm mats.

O'Neil stood up with a sudden movement and pinched out the coal of his cigarette. The perfume was gone. Draught carried only the faint stench of burning thatch. Someone came to the inner door—one that evidently connected to an inside passage and the bar.

A native's voice, "Brandy, *Bwana* Leach. You wan me leave-em here, *Bwana*?"

"Leave it there!" O'Neil muttered.

He stood with his Walther pistol drawn, listening to the retreating sound of bare feet. He opened the door and took the bottle of cheap, Moroccan brandy. He placed it on the table, then, still holding the Walther automatic, he stepped quietly to the arch and swung the drape aside with his hook.

Light from the candle gave a shifting, shadowy illumination. He could see only a billow of mosquito net, a chair, a door partly open with black verandah beyond. The odor was there again, like an essence of flowers rather than the flowers themselves. Jasmine and civet. He realized then it was not from the garden. It was some coarse perfume from Asia Minor.

He went on, letting the curtain swing shut behind him. Only a thin strip of candlelight followed him. He drew up suddenly. There was someone on the floor, half hidden by the mosquito netting that circled the bed. A human form, face down, looking small and dissipated. Even in the dark, without leaning over, he knew it was Lippy.

II

O'NEIL DROPPED TO ONE knee, and without releasing his grip from the Walther, felt for pulse at his throat. There was none. Lippy was dead.

O'Neil stood up and swung around, barely restraining an impulse to pull the trigger. For an instant he'd imagined there was someone waiting in the mosquito net's shadow. Nothing. His nerves were jumpy. He stood for a few seconds, getting hold of himself, then he moved through the open door, along the verandah. The killer had had plenty of time to escape. No use of going further. He went back inside, closed the door, bolted it. He took the candle from its suspension holder and carried it in.

Lippy had been stabbed in the back. Blood made a tiny spot between his shoulders. He'd been struck in the heart by one of those darning-needle daggers that the black Saharah tribesmen liked to hide beneath their *kufans*. Frisked, pockets turned inside out. Even the dirty tennis shoes pulled from his feet. It had been a swift, silent job.

He carried the candle back to the big room and placed it in the hanging holder. He noticed perspiration streaking his cheeks. Fingers shaky. He reached down for one of the Khartoum cigarettes, changed his mind, and instead knocked off the neck of the cognac bottle with a swing of his hook arm.

The brandy was raw and underaged, but it had the right effect, taking the cold shudder of death from his middle. He picked up the two keys Lippy had given him, slipped them in his pocket, and left by the same rear way he'd entered.

The back stairs were deserted. He climbed to the upper verandah. Some-

thing large and white moved beside him. He spun the Walther . . .

"Bwana!"

It was Bobolongonga.

"What in the devil are you doing there?"

"Waiting thy return, O Master."

"Have you seen anyone?"

"No one." He waited, and when O'Neil made no explanation, he said, "Tell me, O Master, art thou once more getting up to thy ears in a potful of trouble?"

O'Neil muttered something under his breath.

"One of these days, O Master, thou wilt receive an ounce of pistol lead in thy guts, and then who will bury thy carcass and repay thy debts? Do not forget, O Master that thou owest me eleven months' back wages, and it is the word of the Prophet that he who dieth in his servant's debt shall enter into Allah's paradise crawling on his belly by the eighth gate which is neither tall enough for a crocodile nor wide enough—"

"The hell with you," growled O'Neil.

"Behold my rags, O Bwana!" Bobolongonga moaned, following on O'Neil's heels around the verandah. "Behold how thy servant hath bankrupted himself in thy employ until he hath barely a whole piece of cloth large enough to cover his pratt as the Prophet commanded."

O'Neil found the door to number twenty-six, and stopped. The door was locked, and wind had blown leaves and yellow dust against the screen, so evidently a couple of weeks had passed since it had been opened.

"You and your naked pratt!" snarled O'Neil. "One of these days I'll boot it higher than thy shoulders, Allah mark my words." He turned and shook the keys beneath the black man's nose. "Behold these keys, thou spawn of a jackass! One of them will open the door to Solomon's treasure house. Only stick with me and be patient for thy back wages and one day I will make thee a man of wealth, and send thee back to thy two wives in Katanga with a silk *djellaba* over thy shoulders and a watch of gold on thy wrist."

"Money-money, Allah-humma," Bobo-

longonga chanted, facing Mecca. "So indeed it is as I have said before, thou art the greatest of masters, O mighty O'Neil. Tell me when thou wilt unlock this treasure house of Solomon?"

"Never mind that. You wait here, don't let anyone come up behind you."

Bobolongonga drew a long machete, "Behold this sword, O Master!"

THE key fit, and he opened the door, went inside. It was just a bedroom not a suite of two rooms like his own. There was a cot surrounded by mosquito net, a table and pitcher, one chair. The match was burning down to his fingers, so he touched it to the candle.

Some old cotton shirts and trousers hung on a rod in one corner. He lifted the mosquito drape. Beneath the cot was a small metal trunk about twice the size of his own uniform can.

He pulled it out, surprised by its light weight, but a strap and staple had been welded on, and it was held by a large brass padlock.

The key fit, and snapped the lock open. He looked inside. The trunk contained only one thing—the handle end of a broken dagger.

He took the dagger out and crouched on one knee, looking at it by candlelight.

It was extremely old, apparently the product of a native craftsman. He looked at the blade where it was broken. The break was not fresh. There'd been time for it to accumulate a deep, granular oxidation. It was iron, rather than steel, and it was fastened to the copper handle by rivets. A design had been worked into the handle—a half human, hawk-headed creature executed with the angularity remindful of the things the Egyptologists like to dig from the ancient cities.

He examined the trunk for a hidden compartment, but there was nothing else. Only the dagger. He dropped it in his pocket, resnapped the lock, and blew out the candle. Then he went below and told Madame Charbonnaire that Lippy was dead.

"You found him so? Dead!" She wailed and wrung her hands. "In my house! My hotel!"

"Sure. It's sort of tough on him, too."

"He was dead when you went in? For how long?"

"He didn't tell me."

"You should not joke, *M'shu*." She made a sacred gesture. "Tell me. The note I gave you. . . . Perhaps if the Colonial police saw——"

"I burned it."

"Ah. You were always thoughtful."

He walked to the dining room where he ate a meal of *koos-koos*, a sort of lamb-rice-curry with bits of nuts and fruit, finishing with cassava hard-bread and bitter coffee made with thick extract and canned milk. It was the sort of meal that would burn the ulcers right out of a white man's stomach, but O'Neil was not the type who was bothered with ulcers.

A barefoot gendarme, Kangala's representative of the legal codes, arrived when O'Neil was on his coffee, and stood with his white *kepi* in his hand, repeating in order the questions set forth in the Manual to Local Police sent each year from the Governor-General's office in Brazzaville.

He finished, saluted, and put his *kepi* back on, all with an air of triumph at having completed his questions without a hitch. The actual apprehension of a killer interested him far less. Things always were the same in those lost jungle ports. Nothing was ever done without the insistence of the District Commissaire, and no District Commissaire would leave his hammock and brandy for anyone less important than an official of the Union du Kongo, or perhaps a big-game hunter with outside connections.

Thus the tropics.

O'Neil gave the gendarme one of Lippy's cigarettes and congratulated him with a slap on the shoulder. They walked out together. No sign of the big man—Gutchinov.

He wished Lippy had said what he was going to about Gutchinov. He walked through to Madame's sitting room, a stuffy, perfumed place filled with plush furniture from France.

"Tell me about Gutchinov," he said.

"That swine!"

"Who is he?"

"How would I know, *M'shu*? He came and rented a room. Number thirty-six at the far corner of the upper verandah. There was an ugly black man with him, but I will no longer let him come in the house. A man called Le Garrotte. Can you think of a hotel giving accommodations to a man named Le Garrotte? I do not know where Gutchinov is from. I wish to know nothing about him. I do not wish to talk to him."

"You're afraid of him just like Lippy was."

"I am a woman, trying to earn an honest living in this——"

"Why was Lippy afraid of him?"

"I do not know. He ask for the room on the lower verandah. He asked for it to be kept secret. He did not tell me."

"All right. Forget it."

HE WENT to the front terrace where he stretched out in one of the long rattan chairs and smoked one cigarette after another. The night breeze lulled him. It was perfumed by night blossoms, the jungle odors of growth and decay, the seething fermentation that rose from the lagoon. Screen surrounded the terrace, but every minute or two came the descending whine of a mosquito. He'd been watching for Gutchinov, but when two hours passed without his appearing, he climbed to his room.

The candle was burning inside his room with the door locked. He'd left a bit of vine against the base of the door, and it was still there, undisturbed. He unlocked and went inside. There was an odor—a perfume. It brought him to a stop with hand swinging to the Walther's butt. The same perfume he'd noticed in Lippy's room. Civet and jasmine.

The movement toward his gun had been reflex, and he stopped it without drawing. He backed up, closed the door, bolted it, tilted the shutters. He wanted nothing to come on him from behind.

The perfume was still there, but it lacked the startling intensity of the first moment. He glanced around. Nothing seemed to be disturbed. Drapes prevent-

ed him seeing inside the bedroom. There was a second door leading from the bedroom to a tiny balcony overlooking the patio, and someone might have found entrance from that direction.

For the moment he felt safe enough. It would be the dagger, not a gun. Nothing crude and noisy as that. He leaned over the table and blew out the candle.

He spun aside at the same instant—listened. His Walther was drawn now. No sound. Nothing. Only the whisper of night wind in palm thatch that overhung the verandah roof, and distantly, the inevitable night-booming of fetish drums.

Even the perfume had vanished.

It was only three long strides to the arch. Instead of lifting the drape or sliding through at one of the outer edges, he swung his hook, chopping its pole support to the floor.

The odor struck him again—more strongly than ever. It was brought to life, made intense by the warmth of the human body.

He spoke, "All right, come on out."

He expected something—nothing. He didn't know what. Least of all did he expect a simple obedience of his command. But there was a responding movement, a form sliding in the darkness, a slight rustle of dry mattings as it came to him.

He swung his hook—a parrying motion. He'd half expected the lash of a dagger. The hook had caught someone by the arm——

A woman's whisper, "*Senhor!*"

"Put up the dagger."

"But I have no dagger," she answered with pleading softness.

He slid the Walther away, reached, found her wrist. The hand was empty. She laid her other hand on his arm, and it was empty, too. He backed away, leaving her.

"*Senhor!*" she whispered again.

Something strange in her voice. Something warm and insistent.

"Stand where you are," he growled.

One handed, it took him longer than most men to get a match from his chemistry can and light it. He stood with the match blazing in his fingers, looking at her.

SHE was young. Supple, tawny, and beautiful. Dark, but with a flash of color in her eyes. She came closer and he could see that her eyes were a strange, midnight blue. It was something one occasionally saw in the blending of races, of Arab or Berber with English. She was dressed in the Arab fashion in a long, green *djellaba*, but the hood was back displaying her face.

She carried no weapon—at least no weapon he could see.

He relighted the candle, replaced the chimney.

"What do you want?"

She did not answer. She came forward, slowly. The soft *babooshi* on her feet made scarcely a sound. Her hands were reaching, her eyes very large with an unnatural fixation. Something was wrong. She came close enough so he could feel the warm caress of her breath, but there was no alcohol on it. He wished she would say something.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"To see you. I have waited for you a long time?"

"Why?"

"Because I like you, *Senhor*. I have dreamed of meeting you all my life. You are ver' handsome, *Senhor*."

O'Neil had been called a certain variety of names during his adult years, but never anything like this. He'd have laughed—only he was not in a laughing mood.

Her being there was all wrong. The expression in her eyes was unnatural, staring, the pupils too large.

He stood by the corner of the table, his arms down, still wary for a sharp dart of her hand inside the *djellaba*. Instead, with a languid movement, she placed her hands on his shoulders. They had a soft, womanly insistence, drawing her close against him.

"You do not want me here?" she asked. "Why don't you like me?"

"Who told you to come?"

She didn't answer the question. She did not seem to have the least understanding of his words. He was aware of the insistence of her body. He was only human . . .

"Why don't you come with me?" she whispered. Her hand was beneath his arm, drawing him toward the door. Please, *Senhor*——"

He jerked her around, "Who sent you here?"

Her eyes stared at him blankly. She was something that could have materialized from an opiate dream.

"Who sent you here?" he barked.

He shook her back and forth—shook her until her dark, wavy hair came loose and strung across her face. She still did not answer. He slapped her like a hypnotist might slap a subject.

"Wake up! Do you understand me? Wake up!"

A new expression was appearing in her eyes. Like the dawning of awareness. She stepped back. The *djellaba* had fallen open, exposing the soft swell of her breasts. She noticed, and pulled the robe tightly across her throat.

"Who sent you here?" he repeated.

She inhaled with something resembling terror. For the first time her eyes seemed really to see him. Her gaze darted around, at the room which was suddenly strange to her.

She started to back away.

"Who send you?" He took one step, following her. "Was it Gutchinov?"

"No!" Her voice was almost a sob. She turned to run, but it was clear she did not have the slightest idea of the way out. O'Neil said something, trying to calm her, but with an agile movement she moved around the table, backed to the door.

"Wait a minute. I won't harm you."

"Keep away—you devil arm."

She reached the door, fumbled a second with the bolt, threw it. He could have stopped her, but he let her go. She was running along the verandah. He followed, down the stairs, along a path that wound through the garden.

Night covered her. He walked for a while, aimlessly, along the paths that zigzagged the high orchilla. It would have been hard to find her even in daylight. He crossed the lower verandah, and there, at the foot of the stairs, was Gutchinov, waiting for him.

III

GUTCHINOV WAS FORTY OR forty-five. It's often hard to guess a man's age when he was huge as Gutchinov. Once, no doubt, he had been a fine physical specimen, and he was still gorilla strong despite the hundred-odd pounds of fat that filled his pantlegs, his coat, the belly of his shirt. His hair was roached short after the African fashion, accentuating the peculiar shape of his head which sloped from his shoulders without compromising a neck.

He'd come down the stairs, by the looks of things, and now he was standing on the bottom step, his legs spread, massive hands placed on his hips. His face wore an expression of set truculence.

"Stop!" He muttered the word. His voice had a thick sound, originating deep inside his throat. "Stop, you hear me?"

He spoke English with a heavy accent, as though his tongue were too large to work easily inside his mouth.

O'Neil seemed tempted to swing his hook and drag him down from the stairs, but he stopped and barked,

"Well? What do you want?"

"What I want, *Monsier*? You ask of me? *You*? After you lure my daughter, blood of my blood, from her bedroom at midnight, and chase her across garden path? Should some men not kill you for that? Should I not——"

"*Your* daughter?" O'Neil's expression was only half credulous. He wondered if the man really expected him to believe it. It would be like a hippo fathering a gazelle. He looked in the man's pale eyes. He wasn't joking. He expected to be believed.

O'Neil said, "All right, Gutchinov, what do you have on your mind?"

"So. You know my name." He stepped down from the stair. His eyes were almost lashless, and they gave his eyes a strange, fatty appearance. "How would you know my name?"

O'Neil ignored the question. "What the hell! Why would anyone want to put a knife through poor little Lippy, and after that stake out a girl in my room?"

Gutchinov listened, and something like

a smile found its way across the folds of his vast face. It wasn't particularly pleasant. Like the man himself, it had an unhealthy, oily quality.

"So. You call me 'murderer.' Perhaps seller of girl's virtue. Sometime I kill you for saying these things. Maybe I should now tear you apart with these two hands." He reached with his right hand and slowly closed the fingers as though he were holding a skull, crushing it.

O'Neil growled, "Get your filthy fingers out of my face."

"Ha! So now you give me orders——"

O'Neil brought the hook around in a sharp arc, catching the man's arm just above the wrist bone. It cut through skin and made Gutchinov bend double with pain.

He roared and staggered back. He'd forgotten about the stairs. The bottom step caught his heel. He tripped, fell, caught himself on backflung hands. He rested like that for a few seconds, looking up at O'Neil.

O'Neil made no attempt to follow it up. He said, "All right, Gutchinov, what was it you wanted?"

Gutchinov slowly raised himself to his feet. The mechanism of his body seemed to be ponderous, like something that had to gather momentum. He rubbed his wrist, smearing blood that was oozing. Sweat had appeared on his broad cheeks, glistened in the distant rays of the terrace light. He was controlling his anger.

"Ha-so? We will go inside, perhaps. A brandy with Gutchinov? You see, I am not a bad fellow. Man that repay evil with good."

He walked past at a massive shuffle, his legs bowed, but with shoulders erect after the manner of many large men. He opened the door and let O'Neil precede him across the terrace. O'Neil walked to the last table. Light was dim there, and it automatically placed Gutchinov in the other chair, a shield against ambush.

THE rattan chair creaked and sagged beneath Gutchinov's weight. He slapped the table and called for brandies, waited until the houseboy brought them, lifted his glass.

"Your health!" He paused. "You are not drinking, *Monsieur*?"

O'Neil batted his glass away. "I drink with my friends."

The words had no discernible effect on Gutchinov. He had a rhino hide that made him impervious to insult. He chuckled, lifted his glass, downed the liquor.

"So. You call me murderer. What else? Lecher? That English word? I could kill you easily, *Monsieur*. Do you think maybe I come here alone?"

"No. You wouldn't have the guts. I know your Senegalese is waiting out there in the shadow."

"You *knew*?"

"Your kind never play a lone hand."

"I am a businessman, not an adventurer."

O'Neil waited. He seemed to be at ease, indolent, eyes narrowed a little, that was all.

"You were there, talking to him to-night," Gutchinov said, "To *Monsieur* Leach. The man you call 'Lippy.' He gave you something. It would be of no use to you. It would only bring you trouble. Who knows, perhaps it would mean your death. You see?—I am here to do you a favor. For these insults you hurl in Gutchinov's face, he would do you a favor."

"How much of a favor?"

"Money. Good, French coin."

"How much of it?"

"I am prepared to be generous. Say—fifty thousand francs, Colonial."

At current exchange that would mean slightly more than five hundred, American. It wasn't the stake O'Neil had been looking for these last fifteen years, but it wasn't exactly chicken-scratch, either. However, he suspected the dagger in his pocket was worth a lot more.

He asked, "Do I look like a damn fool?"

"Any man who would turn down money in favor of a knife in his guts is indeed a fool, *Monsieur*."

"I thought you would get around to that before you were through." He watched the big man narrowly and went on talking, spitting words from one side of

his mouth. "I seem to remember you from somewhere. From quite a while ago. Up around Fort Lamy. You were on the lists of *Gendarmie* up there, and it seems to me the boys ended by marching you over to the Nigeria border and bidding the British welcome to you."

"I have never been in Fort Lamy."

The man was lying, of course. He'd been there, only under another name. O'Neil said,

"Then maybe I shouldn't have given such information when the gendarme was questioning me about Lippy. But if you were never there, you don't need to give a damn whether he checks up or not. Anyhow, I wanted to tell you about it. Save you a little trouble. You see, Gutchinov, if *two* of us turned up knifed, that *Commissaire* back at Bangui would be forced to do something whether he wants to or not."

Gutchinov's face remained in the old, stolid lines. He spoke, "I have offered you fifty thousand, Colonial."

"For what?"

"For the thing your 'Lippy' gave you."

"Let's see it—the money."

"Do I look like so great a fool? Show me what you have, and then you will see the color of my currency, *Monsieur*."

O'Neil shrugged his shoulders and drew out the two keys. "Only these. The keys to King Solomon's mines—that's what he said before you cut him down."

GUTCHINOV looked tensely at the keys. His pale eyes seemed to brighten, his breath came a trifle. "I cut him down. Not I, *Monsieur*." His small tongue kept darting out and licking his lips. "Tell me, what did he mean by King Solomon's mines?"

"That's what I was going to ask you."

Gutchinov exhaled slowly. His big hands kept opening and closing. He reached for the keys, but O'Neil had anticipated the movement. His hook swung in a short arc, gashing the teak tabletop and Gutchinov jerked back his hand as though a cobra had struck him.

O'Neill said, "Haven't you forgotten something? The money?"

Gutchinov shook his head. "You think I

would pay so much for two keys when perhaps the thing they locked up already is taken? How would I know you have not been to this room——"

"Then the hell with you and your fifty thousand."

Gutchinov let out a chortling laugh, "Maybe I do not need the keys now I know which room was his."

"There's been some others tried to doublecross me. It's never been a very good idea."

Gutchinov got to his feet. One of his hands was thrust deep in his coat pocket. It was bulky, even for Gutchinov's hand, and O'Neil realized it was clutching a small, flat automatic.

"Please don't make me pull the trigger," Gutchinov said. "No matter what you think of me, I take no pleasure in killing. Only do not make it necessary." He jerked the muzzle, signaling O'Neil to get up. "Come along."

"You wouldn't have the guts to pull that trigger *here*."

"Are you prepared to take that long gamble?"

There was something in Gutchinov's eyes—an elemental bleakness. O'Neil's gaze shifted around. Only the two of them inside the screened terrace. And shadows. He stood.

"All right. I don't want to take the long one. It's always been my ambition to go back to Chicago someday."

"You are sensible," Gutchinov whispered.

O'NEIL walked through the insect door with Gutchinov following. A black man came from the shadows. He was a half an inch taller than Gutchinov, and almost as heavy. He wore white trousers, no shirt though part of his chest was covered by a fancy Turkish vest. A white topi was on his head. By the purple and gray tattoo marks on his forehead and cheeks, O'Neil knew he had once been a village wrestler.

"Le Garrotte!" said O'Neil.

He could tell by the grin on the Senegalese's face how it flattered him to be recognized.

"Keep going!" muttered Gutchinov.

"And make no move toward that pistol you're carrying."

O'Neil climbed to the dark verandah. He saw that Gutchinov had now drawn the gun. It made a silver glimmer in the darkness. A thirty-two or some such small calibre.

He walked to Lippy's room, took out the key, unlocked it. He stepped inside. There was a spring on the insect door. He let it go, and it swung back with unexpected force, catching Gutchinov in the face. For a second the little automatic was at an off-angle. O'Neil dived face forward, hand going to his belt. He rolled over, drawing the Walther. He tried to bring the barrel up, to work the safety and trigger.

He sensed the dark shape hurtling toward him from the door. Le Garrotte. The man struck his arm, driving the gun to one side. He tried to turn over. His elbow struck a table leg, and the gun jarred free, bounded across the palm-matted floor.

O'Neil started to get up. Le Garrotte was over him—a machete point stung the flesh of his throat.

O'Neil stopped, resting on elbows. It would take only the merest flick of the Senegalese's hand to puncture his jugular vein.

Gutchinov chortled and took time to wipe moisture from the corners of his eyes. "So now you fight with Gutchinov?" He snapped his fingers beneath O'Neil's nose. "Come. I would have it without delay. The dagger."

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

"You perhaps think I have time for joking? No, *Monsieur*. I have done my joking. I have taken my insults. I will tell you this—I do not like you. I would appreciate that machete stuck through your throat. So don't tempt me. I would have it—the broken dagger."

"Damn you, I brought you here——"

Gutchinov responded by driving the sole of his shoe to O'Neil's face. The force of it snapped his head back, stunning him for an instant. He was on his side with the machete no longer touching his throat. The broken dagger was still in his pocket.

He drew it and rolled, pretending to be groggy from the blow, then tried to slide it beneath an edge of the floor matting.

A match flamed in Gutchinov's fingers.

It gave the big man a glimpse of what O'Neil was about. He shouldered the Senegalese out of his way, bounded forward.

O'Neil came to one knee and by that time the man was looming over him.

The blow was like an explosion inside O'Neil's skull. He was still conscious, trying to put his feet on a floor that spun like the vortex of a whirlpool.

He swung his hook, and it caught in Gutchinov's shirt, but the big man cursed and spun, ripping away. O'Neil was on hands and knees with Gutchinov over him, grunting, swinging the automatic to his head, grunting from the effort and swinging it again, again . . .

CONSCIOUSNESS did not return all at once. It was a gradual, aching process, but finally, after what seemed to be many hours, his eyes came back to focus and he knew that he was lying on his back in a bed, mosquito netting pulled aside, and candlelight painning his eyes.

Someone moved beside him, and he heard Bobolongonga ask if there was anything he wanted.

Moving brought pain like a knife blade splitting his brain down the middle, but he sat up anyway. A bandage, turban size, had been wound around his head. It felt hot, and his bruised scalp itched under it. He cursed and hurled the thing away.

"Cognac!" he muttered. Bobolongonga was merely staring at him so he bellowed, "Cognac! And none of that damned Moroccan. Martell, do you hear me? Martell with the seal on."

"Thou may well speak the word 'Martell', O Master, but behold that the bar has long been closed and——"

"Then kick the door down."

"Yes, O *Bwana m'kumbwa*."

O'Neil watched the big black retreat through the door, then he drew out his watch and looked at it. Fungus had evidently gummed its works again, for the hands had stopped at three minutes past

twelve. It was later than that. A good deal later. The fetish drums had stopped, so it had to be close to dawn.

There were a couple of Lippy's cigarettes left in the package. He lighted one, and the mixture of Egyptian and hashish laid a comforting coat of numbness across his throbbing brain.

After eight or ten minutes Bobolongonga returned with a bottle. Angouleme with the French seals still intact. It was a hell of a lot better than O'Neil had expected. Bobolongonga held out the bottle, and O'Neil decapitated it with a practiced swing of his hook. A couple of swigs from the bottle made him feel better.

He sat down, felt in the side coat pocket where the broken dagger had been. Gone, of course. He remembered trying to ditch it in Lippy's room. Risking his neck for the thing seemed ridiculous. A broken dagger, a key to Solomon's mine. He remembered the girl—how she'd been waiting for him, here, in the darkness of this room. That was most ridiculous of all. He closed his eyes and for a few seconds the impression of her was with him once more—her soft, opiate nearness. It was enough to make a man wonder if quinine was getting him after all.

He stood up and examined the door that led from his bedroom to a small balcony overlooking the central patio. The bamboo shutters had been cut enough for a hand to reach through, and the bolt had been opened. That's how she got in then.

"Where did you find me?" he asked Bobolongonga.

"I was returning from that heathen fetish dance, O Master, and behold!—I heareth the sounds of battle. It was one hell of a brawl, as the wise men of thy country sayeth. And so I found thee, Master, lying on thy face and so perhaps would thou have died had not I bandaged that head." Bobolongonga lifted one forefinger high, almost touching the ceiling. "Behold, O Master!—one of these days they will carry thee out, belly up and feet first, and then who will repay me my back wages so——"

"The hell with you." O'Neil light'd the last cigarette and poured more of the excellent Angouleme down his throat.

"Where is he? That fat swine—Gutchinov?"

"How would I know?"

"Go to his room and see if he's there. Number thirty-six."

"You would send me there alone? To that murderer's——"

"If he'd wanted another corpse on his hands tonight, I'd be it."

BOBOLONGONGA came back reporting Gutchinov's room to be unlocked and empty. O'Neil walked around to have a look for himself. There were signs he'd left in a hurry. He entered the room next door. It was strong of civet and jasmine. The girl had gone with him. O'Neil shouldn't have given a damn about that, but it gave him a strange pain in the guts. She wasn't his daughter, and she wasn't the kind who should be traveling with him.

He walked crass-town, through the jungle and cassava patch to the native village, awakened Ikoro the chieftain. He was old, and ill tempered from a hang-over after a night of dancing and palm wine. It took at least one fourth of the Anquoleme to get him to the point of remembering Gutchinov. Yes, he had seen big *bondele*. Earlier that night the big *bondele* had hired four canoe boys to paddle him and young *mama* upriver to N'goi where his great safari was encamped.

"He has a safari?" O'Neil asked.

Ikoro nodded and showed wonderment at its size by puffing his cheeks and batting the air out with the fingers of both hands. It was indeed a great safari, of no less than thirty porters, all of them tall, flat-headed natives from Uganda speaking the Kiswahili tongue which is like pig grunting.

O'Neil walked back to the hotel. He sat in a chair outside his room, slapping at mosquitoes and watching bits of red-purple dawn come through ragged openings in the vine-covered verandah. In three days, or perhaps four, the *Ibis* would return, and there would still be time for him to reach Bangui and join that ivory hunt to Fort Crampel. In six months he'd be back with a small stake. Three

thousand, American—with luck. For a long time he'd wandered the tropics from Bangkok to Boma, living like no white human should ever live, enduring heat and insects, quinine and poor liquor, looking for a stake. A big stake—one big enough to put him back in the States, top of the heap, with sparkling wine in an ice bucket for all the boys back in the old neighborhood.

The last of Lippy's cigarettes was gone, and he sat with a vile Inyorka dangling from his lips, with smoke drifting past his ugly face like the smoke of incense before a copper idol. His head was aching again. It itched and burned where Gutchinov had slugged him with the pistol.

He got to his feet and hurled the cigarette at the floor mattings, cursing Gutchinov in half the dialects between Cairo and the Cape. Bobolongonga, crosslegged on the floor, heard him out with growing admiration, and near the close of the diatribe commenced weaving back and forth on his knees, eyes rolled back into his skull, chanting "Ay-ay-ay" in an awed voice.

"Ay-ay, Master. Indeed, thou wilt follow that Christian swine, and split his skull with thy terrible hook. Also wilt thou open the treasurehouse of Solomon and repay me my back wages that I may return a man of wealth to my two wives in Katanga."

"Sure. Maybe that, too. Who knows?"

IV

O'NEIL SLEPT, and woke up with sun shining in hot slats through the open jalousies.

He stood up, cursed Bobolongonga for not keeping them closed, and went through his regular morning routine of drenching himself with water from the pitcher and letting the heat dry him before he dressed. Downstairs he had the inevitable breakfast of all tropical hotels—tiny fried eggs, hardbread, pinkish papaya juice. He ate slowly, waiting for Madame Charbonnaire from whom he managed to borrow ten thousand francs. She gave him a pistol, too—an old French star. Ten thousand

was sufficient to purchase provisions for a bob-tailed safari at Mynheer Vanderburg's across the palm-shaded street. It was hot enough for siesta by then, so he slept, and did not get started for N'goi until late in the afternoon.

N'goi was not far, twenty kilometers, perhaps, and his four paddle boys got him there well before midnight.

The village boasted a couple-hundred huts, pointed structures of palm and bamboo on both sides of an ancient footpath which wound down to the Ubangi at a spot where it could be forded during the dry season. One white man lived there, by name Bernard Jack, a buyer for the palm nut combine.

Jack was almost pitifully happy to see a white man. He pulled a cork on a bottle of "company whisky," and told O'Neil what he knew about Gutchinov and his safari, which was not a great deal. For two weeks, more or less, the safari had been camped at the *passerelle* north of the village. Jack owned neither watch nor calendar, and as one day in that country was exactly like every other, it could have been as much as a week longer. He'd gone up there, he reported, taking whisky with him as a matter of courtesy, but no one greeted him except the *capito* boy, that swine Gutchinov refusing to leave his hammock where he was snoring out morning siesta.

Jack loaded fresh batteries in an electric torch, led O'Neil along the path which tunnelled through jungle, and across a creek by means of a pontoon bridge floating on empty oil drums, but the safari had broken camp apparently about twelve hours before.

O'Neil slept on the verandah of Jack's hut-on-tilts, and in the morning he hired four lanky boys from the N'goi village and headed north, taking with him the meagre supplies Madame Charbonnaire's money had purchased as well as a quantity of whisky and a Lebel rifle presented by Bernard Jack with the compliments of those Brazzaville *entrepreneurs* of *le compagnie*, bless their fat-bellied souls.

He paused at the edge of the village yam patches and turned to lift his arm in salute to Jack who stood watching them

go, forlorn and discouraged in his disreputable whites. A quarter-minute and the jungle cut him off from sight.

In this portion of the continent it was not usual for jungle to extend more than fifteen to twenty kilometers on each side of the river, and about midmorning of the second day the bowering trees fell away and the foot path cut through bottoms where grass grew high as a tall man could reach. It seemed hotter than ever there, a stifling, rainy season heat. A man perspired and his shirt became a soggy, warm rag, but there was no evaporation to do him good. Occasionally the footpath climbed to low knolls where acacias and wild coffees grew, and then it would descend and lead across oozy ground where every footstep would raise swarms of insects to blind a man and sting his face.

It was not the main trail; not the one taken by Gutchinov. O'Neil had been suspicious of ambush. He reached the main trail on the third evening out from N'koi, and the sign of Gutchinov's safari was there, plain enough to see. They'd butchered an okapi antelope and its skin, head and lower legs were still being picked over by vultures. No hyenas around, though the country abounded in them, so it hadn't been there long.

That evening, with heat shimmer and mirage gone from the air, he was able to see the safari winding snakelike up a distant hillside through waist-deep grass.

Jungle closed in next day as they crossed a southward-flowing tributary of the Ubangi, and after that it was swampy soudan with the footpath following a low shoulder of ground with ooze and brilliant green hippo grass on both sides.

HEAT was bringing on O'Neil's fever again, so he swung a hammock between wild coffees and lay on his back, looking at the patches of colorless sky that showed through the glossy, dark leaves. He treated himself in the time-tested manner of the white man with quinine and whisky, and just a few sulfa pills thrown in. He felt better next morning and went on across a country flat and featureless. It was unending, lacking even a horizon, for at a kilometer's distance

everything grew shaky and flamelike, dancing in the mirage.

The path descended through ankle-deep slough, and worse. Roving herds of elephants had crossed, making false trails that angled off at baffling directions.

O'Neil noticed that the big safari had long ago taken the wrong direction and was wandering farther and farther toward the east.

That night he made camp beneath a monkey-bread tree, took off his *veldtschoen*, and spread blue ointment over feet and legs to defeat the chiggers, blood-suckers and assorted infusoria that liked to hunt out the crevices in a man's skin. Then, leaning back with an Inyorka cigarette scissored in his lips, he actually grinned.

"He's lost. The great Gutchinov. And I hope he ends up twelve feet deep in stinking muck."

"But how about that maiden, O Master," Bobolongonga asked.

"Why, I intend to be around close enough to pull *her* out."

By moonlight, when heat wave was gone from the air, O'Neil made out a line of hills to the north-east. The Anrak hills. A compass gave him his approximate position, and he estimated that he could, if he wanted, reach hard footing by the next nightfall; but on the following day Gutchinov seemed more hopelessly lost than ever.

That evening, O'Neil camped so close to the safari he could smell the stench of damp grass burning in the cookfires.

He waited until darkness settled and night storm came up, blacking out the sky, then he crept forward, parting the grass ahead of him. Rain commenced falling, bucketing down, drenching him. It had extinguished the cookfires, but he could hear the voices of natives jabbering in one of the Uganda dialects. There were some thorn trees, the natives crouched beneath them. In a few minutes the rain stopped and he could make out the angular shapes of two wall tents.

He circled, keeping to bush shadow, approaching the tents from behind. One of them would belong to the girl. He wanted to listen, to learn what she really

was to Gutchinov, to find out the true purpose of this strange safari.

The moon was silvering the edges of breaking clouds. He moved across the last few meters where grass had been tramped down, and crouched against the nearest tent.

There were tiny sounds of someone moving around inside. Nights on the Soudan were chill, and, drenched as he was, the slight breeze following rain almost caused his teeth to chatter. He wished he had a smoke, even fumbled, found tobacco and paper, but rain had turned it to a pulpy, sodden mass.

He put it away, crouched again. The natives were no longer jabbering. A strange, taut silence seemed to hang over the camp.

ALARM struck him suddenly. He stood up, hand dropping to the butt of the old Star pistol Madame Charbonnaire had spotted him back in Kangala.

"No, my friend," Gutchinov's voice. It came from beyond the other tent. "No. Not the gun."

"All right." There was nothing O'Neil could do but lift his hands.

Gutchinov's huge shadow rose and came toward him. A heavy, splay footed walk. Evidently he'd been there all the time, waiting, wondering what O'Neil was about. Moonlight raised a cold gleam from the gun in his right hand. It wasn't the tiny pistol of that night in Kangala, but a big, forward-heavy Mauser. He wasn't pointing it.

"You come to visit me. Good. I will make you welcome."

O'Neil answered in a raw-edged voice, "I came to snoop your camp and find out what I could. What in hell are you doing about it? Pulling the trigger?"

"Ha! So blunt! I could perhaps sometime learn to likt you, O'Neil. We could be friends. We could do much together, you and I. And so I will not shoot you, or even take pistol. No. Had I wanted to kill you, would I not have done it at Kangala? Or this siesta when you came so close to the sights of my rifle? You were not following me unobserved."

"What need do you have of me?"

"Ha! Good! You have the sharp mind. Like *assagai* point. Always to other you impute the selfish reason. So. Good. It is true I need you. As you know, we are lost. Lost in this fermenting quagmire of grass, muck and more grass. Lost with a liar guide, a black boy who——"

"So you want me to lead you out of here?"

"To the main trail—and beyond."

"And what do I get out of it?"

"Your life. A little thing?" He chuckled, shaking his fat and muscle. "So. More, too. I am a realistic man. To the Frenchman you offer women, to the American, money. You would maybe like to talk about it?"

"Over a cigarette?"

"So. Over cigarette."

O'Neil sat crosslegged inside Gutchinov's little tent and inhaled the good, Turkish tobacco. "Where were you headed?" he asked.

"To Almahar."

O'NEIL lowered his cigarette. It took a moment for the name to come down through his memory. The Vale of Almahar. First discovered by the *Expedition Photographique du Soudan* in 1912, and later discovered all over again by the Tizzo Expedition of Milan University in 1929.

O'Neil said, "And why in the hell would you be interested in the Vale of Almahar?"

Gutchinov sat on his heels, bent forward with the backs of his hands touching the fabric floor. A broad, oily smile found its way across the folds of his face.

"I will explain. An American word. The greatest of all American words. *Profit*. You understand it? Ha! So. Profit takes me there, and your tail is up like a hyena smelling carrion."

The reports of neither the Tizzo Expedition nor the *Photographique* suggested any possibility of riches at Almahar. The members of those parties when managed to escape had reported Almahar to be a small area of abundance completely cut off from all but the most accidental communication by impassable thorn jungle and

swamp. Its chief interest was ethnological because there existed in Almahar a small group of people, apparently Egyptian, who had maintained their racial purity over some thousands of years.

"Money?" O'Neil grunted. "From what?"

"Gold, gems. You have read the Tizzo reports, *Monsieur*?"

"Yes."

Gutchinov had expected a different answer. He smiled. "So. You have read it. Then I will not try falsely to use it for substantiation of my strange story. One of the strangest to ever come from the heart of this strange continent, "*Monsieur*. You saw the girl? Lesamba? So we call her. A lovely, half-wild creature. You noticed her eyes? Blue—so dark. Like sky tonight. Rare as blue rose, *Monsieur*——"

"Throw that out in fourteen lines and you'll have a sonnet."

"Ah, so. But it is true. Did you not wonder where she came from? She is not of the world we know. Kidnapped! Kidnapped by that Tizzo Expedition. By *Signor* Balzini, the cartographer. He did not so state in his reports, of course. Nor did he tell of the broken dagger she carried. It is easy to understand. He worked for the expedition, and everything it brought out was to be turned over to the Milano University. But Balzini would get something for himself. As you and I So. He took the child, a princess of Almahar, hoping she, as representative of an ancient Egyptian race, could be sold to another institution. Like a sheep would be sold. What a fool was that Balzini. No one would believe him. A French-Arab dancing girl—so said the ignorant British. What double fools were they. But she was of Almahar—and the broken dagger was proof."

"Not for ransom. Reward. A reward that will make both of us men of wealth——"

"Or get our throats cut."

"Ha! And so spoil them for holding sparkling wine? I would not let you be so foolish?"

"What does Lesamba think of going back?"

"So glad. Again home, after so many years of longing?"

"How old is she?"

"Why? What difference?"

"Say she's twenty. Tizzo went belly-up in '29. She was about two years old."

"She is at least twenty-five."

O'Neil peered into Gutchinov's eyes. There was nothing he could tell from them. They were pale, washed of any discernible feeling.

"And so we split. Fifty-fifty?"

"Ha! You say it—fifty-fifty? Preposterous. Mine the expense of this long safari. Mine the expense of finding the girl, of bringing her across miles of steaming jungle, treating her like daughter. Mine, too the idea——"

"But I know how to get there."

"Twenty-five per cent, *Monsieur*."

"Thirty-five."

"Ah. So be it. Thirty-five per cent. It is perhaps fair."

O'Neil grinned with one side of his mouth and grabbed a second cigarette from the big man's shirt pocket. One per cent or fifty per cent—he'd have to be careful about turning his back once the swamp of Lololake were passed and the crags of Almahar thrust themselves through purple mist to guide them. He'd seen it work out before—these pursuits of big treasure. Too often it was one man come back—one man take all.

"So be it," he said.

V

THE SAFARI GOT MOVING next morning with O'Neil and Bobolonga in front, pointing the way. Back of them were the N'koi boys, and four tall Uganda natives carrying the girl in a tepoi; then the others, Uganda porters, the husky, savage-faced *assagai* guards, with Gutchinov and Le Garrotte coming up in the rear.

The morass seemed deeper than ever, then, unexpectedly, the ten-foot grass fell away and they emerged on a plain where a herd of striped okapi grazed at the edge of thornbush.

He led the safari on through low hills, descended again, and camped at the edge

of swamp. This was the great Lololake—not one, but a vast series of swamps, relatively unexplored, from whose depths had come stories of island paradises and the existence of certain reptiles closely resembling the Brontosaurus of a prehistoric age. There, on a little, grassy shoulder of ground, they worked for six days burning out the trunks of silk cotton trees to make dugout canoes.

Many times, during those days, O'Neil saw the girl—Lasamba. She seemed always to be watching him with her strange, soft eyes, but Gutchinov or Le Garrotte was always around, and he had no chance to say a word to her alone.

On the last night of their stay there he went to his hammock as usual, and lay for an hour watching the night storm black out the stars, then he got up, slipped on his shoes without lacing them, thrust the Star pistol in his pants band, and moved around the clearing, keeping behind successive veils of koba vine hanging from tree limbs until he reached the back of her tent. He scratched his fingernails across the fabric to attract her attention. The sound was slight, mixed with the thud-thud of big raindrops that had commenced falling from the black sky.

"Yes!" she whispered. Even so low, her voice had a liquid sound. Deep and soft.

"It's O'Neil," he muttered.

"I know." He wondered *how* she knew.

"You will take me away, *Monsieur*?"

"You *want* to go away?"

"Yes!" She seemed to be on the edge of weeping.

"Tonight?"

"Yes! Tonight!"

She was talking too loudly. He had no way of silencing her inside the tent. She went on, speaking a mixture of English, French and Arabian—such a jargon as one might pick up by living in Dar es Salaam.

SOMEONE was approaching across the dark clearing. No sound, really. The ground was only a sort of turf bridge over swamp, and it vibrated like a drum head to shifting weight. A shadow loomed up through darkness. He could see the dull

gleam of copper earrings. Le Garrotte. O'Neil had known the Senegalese was on watch, but he had counted on rain and the distant mutter of thunder to cover his conversation with the girl.

Le Garrotte slowed and seemed to be fumbling his way. The girl still didn't know. She said something else, raising her voice a little. O'Neil had no intention of running from the man. He stood up, and it was the first Le Garrotte knew exactly where he was.

"Get back to your bed," O'Neil growled at him from the side of his mouth.

"No. You not come here. *Bwana* Gutchinov, he say——"

"Get back to your bed."

The Senegalese seemed to be on the point of obeying. Sometimes it's hard for a black man not to obey a white. Then he checked himself and started forward, his hand going for the long machete at his sash—the same machete he'd held at O'Neil's jugular that night in Kangala.

Le Garrotte was too late. O'Neil had been expecting the knife—waiting for it. He took a half-step forward, swinging his hook horizontally, waist high. The hook sank itself in the flesh of Le Garrotte's wrist. O'Neil swung back, tearing the machete from his hand.

PAIN brought a high scream from Le Garrotte's flat nostrils. He reeled away, head bent back, facial muscles contorted, hand clutching his wrist. O'Neil moved one side. A tent rope caught his heel and almost spilled him.

Le Garrotte's cry had brought Gutchinov diving from his tent. Mauser in his hand. O'Neil had glimpsed him, drew his own pistol, swung around, covered him.

"Don't try it, Gutchinov!"

"Ha! So this is how you repay me."

"I should repay you with a slug of lead in your guts after that beating I took in Kangala."

"Ah. So. Forgiveness you do not have."

He was crouched, the Mauser still in his hand, its muzzle down. In the darkness, O'Neil could see his little, pale eyes shifting around. The camp was aroused, porters coming from all sides, jabbering in the chattering, Uganda dialect. They didn't

worry O'Neil, not the porters, but the four *assagai*-men did. They were of another tribe, heavy shouldered warriors with copper barbs through their nostrils, native to those furnace hills of Southern Ethiopia. Put a Mauser rifle in one of those fellows hands and you've got something. He glimpsed Bobolongonga leaning against a baobab trunk, the Lebel ready, and he felt better.

Gutchinov rolled forward on his feet that were too small for his bulk, and came to a stop with his eyes shifting from the pistol to O'Neil's face. He grinned.

"Why do we quarrel? It is not good. Not with the native listening, that white man quarrel. Besides, foolish. We should have confidence. See me!" With a flourish he thrust the Mauser back in its holster. "See? Now perhaps you do the same. Yes?"

O'Neil put the Star away. He'd partly turned his back on Le Garrotte. The big Senegalese was crouching on one knee, holding his wounded wrist. The machete was a long stride away, blade wet with rain, gleaming coldly. When O'Neil started away, Le Garrotte sprang for it——

"Garrotte!" cried Gutchinov. "No!"

"*Karo-ta!*" he snarled.

"Drop it. The machete. Have I not told you, *Monsieur le Hook-Arm* is now my friend? So." He bowed with a quick movement that jarred the jowls of his face. "You see. I have again spared your life." He waved at the girl's tent. "Come. I have no secrets. I would like you to talk to Lesamba as you wished."

He bent over and tapped at the tent entrance, spoke a few low words. She answered, and Gutchinov lifted the tent flap for O'Neil to enter. It was blank darkness for a moment, then Gutchinov snapped open a match can and lighted a candle.

The girl was undressed for bed, but she had hurriedly pulled a white *djellaba* around her, and she was sitting on a hammock, feet drawn out of sight. Her lips were parted a little, eyes intent, shifting from O'Neil to Gutchinov. The beat of her heart was rapid and visible along the soft flesh of her throat.

Gutchinov unfolded a tiny camp stool

and placed it for O'Neil. He himself squated on his heels. He always looked large, but hunching there in that manner made his thighs look like kegs, and the rest of his body gorilla-thick filling that end of the small tent. He drew out his cigarettes, gave one to O'Neil, took one himself.

"So. You believe I lie. About—what? About girl? So?" He inhaled to the last air-sac of his lungs and fastened the girl with his pale eyes while smoke drifted from his slightly opened mouth.

THERE was something in the way he looked ather, something that did things to O'Neil's skin, making it itch, making him want to lunge forward and swing his hook to the side of the big man's skull. But O'Neil let none of that show on his face. As always, it was reposed, cast in the old, Buddha lines.

Gutchinov kept looking at her, intently. She returned his gaze. O'Neil said something, trying to attract her attention for a moment. She seemed to try, but was unable to tear her eyes from Gutchinov. Her breathing was faster. Her pupils seemed to have enlarged with the passing seconds. Fear was gone from her face. Her lips parted a little, she had the same opiate quality as that night in Kangala.

"So. Behold her, *Monsieur!* Behold this girl who would tease you by telling that she fears me." He waved his thick fingers. "Can you see it on her face? Fear? You cannot. I have been kind to her. Like my own daughter, because I am kind man." He said to her, "You like your Gutchinov, do you not?"

"I care for you like father," she said.

Her tone was the same, too. Just as it had been that night in Kangala. There had been something about Gutchinov's gaze that worked a subtle hypnosis, and now she was merely saying the things his mind had told her to.

O'Neil grinned, twisting the half of his mouth not holding the cigarette. "You know, Gutchinov, you're good. In fact you're damned good. You have a better mind than a man might think."

"What are you suggesting, *Monsieur?*"

"That she'll say anything on *your* mind."

A laugh came from the depths of Gutchinov's throat. "Ha! Ridiculous. Such stories. Do not believe that it is possible for one mind to transmit thoughts to another. It it not——"

"The hell it isn't. Every sailor ever on the beach in L.M. has seen the fetish priests do it. Don't try to fool me. I'm not a crusade. I'm after a stake. I don't cut my cheese thin and smell it. I take these things as they come. Everybody for himself and the devil take what's left over."

"Ha!" Gutchinov laughed more loudly than ever, slapping hands on thighs. "Good. So. You Americans—what humor! Each word like dripping from gall bladder. Good."

O'Neil got up, stood with his head bent forward by the low tent roof. He looked at the girl, and back at Gutchinov,

"What did you do—get her in that shape and send her in to kill poor Lippy?"

The smile was still on Gutchinov's face, but it had gone sour.

O'Neil went on, "Then, when Lippy was cut down and you still didn't have the thing you were after, you turned her loose on me."

"Who is it now cuts cheese thin?"

"I got a strong stomach." O'Neil bent over to leave the tent. "But don't let anything happen to her, Gutchinov!"

VI

THEY PUSHED OFF AT GRAY, drizzly dawn following winding channels through swamp grass and bulbus-trunked trees. Swamp jungle gave the appearance of solidity, but there was none. All around them stretched a bottomless mixture of water, muck and growing things. The sun came out, but only stray beams were visible, sending long shafts through the ceiling of leaves. Monkeys sometimes swung on parasitic vines, clinging by tail and arm, looking down with curious, old men's faces, and there were occasional flights of awkward, gaudy parrots, but for the most part there was only the dripping jungle, the brackish weed-filled water, the stench of fermentation evolving carbon dioxide that often closed

so tightly a man sat in a half-dream for lack of oxygen.

Darkness, and they slept in the canoes as best they could and then went on. Here and there mudbars cut the channel, some of them strewn with crocodiles lifeless as driftlogs, their great jaws open exposing the double saws of their mouths for birds to pick. The second night was spent on a tiny island scarcely large enough for the two tents. About noon next day there was a rift in the jungle overhead, and in the distance could be seen a craggy skyline rising through purple mists.

Gutchinov's guide, a skinny old *Bamya* from beyond the Bhar Jebel, caught sight of it and leaped to his feet, waving his arms wildly, copper bracelets clanking, threatening to capsize O'Neil's lead canoe as he hopped from side to side,

"Almahar! Almahar!"

Gutchinov's canoe was close behind. He heard the guide, and his face went deep lined and dark. He said something to his paddle boys and the canoe hissed close through water weeds. There was a bamboo pike-pole at his feet. He picked it up and swung it, smacking its heavy muddy end to the side of the *Bamya* guide's head.

The guide was stunned, would have fallen overboard had not one of the paddle boys caught him. Gutchinov stood with feet spread, breathing deeply trying to hold his fury, his pale eyes hunting O'Neil.

"Now why in hell would you do that?" O'Neil asked.

"Ha! The swine. A guide, he tells me. Now saying where is Almahar. Trying perhaps to say he knows way better than old-time jungle traveler Armless O'Neil."

The words were intended to be reassuring, but O'Neil knew what he had known from the first—that Gutchinov would try to bush him the instant he became unnecessary as a guide. And those crags had done it.

Realization of what must have shown in O'Neil's eyes. Gutchinov's face became snarling and intense. He dropped to one knee to steady himself against the canoe's rocking. His Mauser was in a latched-down holster. His hand was back there, fumbling.

O'Neil's gun was handier. He jerked it

free. Le Garrotte screamed something in Senegalese. An *assagai* spear was lying in the canoe bottom. He snatched it up, flung it.

O'Neil was scarcely the length of its shaft away. He had time to come up with his hook, whip it to one side. Its needle could feel the burn of its shaft against his sharp point ripped through his shirt. He naked skin. The *assagai* was gone, rattling through spear grass that grew thickly beyond the channel.

It was enough to throw O'Neil off balance. His gun was out, but he had no chance to aim. Gutchinov couldn't know that. He'd flung himself face forward in two inches of bilge at the bottom of the canoe.

He bellowed—words in the *Kiswihili* tongue. One of the nose-pierced guards was on his feet, *assagai* lifted high above his head, ready to drive it through O'Neil's side.

A gun rocked the air. Bobolongonga's Lebel rifle. The soft-nosed slug smashed life out of the warrior, drove him overboard.

A second warrior had an *assagai* lifted O'Neil angled the Star and pulled its trigger. There was no punch in it as there had been in Bobolongonga's rifle, but the shock of it drove the native off balance and made the *assagai* fly wild.

O'Neil had momentarily lost sight of Gutchinov. Then he glimpsed the big man crouched with the heavy pikepole in his hands.

Gutchinov lunged. O'Neil tried to parry with his hook. The pole was watersoaked, its end heavy with muck and weeds, and the man behind it had a massive strength.

THE POLE smacked O'Neil's chest. It caved the breath out of him. He struck water, came to with muck and weeds tangling him.

He tried to keep afloat, but weed was on every side, ensnaring him. The surface finally. He managed to gasp air.

A gun exploded. The sound seemed to split his eardrums so close was his face to the surface. Bullet near, spraying water.

He glimpsed Gutchinov. The vision remained, stamped on the retina of his brain,

as the big man had been at that moment. He was in the canoe, crouched on one knee, face twisted in lines of prehistoric savagery, looking down the round, tapered barrel of the Mauser.

O'Neil struck out underwater, trying to follow the weedless channel. His clothes were a handicap, too. He kept going, swimming until he was dizzy for the want of air.

Something beneath his hands. A mudbar. He tried to come to the surface. Farther than he thought. Heavy ooze filled his clothes, weighing him down. It seemed to drag him ever deeper.

He sensed something slick and hard. A tree root. It slipped from his fingers. He swung his hook, drove the point deep, dragged himself to the air. He hung there amid muck and weed beneath a curtain of vines, vomiting stagnant water.

Things were still spinning but he knew enough not to remain exposed while that Mauser waited for him. He worked the hook free, swung it again, catching a vine tangle, bellying on.

He was lying across roots and mudbar with vines hiding him. Looking back through a hole among the leaves he could catch glimpses of a canoe, bottom up, with natives clinging to it.

Gutchnov came in sight a moment later, standing, foot on the prow, Mauser ready. Other canoes were racing up. The girl was in one of them, staring at the scene with fixed terror.

Gutchnov spent another five minutes directing the canoes as they probed through spear grass and weed, then he seemed satisfied, and thrust back the Mauser. He signaled, and the canoes slid out of sight.

THEIR waves became only gentle ripples in the weeds, and died altogether. From far above the sun sent white-hot rays through the dustless atmosphere. O'Neil's sun helmet was floating a dozen meters away. He broke bits of rotted wood and tossed them, making waves that coaxed the helmet close enough to be reached with a broken bit of spear grass. He hadn't seen Bobolongonga, hadn't called for fear Gutchnov's departure had only been a decoy.

He spoke quietly, "Bobo!"

The answer came instantly, from close above in the screen of vine. "I am here, O Master."

He turned and saw the big black man, naked except for a brindle loin cloth and a twisted bit of sash holding his machete. Bobolongonga swung down, holding vine, balancing himself with long toes on exposed roots.

"Behold me now, O *Bwana m'kumbwa*! Behold thy servant whom thou owest eleven months in back wages. Behold him without even a pair of pants to cover his nakedness. And how much hope hath he now of ever bringing joy unto his two wives in Katanga?"

Using Bobolongonga's machete, O'Neil hacked monkey bamboo that the black man made into a bundle-raft which they poled all night, reaching solid ground when dawn was breaking through rain cloud.

The canoes were there, upended, bottoms glistening from rain. Some steaming remnants of a fire still clung to the dry heartwood of a log, but the safari had long been gone.

There was no point in stopping. No food nor dry shelter. O'Neil wanted to get somewhere, anywhere, before his fever came back. Quinine, atebrine and sulfa were all in the uniform can, probably at the bottom of the swamp after the canoe capsized.

The footpath led through solid, dripping jungle. Steamy heat hung over everything, becoming hotter as morning advanced through the shadow as deep as ever. Here and there the tops of high okume trees fell back giving a view of the country and he could see highland rising in blue-green billows of jungle.

A drum jarred the silence. Close to the footpath. Not a tom-tom—it was a two-toned message drum.

"*Bonde-mok, Bonde-mok...*" chanted Bobolongonga.

"Is that what it says?"

"Aye, *Bwana*. It says the white man comes."

Even that was better than nothing. The Vale of Almahar was not many kilometers distant. Other drums pounded intermittently. And then the thing O'Neil had ex-

pected—movement in the trail ahead. The appearance of a tall native with *assagai* threatening. There were other natives. Some of them had been crouched scarcely an arm's reach away, unnoticed when O'Neil passed.

O'Neil stopped, lifted his fingers in the sign of friendship.

"*Baminga!*" he said calling himself a brother. "*Bonde-baminga.*"

THEY were Bantu type natives as he had expected from the tongue of their talking drums. Most of them wore welts on foreheads, stomach and arms, but he did not recognize the tribe.

The tall *capito* trod forward, warily, *assagai* aimed waist-high and stopped when its needle-sharp point touched O'Neil's stomach.

O'Neil pretended not to notice. "*Ny-ama!*" he said, asking for food.

The *capito* looked at him with a flat expression, jerked his head in a signal to his men, and they came forward with a sort of elementary military training, pointing their *assagais* in a phalanx.

"All right," grinned O'Neil. "So we play that way."

The footpath gained altitude, commenced making switchbacks through solid mounds of thorn bush. It was brutal afternoon heat when the *capito* called a halt.

The *capito* crouched on his long heel bones, dug a handful of coarse, dry meal from the pouch at his waist, let it flow in O'Neil's palm. It was like sawdust in his dry mouth, but it was food and it sent new strength flowing through his muscles.

He now had time to look more closely at the natives. They were taller and better formed than most. Skins not dense black—more like oiled and polished ebony. They wore wristlets and leg bands he first took to be copper. He realized they were not copper at all, but beaten gold. His eyes went quickly to the *assagai* heads. Some sort of copper alloy, worked with designs, the half-human figures of a man with hawk's heads, startlingly similar to hawk-headed Horus, the sky god of ancient Egypt.

They sat only through the two hottest

hours of afternoon, then went on, climbing wild rock bramble, atop a ridge and down a series of switchbacks through thorn and then massive okumè and African teak. The jungle became less dense, and then broke away altogether, giving a view of meadows irregularly patterned with millet, yam and cotton fields.

A village of grass huts and granaries looked like a field of big and little beehives, and, circling that, O'Neil saw the amazing city of stone that had been described by survivors of the Tizzo Expedition, and the *Photographique* many years before.

It was vast and apparently planless—buildings of stone backed by a line of perpendicular limestone cliffs, all white as chalk reflecting the sun rays of late afternoon. None of the architectural influence of Greece or Rome here. Buildings were pyramidal or simple columns with flat roof-caps of stone. He crossed a low knoll and saw that his first view had taken in only the small half of the city. Here were more buildings, some scarcely larger than native huts, others vast colonnades between rows of stone gods.

It had been a good many years since he'd looked over the Tizzo reports, but now additional details kept coming back to him. A surviving Dr. Sanzio had speculated on the age of the city, suggesting that it dated at least to the time of Assur-bani-pal who conducted the last great campaign against the Pharaohs of Nubia in 661 B.C., and O'Neil had considered it fantastic, but it seemed considerably less so now.

Natives had lined the way and were staring at them. They were dressed in simple, undyed cotton. A native weave rather than the Calcutta brindle that was standard through the eastern half of Africa.

Half way down a roofless collonade, a smaller negroid in dark-dyed cotton met them. The *capito* said a few words while the negroid, apparently one of those black half-Arabs of the deep Nile, came close to look sharply at first O'Neil and then Bobolongonga. He issued a command—a word or two—and strode away.

"Like that," O'Neil grinned.

"Indeed, Master, they will butcher us

with their spears and eat us for tiffin and pick their teeth with thy hook arm. Then how will it be with my two wives in Katanga?"

O'Neil chuckled, "Did you notice the bracelets on *his* arms? Gold. Twenty pounds of it—at seventy-five dollars American the troy ounce!"

The *capito* brought them to a stop at a small stone hut with a door of teak so massive the combined strength of four men was required to open it. Inside, it was hot and dark.

O'NEIL sat crosslegged on the sand floor, ignoring Bobolongonga who paced the small area behind him. After many minutes a hand came in sight beneath the bottom door crack sliding a flat calabash of water. It was spring water, sweet and cool. O'Neil divided it with Bobolongonga. He sat back, feeling better and wishing he had a cigarette.

Slits of sunlight came in around the door and moved across the floor, finally disappearing with sunset. There was an odor of cookfires reminding him of Kangala. Except there was no fetish drums. Somewhere, bounding across the rock surfaces of the city, came the dissonance of a gong.

Men were outside the door so O'Neil stood up and was waiting when they succeeded in dragging it open. The same *capito* was there with his *assagai* men.

O'Neil didn't bother to ask questions. The sky was black, save for a pale-pink strip along the horizon, and rain had commenced falling in big warm drops. He walked, carrying his sun helmet, enjoying the feel of rain on his head, it washed him, refreshed him, and he could taste the slight saltiness of dried, redissolved perspiration.

The gong was banging again, echoes hiding its exact location. They passed beneath a roof—a roof so thick it gave no sound of the drops striking it.

Somewhere, ahead, was a shifting glow of fire. It became brighter, giving white limestone walls a ruddy cast. A turn, an archway and he looked across a room of

a size that made its ceiling seem low, its walls disappear in shadow. Dozens of thick pillars confused his sight, and the light, which came from gum burning in two copper firepots on each side of a dais, gave a shifting brightness that confused it still more.

A man was sitting in a carved chair upon the dais. He was tall and thin. Young, or so he seemed. His face was narrow, dominated by a nose which began in the high bonal structure of his forehead and descended with peculiar straightness. His chin was pointed, his cheeks rather high. In all, the resemblance to the carved faces of ancient Egypt was singular and startling.

O'Neil realized this was the figurehead ruler of Almahar—the "Pharaoh," direct blood descendent from Amenemhtop III, Pharaoh at Thebes, builder of the famous labyrinth at Lake Moeris, or at least that was the conjecture of scientists who survived the Tizzo Expedition.

He wore a long, dark blue robe, and a peculiar headdress that fell in folds across his shoulders. Around his waist was a gold link belt, and as O'Neil moved closer he could see a familiar object thrust in it—the broken dagger—the same broken dagger he'd first seen in Lippy's room.

The gong banged repeatedly, its noise rebounding through the vast stone room. At last it stopped, and a spidery thin negroid walked to the foot of the dais and commenced chanting words it was apparent nobody understood. The sing-song rote took four or five minutes. The Pharaoh did not even glance up. His eyes wandered over O'Neil without coming to rest, and went once again to the thing in his lap. It was a table of smooth, black limestone on which he was scratching designs with a metal stylus. Something strange about his eyes. He made a mistake with the stylus and it fell at his feet. He merely sat looking at it, and a black fellow with slave brands on his shoulders hurried forward to guide his fingers to it. When the Pharaoh sat back up his mouth lolled open, and spittle came out.

O'Neil turned away, making a wry face. An idiot was one of the things he could never bear to look at

MORE of the scrawny negroids were coming. They were evidently the ruling class here at Almahar. More guardsmen, too. Most of these seemed to be private guards, carrying shortswords, and shields of rhino hide. Rain had found its way through one of the deep crevices of the stone roof, and was pouring into the sand at O'Neil's feet.

A girl was led in. She was dressed almost the same as the Pharaoh. A pitiful creature with wide, staring eyes. She sat where they placed her in a chair near the foot of the dais. Soon after there was another dissonance of cymbals and the "Ay-ya!" cry of native voices. Four assagai guards came, escorting another girl, and behind her a massive man in whites.

It was too dim for O'Neil to actually see, but he knew it was Gutchinov and the girl—Lesamba.

Gutchinov's eyes were on him as he stalked up through the shadow, but Lesamba did not see him until the last second. She paused with one small, slippered foot on the bottom step and drew back for a startled moment. Gutchinov twisted his mouth, turning its corners down in sort of a smile. He walked close behind the girl, said something. Whatever it was had the desired effect. She mounted the dais and took a vacant chair beside the idiot Pharaoh.

The negroid spoke again, but this time it was not the incomprehensible sing-song—it was a Bantu-Arabian jargon that O'Neil could get the gist of. He was asking for her verdict on the fate of O'Neil and Bobolongonga.

He finished and dropped to one knee, extending two objects—a piece of hard bread, and a tiny, bronze dagger. Bread or the dagger—life or death.

She started at the two things, eyes wide, breath gone from her lungs. She half rose. Her right hand was stretching, reaching for the bread.

"Lesamba!" Gutchinov hissed.

Her hand stopped. She was looking at him. It was the same old tableau. Like that night in the tent all over again. He exercised some power over her—something too strong for her to resist. She drew her

hand back slowly. Directness was gone from her eyes. She moved like one in a dream. Her hand went out again, but this time without any apparent realization of its action. Her fingers closed on the dagger. She sat holding it, looking down at O'Neil as though she had never seen him before.

A cry had gone up from those close enough to see, and it spread to others gathered through the dark depths of the room. O'Neil lifted his hand, brushing away perspiration from his eyes.

He cursed Gutchinov and lunged forward. It was a fool thing to do, but a man gets to doing foolish things when he's been too long off liquor and quinine.

Gutchinov hadn't expected anything. Assagai guards taken by surprise, too. One of them, quicker than the rest, tried to get his bronze-headed spear between them. O'Neil batted the spear from his way. He was close to Gutchinov then. Gutchinov swung his huge body back, saw the hook coming, let himself fall.

He struck on his back with legs doubled. O'Neil noticed too late. The legs uncoiled, smashing him in the guts.

It doubled him, sent him reeling back. He stayed on his feet. The *assagai* man had recovered himself. He came around, apparently intending to drive the spear into O'Neil's back.

Bobolongonga bellowed, charged forward. Half a dozen natives were holding him, but the huge black from Katanga took three long strides, dragging them all.

His shout, or a last-second presence of mind, stopped the *assagai* man. He twisted the point of the spear up, sliding it through the flesh of O'Neil's shoulder blade. He didn't withdraw it. He let the shaft end of the spear fall, propped it against his foot, lifted the point with one hand, held O'Neil like that with the slim point pinned through his skin.

O'Neil started to rip against the point. He knew then how he was caught—checked himself. He was on tip toes, rigid, teeth set and face contorted against the pain.

"*Mu'sabwa!*" the *assagai* man muttered in his ear.

"Sure," he hissed through clenched teeth. "*Mu'sabwa*. I go. Easy."

VII

WITH A SWIFT, DEXTROUS movement, the warrior removed the point of his *assagai*. Blood came in a swift stream from the flesh wound, soaking O'Neil's swamp-grimed shirt. He stood for a while, getting his bearings. More guardsmen were converging, prodding with their sharp spears. As he walked back toward the long passage, he could hear Gutchinov's triumphant chortle——

"Go! Go, *Monsieur* swine. Thus. Go for last time. Ha! So always with men who fight with *me*. You say once perhaps Gutchinov have brains. Now you know. Inside this skull, brains!..."

The banging gong drowned him out. Rain was falling harder than ever when they reached the doorway. It struck wet earth and formed a spray that rose and felt good in a man's nostrils. Numbness was leaving the flesh wound in O'Neil's back, and it burned with repeated flashes of pain.

The guards kept them there for a moment as other blacks ran along the passage and came up the paths from outside. A half dozen natives carried pitch-gum torches, protecting them from rain by means of crude banana leaf umbrellas.

With the spidery negroid leading the way they climbed a path running insteep with rain and found partial protection against the cliff.

More natives kept coming all the time. They were hemmed in by a small army, moving along the cliff. Ahead, other torches were bobbing along. Rain, with light and shadow along the cliff gave the scene a nightmare quality.

O'Neil kept going, teeth set against the pain of his shoulder. It had shocked some of the strength from him, but now his strength was coming back. He was steady enough when the *assagai* guard stopped before the door to a cavern inside the cliff.

The cavern doorway was fifteen or eighteen feet high and almost completely filled by a huge boulder the size and smoothness of an egg, and once at repose it would fill the cave doorway with an exactness as though molded to shape.

Flames from torches brought the stone to strong relief. O'Neil judged its weight at fifteen or twenty tons. He wondered what trick of engineering these natives used in moving it—then he saw there was no real engineering at all. The throne had been thrust away from the door enough to leave a scant twelve inch passage by a genngordt trunk that had been rooted near the top for that exact purpose.

It wasn't a comforting discovery. It meant the door could be closed by simply chopping out the genngordt, but once closed, it could not be opened until another sapling had obtained sufficient growth—twelve months at the least despite the plant's rapid growth.

He turned, with his back to the wall. *Assagais* bristled in a half-circle aimed at his breast, and the breast of Bobolongonga.

"Be careful, O Master," Bobolongonga intoned, skin twitching from the nearness of the *assagai* points. "They will impale thee like a sheep on a spit, and then who will pay my back wages that I may go back——"

"To hell with you!" O'Neil snarled. "And I'm tired of hearing about your two wives in Katanga."

The skinny negroid was shouting at them again in his parrot voice, motioning them in through the narrow entrance.

Bobolongonga went in first, with O'Neil close behind. No one followed. They were alone in the cave's musty darkness.

Voices from outside made fantastic echoes, bounding and rebounding from the stone walls. Something unclean and tomblike about the atmosphere. An odor of dry bones and death.

More light entered around the door as torch bearers pressed close. A drum was beating. The deep, measured rumble of elephant hide. By reflected torchlight he could see Bobolongonga with arms uplifted, moaning his despair,

"O Master, never did I think thou would lead me to such an end of the trail, to a tomb where they will lock thy servant forever. Without even a wave of thy hood did thou surrender. And behold us now, inside our tomb, without food nor water——"

"Take off your legbands," O'Neil said.

BOBOLONGONGA instead prostrated himself with forehead touching the ground toward Mecca, "*Allah akbar, Allah illa—*"

"O'Neil booted him, "The leg bands!"

Bobolongonga gathered himself after sprawling head foremost and commenced twisting off the heavy copper hoops fastened above his calves.

"They have grown fast, O *Bwana—*"

"Then I'll chop your heathen legs off."

Bobolongonga got one free. While he was at work on the other, O'Neil hefted it, held it at arm's length, scrutinized it by torchlight coming around the door.

"Thou hast an idea to save our skins?" "Maybe."

"O wise and mighty *Bwana!* Tell me what thy great mind hath conjured!"

O'Neil growled something and kept hefting the legband. It was heavy alloy, made by the black craftsmen of Laurence Marques from ship-repair scrap, in this case a length of torbin bronze salt-water shafting. He waited for Bobolongonga to free the second one. It was slightly smaller, but the fit, one on the other, was close enough.

A black arm came in sight, grasping a torch. For a few seconds the light fell strongly inside the cave showing the human bones that were strewn there—bones representing victims many times the numbers of those entombed from the Tizzo and *Photographique* expeditions. They were the accumulations of centuries.

The torch was pulled back, and the native carrying it commenced to mount, apparently climbing a ladder. He reached the top of the egg-shaped boulder and came in the range of O'Neil's eyes, sliding over the crest and reaching down to thrust his torch beneath the trunk of genngordt. A second and a third torch were lifted up to him, and he added those.

Pitch blazed with new intensity, melting, running in little, blazing trickles down the rock. Heat commenced raising a smudge from the genngordt.

O'Neil moved against the rock, lay on his stomach, maneuvered the legbands beneath it, rammed them home with his hook just to the left of its center of gravity.

He did it just in time. The genngordt started charring, letting the rock settle. The legbands were deforming a little, pressure was snapping off little scaly bits of rock.

The genngordt was burning. Blazing fragments, pitch-covered, kept falling from above, but the huge stone seemed to have stopped moving. The leg bands had propped it momentarily. Then it rocked suddenly, came with a lurch, crushing rock particles from one of the high edges.

A yammering cry went up from the natives outside. Torchlight still entered, but from the top, rather than the sides.

O'Neil stepped back, looked at the dim strip of light, and grunted his satisfaction. The stone had settled just as he'd computed. Its bottom fit snugly enough, but the bronze hoops, angling it a trifle from its center of gravity, gave it a torsional twist which caused the right side to jam, and somewhere up there would be plenty of room for a man to crawl through.

"With luck, Bobo," he grinned in the smoky darkness. "Always with luck."

They waited. An hour—two hours. The sounds died away. Yellow torchlight glowed for a while, then it disappeared leaving only a cold strip of starlight.

O'Neil stood up, felt for Bobolongonga, tapped his knee in a signal that he wished to be boosted.

Standing atop the black man's shoulders, the crest of the entrance was still three feet above. He found a toehold at one side, wedged his hook in a rock joint and swung aloft. The opening was there plenty of room for a man to belly through.

He could see a strip of the ground outside. No movement discernible. He took off his belt, lay full length, hook still wedged in the rock joint, the other arm reaching down with the belt and its buckle swinging, making a metallic rattle.

He felt the tug as Bobolongonga grasped it, set himself to bear the man's 250 pounds of weight, but he came with unexpected ease, seeming to cling to the rock with his bare toes.

The man was beside him, excitement more than effort making him breathe hard through his nostrils.

"Take it easy," O'Neil whispered.

He started to refit his belt, thought bet-

ter of it, handed it to the black man, "Keep this. It makes a nice, silent weapon if we have to handle a guard or two. You understand?"

"Me understand."

O'Neil slid over the crest of the boulder clung as long as he could, dropped to the ground below.

He made scarcely a sound on the damp sand. He remained crouched, listening. Moon shone strongly on the cliff face, there was deep shadow on both sides of the rock. He got to his feet, took a step, spun around.

SOMETHING had moved—a falling shadow. Now he could hear struggle, the quick inhalations of breath. An *assagai* guard had been posted there, and Bobolongonga, seeing him creep forward, had dropped on his shoulders, had twisted the belt around his throat, and was calmly strangling the life out of him.

O'Neil stood, looking at the fellow's face. It was contorted, lips peeled back from his file-pointed teeth, his eyes seemed to have jumped from their sockets.

"That's enough."

Bobolongonga let the belt relax. In a few didst thou not see that this was the same eater of pork who rammed his heathen spear through thy flesh?"

"Let him go. I still need him."

Bobolonga let the belt relax. In a few seconds the man started coming around. O'Neil crouched beside him, speaking a mixture of Arabian and Bantu, asking him where they kept the girl.

The guardsman sprang to his feet, but the movement was not unexpected as he had intended. O'Neil hooked his cowrie-shell necklace, flung him back to the ground then he lifted his hook as though to drive it through the fellow's head.

"I take. *Bwana*. I take!"

The guardsman's *assagai* lay on the earth. O'Neil found it, carried it beneath his arm as the man took them down the pathway, between small pyramids and sphinxlike gods to the same collonade they'd left only an hour or two before.

Black silence now. Bobolongonga kept hold of the fellow's arm. Ruddy coals clung in the flame baskets dimly revealing

the dais, the empty chairs, the nearest columns. There was another long passage beyond, and finally a set of stone steps with moonlight coming from the roof opening through which they led.

The guardsman hesitated. "Keep going!" O'Neil said, prodding him with the spear.

Atop the roof they found a sort of garden—plants and vines growing in huge, stone vases. At a distance of about thirty paces was the entrance-arch to a house that had been built there.

O'Neil remained quite still, watching for movement. It looked safe enough. He motioned the native on.

They crossed, revealed sharply by moonlight. His nerves were tense, on edge. He passed through the arch. A short hall—an inner room. Light coming from the room. A tiny, scratching sound. Familiar. He remembered—the idiotic pharaoh working with his stylus on stone.

He stepped to the door. A grease lamp was burning with a smoky flame, falling on the Pharaoh who was hunched over a table, working out tangents on a tablet of smoothed, black stone. O'Neil watched for a while. Breeze came from somewhere, blowing the lamp bright and dim. During a moment of brightness he could see the room's shadowy corners. Only the Pharaoh—that strange half-idiot with his prehistoric face.

O'Neil jerked his head, telling the guard to go ahead of them through the room, but he cringed against the wall.

"Where is she?" he hissed.

The guard was on one knee, pointing native-fashion with his lower lip, indicating an inner doorway.

Bobolongonga rumbled, "Now indeed shall I strangle thee, O eater of pork——"

"You'll have your chance to do some strangling or maybe get strangled yourself before the night's over."

O'Neil thrust the *assagai* through the gold bracelets of the guardsman's wrists thus linking them together, then he drove the point on, wedging it hard between two stones of the wall.

He said to Bobolongonga, "You'd better watch *here*. We might get visitors."

O'Neil paused a moment and looked

down on the Pharaoh's black stone table. It was at least three feet square, almost completely covered with a minute accumulation of angles, curves and tangents—and though O'Neil knew scarcely anything of geometry and calculus he was certain that there was some point to the computations. The Pharaoh was not an idiot, he was a genius. O'Neil grinned. Sometimes an ordinary fellow can scarcely tell the difference.

The guardsman had pointed to a door draped with purple cotton. He went through. A small room, a door barred by a huge plank of okume wood.

It took most of his strength to lift the bar. He felt it thud to the floor, drove the door open with his foot.

THERE was a grease lamp burning on a low bench in the middle of the room and for a second its light kept him from seeing the exact nature of the movement back of it. Then he made it out—the girl, Lesamba hurrying towards him.

Suddenly she stopped. Her eyes were staring beyond him.

"Come along!" he said, mistaking her expression for the old hypnosis. "Hurry. I'll get you out of here."

She was looking at something behind him. He spun around. Gutchinov. The Mauser was in his hand. He was staring at O'Neil like one would stare at an apparition. Sweat streaked down across his broad cheeks. His face looked hollow and savage.

"You!" Gutchinov hissed. "No. Not you. Again. Always you. Come back—like nightmare dream. Do you not drown? Do you die by bullet? *Assagai*? Hah? Through rocks of the earth do you come? Through door that weigh twenty ton? Will you even come from grave too?"

"I'm a persistent fellow," O'Neil said. His eyes remained on the automatic's wicked round muzzle. "Just angle that gun away. I'm not alone. Bobolongonga's behind you—"

"So? And Gutchinov? Does he not have men, too? *Le Garrotte*! Maybe more. So. They will kill that black gorilla of yours, just as I will kill you."

Gutchinov moved to one side. The girl

was just beyond O'Neil in the line of fire. O'Neil sensed the movement as it came, flung himself toward the floor, struck on hip and outflung arm, twisted, swung his hook at Gutchinov's gun wrist.

The Mauser exploded as O'Neil fell. Bullet and powderflame ripped five or six inches above his shoulder. O'Neil's hook missed the man's thick wrist, but it made him lift the gun and the second bullet went wilder than the first. O'Neil rolled on, a leopard-quick movement, coming to a crouch. Gutchinov tried to angle the Mauser down. No time nor room. The gun exploded a third and fourth time fast as his finger could pull the trigger. Lead went to a far corner, to the ceiling above.

Gutchinov tried to move back. The wall rammed his shoulders. For a second he was jolted off balance. O'Neil's hand was on his shirt thrusting the gun high.

Gutchinov was huge, gorilla-powerful. O'Neil had already found that out, and he learned it again now. The man took a moment to gather his strength, then he brought one arm forward in a massive, thrusting blow.

O'Neil was ripped free. He would have been hurled across the room, but instinctively he used the hook. Its point sank in the tendons beside Gutchinov's neck.

The man roared pain—a high-pitched scream coming from his nostrils. He ripped back shaking his head from side to side like some devil fish trying to toss the gaff.

O'Neil sprang, driving feet into the big man's stomach, hurling himself backward, shoulders toward the floor. Gutchinov was snapped forward. He was lifted off his feet, flung bodily, face down across the floor.

The hook was free. O'Neil rolled to his feet. Somehow, Gutchinov had managed to keep hold of the pistol. He was on one knee, neck running blood, rolling his head, staring blindly for his adversary.

He pulled the trigger. Not aiming. Bullets striking the floor, spattering fragments of stinging lead. The pin fell empty. He squeezed the trigger again and again anyway.

O'Neil hooked his shirt, jerked him to his feet. Gutchinov saw him then and

swung the Mauser, aiming it's barrel at O'Neil's skull. O'Neil batted the gun away, stepped back, and smashed a fist to the big man's beefy jaw.

The blow snapped his head over like he'd hit the end of a hangman's rope. He was still on his feet, eyes glazed. His lips opened and closed. Words came in a throat-rattle,

"No. *Monsieur*. We would be—freinds. Yes—"

O'Neil smashed him to the floor.

VIII

GUTCHINOV LAY ON HIS BACK, arms flung wide, gun gone from his fingers. O'Neil snatched it up, crouched, felt through Gutchinov's pockets, found an unopened box of fifty Mauser cartridges.

He tore the box open with his teeth. The hook wasn't much use for this. He clamped the gun between his knees while ramming shells into it.

There was a struggle going on in the other room, clang of knife steel falling to the floor, the high-pitched cry of Bobolongonga but in rage rather than pain.

O'Neil stopped after getting five cartridges inside. He looked for the girl.

She was standing over Gutchinov, looking down on him with a expression of feline hatred. A dagger was in her hand. O'Neil should have seized her wrist, twisted it away from her. He didn't, Gutchinov was coming around, anyway. O'Neil didn't give a damn about him, but he wouldn't want the girl to be a murderess—any more of a one than she was already.

"No!" Gutchinov hissed, eyes on the knife steel. "No, you hear!" His voice had changed with that. It was his old, commanding tone. He was staring at her, sliding back gathering himself rising, making each move carefully like one who stumbles into a cobra's nest and tries to escape without raising a strike. Her eyes started to go off focus, but she shook her head, a violent gesture, and his power over her was snapped. Her lips drew back exposing sharp, clenched teeth. She cried, "You see? I am not afraid of you now!"

Gutchinov lifted himself from his crouched position. He had no further fear

of the dagger and would have slapped it from her hand, but his eyes were fastened on the Mauser. He was up now, but still groggy. He backpeddled, made it through the door. O'Neil let him go. He didn't want to be the first one outside. He seized the girl's wrist, dragged her after him.

Bobolongonga was crouched in the middle of the Pharaoh's room, back towards them, his muscles taut and corded like pythons beneath his black skin. A man was down, face first, and Bobolongonga had one knee in his back, the belt around his throat, drawn tight. The man was Le Garrote.

Le Garrote had been Gutchinov's hope. Seeing him down seemed to make his terror worse. His shuffle became a trot, then a reeling gallop. He saw the door and tried to go through it. His shoulder struck the stone at one side and he bounded back, spinning half way around.

The guardsman was still held to the wall by the *assagai* thrust through his wrist bands. Gutchinov fell against the shaft, realized what it was, seized it, jerked it free. He turned on O'Neil, *assagai* lifted above his head.

The Mauser exploded. Its slug struck him somewhere in the chest. Shock hammered him to the wall. He let the *assagai* fly wild, his humming shaft barely missing the Pharaoh who was watching with blank eyes.

The bullet had him against the wall, but not down. He was tough. Rhino tough. He thrust himself away, reeled through the door. He seemed to be getting stronger instead of weaker. *Assagai* guards were running up the stairs. Bare feet made scarcely a sound, but their spears rattled against the stone walls.

Gutchinov saw them pouring onto the roof, blocking his escape. He lurched almost to a stop, turned, started on a gallop to the right. He'd evidently forgotten he was on a rooftop. He reached the edge and came to a stop. He was balanced there, arms flung high, face tilted back in a desperate balancing act. Then he fell smashing himself to a lifeless heap on some stone images below.

O'Neil had to beat Bobolongonga aside the face with his pistol barrel before he'd

release his stranglehold on Le Garrotte. The man was dead anyway.

A native appeared in the door, glimpsed them, charged with *assagai* lifted high. O'Neil swung, pulled the trigger. The bullet spun him around, made the *assagai* fly end over end. The tail of its shaft whipped Bobolongonga across the arm. There were two more in the room. O'Neil downed one of them, the other retreated, chattering Bantu and Arab jargon.

"Is there a way through your room?" O'Neil asked Lesamba.

"Yes. But the door. Locked——"

"Lock be damned."

It was barred, but Bobolongonga shouldered his way through. Stairs led to the street. Men were running from many directions, but darkness and the mazelike streets and collonnades made pursuit impossible.

In an hour they were crosing millet fields with the torches of the wakened city far behind.

O'Neil's N'koi boys and fourteen of Gutchinov's Uganda natives had returned and were waiting by the upended canoes at the edge of the swamp. For the first time since leaving Almahar, O'Neil took time to really look at the girl.

She was perhaps even younger than he'd first imagined. That was too bad. There was a lot of difference between his age and hers. Too much difference. Madame Charbonnaire—that was his speed. He borrowed some black, native tobacco and chewed it, making a wry face as he leaned to spit at the water. It wasn't good when you still feel young and yet every mirror tells you you're over the hill.

He hated to think that she'd killed Lippy, yet there were the facts—her perfume, the tiny wound made by a dagger about the size of the one she'd used in scaring the fat off Gutchinov last night.

"Why do you look at me like thees?" she asked.

"Like what?"

"So—not nice. Not as I would have you look at me."

"Don't give me too much encouragement kid. I have to spread my moral character pretty thin as it is."

"I don't understand."

He shrugged. Then he asked, "Did you kill Lippy Leach?"

"No, *Senhor*. I have never kill anyone. It was perhaps Le Garrotte that kill him. You must believe! It is true, I rap at his hotel door so he would open it and come to verandah. I did not know Le Garrotte would kill him. You see, he think *Senhor* Leach go for gun. When he is dead, and nothing in his pocket, Gutchinov was ver' angry."

"Tell me about yourself."

"I am not really Lesamba. My real name—Nada Von Hoesch. Dr. Hans Von Hoesch, my father. My mother was half Arabian, half Portugese. She was my father's wife of Africa. You understand?"

"I understand."

"He was famous Egyptologist. Gutchinov his assistant. They excavated small tombs at Thebes and there my father learned the strange story of the Pharaohs of Nubia—the lost tribe of Egypt who were driven south after the New Empire under Amasis smashed Hykso's power on the Delta. It was Amenhotp, in 1540 B.C. He was first of Pharaohs to be buried in Valley of Tombs of the Kings of Thebes. But I tell you what you know already."

"You keep right on talking."

"It was there, in the Valley of the Tombs my father found the broken half of dagger, and coupled the inscriptions with what he already knew from the Tizzo reports. So he learned that this was the very broken half which would fit the broken blade kept at Almahar by the Lost Egyptians of Nubia, the same who had once traded in gold with Solomon. They had always believed someday a princess with dark skin and blue eyes would return it and sit on throne beside Pharaoh, you understand?"

"Not exactly, but I can fill in the spaces. Go ahead."

"My father was not wealthy. He needed money to carry on his excavations. His sponsor, the University at Breslau, could send not enough money out of Germany after Hitler's restrictions. So with the broken half of dagger he went in search—for the Lost Mines of Solomon. You have heard of Solomon's mines——"

"It seems that somewhere in Africa I've heard mention of them."

"Yes. So he lef' me with my Mama in Somoliland and traveled to Kangala—the closest place to outfit safari to Almahar. But then there was war, and he had to leave French land. He wrapped the dagger, had it locked in a strongbox of Union du Kongo office. He went to Germany, but I was left behind. With Mama in Somoliland. He returned to University at Breslau. I never saw him again. Dead—as so many. But there came Dr. Gutchinov after the war. He had been at Breslau to classify the museum relics after the Russians took everything. There he learned my father's secret. He came to us in Mogadiscio, he said my father was waiting there, at Kangala, that I was to come. We were fools to believe. He would not let me go back. I had fever, then palsy so I could not walk. He said 'Concentrate in my eyes and you will walk.' And so many times he cured my palsy, but never again could I prevent him making me act as in a dream. You call it..."

"Hypnotism. It's happened to lots of others. And so you reached Kangala."

"Yes, but the dager was gone from the strongbox. The little man had it. Lippy. He knew it was valuable without knowing why. He was afraid to deal with Gutchinov. He locked himself in his room—"

"Until Gutchinov killed him."

"Le Garrotte. It was Le Garrotte who became angry and killed him. But the keys were not in his pockets. You were in the other room, and Le Garrotte feared—"

"I seem to remember."

"But he got them the same night, and you know the rest."

O'NEIL NODDED. He lay back in the dugout, watching bubbly, weed-thick swamp water slide past. He said, "They would really trade so much for that broken half of dagger?"

"Yes, *Senhor*." She was sad. "But they have it now. It is too bad, after my father—"

She stopped and watched wide-eyed as O'Neil's hand came from a pocket holding the dagger.

He said, "I lifted it from the Pharaoh as we left. Didn't you notice?"

"But *I* will not go back. I—"

"Of course not. O'Neil will split any man's skull that tries to take you back. But there might be other ways—"

Bobolongonga nodded and paused a moment in his paddling. "Aye, *Bwana*. Is there not that water buffalo, that cow, Madame Charbonnaire? Couldst thou not trade her off and whose loss would it be?"

O'Neil lay back against a thatch pad and looked up into the girl's eyes. He tried staring hard. That expression came into them. An expression that had not been there a moment before. The pupils were expanding. Her lips fell apart. Her breath was slight but rapid. Hypnotism is an excellent art in Africa, and he'd long heard that subjects become more easily entranced each time they succumb. It only surprised him to see how easy it was.

He snapped his fingers to bring her out of it. The first attempt was not successful. He put off making a second. He exhaled with slow contentment as the girl laid her cheek against his shoulder.

Bobolongonga stopped paddling once more, and hunched forward on his knees, letting swamp run from his paddle blade.

"And so, O Master! Behold, thou hast secured thyself a woman from this deal, but what is there left for thy faithful servant? Behold him without even a pair of pants to cover his—"

"I'm taking her back to her mother in Somoliland." O'Neil growled.

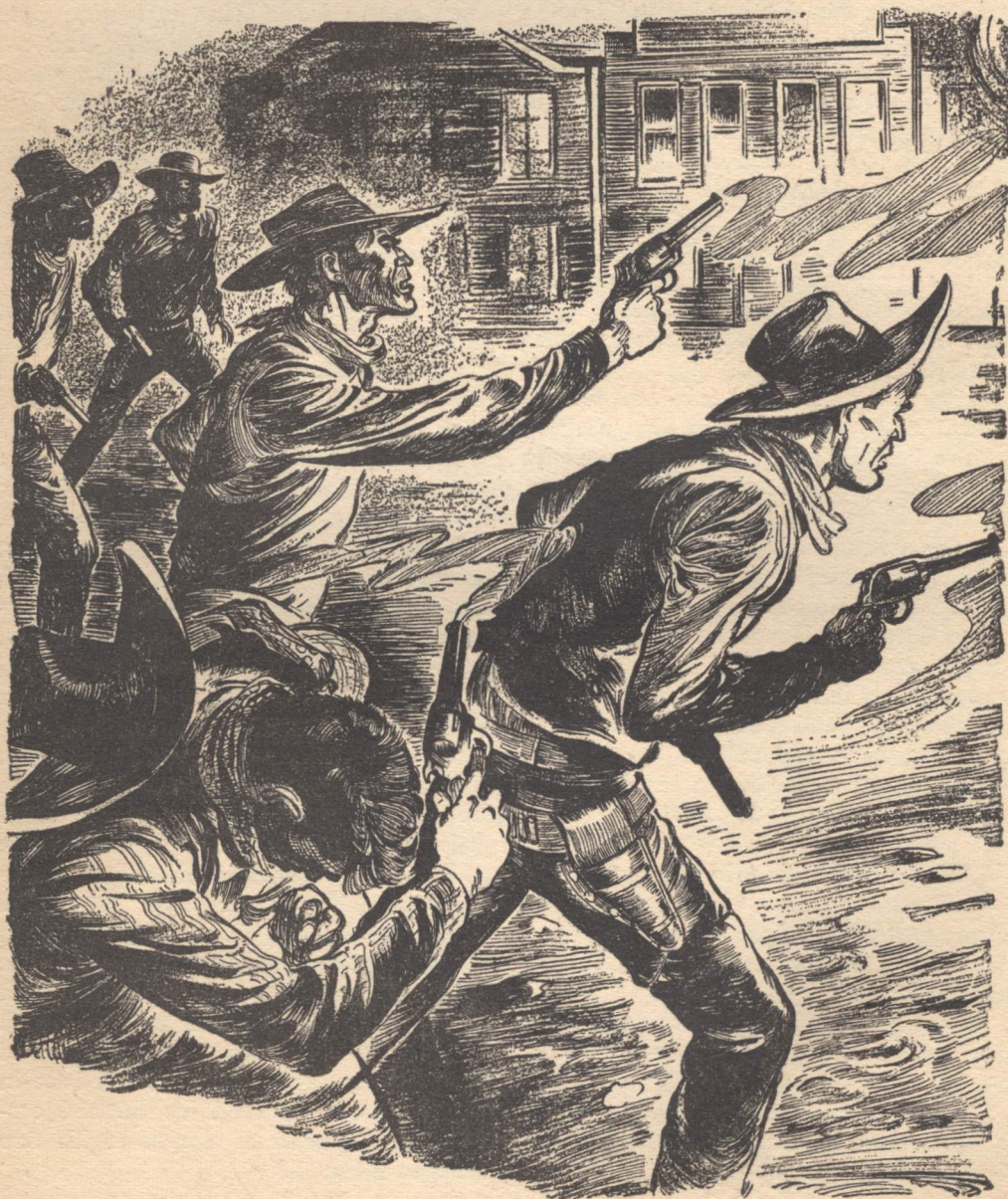
"Aye-yah! Ho! Ho!" Bobolongonga bellowed derision, shaking his paddle high. "Hear now what a fool my Master would make himself out to be! Who would take so beautiful a woman back to her mother in Somoliland? *Aye-aye-Allah!*" he chanted addressing the sky which existed above him somewhere through a hundred feet of tree and water-sweeping vines. "O *Allah*, thou given my *Bwana* a woman and it is good. Now present unto him another streak of luck that he may wade to his tail bone in green money and send his faithful servant home a man of wealth to his two wives in Katanga."

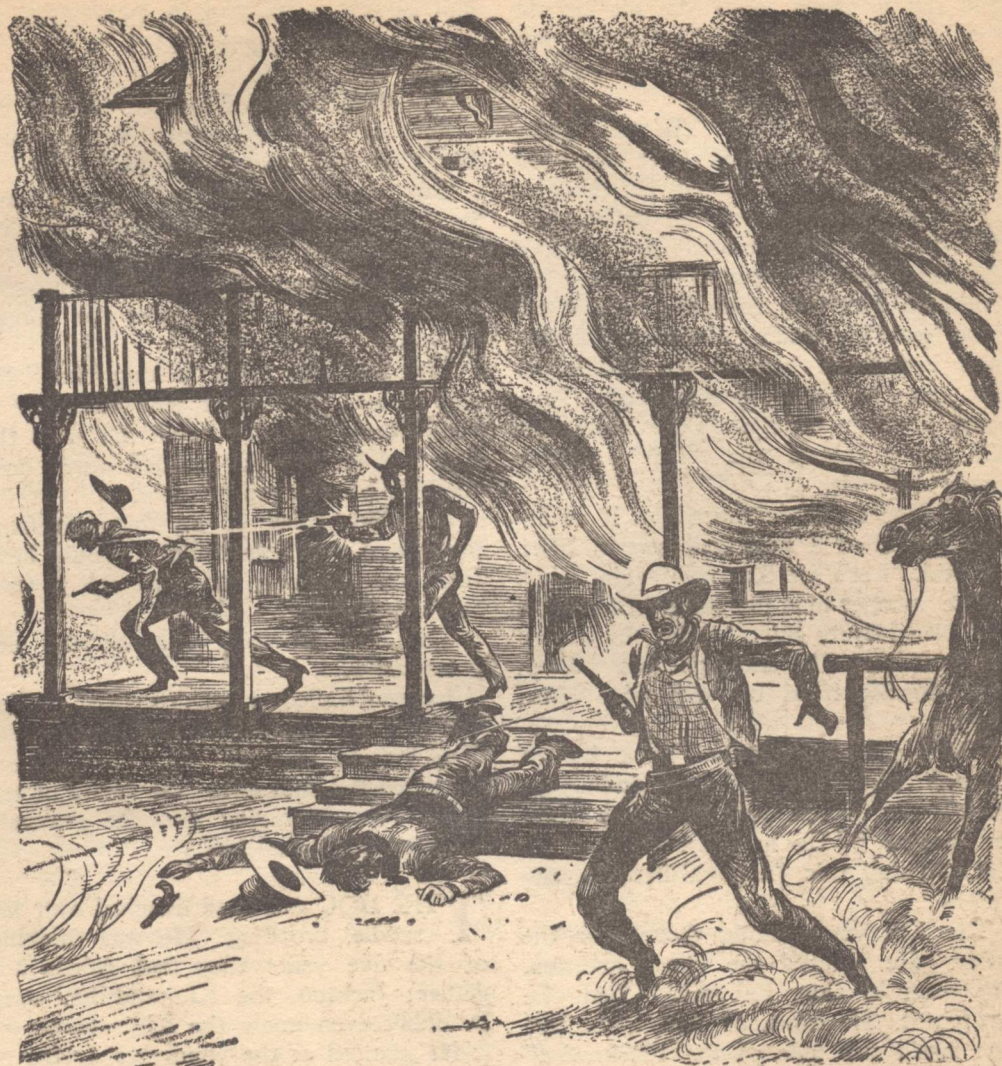
"I Pack An Outlaw Star"

By BARRY CORD

The Unholy Three they were called—Jackson, Doc and the Kid—a proddy, gun-hung crew who toted their own smoky brand of law and order. What had this sleepy little cowtown to offer them, beside crashing six-guns and whistling lead?

Shadowy figures were spilling from the doors.





THE SOUND OF CREAKING saddle leather floated through the the early morning grayness. A wide-shouldered, slim-hipped rider loomed up on the rimrock and became a black etching against the eastern sky. Another showed up on his left, like a ghost—and a moment later a giant figure eased up on his right.

The faint clang of a shod hoof died out against the quiet. In the grayness a match flared as the first rider lighted a cigaret.

The Kid sucked in smoke. His gray eyes were on the vague cluster of buildings, like toy blocks, on the long flat below them.

He said, dryly, "That's it. That's Del Rio." He let smoke dribble out of his nose and his lips twisted oddly as if the sound of the name was unpleasant.

The giant on his right shrugged. He sat heavily in the saddle of his huge gray stud, his blue eyes sleepy and seemingly disinterested. He had crisp red hair thinning on his brow and turning gray at the temples, and a trick of running two fingers of his right hand across the pale, two-inch scare above his left eye.

Slowly he eased forward for a better look at the country below the rimrock.

In the north a hat-shaped butte dominated eroded wasteland. To the east range-

land ran to vague peaks that marked the sere, rocky Blackrocks. Southward, low ridges faded into the tangled bosque of the Rio Grande flatlands.

"So that's Del Rio?" The tall, spare-framed man on the Kid's left asked the question absently, as though his thoughts were far away. He was an oldish man, his smallness accentuated by rounded shoulders and a caved-in posture. His long bony face was reserved; the Kid had never seen him smile. He packed a doctor's instrument bag on the saddle behind him; he had a medical degree from some Eastern college. That much the Kid knew about the "Doc"—nothing more.

The Doc suddenly roused, as if realizing the end of a long trail was in sight. He said, "Let's see that note again, Kid."

The younger man unbuttoned the pocket of a black, dusty shirt, handed the oldster an envelope. The message was written in a flowing hand on expensive linen paper.

"Five thousand dollars is a lot of money," the Doc commended, handing the letter back. "Even for bucking a killer like Yaegar." He looked closely at the Kid. "Think this Judge Miller can pay it?"

The Kid was looking down into the valley. He ignored the Doc's question. But after a time he said, "Yeah—he can pay it. He owns, or owned, the biggest ranch this side of the Blackrocks."

Jackson's blue eyes widened a trifle. "You sound as though you knew this section, Kid. What does it mean to you?"

The Kid took the cigaret from his mouth and flipped it over the rim. The gesture was half impatient, half bitter.

"I was born in Del Rio. I was nineteen when I left town, a rope-anxious posse on my trail. My own father was in that posse."

He stopped with that. The silence held the weight of things unspoken. His companions waited, but when the Kid eased back to look over the rim they looked at one another and shrugged.

Jackson's voice was casual. "We're splittin' up here then, like we planned. We'll ride into Del Rio by different trails

and we'll meet in Pedro's Cafe Reale by sundown. That right, Kid?"

The Kid nodded.

The giant dropped a hand to ease the weight of the long-barreled heavy Frontier Colt tied low on his hip.

But the Doc hesitated. He spoke slowly. "For me and Jackson it's just another job, Kid. But you have reasons for coming back here. Way back in Pasado, before we even got this note, you wanted to come. Why?"

The Kid was silent a long time. He was a cold, hard man who had built a wall around himself. In all the years the Doc had known him he had never been confidential. He wasn't now.

He said, "Call it my own personal problem, Doc. Something I should have taken care of long ago. Just call it that, an' forget it."

The Doc frowned. But he did not press the Kid.

Jackson smiled, a peculiar twist of lips that held a brief, sardonic mirth. He said, "See you in Pedro's," to both of them. He eased the stud away, the sound of the animal's hoofs fading into the grayness that shrouded the trail.

THE DOC remained hunched over his saddle, brooding. He was thinking of the five years they had ridden together; Jackson, the Kid and he. And he didn't even know the Kid's name.

He glanced at the youngster, trying to fathom the thoughts behind the impassive features.

The Doc knew Jackson better than he knew the Kid. He had met the redheaded giant on the old Mescalero trail one stormy winter night. Two drifters heading the same way. They had teamed up in an unspoken agreement. He had come to know the big man's moods, the strength in those huge shoulders and gnarled yet nimble hands, the deceiving speed in that bulky frame. He knew how the big man ate, slept, washed. But of Jackson's life before they met he knew nothing. Only one hint was vouchsafed in a question the big man often asked.

Along many trails, in many towns, Jackson had inquired, casually, about a man.

A man named Red Becker. He had not found him.

They had picked up the Kid three years after the Mescalero trail meeting. They were crossing a corner of the Staked Plains when they found the youngster, a bullet wound festering in his thigh. He was dragging himself toward the hills. A mile before they had come upon the carcass of his horse.

The Doc nursed him back to health. When he was able to ride he rode with them. They didn't ask questions. The Kid volunteered nothing.

Gun-handly, grimly efficient, a reputation had grown around them—and a name. The Unholy Three.

Inevitable wanderers, they made guns their business—and sold their skill for a price. Towns ridden with lawlessness welcomed them. They came, brought gun-smoke order, then drifted on.

But Del Rio was going to prove different. The Doc felt it as he brooded. The Kid's past was in Del Rio.

He smiled bitterly, thinking how little each of them knew about the other. Neither the Kid nor Jackson knew what had made of him a wanderer—nor could he guess what it was that had driven the Kid from Del Rio.

Now he watched the Kid, trying to fathom what lay behind the brown, impassive features. He shrugged. It was the Kid's play, and he was handling it.

He swung the fidgety palomino away from the rim, echoed Jackson's "See you in Pedro's." He knew the youngster didn't hear him as he rode away.

II

JACKSON RODE INTO DEL RIO first. A big man with a sleepy slouch and two bone-handled guns tied low on his hips. He came in across the wooden bridge that spanned the almost dry river bed and swung west along the dusty trail that widened to become Del Rio's main street.

There was a long frame structure squatting on the west corner of the first cross street. A dark faced Yaqui squatted on his heels in the shade, smoking a

brown paper cigaret. He watched Jackson ride past, then he straightened, shuffled into the wooden building.

A moment later a tall, hatchet-faced man with a brown calf-skin vest came out and stared after Jackson. He watched with frowning gaze until Jackson turned into Texas Square before going around to the back yard and mounted a mettlesome sorrel. He hurdled a low fence, crossed a littered lot, and rode west, pushing the sorrel as if something important urged him.

Texas Square, the heart of Del Rio, was like an amphitheatre—a wide, dusty plaza encircled by two-story adobes and a single, towering three-decker frame and adobe structure that held a single word over its slatted doors: **YAEGAR'S**.

Jackson noted the legend with sleepy-eyed interest. His gaze slid down to the gunman taking things easy in a tipped back chair on the wooden porch. A wide brimmed sombrero shaded a heavy jowled face. A thin trickle of cigaret smoke seeped up from under the sombrero.

Across from Yaegar's a low adobe building held a painted sign that read simply: **SHERIFF'S OFFICE**. There were bullet holes in the sign.

A wiry man about the Doc's age was crossing the square to the law office. He stopped to appraise Jackson. He wore a star on his black vest and two guns, belts crossing, on his hips. His boots were scuffed and runover at the heels and there was a bowed look about him that went beyond that of his legs.

Jackson felt the man's hostility reach out and slap him across the face and he instinctively stiffened. The bitterness in this small, old lawman was almost palpable. Then the gun-metal blue eyes left him and the man continued across the square to the low adobe office.

Behind Jackson the silent figure on Yaegar's porch got to his feet. He took a burned out cigaret butt from his mouth, spat shreds of tobacco into the street. A bleak smile edged his lips. He shouldered through the batwings and vanished.

Jackson felt this, as he had sensed the departure of the hatchet-faced man on the edge of town. Sensed the loaded trap that

was Del Rio. He felt wariness crawl through him, tingle his spine.

He and the Doc and the Kid had run up against some tough opposition before. But he was moody this afternoon as he paced the gray toward the narrow *Avenida de Sangre* leading off Texas Square; shades of old memories darkened his soul. He had these recurrent moods, and they made him taciturn and as irritable as a hungry grizzly.

He felt the need of a drink, and all at once he hated the idea of going to *Pedro's Cafe Reale*, hated the thought of the methodical plans they had laid.

A small saloon on the south side of Texas Square, shaded by a tall eucalyptus tree, caught his eye and he nosed the gray up to the rail, dismounted, and went inside.

The three customers at the small bar edged over as he breasted the dark wood. He said, "Rye," and threw a gold eagle on the counter. He took the bottle and glass and filled a quick one, tossing it down.

The bartender was a one-armed man with a sloppy face. He kept a towel on the bar, bunched up, as if he used it to wipe the wet counter. Under the towel was a snub-nosed .38. He was pretty handy getting to it, and he could hit what he aimed at.

Jackson drank four straight before the liquor began to burn hot inside him. He pushed the bottle to one side then and asked the question he had asked in more than a hundred towns.

"Anyone here ever hear of a gent named Red Becker?"

The bartender put his hand on the towel. The three men at the bar stopped talking. The room suddenly held the quality of a powder keg with a man fumbling with a match by the open lid.

"Sure," a voice answered, very coldly. "You a friend of his?"

Jackson turned, like a tiger wheeling. In the half darkness of a corner table a kid slowly got up. A thin faced, freckled youngster with straw hair and a button nose and a liquor induced hardness to his lips.

The room cleared behind Jackson as

the big man paced to the kid. The youngster held his ground, but he flinched nervously when Jackson loomed over him and suddenly he lashed out with a right hand.

Jackson caught the hand before it hit his face. Caught it and held it, as if it had run into a stone wall. His fingers tightened and the blond puncher paled, his lips drawing in over his teeth.

Jackson's voice was like the dark, vicious mood in him. "Where's Becker?"

THE youngster stopped trying to get free. Sweat jewelled his forehead. He said, "Becker's at the Dia—"

The rifle cracked viciously. Jackson felt the slug splat into that thin body a split second before the sound. The kid jerked, and Jackson was like a jungle cat, cornered and seeking escape.

He was across the room before the kid fell, and a gun was in his fist. The rifle cracked once more, trying to hit him as he moved. Lead gouged into the adobe wall. Jackson shot twice at the figure he saw unclearly in the doorway and it vanished, swallowed up in gun-smoke.

A dark, raging mood was in Jackson, alive and heedless, and he hurdled an overturned table on his way to the door. He knew the killer might be waiting for him to come out, waiting with cocked rifle, but his rage was greater than his caution.

The Square was empty when he plunged out. Empty save for a wiry lawman who was coming down the stairs of the sheriff's office. Coming down slowly, like a man who didn't care what happened, indifferent but curious.

Baffled, the big man hesitated. Then he remembered the youngster who had been about to tell him where he could find Becker—tell him what he had lived only to know for fifteen years.

He went back inside. But the tow-haired puncher was dead.

He was rising from his side when the lawman came in. Came in leisurely, walked over to the boy, and looked down. There was no expression in him; he only looked old and tired.

Jackson faced him, stiffly, expecting hostility. But the sheriff's voice was mild. "What happened?"

Jackson growled his explanation. The bartender added, "That's the way it was, Judd. Lou started to tell this stranger about Becker when someone killed him."

The sheriff looked at Jackson thoughtfully. "So you're looking for Red Becker?"

Jackson nodded. He did not feel like answering questions, and, strangely enough, the lawman did not ask them.

"You'll find Becker in that big building across the Square," he said matter-of-factly. "In Yaeger's. I just saw him ride in."

Jackson looked down at the dead puncher. "Then it couldn't have been Becker who killed—"

"No." The sheriff did not elaborate. "Lou rode for the Big Hat."

Jackson shoved brusquely past the sheriff. He picked up his black sombrero, tilted it up on his forehead. He shoved fresh cartridges into the chambers of his fired Colt, and went out.

He had forgotten he was due to meet the Doc and the Kid at Pedro's, forgotten well laid plans . . . everything was forgotten in the turmoil within him save that Red Becker was in this setup. Red Becker was in town, only one hundred and fifty yards away.

He crossed the Square on foot, a big, two-gunned man with a shambling walk. And from a second floor window in Yaegar's, a heavy, red-faced man watched coldly, with deliberate smile.

The trap was set . . .

III

THE DOC RODE IN FROM THE south, skirting the Mission of San Pablo that looked down from a knoll on the town sprawled along the river. His small figure hunched broodingly over his saddle horn. There was no tension in him as he came into Del Rio . . .

A woman and a child stopped to let him pass and sunlight, striking gold from the little girl's curly hair, quivered an answering chord in him.

For just an instant he looked down the corridor of his past years to a little elm-shaded Massachusetts town . . .

He came out of his sombre reverie to find himself in Texas Square. Jackson's big gray stud, nudging impatiently against the saloon rail across the plaza, caught his attention.

He had the brief, disturbing thought that Jackson was in trouble. But he kept riding, heading for the agreed-upon meeting place.

The *Avenida de Sangre* was a narrow alley between low adobe walls. At the end of the old Spanish street stood Pedro's Cantina—a pretentious affair with a second story balcony that ran around three sides of the square building.

The Doc dropped his reins over the tie bar, surveyed the Diamond Cross brands on slack-hipped cayuses nosing the rail and went inside.

The barroom was a gloomy place with a cool, earthy smell. There was no one behind the counter. At a corner table a mountainous Mex with a bland moon face, a wisp of mustache and incongruously blue eyes stopped dealing with a grunt of impatience. The three other players craned their necks. They looked like tough cowpokes, handier with a gun than a branding iron.

At the only other occupied table a slim, young Mexican, gaudily dressed in velvet jacket, bell-bottomed, silver-ornamented trousers and a bright red sash was talking to a girl with mischievous dark eyes.

The Doc made his way to the bar.

The huge man slapped cards on the table and came around the counter. He said, "I'm Pedro. What you having, stranger?"

"Bourbon." The Doc slid a silver dollar between his fingers and tossed it on the counter.

The big man placed a bottle and a glass before him. "Serve yourself," he said shortly, and went back to the game.

The Doc sipped his first drink. It was getting along in the afternoon. The Kid wasn't due in Pedro's until sundown. He'd have more than two hours to kill.

He wondered what had happened to detain Jackson. He knew the big man's moods. He shrugged and finished his Bourbon. Jackson was big enough to take care of himself.

SUDDENLY he became conscious of a pair of eyes studying him and he turned, making the move appear natural. One of the card players dropped his gaze. He was a long beanpole with a draggy mustache and a sad sort of face. The Doc tried to place him.

The hard jingle of spurs sounded flatly in the quiet. The batwings parted. A rangy man with a hatchet face and a cigarette drooping from a corner of his thin lips came in, evidently looking for someone. He bounced a quick glance off the card players, held it a moment on the Doc. Frowning, he paced to the table where the young, gaudily dressed Mexican was obviously trying to impress the senorita.

His voice held a rough edge. "Drinkin' again, Jose?"

Jose turned and glanced over his shoulder. "Go away, Sleem," he waved airily. "I'm busy."

Slim's lips crimped around his cigarette. He stepped around the girl, drew a chair to him and sat in it, facing Jose. He leaned forward. "Look, Jose," he said coldly. "Lay off the drinking!"

The card players at the other table stopped playing.

An ugly flush took the laughter from Jose's eyes. "Sleem—I dreenk wen I want——"

The slim man's voice did not raise. "I'm telling you, Jose—lay off the drinking! You talk too much——" he glanced meaningfully at the girl who gave him a sullen look.

The Mex sneered. "I talk wen I please—an I dreenk wen I want, Sleem. Now get out! I want to talk to Carmelita——"

The Doc sensed rather than saw the change in Slim—the deadliness. The man didn't move, didn't raise his voice. "Jose—I'm telling you for the last time. Lay off the drinking. Yaegar wants to see you, when he gets back."

Jose laughed contemptuously. "I don take orders from you, Sleem—an eef Yaegar want me to queet drinking let heem come tell me, eh?" He tapped himself arrogantly on the chest. "I no take orders from no one save maybe Yaegar—an even Yaegar no tell Jose Martinez y Castinado wen to dreenk!"

Slim's leashed anger slipped free. "You'll take orders, you damn cocky Mex—or——"

The Mexican lunged across the table and backhanded him across the mouth. Slim skidded out of his chair and Jose straightened, piling the table on top of him, spoiling his draw.

Carmelita screamed as Slim came up with a gun in his hand.

The Doc was out of bullet line and he didn't move. But his eyes widened at what followed.

He didn't see Jose draw—it was that smooth and fast. There were two shots—both of them from Jose's weapon. Slim collapsed across the overturned table.

Jose kicked a chair aside and walked to the unmoving group at the other table. "Any of you want to take up Sleem's unfinished business?" he challenged, thickly.

The three gunsters evidently didn't. One of them said, very carefully, "Yaegar won't like this, Jose——" then stiffened as the Mexican sneered. "All right, all right," he added hastily. "I'm not buckin' yuh—I got more sense than Slim had. But Yaegar won't——"

"To hell with Yaegar," Jose snapped. "No one tell Jose wat he do. I am un gran vaquero. One time my great grandfather own all thees land. Then the revolutionistas come—my grandfather ees keeled. Now the Americano Meeler own it—an' Yaegar, he want it. But it belong to Jose. And some-day Jose weel take what ees his——"

His ornaments jingled as he turned, his face still dark with rage. "Carmelita!" he called roughly to the girl still standing by the overturned table. His mood changed and he smiled. "Carmelita—you have the guitara upstairs, no? Come. Jose weel serenade your beauty——"

The girl laughed merrily as they went upstairs.

Pedro finally rose. "Give me a hand, will you, Hank?" he asked the man with the sad face. "We'll take Slim's body into the back room."

Hank shrugged. The gunnie on his left hand said softly, "Some day someone's gonna take thet damn Mex down a peg."

But I wouldn't want to be the man to try it."

The Doc poured himself another drink. Hank and Pedro came back into the room and the Cantina owner straightened the furniture before returning to the game. The Doc drifted over.

"Friendly game?"

Pedro looked up. "Two bit limit. Feel lucky?"

The Doc nodded. In his long black coat he often passed as a professional gambler.

Hank was dealing. He shuffled the deck, placed it front of the Doc. "Cut?" he said softly.

The Doc cut.

Hank was watching his hands. Then his gaze came up and studied the Doc. "I've seen you somewhere before, stranger," he said watchfully. "Where?"

Doc smiled, "It's yore memory," he said. "You figger it out."

Hank scowled. He dealt abstractedly.

Hank was watching his hand. Then he put aside the deck and picked up his cards. He stared at them a long time. Then he looked at the Doc and suddenly sneered. "Gunsight," he said. "Two years ago—in Gunsight!"

He tossed his hand into the discards and rose, still sneering. The Doc watched him leave, without emotion. It was Pedro who broke the silence.

"Pass," he said quietly.

IV

STANDING ALOOF FROM DEL Rio, on the same level as the Mission of San Pablo, stood the Miller house. It was a palatial dwelling. Once it had been the proud hacienda of Juan de Esperansa Martinez y Casinado who had come north with Coronado in search for Cibola's mythical gold and been rewarded by the King of Spain with a tract of land that ran from the Rio Grande to the Blackrocks, a score of miles away.

Old, solid, the converted Spanish house faced the hills with something of the iron and vision of the men who had built it—a touch of grandeur in a barren land.

6—Action—Spring

The Kid rode in along the old Mission trail and the shadow of the church tower was like a voice recalling incidents of his boyhood.

The high adobe wall of the patio hid him from a view of the house as he curbed his horse. He sat in the shade of a cottonwood and lighted a cigaret.

He had come home after six years and somehow there was no quickening in him. For the big house behind that wall held few warm memories. And there was in him now only regret.

He finished the cigaret. Then he drew his feet up under him, balanced himself on his saddle, and jumped. The thick branch creaked under his weight. He drew himself up, swung a leg over the limb, and paused.

There was no one in the patio. The sun slanted across untended flower beds. A fountain, guarded by yellowed marble saints gurgled dreamily. It had a peaceful beauty, but it touched no responsive chord in the Kid.

Hitching himself along the thick branch he made the top of the wall, swung quickly over, hung a moment from his hands, and dropped. He straightened, turned swiftly, and from habit his right hand dropped to his Colt butt snug against his hip.

Bees buzzed drowsily among the flowers.

The Kid paced swiftly to the flagstone terrace. He paused, glanced into the room behind the French windows. The man he had come to see was inside.

Some of the old bitterness was in him, making him look young and petulant as he pulled open the double doors that led into the library.

JUDGE Henry Miller slid a manicured hand into the open desk drawer for the Smith & Wesson .38 that reposed there. The move was instinctive.

The Kid said, "I wouldn't, Judge."

Judge Miller hesitated. There was twenty feet of space between him and the Kid—and six years! Recognition rocked him back in his chair. Then he came to his feet, hand outstretched. "Gary—Gary, my boy! You came back!"

The Kid ignored the hand.

Judge Miller sensed the coldness in the Kid. He dropped his hand. "Come in Gary—come in. I'll have Juan bring you a drink." He stepped back to the library wall and pulled on a long tasseled cord. Somewhere in the house a bell tinkled.

He was a tall, patrician man of about forty with gray temples, a well-trimmed mustache and a goatee. His spare figure was clad in a richly embroidered coat and he looked like a Spanish don. But the Kid knew that his courtliness cloaked a calculating nature and it made his affability trite and counterfeit to his ears.

"Tell me about yourself, Gary," he smiled, waving to a chair. "Tell me how you've been all these years."

Gary Miller shrugged. "It has been a long time," he agreed. Involuntarily he glanced up to twin oil portraits on the wall over the desk.

One was that of a gay young woman he had never known save by that painting. His mother. The other was a stern-mouthed man he had known well. His father.

Both were dead.

"You're not forgetting I'm wanted for murder," he said, and despite himself there was bitterness in his tone. "Wanted for the killing of a boyhood chum?"

The older man waved a dismissing hand. "I never believed it—you know that. I tried to tell your father that—but he wouldn't listen. He——"

"Helped organize the posse that chased me out of town," the Kid finished. He turned as an old Mexican shuffled into the room. Juan was old and nearsighted and he didn't recognize the lean figure in the library. The Judge ordered in Spanish and Juan disappeared.

"I want the straight of it," Gary said quietly. "How did father die?"

The Judge walked to the patio windows and stared into the garden.

"Rumor said it was Yaegar," the Kid pressed. "That right?"

Judge Miller turned. "I don't know," he said, "I don't know. I was down in Laredo when the trouble started. I—we—" he hesitated, then went on. "Your father and I quarreled shortly after you left. I packed up and took the stage to Laredo.

It was there I heard that Yaegar had crossed the Border and bought out Salters' old place in the Blackrocks. He filed a brand and gathered around him some of the worst killers this side of the Line. Men like Slim Trevor, Red Becker, Sam Insted, Texas Jack."

The Kid nodded, waiting.

"Then he declared range war on the Big Hat. He shoved your father's brand out of the Blackrocks, killed off most of your father's best men. I came back a month before your father was killed . . ."

Juan entered, silent-footed, leaving a tray on the desk. Judge Miller poured Bourbon into two glasses.

"I was here, waiting for your father when he was killed. He and Sheriff Vestry had gone out early that morning to see Blake, your father's foreman at the Big Hat. He rode back alone that same night. With a knife in his back. How he lived long enough to reach the house I'll never know. He was unconscious when I pulled him from saddle. He never gained his senses."

GARY listened without visible emotion. He had never gotten along with his father but it had been his fault as much as the older man's. He had been a wild kid, hard to handle, and the elder Miller had reined him too hard.

He felt regret now, and because it was too late anger ran a bitter course in him. He had left things unfinished in this town when as a frightened kid he had run away.

The knowledge was in him as he reached in his shirt pocket and drew out the letter Judge Miller had mailed to the Unholy Three.

His uncle took the letter without a word. Then he crumpled it in his fist. "You're one of them. You're the Kid?"

Gary nodded. "We got your letter a week ago."

His uncle shook a bewildered head. "And I thought you had come back because——" He did not finish. Instead, he asked coldly, "What do you intend to do?"

"What we were hired to do. But first I want to know the situation here."

"You'll be bucking Yaegar," the Judge

answered. "He runs the Diamond Cross brand on range that belonged to your father. A few weeks ago he bought out the old *Palacio Verde* and moved into town. It's a sort of headquarters for his killers when they're in Del Rio." He turned abruptly, bent over his desk and found a slip of paper he had tucked under the desk blotter."

"I made this out to give to the gun trio I had sent for. It's a list of the top men with Yaegar. Get those men and you break the power of the outfit—the wolves that are harrying the Big Hat will break up and scatter."

The Kid read the names without expression. Then he folded the slip, tucked it into his pocket. He said, "Is old Judd Vestry still wearin' a badge in Del Rio?"

"He's wearing Yaegar's badge," his uncle answered. "And his two deputies are Yaegar's riders." The Judge's lips curled with distaste. "He did a lot of talking in the old days about law and order. He was your father's friend, until Yaegar came back. But he turned—like they all did——"

The Kid said, "Ill be seeing you——"

"Wait!" Judge Miller came to him. "The Big Hat's yours now, Gary. What do you intend to do with it?"

"Save what's left of it!" the Kid answered levelly. He stepped back to the patio doors, nodded coldly, and went out.

V

GARY MILLER RODE DOWN the old Mission Trail to Del Rio with the sun fading on his back. The town sprawled out before him—an L shaped cluster of dobes along the bend of the river. But he was remembering it as a youngster when he had stolen from his bedroom under the light of a sickle moon and gone prowling through the narrow streets. He had been wild then. He had changed little since. He felt the old unrest in him now—and he tried to lay a mental finger on just what had brought him back.

It was more than a letter to the Unholy Three asking for the famed gun trio's help—more even than revenge.

It was Ann Vestry he had really come back to see. Ann Vestry, sister of the man he was believed to have killed in a drunken brawl.

In all the years since he had run away she had been there, way back in his thoughts.

He didn't know if she believed he had killed Bob. He knew old Judd did. The sheriff had looked upon him as a wild kid who would come to no good. He had tried to keep Bob away from him, and when Bob had been killed the lawman had not stopped to weigh the evidence. Bob had been his only son, and old Judd had taken a fierce pride in the boy.

Gary remembered that night. How it had happened.

He had slipped out of his room, over the adobe wall and made his way down to Del Rio. He and his father had quarreled, and he had been bitter and determined to run away. Bob Vestry had arranged to meet him in Vestry Square and together they planned to head east and join the Texas Rangers.

They had gone to Pedro's *Cantina Reale*—they had gone there before—and buying a bottle had gone upstairs to one of the private rooms. Gary drank a lot and raged against his father's tyranny. Young Bob had tried to quiet him. Then the shot had come through the open window.

It had all been rather blurred to Gary. The suddenness of it, and the liquor, had stupefied him. When he had recovered sufficiently to move he had stumbled to the window, fired at a shadow he barely saw vanishing around a corner of the veranda.

Bob was dead when he bent over him. He heard voices coming up the stairs and he reacted like a kid. He had climbed out and run home.

The sheriff came for him that night. From his room overlooking the yard Gary had seen him. His father had gone out to meet him, and the shred of conversation that had passed between them lingered in Gary like acid in a wound.

"Thet damn kid!" His father had exploded. "He's gone too far this time, Judd—too far. Murder! By Gawd, I hope you see thet he swings for it——"

Gary had not waited to hear more. He slipped out the back way, circled around to the front gate, and while the sheriff was inside the house, mounted the lawman's cayuse. And that was the way he had left Del Rio, six years ago . . .

He was passing Yaegar's now, and he shrugged off the old memories, feeling the weight of what he and the Doc and Jackson would be bucking disturbed him. *Yaegar!* All over the Southwest that name was whispered in connection with a gun skill that was legend.

Where did the law stand in this fight between the Big Hat and Yaegar's Diamond Cross? Where did Judd stand in this at all?

Gary remembered the lawman as a fighter. He had admired the lean, gun-toting sheriff more than he had his father. He had even tried to pattern himself after the man. Somehow, the picture his uncle of the sheriff gave him did not fit.

He had to know first, before he joined the Doc and Jackson. He had to know where the law stood.

THE roan tossed its head as he swung it down a side street. He rode down a cobbled alley and swung west toward Texas Square. A block from the law office he dismounted, tied the roan to a sagging board fence, and went forward on foot.

He knew this town by instinct, the back yards as well as the main thoroughfare. He hurdled a low adobe wall and walked swiftly to the back door of the law office.

A stable cast its shadow across the yard, a horse stamped uneasily in a stall. Flies buzzed over the manure pile.

Gary knocked on the door with the butt of his Colt.

A chair scraped inside the law office. Boots made a dragging sound on worn flooring.

The door started to open and the Kid stepped up and shoved his shoulder against it. It held for an instant, then swung in, and the Kid was inside, kicking it shut, the Colt levelling in his fist.

The sheriff, off balance, dropped his left hand in a clumsy move for his holstered gun. The Kid moved in and twisted the

weapon from him and was surprised at the ease with which he accomplished it. He thrust the Colt inside his belt, reached around and slid the sheriff's other weapon from holster.

He had moved fast, but still the surprise lingered in him. It had been too easy.

He said harshly, "Relax, Judd. I want to talk to you."

The sheriff faced him, hunch-shouldered and bitter, and the thought came to Gary, with a shock, that the years had broken Judd. He was a small man with pale eyes in a seamed, bitter face—his bleached brows stood out against the burnt leatheriness of his features.

"Damn you, hombre—what are you up to——" Recognition choked him. "Gary Miller!"

He lunged for the Kid, ignoring the levelled Colt.

The Kid hit him. He hated to do it. The lawman went down on his face.

Someone who had been dozing on the front porch came awake at the sound. Chair legs thudded. Boots scuffed. A surly voice questioned, "Judd! What's going on in there?"

The Kid tossed the sheriff's guns on a cot by the wall as he paced to the front door. The sheriff was stirring. He got to his hands and knees and shook his head. "Baker!" he called thickly. "Look out——"

Baker was half way inside, dragging at his gun, when the Kid brought the side of his Colt down on his head. Baker slumped. The Kid dragged his limp body inside and heeled the door shut.

Judd had regained his feet. His eyes focussed on a gun rack across the room and he made a lunge for it.

The Kid beat him to it. He caught the sheriff's wrists, swung him around, jammed him against the desk. The lawman struggled like a man gone mad. And then, abruptly, he slumped, the strength going out of him, leaving him limp.

The Kid stepped back, glanced at Baker. The deputy was out cold.

Judd's breathing sounded raspingly in the office. But hate was a living thing in his eyes.

"What—do—you—want?" he gasped. "Why did—you come back?"

"To do what you should have done, long ago," the Kid answered. "Clean up Del Rio."

The lawman sneered. "That's big talk from a wild kid who killed my boy in a drunken brawl six years ago."

"You believe that, don't you?" Gary asked, quietly.

"I never doubted it," the lawman grated. "I tried to keep Bob away from you—but he was a kid and thought more of you than of me—" Rage choked him. "*Why did you come back?*"

"To get Yaeger!" the Kid snapped.

"To find out who killed my father. And—to see Ann."

The lawman flinched as though struck a blow. "Ann! Damn you, Gary—I'd kill her first before——"

"Before what?" the Kid interrupted harshly. "What right have you to judge me? Where do you stand between Yaeger and the Big Hat? You were my father's friend—but you sold him out. When you did that you sold out that badge you're wearing. You sold out the honest people in Del Rio——"

"To hell with this badge!" the old lawman said. His voice was thick. "To hell with Del Rio!"

Gary sneered. "That's what I wanted to know. Where you stood."

He stepped to the desk, took the keys that hung from a hook, and jerked a thumb toward an empty cell. "I'm taking over, Judd."

He paced to the cell, unlocked it. "Get in!" he snapped.

The lawman glanced at Baker who was just beginning to stir. His gaze moved to the Colts on the cot.

Gary's voice was bleak, "Don't try it!"

The lawman walked to the cell. Gary reached out as he passed and ripped the badge from his vest. "You won't be needing this, Judd." He locked the door after the old, bitter man.

Baker was still half unconscious when the Kid dragged him to another cell and plopped him on a straw mattress. He was coming out, locking the door, when the front door opened.

HE WHIRLED, his Colt flipping up. But a miracle of quick thinking kept him from firing.

The girl in the doorway stood rooted, staring at him, surprised recognition wiping the shock from her eyes. "Gary!"

The Kid nodded. "Hello, Ann."

He was seeing the change in the sheriff's daughter—noting the steadiness of her blue eyes—sensing the intangible difference the years had wrought in her.

She had evidently been out riding. There was dust on her tailored riding jacket and she carried a short riding crop in her hand. She looked cool and trim and more beautiful than he had remembered her. He wanted to tell her, but the look in her eyes stalled him.

"Six years. Gary," she said. "And all the time I knew you'd come back." A cold distaste crept into her voice. "But I didn't expect this"

"I'm sorry, Ann."

"Dad was right," the girl went on. "You were wild—wild and reckless and hard. But Bob liked you. And I couldn't believe that you killed him——"

"Then don't!" the Kid broke in roughly. "Because I didn't kill Bob——"

"Ann!" the sheriff interrupted harshly. "Ann! Don't listen to him——"

"I didn't kill Bob," the Kid repeated coldly. "I came back to tell you that," he added. "I don't know who fired the shot that killed him—maybe I'll never know. But I didn't do it, Ann."

From the cell old Judd grated, "Damn you, Gary—leave her alone with your lies!"

The Kid looked at Ann, hoping for some sign that would indicate she believed him. He found none in her stony stare.

"All right," he said, resignedly. "All right, Ann."

He walked past her to the door.

The girl stopped him with his hand on the latch. "You can't keep father in a cell——"

"I have a job to do," Gary answered. His voice was bitter. He opened his hand and looked at the badge in his palm. "You were right, Ann. I was a wild kid—and I didn't change much. But this will sur-

prise you. I've traveled a rough road since I left Del Rio. But I kept on the side of the law. And it was the memory of your father that kept me straight. Whenever I thought of Del Rio I thought of Judd Vestry—the squarest lawman this side of the Pecos.”

He looked at Judd, silent and bitter in his cell, and laughed. “And then, as far north as Denver, I began to hear the stories. Judd Vestry had turned crooked! Judd Vestry had thrown in with Yaegar!”

“They lie!” Color whipped into Ann's face. “Dad—tell him the truth! Tell him——”

The thin, biting voice of the old lawman interrupted. “What if I have? What if I have quit bucking Yaegar?”

Gary shrugged. “Nothing, Judd.”

Ann pleaded. “Gary—don't leave Dad locked up. You don't know——”

“I'll have my hands full with Yaegar,” the Kid said roughly. “I don't want to be fighting him as well.” He looked back at Judd, and for a moment his eyes held the bitter ones of the old lawman. Then he pinned the sheriff's badge on his shirt.

“I'm taking over, Judd,” he said, Gary Miller—self-appointed sheriff of Del Rio.”

VI

THE KID PAUSED JUST INSIDE Pedro's swinging doors, conscious of the eyes that focused on the badge on his shirt. Wearing that badge meant that every Yaegar gunman in town would be challenging it.

The cantina had not changed in the interval he had been away—nor had Pedro. The huge cantina owner was behind the bar, tending to a half dozen customers, and his glance at the Kid was cursory. Strangers were not new to the cantina, and evidently the years had changed Gary from the hard-lipped youngster Pedro had known.

The Doc was sitting in a card game at a corner table. His eyes lifted to meet the Kid's, but he showed no sign of recognition. Jackson was not present. That fact disturbed Gary as he paced to the bar; he knew the big man's moods and he sensed something had gone wrong.

He breasted the bar close to where stairs led to the second floor, and he was aware of them, seeing, with a part of his mind, the two kids who had gone up those steps six years ago. He had nursed a hunch that Pedro knew something about those happenings; knew who it was who had followed him and Bob and waited by that open veranda window. When he had more time he was going to ask Pedro . . .

A lanky man with a low slung gun and a cigar stub in a corner of his mouth turned as the Kid came up to the bar. He had tawny hair that matched close-set eyes and he looked Gary over with slow, insolent regard.

“Badges are mighty unpopular in this town, stranger,” he said. He had a nasal voice that grated on Gary's ears. “You aimin' to keep wearin' it?”

The Kid faced him, setting himself for the trouble that was coming. This was Sam Insted. He recognized the Tombstone killer from descriptions he had seen on several county posters.

He said, “Yeah—I'm aimin' to make it popular.” He felt a bitter impatience drive him. “You objecting?”

The men flanking them at the counter edged away in a swift flurry of movement. Pedro, from behind the bar, said, “Sam—no trouble. Not in here. I——”

“Shut up” Sam growled. He did not take his eyes from the Kid. “I don't like badges,” he sneered. “Specially when a tinhorn lawman wears it. I aim to take it off an' teach you——”

The kid slapped him contemptuously while the gunman was still talking.

The palm of his hand spread the cigar stub across Sam's face. For a split instant the killer was off balance, the shreds of tobacco making him look foolish . . .

Then he reached for his Colt.

The Kid's .45 jammed its hard muzzle into his stomach before he cleared leather. Sam wrapped his long body around it, the breath whooshing out of him. The Kid clubbed him alongside the head.

Sam folded himself in a neat heap by the bar. The Kid whirled, the Colt backing the blazing challenge in his eyes. “Any other hombre in here don't like this badge step up and say so.”

There was a most unusual silence.

Pedro eased his huge bulk against the shelves. He was looking at the Kid, trying to pin down the familiarity of that lithe, dusty figure, the hard brown face, the lick of brown hair that had come down over one blue eye.

He said, "You the new sheriff."

"New and self appointed," the Kid answered coldly. "And I'm setting up a few new regulations as of today. One of them is a warning to all Yaegar riders. Get out of Del Rio—and stay out!"

"All of them?" a voice asked softly. "All of them, Gary Meeler?"

THE KID eased his back against the counter and looked for the voice that had recognized him. He found it in the man who had come catlike down the stairs. The man who was now waiting on the landing where the stairs hooked and went out of sight to the floor above.

"Jose!" he said, and memory fitted that gaudily dressed figure into the pattern of his youth. The swaggering, bitter-tongued kid who hated him because he was a Miller.

Jose waited on the stairs, sensing the eyes on him. He played up to an audience the way he always had. He was a Castinado, and the arrogance in him had crystallized around his gun skill.

"You remember eh?" he said softly. "Jose Martinez y Castinado—the ragged, little *muchacho* raised by Padre Tomas. You remember?"

Gary remembered. Jose, the hard, bitter kid who had scorned the Miller helping hand when his father was killed in a stampede of Miller cattle. His mother dead, he had been left an orphan—and kindly old Padre Tomas had taken him in. But neither the soft words of the padre, nor the influence of the cross he had grown up under had changed this kid who remembered that his father had been a Castinado—and that the Castinados had once owned the Miller acres.

He was younger than Gary by two years, but there was youth in neither of them. Watching him Gary knew words would not deter this man from his course. And he had a momentary doubt—a doubt

he had never felt before—whether he was good enough to stop Jose.

"I wait for you seex years," Jose said. "I knew you would come back to Del Rio. You are a Meeler.—and I am the last of the Castinados."

It was melodrama, drawn out for the sake of his audience—but Gary knew it was Jose's way. And his own mood, cold and bitter through the years, rejected it.

"You one of Yaegar's men?" he asked curtly.

"I work for Yaegar, si," Jose answered. "Together we smash the Beeg Hat—"

"No," Gary said. "Neither you nor Yaegar will smash the Big Hat, Jose."

"You theenk so, eh?" Jose was sneering, confident of himself. The room was quiet. Never had he had a more attentive audience.

"I weel tell you things, Gary—before you die. I weel tell you that I know who kill yore father. It was not I—though I would have done it. And I know who keel Bob Vestry. I know, 'cause I see heem. But I keep quiet—for seex years I keep quiet. Waitin' for you—"

"You talk a lot, Jose," Gary said. "But you don't say much. Spill yore piece an' make your play!"

Jose laughed. "First I weel tell you about the Unholy Three." He nodded as the Kid's eyes narrowed. "Si, Gary—we knew you were coming." He glanced at the table where the Doc was sitting, silent and watchful. "That ees why yore beeg compadre, Jackson, ees not here. He is a prisoner in Yaegar's."

Gary tensed, sensing the climax of Jose's speech. This explained why Jackson had not shown up. This was the reason Sam Insted had been waiting. His eyes caught the strained attitudes of the two men at the Doc's table, the stiff stance of the lone hombre at the far corner. This was what Yaegar had stacked up against them.

"Eet was Yaegar's idea," Jose sneered.

"Weeth you out of the way the Big Hat is hees. But not even Yaegar weel take over the land of the Castinados . . ."

Gary said, "You were always sure of that, Jose—wasn't you? Even when you

were a kid? I used to whip you a half dozen times a week——”

“Thees time eet weel be different,” Jose snapped. “Thees time——”

The cantina doors banged open. Ann Vestry paused just inside, her face white and tense. Her eyes found Gary, without sensing the import of that unnatural stillness. “Gary——”

And that was when Jose went for his gun.

THE KID shot twice and was turning away as Jose buckled slowly, an amazed look on his face, and fell down the stairs. Blood trickled down through the Kid’s beard stubble from a gash under his left eye.

Jose had come that close to making good his boast!

Across the room the Doc had his Colt out, holding two very surprised Yaegar men stiff and unmoving at the same table.

The lone gunnie, planted as a sleeper in the corner, reacted to Jose’s death too late.

The Kid’s shot broke his arm, spun him against the wall. He dropped his Colt and caught his wrist, blood seeping through his fingers.

The Kid stood over Sam Insted, his hard eyes watching the rest of the Cantina owners. Pedro was an unmoving bulk behind the bar. Ann Vestry had shrunk back against the wall, whitefaced and uncertain, and the Kid felt desire to go to her, take her in his arms, reassure her.

The impulse faded.

“Take their irons, Doc,” he called authoritatively across the room. “We’re filling a couple of cells tonight.”

The killer at his feet was still out cold as he bent and extracted his guns. Straightening, he backed his order with a levelled Colt. “All right, you two,” he addressed the two gunnies at the Doc’s table. “Come here and pick him up!”

They obeyed. The Yaegar man with the broken arm was herded into the group. The Doc came up beside the Kid and looked briefly at Jose’s slumped body at the foot of the stairs.

The Kid turned to the girl. “Ann,” he said. His voice lost its hardness. “Ann——what did you want?”

The girl seemed to shake off a numbness. She came to him, avoiding the sight of Jose’s body. “I wanted to tell you that I believed you——about not killing Bob,” she said simply. “I wanted to tell you this——before——” She turned then and looked at Jose, and shuddered.

The Kid said, “Thank you, Ann.”

The girl looked up. “Blake’s in town. You remember your father’s foreman? He’s in town with the last of the Big Hat riders, Gary. He’s come for a showdown with Yaegar!”

“Where is he?”

“At my father’s office.” She put out a hand and touched his arm. “Gary—I’m going to tell you the truth. My father never backed Yaegar. But he didn’t buck him——because he couldn’t. Gary—he’s helpless. He’s been helpless for more than a year. Only Doctor Barnes, and Blake, know. He suffered a stroke a year ago. Barnes told him he’d have to keep quiet, keep from getting excited, if he wanted to live. The stroke left him with a partially paralyzed right arm. He’s not the same man you knew, Gary——believe me!”

The Kid nodded. “I believe you, Ann.”

The Doc interrupted. “What are we going to do about Jackson, Kid?”

The Kid turned. “We’re seeing Blake first, Doc. If they’re holding Jackson in Yaegar’s—we’ll get him out. We’re cleaning house tonight!”

VII

LARRY BLAKE WAS A TALL, raw-boned man of about fifty. He was talking to Judd when Gary, backing up the procession of Yaegar’s men came in.

He stared as the Kid unlocked the remaining cells and herded the Diamond Cross gunmen into them. They deposited Sam Insted on a cot. The man with a broken arm asked for a doctor.

Blake had been with the Big Hat longer than Gary—he had known Gary’s mother—and the ranch was home to him. He was staring at the Kid now, noting the difference in him, the tempered steel in this youngster who had been a wild one.

He swung away from Judd’s cell and

came to him, his eyes holding briefly on the dried blood on Gary's cheek, the star pinned to his shirt.

"Judd told me you were back, Gary. Told me you had taken over——"

The Kid nodded. He didn't know how Blake would take his return—he didn't know how he stood with his father's old foreman, or with the six grim-faced riders behind him.

Blake held out a horny hand. "I'm glad you're back, Gary. Glad you'll be taking over the Big Hat." He laughed shortly. "What's left of it."

The Kid took the hand. "What is left of it, Larry?"

The rawboned foreman jerked a thumb to the men at his back. "This!" He took a deep breath. "We've been buckin' Yaegar for two years. Fightin' a losing fight. With yore father gone an' Judd out of——" He stopped and looked back at the silent, bitter lawman in the cell.

The Kid nodded and walked to the cell and looked in at the sheriff. "Ann told me about you. I'm sorry——"

Ann was beside him. "It was best that he knew, Dad," she said.

Judd looked steadily at the Kid, his hate uncompromising. "When you let me out of here, Gary—I'm going to kill you. As soon as I can lay a hand on a gun——"

Gary turned away.

The Doc was by the door, and suddenly the Kid remembered that the man knew nothing of this. He and Jackson had ridden to Del Rio with him, to do a job. He could see the questions in the Doc's eyes.

He said, "I didn't come back to take over the Big Hat, Larry. I never wanted to come back at all." He looked past Blake, to Ann, and his next words to her.

"When I left Del Rio I was a kid, running away from a murder. I didn't kill Bob Vestry that night—but the sheriff thinks I did—and so did my father. I left Del Rio that way—a wild and bitter kid. I didn't know where I was going. And then I met the Doc there," he made a motion to the small man in the black coat—"and Jackson. We had a lot in common—so we rode together. A lot of people know us by another name. The Unholy Three!"

He saw Ann start, and past her, through the bars, Judd sneered.

Blake shrugged. "We knew that all along, Kid. Yore father knew—and yore uncle——"

The Kid stiffened. "Uncle Henry knew——"

Blake nodded. "More than a year ago. I tried to talk yore father into askin' you to come back. To help us——"

The Kid wasn't listening. He was remembering the surprise in his uncle's face.

Then the Big Hat's foreman's voice drummed in his ears. "So Judge Miller finally sent for you?" Blake's voice was bitter. "It's a little late. They killed Randy and Martin this morning—we found their bodies at the river linehouse. That's when we held a pow-wow and decided to come to town for a showdown."

One of the men behind him jerked a thumb in the direction of the cells. "Looks like the Kid got off to a good start." He came forward and put out a sinewy hand. "Name's Landers. Joined the Big Hat after you left, Gary. But I'll be glad to ride for you."

The Kid took the hand. "Glad to have you, Landers." He turned to Blake. "How many men with Yaegar?"

Blake looked toward the cell. "Five thet count. The rest——" He shrugged disparagingly. "You got Sam. But there's Jose——"

"Jose's dead," the Kid said. "I killed him—in Pedro's."

Blake's eyes widened. "You killed Jose Castinado?"

The Kid nodded. "That leaves——"

"Texas Jack, Red Becker an' Slim Trevor," Blake filled in.

"Slim's dead, too," the Doc said. He was by the door, a small, unobtrusive figure. "Jose killed Slim, just before you came in," he told the kid.

Hope lightened Blake's eyes. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "That leaves only Becker an Texas Jack with Yaegar. Gary—we've got a chance—a good chance—to wipe the slate clean——"

The Kid nodded. He turned to the cell where Sam Insted was sitting on a cot, holding his head in his hands.

"Where's Jackson?" he asked the killer.

"Go to hell!" Sam snapped.

Ann's voice suddenly overrode Gary's reply. "Wait! What's that?"

Someone was yelling outside. "Fire! Fire!"

The Doc opened the door and looked out. He turned, his face holding a curious look.

"Yaegar's place," he said. "It's burnin'—"

The Kid whirled. The others were already crowding out. Ann's voice stopped him.

He turned, paced back. The keys jingled as he handed them to her. "In case I don't come back, Ann."

Then he was gone.

THE LIGHT was in Jackson's eyes and it seemed to accentuate the throb in his head. He shifted his powerful body and tried the bonds that held his wrists. They were loosening.

That second floor in Yaegar's where he was being held a captive had only one door, one window, and a table. Three men were playing a desultory game of stud poker. One of them was Becker.

Jackson could see that square face with the bleached brows and the light, cruel eyes. Becker was looking sleepily at his cards.

Yaegar sat facing Jackson. He was a slight, blond man, almost dapper in appearance when contrasted with Becker. But he had a vibrant deadliness about him that dominated the others.

Becker pushed his hand into the discarded cards. "Sam should be along by now," he said.

Yaegar nodded and looked at Jackson on the cot. The big man was in the half shadows and he was very quiet. "Soon as Sam shows up we'll ride up to the Miller place. His eyes narrowed and he smiled, like a cat. "We'll see the Judge—for the final payoff."

Texas Jack shifted nervously. "I don't trust Jose," he said. "He's been playin' a lone hand all along. What if he and Sam don't work together?"

Yaegar shrugged. "I'll handle him." He tapped a card on the table before turning it over. "But first we'll let Jose set-

tle with Gary Miller. I know Jose. He hates the Millers."

Someone rapped hurriedly on the door.

Yaegar shifted in his chair and said, "Come in."

The man who entered evidently had bad news. He looked nervously around the room, avoiding Yaegar's eyes. He said, "Jose's dead. Sam's in the lockup. So're Myers, Rivers an' Steele!"

Yaegar came to his feet like a startled cat. "What?"

The gunnie told them what had happened. "Sam never had a chance. Jose was good—but not good enough." He took a deep breath. "An' that ain't all. Blake's in town—with half a dozen Big Hat riders!"

Texas Jack whirled. "You should have handled it, Steve!" he snapped. "I told you this Kid was good—too good for Sam—"

Yaegar's face was a twisted mask. "There's still time. Time to smash this —" He whirled on the man who had brought the news. "Get the rest of the boys. Jim an' Bigfoot are in the Emporium. Get 'em here. Downstairs." He sneered. So Blake rode into town for a showdown? All right—we'll see that he gets it!"

Texas Jack was already on the way out, following the gunnie. Yaegar paused in the doorway. Becker was still sitting at the table, shuffling cards. "Comin', Red?"

Becker nodded. He kept shuffling the deck. "Right away. Soon as I take care of—him."

Yaegar nodded. "Make it fast!" he snapped, and closed the door.

IN THE half darkness Jackson smiled—a grim, savage smile. His hands were free.

Becker played with the cards. "So you found me?" he said casually. "Trailed me all over hell." He laughed without mirth. "An' now you found me."

Jackson was quiet, gathering himself. Fifteen years of search had come to an end. Fifteen years ago he had been a peaceful farmer, eking out a living on the Platte flatlands. With a wife and a grown son.

Becker worked for the big Bar T ranch. Trouble had started over water. An then, one lazy afternoon, Becker and a half dozen Bar T riders had ridden up, wearing special deputy badges. Becker was looking for Jackson's boy. He said the kid had killed a Bar T rider that morning, at the Platte crossing. And in Jackson's yard, from the big oak in front of the house, he had strung the youngster up while Jackson's wife looked on, and Jackson, clubbed into unconsciousness had been unable to prevent it.

The shock of that had killed Jackson's wife.

Now, with Becker only five paces away from him Jackson's big hands began to close, anticipating the squat man's neck under his fingers.

Becker tossed the cards on the table and rose. The lamplight outlined his stocky frame, the gun belts that crisscrossed at his waist.

"Damn you!" Becker suddenly snarled. "I ran from you for near fifteen years. Me—Red Becker. Ran from——"

It was then that Jackson swung off the cot and leaped for the snarling man in a savage, tigerish bound.

Becker drew instinctively. He fired once. Then the big man was on him, bearing him back.

They fell against the table, overturning it, splintering it. The lamp smashed, and a trail of fire leaped at the spattered oil.

Jackson got his hands around Becker's throat. His huge body pinned the squat man down. No sound came from him, but the red flames that began to lick hungrily at the dry wooden walls outlined the dark savagery of his features.

Becker threshed wildly, trying to free his gun hand. His arm came around, but the big man caught it and twisted it back until it snapped. Becker gave an animal cry of pain, broke loose and stumbled to his feet.

Sheets of flame were licking across the window. Jackson lunged after Becker and the outlaw turned and kicked him in the face. The big man fell against Becker, his big hands sliding down the other's body. They clamped on Becker's leg. Becker came down on top of him. Jack-

son doubled Becker's leg under him and began to twist . . .

Becker made a blubbering sound of pain. Jackson suddenly shifted and his right arm slid around Becker's neck and with a violent heave he got Becker under him. His arm was still around Becker's neck. His other had come around and clamped on his wrist.

The slug in his chest was burning hotter than the roaring flames in the room. He felt Becker jerk and thresh under him and he smiled . . .

He was still smiling as a flame-sheathed board fell from the ceiling across them.

VIII

YAEGAR'S UPPER FLOORS were flame-wreathed when Gary and the Big Hat riders broke into the Square. The Kid paused, his face hard in the fire glow.

The Doc stared up at the flames. "Jackson!" he whispered. "Jackson's in there——" and started to run across the Square.

Shadowy figures were spilling from the doors. One of them cut down at the Doc and the oldster fired back. The Yaegar gunman staggered and fell down the short steps.

Another jumped over his sprawled form, firing as he landed. The Doc jerked. The Kid reached his side and cut down at the spread-legged gunnie making his stand in front of Yaegar's.

Texas Jack sank to his knees.

The Doc shot as he shuffled forward, finishing the outlaw as he knelt in the glare of the burning building.

The Kid reached him before he mounted the steps. "Doc!" he snapped. "You can't go in there. The whole thing'll come down any minute now!"

The Doc jerked free of him. He lunged forward and disappeared through Yaegar's swinging doors.

Trickles of smoke trailed across the empty barroom. In the long mirror behind the counter the Doc saw his reflection—vague and hunched over—and then he saw Yaegar.

The outlaw leader was coming down the stairs. He saw the Doc as the oldster

jerked up his Colt. He reacted violently, not trying for his weapons. The Doc missed as Yaegar spun off the steps, vaulted the hand railing, and vanished through a door in the back of the saloon.

The Doc followed. Vaguely, through the smoke that thickened the gloom, he heard Gary call. But he didn't stop. A grimly fatalistic mood was in him, driving him. He wanted to meet the vaunted Border killer face to face . . . wanted to match his gun speed against Yaegar's.

There was less smoke in the back room, and shuffling across it he found a door open. He stumbled out and the cool night air hit him, clearing his choking lungs.

He paused, peered unsteadily into the shifting gloom of that back yard. A horse snorted, and he whirled, Colt cutting up.

Yaegar was coming out of the barn, straddling an iron gray horse he had not bothered to saddle. He saw the Doc at the same moment, and he swung the animal toward him, intent on riding that puny figure down.

The Doc stumbled as he cut up with his Colt. Yaegar's shot spun him around. He spraddled his legs, tried to lift his gun again. Yaegar drove the gray into him. The animal's heavy shoulder knocked the Doc aside as if he was a stuffed doll . . .

Gary found him a few minutes later. The Kid knelt beside the sprawled figure and turned him over.

The Doc was dead.

He stood there, feeling the heat from the burning building hot against his face. Landers and a couple of Big Hat riders came out as Gary straightened.

They looked down at the body, sensing the feeling in the Kid. One of them said, "Better get out of here, Gary. The walls will be coming down any minnit now."

Gary turned. Jackson was in there, somewhere. But it was too late to do anything. There was only one thing he could do. Make Yaegar pay.

Landers tried to stop him as he headed for the barn. The Kid shook him off. Two minutes later Gary came out, leading a frightened roan that plunged wildly at the sight of the flames.

The Big Hat men stepped back as the roan reared, fought the Kid. Gary took

control with a rough hand. The roan ceased its frightened plunging, crossed the flame-lighted yard at a run and hurdled the low fence.

Ahead of him, on the Mission road, Yaegar was lashing a madly running gray . . .

THE FIRE in Del Rio was plainly visible from the Miller house, standing in patriarchal aloofness on the hill.

Judge Miller watched it from the library windows, a self-satisfied smile on his lips. It remained on his lips as a rider came into view on the trail, but it changed, subtly, and matched the sudden calculation in his eyes.

He turned, walked to the heavy mahogany desk, and from a side drawer he took out a snub nosed .38. It fitted nicely up his loose sleeve and the heavy elastic held it up even when he lowered his arm.

He straightened, rang for Juan.

He was toying with his drink, poured from the decanter Juan had fetched, when Yaegar came, stepping like a ghost through the French doors that led into the patio.

Judge Miller turned, as if startled. Then a look of relief embossed itself on his face. "Steve!" he said. "Steve—what happened?"

Yaegar leaned his pain-wracked body against the library wall. In the flickering light from the candelabras on the mantle Miller could see the blood stain on the outlaw's bloody shirt front, the pinched whiteness of that cruel face.

"You played yore cards right!" Yaegar grated. "Damn you—you played us off against each other—while you sat in the middle and waited!"

Miller frowned. "Steve—you're wrong."

"You sent for the Kid!" the outlaw snarled.

"Only to get him here so you or one of yore men could get him out of the way," Miller answered. "You know that. It was part of our agreement. With Gary dead I became sole heir of the Miller estate. And you'd get your cut——"

"I'm gettin' my cut now, you damn doublecrosser!" Yaegar's Colt menaced the Judge. "I'm takin' all the cash you have

in that safe. An' there better be enough. Now get up an' get it! I'm through palaverin'!"

The Judge looked hurt. "Steve—I'll give you the money. But you're wrong about—"

"Get it!"

The Judge got to his feet and walked to the library wall where an old Persian tapestry hid the wall safe. Drawing the tapestry aside he said. "Steve, there's only—" He turned slowly, as if to protest.

And he shot Yaegar, quite calmly, through the heart.

He smiled thinly as he bent over the outlaw. "So you thought you were a killer," he said softly. "You were crude, Yaegar, crude . . ."

He stiffened as a sound in the patio reached him.

Then he straightened, sliding the .38 up his sleeve again. He was looking down at Yaegar's crumpled body when Gary stepped through the French doors and stopped.

The Judge looked up then, relief breaking across the fear he had put in his face. "Gary," he said. "Gary—I'm glad you came."

The Kid moved warily into the room, staring from the empty-handed Judge to the body. He holstered his Colt and said, "Who killed—" Then he stopped.

He was looking into his uncle's levelled .38. Behind that gun the man seemed to change. It was a ruthless man who stood there, getting ready to kill again.

"I shot him, Gary," the man said. "Killed him, like I'm going to kill you. Yaegar was right—it was all part of a plan. A plan I had worked out, long ago."

Gary Miller stood beside Yaegar's body, conscious that Yaegar's Colt was not two feet away.

"You might as well know," his uncle said. "I killed your father. Yes," he nodded. "I played my cards right. I came back from Laredo, after teaming up with Yaegar to gain control of the Big Hat. I killed your father and passed it off on Yaegar. Then I sent for you. I

wanted you back so Yaegar could kill you. But he fumbled the job and now I'll have to do it myself."

The Kid was remembering things now, and the pieces were falling into place.

"Then it must have been you," he guessed, "who killed Bob Vestry. It had to be you!"

His uncle nodded. "Yes. I followed you into town that night. I wanted you out of the way. At first I thought of killing you. But framing you seemed best. I thought Judd would see that you hung for it—and he would have—if you hadn't run away. It was easy, killing Bob. I can still remember his face—"

The shot seemed to shock him. He stood straight and stiff, his face rigid with a strange surprise, while the sound filtered slowly out of the library. A little red circle began to spot his white shirt under the embroidered coat. He opened his mouth as if to gulp in air. Then he fell.

OLD JUDD VESTRY came into the library from the patio, a smoking Colt in his hand. The Kid got to his feet and faced the sheriff.

"I heard him," Judd said simply. He looked down at Yaegar. Then he dropped his Colt and brushed his hand over his eyes as if he were very tired.

"Ann let me out," he explained. "But she tried to keep me from coming after you. So I locked her up in my place. I saw you come out of Yaegar's back yard, and followed . . ."

The Kid walked to the desk and poured out a drink. He handed the glass to the lawman and poured another for himself. Then he started to unpin the badge on his shirt.

"Keep it," said Judd. "I'd rather you wore it. I'm through as a lawman. I've been through for a year."

The Kid shrugged. He looked up at the picture of his father over the desk. Then he turned, held up his glass. "To Jackson and to Doc," he said—"an' to Del Rio."

The sheriff matched his smile as he clicked his glass against Gary's.

They drank.



He was prepared. He turned and threw lead.

Marshal Till Midnight

By CALVIN L. BOSWELL

Cartridges lay in their chambers, hands poised over gun butts, fingers curled toward triggers—all waiting for Jeff Randall to unpin his badge.

THE RED-HEADED PUNCHER stood spraddle-legged with the street's thick brown dust cascading off his clothes. But some of that dust still adhered as a dark smear on the side of his sharp face. Violence boiled and bubbled within him as he stared at the big man standing on the board walk in front of the saloon.

"Ain't nobody can throw me around

like that!" he yelled. "Nobody! You hear?"

The big man raised his hand as though to brush the words aside. His motion made the lowering sun gleam on the marshal's star pinned to his vest as he said quietly, "You're in the wrong town, friend. Ride on out—and don't come back."

Breathing hard, the puncher stooped

over and picked up his hat. He beat the dust out of it against the leg of his bleached levis and crammed it on his head. He wiped a hand across his mouth and slowly brought it to his side; and the fingers began to curl and twitch as they came even with the holstered gun at his hip.

The big man watched him stonily. "I wouldn't try it," he warned. "And let me put you straight about Clearwater. This is no longer a trail town, and we don't want troublemakers. Now get going."

His last words jumped through the August heat and fell across the puncher like a bullwhip, drawing the skin tight and grey across his cheekbones. For a moment the man stood fast with the breath hurrying in and out of him and wickedness flaring through his smoky eyes. He opened his mouth as if he were going to speak, then clamped it shut and wheeled, almost running to the hitchrack where a half dozen ponies were tethered. He fumbled at the reins of a big roan with trembling rage-stiffened fingers. The horse fiddled nervously, as though sniffing a latent violence in the air; it tossed its head, showing the whites of its eyes.

The puncher backed it away from the rack and turned it, putting its body between himself and the rock-calm man on the walk. His lips drew thin; his right hand fell, and opened, sliding around the shiny-brown grip of his gun and yanking it upward. He laid the barrel above the saddle and took his shot, seeing the big man move instantly. Out of that motion came a lancing thrust of smoke and sound that barely touched the puncher's perception; and then all of his awareness was gone as a bullet took him high in the forehead—whipping off his hat. He fell heavily against the horse; it snorted and shied, rolling him along its flank and dropping him suddenly in the street's thick dust.

FACES appeared above the saloon's swinging doors and men crowded out upon the walk as the marshal holstered his gun. A slow red stain began to color his right sleeve just above the elbow, but he disregarded this, letting his aloof gaze touch the man who had come out of Web-

ster's barber shop and was now rapidly crossing the street. He paused beside the fallen puncher and gave him a brief look, then raised his head.

"That's one of my hands, Jeff," he said. "You also threw him out of my saloon."

He was a lean man, smooth and dark and dressed in gambler's broadcloth, with a thirst for power in the shine of his eyes and a politician's suavity in his voice. He was Mark Kenna, who two years ago had come to Clearwater a stranger, and who had steadily bought his way in, until now he owned the nearby Tumbling K and a quarter of the town's commercial buildings.

Jeff Randall's wide nostrils flared; it was the only indication of his dislike for this sly, scheming man. "Too bad," he murmured. "If you've been picking up boys like that lately you'd better tell them to go to Paloverde for their fun. She's wide open up there, and rough."

"You're damned quick on the trigger," said Kenna. "If he got out of hand it was no sign you had to kill him."

Randall's big hand rose and fell. "We won't argue the point. He got to talking big and acting tough. I threw him out of the saloon and he drew down on me. That's all."

"It's not all," Kenna persisted.

"If you've got more to say, say it."

Kenna shook his head, and his voice was like wind blowing. "Not now," he murmured. "No. Not now, Jeff."

Randall shrugged. He turned; the men shifted aside, making passage for him, and he moved down the walk, carrying his aloofness like a banner.

DOC MILLER finished dressing Randall's wound and stood back, his weathered face remote and cool.

"Just a gouge," he said. "It may bother you for a few days, but it won't interfere with your draw, and—"

Randall said shortly, "That's enough, Doc." He tossed a half-eagle on the desk and walked out. He went up to his room in the hotel and changed his torn, bloody shirt. Afterwards he glanced at himself in the mirror above the cracked water pitcher, feeling the dry emptiness that vio-

lence had always left within him. In the glass he saw a pair of grey-green eyes under thick jet brows and a heavy-boned face that just missed being homely. It was a proud face, touched with the inevitable loneliness of his calling.

He moved to the window and let his gaze drift out over the board awnings and the flimsy grey buildings of the town. There had been a time when he had seen yipping, yelling trail hands racing up its narrow main street, their dust rolling in the outflung light from the noisy saloons and dance palaces. Violence had been part of his daily routine, then, and the man wearing the star needed a quick gun and ready fists to stay alive; but now all that was gone. It had become a ranchers' town, and the gamblers had moved up the river to Paloverde and taken the girls and the games and the trail herds with them.

Randall reached for his cigarette tobacco and found the sack empty; he swore mildly and went downstairs. He stopped in at Dailey's Emporium, smelling its sweet-spicy coolness as he passed along a counter laid with bolts of cloth. There was a woman in here with a little girl barely past the toddling stage, and two men. The men had been talking volubly; but now the talking came to an abrupt end and he caught the raw glint of hostility in their eyes as they stiffly returned his nod of greeting.

Randall bought his tobacco and went out, pausing in front of the store to roll a cigarette and feeling vaguely ruffled. The little girl came toddling through the doorway and went past him; she climbed down off the board walk and headed straight out toward the center of the street, crowing delightedly and kicking at the flour-fine dust. Randall was after her in three long steps, raising her high in his big hands and setting her back on the walk. Her mother came running out after her and Randall lifted his hat.

"Your youngster was in the street," he murmured. "It could be dangerous if a rider should come along in a hurry."

She was a dark, drawn looking young woman. She snatched up the little girl and said coldly, "I'll thank you to keep

your hands off her," and stalked into the store.

Randall flushed deeply. He put his hat on his head; he stuck the cigarette between his lips and then jerked it out and flung it away from him, suddenly having no taste for a smoke.

He turned up toward George Webster's barber shop. Webster was fat and red faced and as bald as an orange, and ordinarily garrulous. Now there was an unnatural reserve about his greeting as Randall hung his hat on a peg and loosened his collar and lay back in the chair for a shave.

The barber lathered his face in silence and then put a hot towel over it. Randall inhaled the steam and the clean soap-smell and listened to the steady slap-slap of Webster's razor against a stop, feeling a slow tide of puzzled resentment grow steadily within him. He heard the door open; a man's voice drifted inward, speaking angrily to a companion:

"—He's too damned bloodthirsty, I tell you. I don't see why we have to put up with a trigger-quick marshal just because he's from the old days . . ."

THE voice trailed off as Randall became aware of frantic motions above his head. He tore the towel off his face and came upright, seeing the door slam and hearing the quick mutter of retreating footfalls against the board walk.

Webster looked flustered and murmured, "Sorry, Jeff."

"Never mind," Randall said coldly. "Is that what's got into this town?"

"Seems to be. It's kind of got around that you was too quick to kill that fellow."

Randall had his shave and afterwards stood outside; he frowned into the orange light of the dying afternoon and probed these people's resentment with his mind. He knew it hadn't sprung up all at once. Its roots lay deeper than that; they lay in the tough reputation he had acquired during the town's lusty days. A quiet man, he had never gone out of his way to make friends; therefore he had always been held in reserve by the townsfolk. He had accepted their faint apathy as something a man who wears the star must face, and

so had built up his shell of aloofness. But this sudden active resentment was without foundation, and his own inherent sense of fair play demanded that he clear himself.

An idea came to him and he turned, heading for the little building that housed the town's bi-weekly newspaper. He found Elza Bonney, its editor, hunched over his type cases, and said, "Elza, I want you to run an article for me."

Bonney was a little man, wizened and dust-dry, with a pointed face and a sparrow's eyes. He fiddled with a stick of type as Randall went on:

"Seems a rumor is flying around and people have got the wrong idea. I can't fight it except by telling my story, and your paper is the best way I know."

Bonney licked his lips and shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't run it for you."

"Why not?"

"I can't," said Bonney. "I just—can't." His voice thinned out as he saw the rising anger in the big man's eyes.

"You've got a reason. Let's hear it."

"I——"

"Don't lie to me, Elza."

Bonney's narrow shoulders slumped; his head drooped forward. "Mark Kenna," he said. "I borrowed money from him some time back. Needed paper and type. He gave me orders not to help you, Jeff."

"Ah," murmured Randall. He turned and went out and headed for Kenna's office, beyond George Webster's barber shop. He found it locked and stuck his head in Webster's place.

"Where's Mark?" he demanded.

Webster had been shaving. He turned with a razor in his fist, his jowls half covered with lather, and his eyes grew round and lidless at the anger in Randall's face. "Why—up to his ranch, I think. Said he'd be back tomorrow."

TWICE the next morning Randall sought him and found his place empty. He had to settle a neighborly quarrel for a couple of nesters below the river, then, and this occupied him until late afternoon. Toward four o'clock he

came again to Kenna's office, turning in past a lean stranger who stood at indolent ease against the building and stared at him with muddy yellow eyes.

Mark Kenna sat in a spring chair before a roll-top desk with his feet propped on an open drawer. As Randall came in he looked up and said suavely, "Hello, Jeff. I've been expecting you."

Randall made an outflung gesture with his big hand. "What was behind that play of yours yesterday?"

Kenna settled in his chair. "Why," he said, "I guess you've come to the end of your string. The town has outgrown its need for a trigger-quick marshal. That kind of legal murder will no longer be tolerated."

"Don't waste talk, Mark. What's the rest of it?"

"I just returned from a meeting of the town council. They asked me to give you this." Kenna handed Randall a paper. "It's a request for your resignation, effective at midnight."

Randall glanced at it. There was a cold fury in his voice as he said, "A pretty smart play, my friend." He plucked off his star and flung it on the desk. "You and the rest of the councilmen went to a lot of trouble to get that badge, and you're welcome to it—for what it's worth. I've worn it for five years and it has given me nothing."

He turned to leave and saw the man who had been outside now standing in the doorway with a bright-hard grin on his face, his curled fingers almost touching the butt of his gun, and knew that Kenna must have planted him here, expecting trouble.

Mad clear through, Randall walked straight at him. He watched the fellow's jaw muscles go buncy and his nostrils spring wide. He came steadily ahead and then was even with him and shouldering past him, hearing the man's quick-running breath. He reached the door and opened it and stepped out into the street; and not until then did he release the pent-up air from his lungs.

Still nursing his bright rage, he went directly to the hotel. He went up to his room and packed his warbag; he came

down and paid his bill in full and headed at once for the livery stable. He found Cap Elton dozing in the sun and said, "Get me my horse, Cap. I'm checking out."

Cap Elton was a wizened ancient with a cockatoo's crest of snow white hair. He had been one of the first settlers in the town, and was perhaps the only man who had given Randall his unreserved friendship. Now he pushed his chair away from the stable wall and got creakily to his feet. He eyed the dark five pointed spot on Randall's vest. "You quit?"

"Fired," said Randall.

Cap wagged his head. "Mistake," he said gravely. He disappeared into the stable's dark interior and pretty soon came forth leading a big bay, fully saddled. He took Randall's money and stuffed it in his pocket without looking at it. "Checkin' out permanent?"

"Looks like it," Randall said shortly. He slung his warbag behind the saddle. "The council has decided that I'm through, and the only kind of work I know has got a star attached to it."

"Never knowed you to spook before," Cap murmured. "Ain't like you."

"Maybe this is the way I want it. I should have made the move two years ago along with the gamblers and the gun-slicks. I don't belong here."

Cap shook his white head. "I been listenin', and I been watchin'. Somethin' in the wind."

There was a grey bitterness in the lift and fall of Randall's shoulders. "It's not my lookout," he said sourly. "The people of this town have always had the idea that I was too rich for their good. Now let them take care of their own troubles."

HE PASSED out beyond the straggling shacks at the edge of town and headed northward, following the road. He rode rapidly for a while, until the rush of air took the sharp edge off his anger, and then let the big bay pick its own gait, sitting loosely aboard the saddle. On this summer afternoon the smell of sage and sun-cured grass was strong over the land, and he breathed deeply of it. It had been five years since he was on the move, and he

felt an almost forgotten restlessness lay hold of him, and found it good.

Beyond sundown the road brought him along the edge of the wide, tawny bowl that cradled Kenna's Tumbling K. Here he paused to lay his glance out over the sprawling ranch house with its scatter of corrals and outbuildings, partly concealed by a dozen full-bodied cottonwoods. As he watched, a horseman appeared from behind the trees, and then a group of them, all bunched up. They drifted down the valley with the dust rolling up under the ponies' feet and he found himself squinting against the distance, counting them.

"Twenty," he murmured. "That's enough for a small sized army."

The fact touched him with its broad significance, turning his thoughts grey. These men were heading toward Clearwater. He had seldom seen Tumbling K riders in the town, Kenna having once informed him that they preferred the gambling tables and the girls up in Paloverde. Now their riding into Clearwater spelled only one thing: Something was in the wind. Cap had been right.

A wagon climbing out of the valley caught his attention. He waited for it and as it came nearer he saw that it was loaded with household possessions. His sharp gaze touched the man holding the reins of the two horses, and the tired looking woman sitting at his side. She had a pair of half grown children beside her and a third, a three-year-old girl, sat on her lap, whimpering broken-heartedly. The man's face was familiar. Randall had seen him in town quite often—a nester who lived on the edge of the hills, near the boundary of Kenna's ranch. Their name was Evans.

He touched his hat to Mrs. Evans and offered his greetings. And to Evans, "You moving?"

"Got to," said Evans. Randall caught the hopelessness in his voice, saw the dismal despair in the slack hang of his shoulders and the deep-etched lines of his gaunt face.

The three-year-old drew a breath and stared at Randall and then began to sob again. Mrs. Evans rocked her gently and said, "Hush, now. Hush."

"What happened?" Randall asked.

"Pushed out," said Evans. His voice was grim and bleak. "What can a man do, Mr. Randall? I've never bothered Kenna, but suddenly he decides he wants to make a lot of big tracks and his bunch rides into my yard and says we got to move before the day's out because they're goin' to tear the place up by the roots."

The little girl had been whimpering steadily through all this, and now Randall said, "Your baby sick? Maybe she needs a doctor."

"Ain't sick," said Evans. "It's her dog. She had a hound pup, and when them riders come on the place it run out and barked at the ramrod's pony. Yellow eyed feller by the name of Hake. He shot it."

Hake. That had been the man in Kenna's office . . . "When was this?" Randall asked quickly.

"This mornin'." Evans chukkered to the horses and slapped them with the reins; the wagon got in motion with a slow creak of body-wood. Randall watched them go, a solid, frowning shape on his big bay, and the last thing he heard was the fretful crying of the little girl.

In his mind was the picture of a sly, scheming man who wanted power and wealth and would stop at nothing to get it. Mark Kenna's smooth tongue must have been behind the townspeople's resentment from the very beginning. Kenna had wanted him out of the way; he was behind the series of events that led to Randall's being fired, knowing that with no law in the town he could tear the lid off it, and with that small army of tough punchers to back his play there would be no one to stop him.

Randall saw another picture, too; he saw the Evans yard being invaded, the little girl's dog shot by the yellow-eyed Hake. And he saw that other little girl, the one he had picked up out of the street in Clearwater. He saw the town wide open and a wild, drunken rider pounding down the street, his horse bowling her over and beating her into the dust; and these thoughts turned him cold.

He swung abruptly about and sent his horse into a swift run through the gathering dusk.

HE REACHED Clearwater beyond full dark, coming up the main street and seeing from afar the gush of yellow light from Kenna's saloon. He pulled his horse down to a walk and moved past it, and heard men's loud voices and the tinny jangle of a piano. They weren't wasting any time.

He made a thoughtful study of the score of horses tied to the hitchrail and then swung his eyes toward a dark man-shape that lounged against the face of the building. A lookout. The man stood away from it and Randall could almost feel the force of his narrowed, considering stare.

At the stable he turned in and stepped out of the saddle. Cap Elton emerged from its thick darkness and murmured without surprise, "I been expectin' you."

"It took me a while to make up my mind," Randall said. He nodded toward the din at the saloon. "What's happening over there?"

"Cookin' up a lot of hell," said Cap. "Girls comin' in from Paloverde in the mornin'. Kenna figures to open all the joints. By tomorrow night she'll be plumb wild. There's a trail herd at the fork and he sent a rider out to steer 'em up this way."

"Is the town doing anything?"

"What can they do?" Cap's voice was sharp, scornful. "Townspeople is family men, mostly. Family men is cautious; they don't like blood spilt. So all they'll do is mutter and grumble and take a look at that small army Kenna's got together and crawl in their holes."

Randall said, "He's got to be stopped, Cap."

"Lot of weight over there for one man to buck," Cap observed greyly.

"Maybe," Randall murmured. "Maybe not. When you knock down the top dog all the curs under him will scatter. It always works out that way."

Cap spat onto the stable floor and then slanted his silver-topped head at the big man standing beside him. "Now me, I ain't married. And I ain't cautious, neither. I ain't so good with a sidegun, but I cut my teeth on a rifle barrel."

Randall laughed softly. "Get it. Go out

the back way and cut across the street down below, where you won't be seen. Then circle around the saloon. I want that lookout kept off my back."

Cap chuckled and disappeared into the stable. Randall walked out into the street, crossing it and moving up the board walk on the other side. He came abreast of the lookout. He caught his quick-flung glance and paused as the man spoke out:

"Can't go in there, friend."

Randall swung about. "Why not?"

"That shindig's private, for tonight. If you——" The man's voice trailed off and his face grew dead still and sullen as he slowly raised both hands to shoulder level. Behind him Cap Elton murmured, "Easy, now, my salty friend."

Randall pulled the man's gun, shucked the loads and threw it in the street; then leaving him wholly to Cap, he went on to the saloon's batwing doors. The full thunder of sound came against him as he laid his long and close look above them.

His gaze slipped along the men standing at the bar; it stopped on the black-clothed figure of Mark Kenna, leaning against its far end. Randall's eyes made a complete circle of the big room, then, touching the men at the gambling tables, and coming to rest upon the lean and yellow-eyed Hake, deep in a stud game off to the left.

He took a slow, deep breath; he pushed his shoulders against the doors and stepped inside. For a dozen seconds no one saw him, and then a busy barman glanced past the head of a man raising a drink to his lips and murmured, "Randall!" and the whisper seemed to run like quick fire all around the room.

THE laughter and the banging of the piano fell away to a thready silence. Turned stiff and cold and wary, all these men shifted and wheeled and faced him; and the pale glare from the kerosene lamps threw stark planes of light and shadow against their faces and put a devil's shine in their eyes.

Hake had thrown his head up. He turned his cards against the poker table. He pushed his chair back with a raw, scraping noise and came to his feet. There

was a lean recklessness to him, a wicked, dagger-bright insolence in the way he grinned past the smoke of a cigarette that hung loosely from his lips.

Kenna had turned. He stood away from the bar and slowly pushed back his coat until he cleared the gun at his hip. His face still had that sly, scheming look, and now it was coupled with an arrogance, a certainty of seeing his dream of power and wealth come true. He stood unmoved and completely sure of himself as Randall said:

"Turn out your lights, Mark. This place is closing."

The men at the bar had begun to drift carefully down its length; they hastened, and dropped off its end, getting out of the line of fire. Kenna held his eyes against Randall's; his white teeth flashed against the darker oval of his face. "You're a fool, Jeff. You're not wearing the star any more. Why buck a pat hand?"

Randall shook his head. "The pat hand is mine, my friend. My term is not over till midnight; remember? Now close up this place and get out."

All the lines in Kenna's face drew thin and deep. Time stretched out and fell away; it seemed to leave Randall hanging motionless in a tense and silent space through which crept the single tiny sound of a man's foot slithering across a board. Then he saw the dip of Kenna's head, the flicker of his eyelids, and, prepared for this, turned and drew and made his shot.

Hake had drawn on Kenna's signal, and now his gun winked its red bursts of fire and Randall felt the close brush of a bullet's passage as Hake's body jerked and his gunarm dropped, firing once into the floor as he bent at the knees and then bowed his head and fell against the poker table.

Randall had seen his bullet strike and at once turned, swinging his gun toward Kenna and seeing his thin-drawn lips curl back as his gun roared and roared again. A white heat poured through Randall's body; it slammed him against the door-jamb and then he steadied himself and squeezed the trigger of his gun. He heard its burst of sound and saw the greed and the sly scheming washed out of Kenna's face by the bullet's heavy shock as he spun

half around, threw both arms over the bar and slipped away from it, turning and falling on his back.

Randall felt himself sinking. He caught himself; he took a pain-filled breath and stood up to his full height. A wild fury boiled out of him as he faced the crowd and said through clenched teeth:

"Now get out of town, damn you! Move!"

Their faces whirled before him and he blinked to focus his eyes. He took two heavy steps toward them with his gun thrust in front of him and heard a man's windy sigh; he saw his head go down and saw him shift and head for the door. Another man followed and then another. They melted away and he heard their feet hit the board walk, the quick pound of their ponies' hooves on the street. And then a barman moved, snuffing out the lamps. The room darkened; there was a dull roaring in Randall's head and through it he seemed to hear Cap's ringing, triumphant yell, and then he knew no more.

RANDALL opened his eyes and blinked and murmured, "That lamp's pretty bright, isn't it?"

Doc Miller's weathered face appeared

above him. "Same old lamp," he said, and he was smiling. Randall smelled the anti-septic, then, and felt the ache in his side, and realized that he was lying on Miller's operating table. He turned his head and saw old Cap Elton standing nearby, also grinning. He became aware of a low murmur that seemed to come from somewhere outside. He said, "What's that?"

"People," said Doc Miller. "Talking. Lie still, will you?"

"What's up?"

Cap leaned over him. "Nothing, you damn fool. Lay quiet, like the doc told you. Those are friends of yours."

"Friends?"

"Sure. I reckon half the town's out there. They're kind of anxious to get in and shake your hand, but the doc won't let 'em. Not till he's through patchin' you up, anyway."

"But I——"

"I know. You don't think you've got any friends, do you?" Cap chuckled. "Seems they've decided that a rough, tough marshal is a pretty good man to have around after all."

Randall suddenly felt all warm inside. "Pretty good people," he said softly. "Pretty good town, too."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of ACTION STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1948.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Malcolm Reiss, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the ACTION STORIES and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation) etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Malcolm Reiss, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Business manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily, weekly, semi-weekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) MALCOLM REISS,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 21st day of September, 1948.

LIONEL G. MOORE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1950.)



APACHE BAIT

By William Heuman

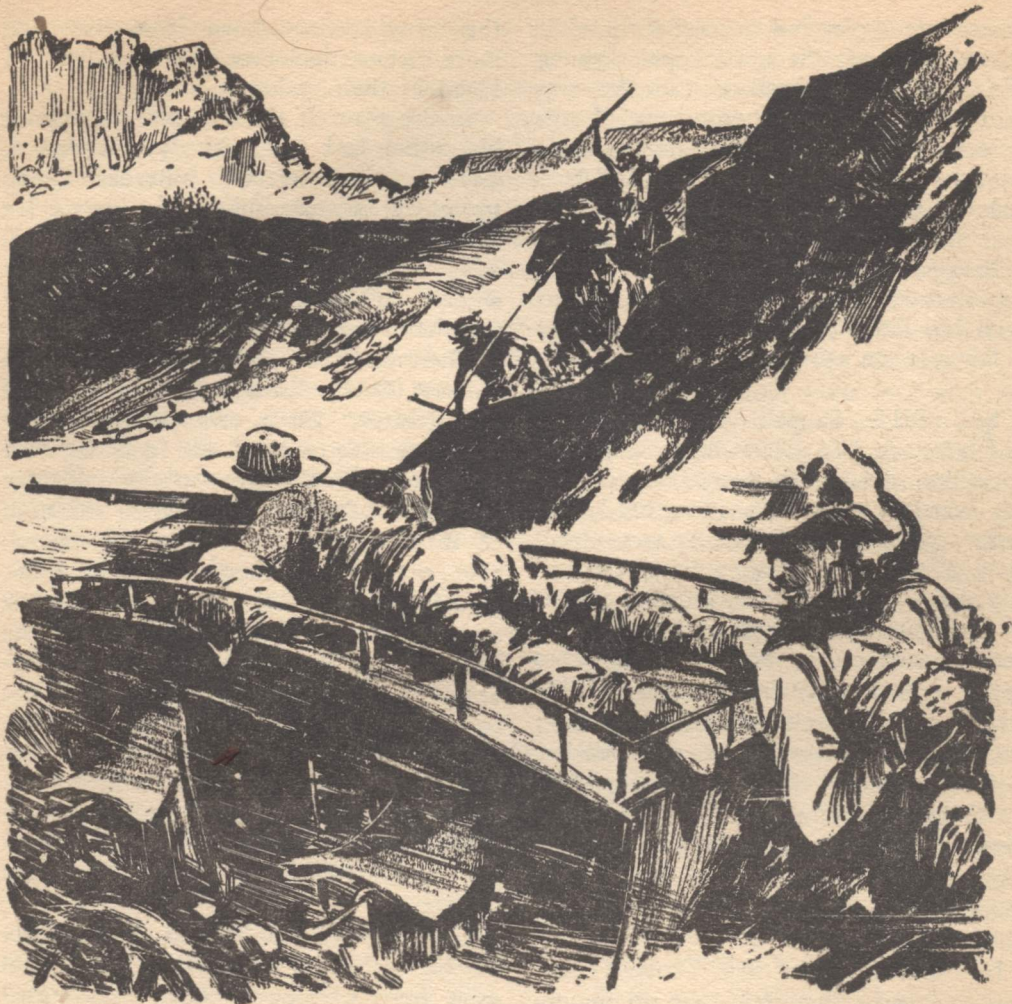
While Lt. Garrett Owen and his troopers rotted bitterly in their Arizona sun-baked fort, an ugly little devil led his screaming murderers in raid after bloody raid. Somehow, Satana knew the son of Major Owen would never move against him.

THE HEAT WAS IN THE ROOM, heavy, suffocating, pressing down on a man's senses so that he could not think clearly. Big green flies buzzed up near the low raftered ceiling, and Lieutenant Garrett Owen, of the Second United States Cavalry, Arizona Territory, wondered how they could exist in this dry, hellish country. Even flies had to have water. One would think that green flies in particular needed plenty of water. He wondered how many green flies there were in Arizona as compared to black flies; he wondered...

Lieutenant Owen caught himself abruptly. His mind was wandering again, going

away from the subject at hand which was a report to his superiors back at Fort Anderson. He sat with the pen poised above the white foolscap, and he wondered bitterly how he was to begin a report like this, his first since coming to this farthest outpost in Arizona Territory. A courier from Anderson was leaving in two hours and he had to write something. He had to tell them what he was doing on government time, with government money, with the fifty odd cavalrymen of Troop C, his command.

Classic phrases were running through his mind, the heroic reports of the great fighting men of antiquity. "I came; I saw;



Seeley yelled, "Nice shootin', Lieutenant!"

A Novelette of Frontier Days

I conquered." He tried to remember who'd said that, and then he discovered that his mind was wandering again and he wanted to hurl pen, paper and ink against the adobe wall.

Jaws tight, the perspiration standing out on his forehead, he got up and walked across to the little window which looked out on the sun-baked parade grounds of this tiny outpost, Fort Apache, which his father, Major Gilbert Owen, had constructed ten years before.

Two weeks before he'd arrived at Apache, a tumble-down ruin, deserted for more than eight years, overrun with rattlesnakes. He'd come, but he'd seen

nothing of the enemy and he'd done no conquering. He'd made habitable an old army outpost; he'd seen an occasional reservation Apache, small, dirty, evil-looking, their black animal like eyes always averting his own. He'd compared them with the tall, fierce-visaged Sioux and Cheyennes of the Department of the Platte. There were rumors coming down from the north even now that Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall and the rest were assembling several thousand of the hardest riders, the most savage fighters in the world, along the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn.

Generals Terry and George Armstrong

Custer were going out to meet them while he, until two months ago a popular young officer at Fort Abraham Lincoln, was dying of heat and the monotony of this existence in the rough and tumble mesa country of Arizona. The "army" he'd been sent out to combat with his Troop from Fort Anderson consisted of some twenty or thirty renegade Apaches, headed by the notorious Satana, the same murderous devil his father had tried unsuccessfully to bring in ten years ago.

ON THE flagpole on the parade grounds Old Glory hung limp, like something dead, like everything else in this country. The hills were dead; the deserts were dead; the mesas were dead. Only Satana was alive, moving through this maize of dead rock, canyon, desert, the *malpais*. Only Satana was alive, but Satana made others dead—a lonely prospector spread-eagled over an ant hill, his eyes, nose and mouth smeared with honey; the sprawled, lifeless bodies of a rancher with his wife and children, horribly mutilated; that band of a dozen Mexican smugglers, ambushed in Skull Canyon, three of them found dangling from trees, their scalped heads suspended over slow fires. That was Satana.

In the two weeks that Troop C had been at Apache there had been no rumors of Satana, recently come up from the Sierra Madres in Old Mexico to continue his marauding ways. For years Satana had been doing that. He was supposed to have been an old man when Gilbert Owen, fresh out of the Army of the Republic, a brigadier general reduced to the rank of major in the stupendous shake-up, the aftermath of the war, had been sent to Arizona to bring him in.

Impatiently, Garrett Owen had waited for his scouts to bring him word of the whereabouts of Satana, but the wily Apache had disappeared in his mountain fastnesses. Al Seeley, the scout, had informed Garrett that it was his opinion Satana was making mescal up on top of some mesa, and he wouldn't come down until he and his smaller devils had drunk themselves into a state of stupefaction. Sobering up slowly after this debauch,

they would come down from the mesa more vicious than ever, leaving a trail of blood in their wake.

Looking out at the tiny parade grounds his father had painstakingly constructed, Garrett Owen felt the bitterness rising up in his throat, filling his body. He wanted to curse the heat, this room in which his father had sat making out similar dull reports, this whole damned forsaken country.

There had been nothing fair in the way Gilbert Owen, distinguished soldier, had been treated. Forty years in the regular army, coming out of the war between the states with three brevets for gallantry in action, he'd been demoted to the rank of major. That had been understandable, even though lesser men with better connections had been able to cling to their stars. Immediately following the war the Grand Army had been practically obliterated. There were too many generals, too many colonels, too many officers. Demotions had been necessary, but the other thing had not been—this oblivion his father had been subjected to, this living death in the far outpost of Arizona, chasing small bloody bands of renegade Apaches.

Gilbert Owen had died at Apache—not heroically, not on the field of battle, not even from a sniper's bullet. He'd died in his bed; he'd died from forty years of army life, of sleeping in wet bivouacks; he'd died from the hard-tack army food, from the thousands of hours in the saddle; he'd died from the heat in this rainless country where the sun was a molten sabre blade suspended over the heads of good officers.

Gilbert Owen had died at Apache and he'd been forgotten, and it was not until Lieutenant Garrett Owen, recently transferred from the Department of the Platte, came to Fort Anderson that it was remembered another Owen had chased Satana, who was causing the trouble again.

Sentiment sometimes operates even in the decisions of hardened army officers, and it was sentiment which sent Garrett Owen out to Fort Apache to garrison the outpost his father built, to protect the citizens from the ravages of a small,

weazened brown man with the heart of a devil and the face of a gargoyle.

They'd be short experienced army officers in the Arizona Territory when the troubles started again, and they'd had to call on the Department of the Platte. Garrett had had three years chasing the Sioux—three years of wild skirmishing and pitched battles. He knew his Indian, and they'd sent him south to Arizona at a time when the big war clouds were gathering on the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn; they'd sent him south while right now Custer was riding out of Abraham Lincoln at the head of his gallant Seventh Cavalry. He felt that he was entitled to bitter feelings, remembering that his father, too, had been consigned to this hell hole.

There was a step outside the door and Garrett turned his head. Sergeant Mattock was there, heavy-set, black jowls, a face blackened by exposure to this Arizona sun.

The sergeant said gruffly, "Beggin' your pardon, sir. Al Seeley's comin' up with two dozen o' his Apache police. He's comin' pretty fast, sir. Looks like trouble."

Garrett reached for his hat. He stepped out on the piazza and he could feel his heart beating a little faster. There was the faint promise here of action—a chase which might bring Satana into the net, end this ridiculous farce in Arizona, and permit him to get back up north in time for the real fighting with the Sioux.

THE heavy log post gates which had set in place two days before were opened and Seeley came in. He came in on a huge white mule, a seedy man in black coat, greasy checked vest, a dilapidated black felt hat on his head, baggy black trousers, and of all things, knee-high Apache moccasins! His trousers were tucked into the moccasins the way a man tucks his pants into his boots.

About two dozen Apache police patterned in behind him, on foot, and that was another thing Garrett didn't understand. In the open country a man needed a horse, but these Reservation police operated on foot.

They'd been running, and probably for a

long time because Seeley's mule was wet with perspiration, but the Apaches seemed comparatively fresh. They wore colored bandeaus around their heads, holding in place the lank black hair; they wore shirts, their only concession to the white man. On the trail now they wore breechclouts and the high Apache moccasins.

They were considerably smaller than the northern Indians, and the features seemed to be more Mongolian than American Indian. They reminded Garrett of steel-sinewed mountain lions he's seen in the Rockies. There was a wild ferocity about them, but it was not like that of the Sioux or the Cheyenne. The northern tribes were the haughty eagles of the plains; these small brown men were the cats.

Unceremoniously, the Apache police squatted down on the parade grounds and began to smoke cigarettes of Sonora tobacco.

Sergeant Mattock, who was standing beside Garrett, said softly, "They're Chiricahuas and Tontos, sir. Al Seeley always picks them for his police."

The scout had slipped from the white mule and he was coming forward without haste, chewing on a wisp of straw. It was this deliberateness of the man which galled Garrett. Up north when the call came in that hostiles had been sighted, it was "Boots and Saddles" and away we go to catch up with them before they disappeared over the horizon.

Seeley paused at the bottom step of the piazza to light one of the Apache cigarettes. He was not big in height and he was not small. The black coat was much too big for him; it hung down low on his body, making him look smaller than he was. He had washed-out blue eyes, crinkled at the corners from much peering into the hot sun.

Garrett waited impatiently for him to speak, mentally comparing him with the alert, buckskin-clad northern scouts he'd known on the prairie.

Seeley said, "Reckon we'll be havin' our little troubles, Lieutenant. Satana's band was seen up on Wild Horse Creek last night. One of our boys spotted 'em. They was headed north in the direction o' Black Mesa—quite a few families up

there. I'm hopin' Satana don't git there afore we do."

"How far is Black Mesa?" Garrett snapped.

"Twenty-two miles," Seeley said. He puffed on his cigarette and he looked thoughtful. "I'm givin' my boys a breathin' spell afore pushin' on. You won't have to wait fer us, Lieutenant."

Garrett wanted to laugh at him. He had a picture of himself waiting for this scarecrow on the white mule and his twenty-four running Apaches. He said to Mattock, "You know the way to this new settlement, Sergeant?"

Mattock nodded. "We might make it before nightfall, Lieutenant, but it's damned rough country."

"We'll take thirty-five men," Garrett said tersely. "Rations for three days, two hundred rounds of ammunition per man. How soon can you be out, Sergeant?"

"Fifteen minutes," Mattock told him. He stepped off the porch, and Garrett turned to go inside for his gun belt.

Al Seeley was still lounging just off the bottom step of the porch, puffing on a cigarette. Garrett fancied he saw some mild amusement in the scout's eyes—the amusement of the civilian who does not understand nor appreciate army methods.

Scowling, Garrett went back into the office, only then remembering the report he was supposed to submit. He dashed it off quickly—just a brief sketch of the work he'd done in rebuilding the post, finishing with the note that he'd just received news of the whereabouts of Satana and he was putting his men in the field.

He felt better when he gave an orderly the dispatch and he went out on the porch again. The Apache police were still squatting on the parade grounds, smoking, watching the troopers scurrying about. Their brown faces were stolid, but Garrett got the impression that a kind of amusement lurked in the depths of those glittering black eyes.

In front of the stables troopers were lining up their mounts, waiting for the bugle call. Sergeant Mattock stepped up and said, "All ready, sir."

An orderly came up, leading Garrett's iron grey gelding. The bugler was waiting, looking in Garrett's direction. When Garrett nodded to him, the stirring notes of "Boots and Saddles" rang out across the parade grounds. Thirty-five bronzed, blue-shirted troopers hit the McClellan saddles as one. There was the whacking sound of leather, the jangle of canteens. They were ready to go.

Garrett looked for Al Seeley, didn't see him anywhere, and decided to leave anyway. Seeley's Apache police did not come under his jurisdiction. He represented the military in this sector of the vast Arizona Territory, while Seeley was a civilian employee, working for the Reservation people. He didn't expect Seeley to be in on the fight anyway if there was to be a fight. Riding that white mule, having to wait for Indian runners, it was doubtful the seedy man would reach Black Mesa settlement before midnight.

II

GARRETT SENT HIS POINT riders up ahead when the column cleared the gate. He had a flanker on either side and a rear guard detachment, and he did all these things instinctively, knowing that there was no body of hostiles in the country capable of attacking him in the field. He was chasing a wolfpack this afternoon, and the wolfpack attacked only the helpless, the infirm, the isolated.

Accustomed to the hot northern plains, Garrett had thought this Arizona heat would not bother him. He'd been wrong. This was a different kind of heat. The sun seemed to be closer to the earth here. The heat cracked the lips until they bled; it seared the neckline until it became the color of old leather.

The thirty-five men in this detachment were seasoned fighters, and Garrett was glad they'd given him the Troop. They'd been chasing the Apache renegades for many years; they knew the country; they could be depended upon to obey orders to the hilt.

The country sloped away toward the north—a yellow, seared country, void of grass or trees, broken by enormous gashes

and huge outcroppings of red lava rock. In the distance were the flat-topped mesas, favorite camping grounds of the Apache. Atop of these table-lands they could survey the surrounding country for miles, and at the first sign of the enemy take cover in the maze of canyons and deep draws abounding in the vicinity.

The detachment dipped down into a draw, followed it for a half mile or so, and then climbed out up a narrow cut which Garrett surveyed with some misgivings at first. Sergeant Mattock climbed his mount up the cut without a second thought, and then the going really became rough.

They went over dead lava beds; they twisted in and out through huge outcroppings of rock; they climbed down into canyons where the heat was almost unbearable, and then they walked or rode their mounts up the opposite wall. It was very slow going.

Garrett called a halt once to breathe the horses. They'd found a little shade under a group of cottonwood trees at the base of a huge rock wall. There was a spring here, and the troopers watered the animals and refilled their canteens with cold water.

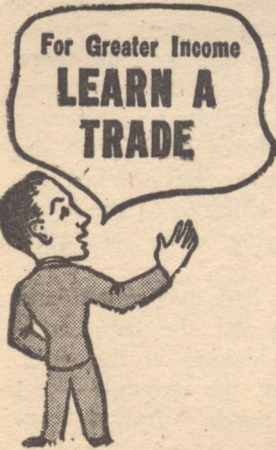
Sergeant Mattock was loosening the cinch belt on his mount when Garrett came over to him. Garrett said, "How far do we have to go, Sergeant?"

"Should be reaching the first ranch house in two hours, sir," Mattock told him. "It's not too bad from now on."

Garrett frowned. "If Satana was coming up from Wild Horse Creek, do you think he's up here already?"

"He might be," Mattock said. "Them Apaches travel damned fast, sir."

"Then he's already doing his murdering," Garrett said slowly. "Sergeant, I'm taking half the detachment and pushing on. You bring up the remaining men as fast



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as you can. I might be able to catch up with the devil."

Sergeant Mattock hesitated. He was an older man, old in the service, too, and he did not like to give his commanding officer advice.

He said slowly, "Beggin' your pardon, Lieutenant, but if Satana's reached Black Mesa, Seeley will be there, too. He'll have Satana on the run."

Garrett stared at him. He said, "Seeley? We left him back at Fort Apache."

Mattock smiled. "I'd say he was at Black Mesa now, sir," he said. "Them Apache police travel pretty fast."

"They—they're on foot," Garrett persisted. "It's impossible for them to move faster than we've been doing. We've been pushing every minute since we left."

Mattock shook his head. "I've known Al Seeley for a dozen years, sir," he explained. "He'd never have stopped at Apache if he didn't think he could beat Satana to Black Mesa. Them Apache police travel over a country a horse couldn't get through and they can run longer than any horse I ever knew."

"Seeley rode a white mule," Garrett pointed out.

Mattock grinned. "That damned mule's half mountain goat," he chuckled. "I've seen Seeley slide her down a hundred foot embankment I'd be scared to go down on foot."

Thinking back over the country they'd just traveled, Garrett wasn't quite convinced. He had the column moving again in ten minutes and he pushed them hard. It was nearly six o'clock when they sighted the first ranch house at the base of Black Mesa. They'd been in sight of the Mesa for over an hour, a huge table-top jutting up above the surrounding country.

The point rider came back with the report that he'd sighted Indians in the vicinity of the ranch. Garrett slipped his army Colt out of the holster and gave the command to charge. Fan-shaped now, the detachment swept down a slope toward the log ranch house.

THERE were Indians around the house. Garrett saw the brightly colored bandeaus, and the glistening brown

bodies, and then he saw the white mule tied to the gate of a pole corral.

Sergeant Mattock saw it, too, and he called sharply, "They're Seeley's boys."

Garrett spotted Al Seeley then, sitting on the top of the corral, watching them drive toward him. He was chewing a wisp of straw and his battered hat was set back on his head, his face bland as Garrett came up.

There was a white-faced rancher there, too, and his wife and his two children. There had been trouble. It was written in the strained faces of the man and his wife.

The trouble had been quite recent, too, because the Apache police were still prowling around, reminding Garrett of so many big hunting dogs who'd caught the scent and were anxious to get going on the run again.

"Evenin', Lieutenant," Seeley said. He touched the brim of his hat in a kind of salute.

It was evening now with the sun a huge red ball on the western horizon. The heat was still in the air, but there was a faint promise of coolness to come.

Two almost naked Indians were sprawled on the ground a dozen yards from the door of the ranch house. They looked like two big ragdolls the children of the house may have been playing with, cast aside now.

Sergeant Mattock had dismounted and was looking at them with the vague curiosity of the living looking at the dead. There was blood on the ground—blood which sank into the parched ground, leaving a reddish color.

"Satana?" Garrett asked.

Al Seeley nodded. "We got here maybe ten minutes afore he come up. We're damned lucky he decided to strike this place first."

"How many were there?" Garrett wanted to know.

"Maybe thirty," Seeley said. He glanced at the two dead Apaches on the ground and he spat in that direction. He said, "Twenty-eight now, Lieutenant." He added, "We'd o' gotten more of 'em, but Satana's too smart to rush his whole band into a trap. He sent these two boys up

first, an he skipped when the shootin' started."

"He outnumbered you, too," Garrett said contemptuously.

Seeley shrugged. "Satana likes odds o' ten or twenty to one," he observed. "Reck-on that's why he's lived so damned long."

"You didn't go after him?" Garrett asked.

Seeley spat again. "Satana's mounted this time, an' you don't catch him like that any way. When an Apache band runs they scatter like quail. You got twenty-eight different trails to follow, each of 'em leadin' a different way, an' each of 'em disappears, when they hit the rimrock. Figured I'd wait fer you, Lieutenant."

Garrett thought he saw that faint amusement in Seeley's eyes again. He said quietly, "You have any idea where he'd go, Seeley? You know their hide-outs."

Seeley glanced at him and scratched his chin. He seemed a little pleased now that Garrett had admitted he needed help in this chase. He said,

"Might look fer him on top o' King Mesa. He knows every settler in this part o' the country is waitin' fer him with loaded gun. I sent a runner on ahead to warn everybody."

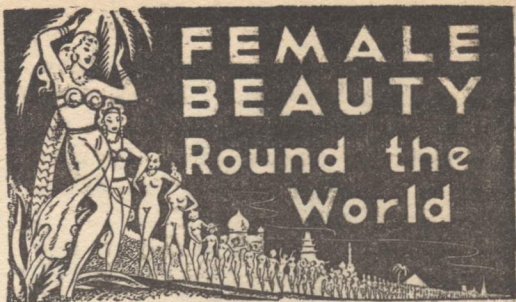
"Where is King Mesa?" Garrett wanted to know.

"Half dozen miles east," Seeley said. "Your father had a run in with Satana on King Mesa good many years ago. We damn near caught him that mornin'. We killed half his band an' then they skipped down across the border an' we had orders to stay on this side o' the line." He laughed and he said, "Satana ain't never forgot your father, Lieutenant."

Garrett moistened his lips. It was the first time he'd learned that Seeley had worked with his father. He said, "If you'll cooperate with us, Seeley, I'd like to go after them tonight. Your men know the country better than we do."

Again there was respect in Seeley's eyes. He said, "Always glad to work with your father, Lieutenant. He was a damned good soldier."

Garrett could see that in Al Seeley's



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eyes a good soldier was one who listened to advice.

"Figured we'd leave three hours after sunset," Seeley went on. "There's three trails to the top o' King Mesa. If we kin block up two of 'em an' go up the other we might have him, but he'll fight like a cornered rat."

Garrett smiled. "We'll be ready to ride when you are," he said. He gave orders to the men and they made camp in the field on the other side of the corral.

Seeley's Apaches had already built their small cook fires and were squatting around them, boiling coffee in tin cans, roasting slices of the beef the rancher had cut up for them.

THE cool night breeze was sweeping away the heat of the day, and the tiny campfires on the field were patches of glowing embers when Garrett strolled up to Al Seeley, who was again up on the corral fence, picking his teeth with his hunting knife.

Seeley said casually, "No moon tonight. That'll help some. With a moon you wouldn't git within five miles of 'em."

Garrett listened to the stamp of the horses picketed nearby. He said, "Did you know my father well, Seeley?"

The scout looked at the knife in his hand. "We chased Satana all over this damned country," he said.

Garrett Owen smiled grimly. He was thinking that his father's son was still chasing the will-o-the-wisp of fame, getting so close and never closer. His father, however, had not been relegated to the ash heap until he was past his prime. The brass hats had started on his son early in life.

"He was a good soldier," Al Seeley was saying meditatively, "an' I run across plenty of 'em."

"A rather tame spot for a man with his ability, don't you think?" Garrett asked tersely.

The scout glanced at him curiously. "Nobody's caught Satana," he observed, "an' a hell of a lot have been after him."

Garrett lighted a cigar and as the match flared up it revealed his face, a sardonic

smile of amusement. He said, "Seeley, do you know how many riders Crazy Horse and Gall can take out with them on a big raid?"

Seeley shrugged. "Don't know a hell of a lot about the Sioux," he admitted. "This is my country."

Garrett puffed on the cigar, enjoying the rich aroma. He was thinking—*thirty odd filthy brown devils are keeping me from riding out with Custer!*

At nine o'clock the column was mounted and ready to go. Seeley and his police slipped away into the night and the men in blue followed them. Seeley had already ascertained that Satana was on top of King Mesa. Two of his men had climbed the Mesa shortly after sunset and they'd seen Satana's small fires. There were all men in the band, and Garrett felt better hearing this.

"He come up fer loot," Seeley had said, "maybe to steal a few Apache squaws, maybe just fer the hell of it. He's like that."

The night was dark and it was cool now. As they climbed it became even cooler. Garrett lost sight of Seeley and his Apaches, but Sergeant Mattock, who knew the man and his methods, was able to follow the route to the Mesa.

They passed between two narrow canyon walls, several hundred feet on either side with the dark vault of the sky overhead, glittering with stars. At the far end of the canyon they came upon Seeley and his Apaches squatting on their haunches, smoking cigarettes.

"Far as we go with the horses," Sergeant Mattock said. "Reckon Seeley's waitin' fer a confab, Lieutenant."

Garrett dismounted. He walked over to where Seeley was squatting on the ground. He said, "You want to see me, Seeley?"

The scout nodded. He belched and he said, "We start climbin' up to the top o' King Mesa from here. You git up on top o' this canyon wall an' you kin see it. Should take us about an hour to reach the summit."

The scout stopped and Garrett waited for him to go on. Seeley didn't say any more, and he realized the man was wait-

ing for him to make the decisions now. He was the military.

"Where is Satana's camp on the Mesa?" he asked.

"Southeast corner," Seeley told him. "Mesa ain't more than a half mile across an' less than a mile long. You'll see his fires when you git up on top."

"You mentioned three routes to the top of the Mesa," Garrett said. "Which is the least likely that a man would take climbing it?"

Seeley thought a moment. "North side," he said. "Pretty damn rough goin' up that way. Reckon that's the one Satana won't be worryin' about too much if he has sentinels watchin' fer us."

Garrett nodded. "We'll go up the north side," he said. "Split your force in half, Seeley. You take one half and block one route; Sergeant Mattock will take the other half and block up the remaining exit. If any of them get away from us on the top of the Mesa you'll have them on the way down."

"That's so," Seeley said.

Garrett couldn't see his face clearly now, but he thought there was amusement in the man's tones again.

"Any comments?" Garrett asked him.

"It's your war," Seeley said. "I'll set your boys in the crack which leads to the top. Follow your nose; you can't git lost."

Garrett explained the plan to Sergeant Mattock. The sergeant's answer was simply, "Yes sir." He was the common soldier; he went where he was told to go and he didn't think about it because thinking made it very bad when the superior officer made a mistake.

III

GARRETT FOLLOWED SEELEY up out of the canyon, climbing the steep wall through an erosion cut. At the top he was already perspiring because it had been hot in the cut.

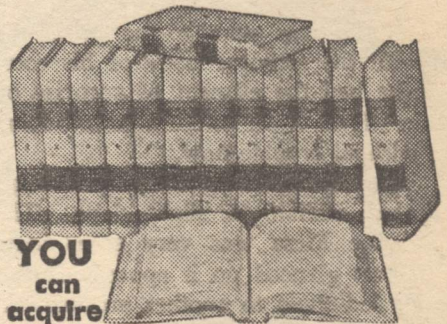
A cool breeze struck them when they came out of the canyon. Garrett mopped his face with a handkerchief. Sergeant Mattock had already swung away toward

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the south with a dozen of Seeley's Apache police. Garrett heard their moccasined feet on the hard rock here; it was like the soft patter of animals, and then it was gone.

King Mesa loomed up directly ahead of them, the base fringed with a heavy growth of timber. Garrett could see the table top—several hundred feet above them, the bulk of the Mesa blacking out the stars.

Looking at it, Garrett wondered just why his father hadn't been able to capture Satana. This day it had been very simple. He had his quarry pinned up on top of the mesa. There were only three ways of getting down, according to Seeley, without breaking one's neck. His force doubled that of Satana, and his men were trained soldiers, half of them partly-trained Apache police, but all armed. His plan of battle, too, was impeccable. He was going to the top of the mesa with the stronger body of his command; he had the element of surprise on his side. Even a cat couldn't get off King Mesa without trouble now.

Al Seeley was leading the way through the timber, climbing a slight slope. The wall of the Mesa was very steep here, and Garrett glanced up it apprehensively.

Seeley led them to another erosion cut, wide enough for two men to go up abreast. He said, "Here it is, Lieutenant. Good luck. Reckon we all need it when we're chasin' Satana."

Garrett was smiling as he stepped into the cut and started to climb, feeling his way with his hands. The thirty-five troopers followed him, making very little noise. Occasionally, a boot slipped on a loose stone and there was a muffled curse. There was no banging of canteens or jangling of sabers. These troopers in the southern department did not carry sabers, and Garrett had ordered them to leave the canteens behind.

Halfway up to the top, Garrett called a halt to give them a breathing spell. He squatted in a crevice, unable to see the top of the mesa now, but he'd figured the distance. Both Mattock and Seeley were in position by now, blocking up the two exits. The rest was up to him, and it was a

very simple matter—a sudden charge, the banging of heavy army carbines, and it was over. It was hard to realize that his father had had Satana on this same Mesa years before and had somehow let him get away.

They started to climb again after five minutes, and they were more cautious as they neared the summit. Army Colt in hand, Garrett pulled himself up on top of the mesa and lay there, peering into the darkness. There were clumps of low trees, shrubs, high grass. He saw no sentinels, and his opinion of Satana's military prowess dropped to a new low. No white trooper could get near a Sioux tepee encampment without a hundred dogs sounding off the alarm; no Sioux war-party would sleep without leaving sentinels.

The thirty-five men crawled out of the cut and crouched on the level top of the plateau. Garrett saw the fires several hundred yards away. He counted four of them, small spots of flame against the darkness of the night. A figure passed in front of one fire, blotting it out for an instant.

Garrett said to the red-headed Corporal Shannon, crouching a few feet away, "Take ten men, Corporal. Move in toward those fires from the right. Wait until you hear us start to shoot before you go in."

He gave similar instructions to Corporal Redfern, assigning another ten men to him, but sending Redfern in from the left. They were to push Satana back to the rim of the Mesa, hitting him from both wings and the center, cutting off all chance of escape. The Apaches who were fortunate enough to slip through the cordon would bolt for the other two exits and they'd run into the guns of Sergeant Mattock and Al Seeley. It was like a turkey shoot.

They started to move forward very slowly toward the fires, Garrett at the head of his center detachment. The grass was high, above the knees, providing excellent cover, and there were dwarf trees up on top of the Mesa, trees bent by the wind.

Garrett could see figures in front of the fires when he was a hundred yards away.

He slowed down and he waited until the two wings were able to get up closer, and then he started to crawl again. Still he saw no sentinels in this camp.

It was rather chilly up on top of the mesa and some of the Apaches were huddled around the fires, smoking. All of them wore the familiar colored bandeaus binding their coarse black hair. A few of them wore gaudy Mexican jackets which they'd undoubtedly taken from murdered Mexicans below the border; others had on dirty blouses, breechclouts, high moccasins. They were small men, brown men, with evil faces.

Garrett was rising slowly from the grass, Colt gun lifted, ready to fire the signal which would send his thirty-five troopers in toward this camp on the run, firing as they advanced. A gun cracked before he could squeeze the trigger, the shot coming from the left wing where Corporal Redfern was coming in.

The shot was followed by a high-pitched scream unlike anything Garrett had ever heard before and he'd listened to the war-whoops of the Sioux, the Cheyenne, the Arapahoe, Kiowa, Pawnee, and a half dozen other tribes of the west. This was an animal scream, a defiant maniac scream.

The Apaches around the fires tumbled away into the brush as if by magic. They were gone in a fraction of a second, and Garrett blinked his eyes, looking at those fires. He'd seen cougars in the mountains disappear like that at the first sign of danger. There was a flash of tawny fur among rocks and then nothing.

THERE were more of those wild, insane screams coming from Redfern's wing, and more shooting, the sharp decisive crack of Henry rifles, the latest arms, mingled with the heavy boom of army carbines. The Apaches were well-armed. Garrett Owen was suddenly aware of the fact that this was no bow and arrow war.

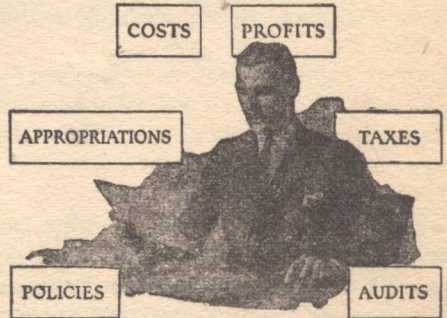
Bullets were coming in their direction, some of them clipping through the tall grass. A man off to Garrett's left let

8—Action—Spring



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out a soft cry as a bullet whacked into his flesh with a sickening thud.

"This way," Garrett yelled. He led the charge toward Redfern, sickeningly conscious of the fact that he hadn't surprised Satana. Satana had surprised him by crawling out to meet them while retaining some of his band around the fires as decoys. The element of surprise was all in Satana's favor now. He knew where they were, but they were not too sure about him.

Corporal Redfern was shouting to his men, trying to make himself heard above the shooting. The fifteen men with Garrett didn't shoot because they saw nothing to shoot at.

Garrett called, "Redfern! Redfern!"

A bullet from a Henry rifle less than fifteen yards to his right grazed his cheek. Corporal Redfern was shouting,

"Down—everybody down!"

There were more bullets coming, and then Garrett saw a small shape dart past him. He heard the swish of the grass and before he could get his gun around on the Apache he was gone. He stumbled over a wounded trooper in the grass, and then he heard the exultant yells of the Apaches behind him!

The shooting had stopped in front of him. There was no more noise—no shouting. Corporal Redfern located Garrett. He said ruefully as they listened to the wild shouts die away,

"They got through us, Lieutenant. They're going down the cut up which we came."

Garrett didn't say anything. There was no use chasing the Apaches now. An Apache on foot in his own country was no more to be caught by a white man on foot than a jackrabbit.

It was very evident how Satana had slipped out of this trap. He'd known all the while that they were coming up after him. He knew two of the exits would be guarded, and he'd made plans to go down the one up which the raiding party had come. Very cleverly he'd made his attack on the left wing, and then when Garrett came over with the main body he'd slipped his band through the center. Probably a half dozen or more Apaches had been in

front of Corporal Redfern, blocking his advance, and they'd slipped through the lines soon after the short fight began. The main body had been waiting silently, directly in front of Garrett. He was positive that if he'd kept advancing toward the fires he'd have stumbled over them in the grass. Now they were gone.

"Pick up your wounded, Corporal," Garrett said tersely. He was hoping against hope that he had no dead.

Corporal Shannon came up, breathing hard, anxious to get into the fight if there still was one.

"Some of 'em get away, sir?" Shannon asked.

"Some got away," Garrett said morosely. He knew that he should have included Al Seeley or Sergeant Mattock in this sortie against the Apache camp. Both men knew the Apache better than he did. They would have been looking for some kind of a ruse.

They had five wounded, and only one man fairly seriously. There were no dead, and there were no Apaches, every one of Satana's band having slipped through the net.

Garrett had a look at the trooper with a bullet through his side. It was cold up on top of the mesa now and they were not equipped to spend the night here. Blankets and supplies were with the horses in the canyon.

"We'll try to get down," Garrett said finally. "Handle this man carefully." He wasn't too anxious to get down, himself, now, with Seeley waiting below, the amusement showing in his eyes again.

It was a hard climb down, the five wounded men having to be handled very gently. When they reached the base of Mesa, Seeley's Apaches already had fires going and hot coffee ready for them. Seeley said succinctly, "Heard shootin' up there. We got over, but they was already down, runnin' like hell."

"He slipped through my lines," Garrett said quietly. "He fooled me with a feint at my left wing and he went through the middle." He accepted the cup of coffee an enlisted man brought up to him and he sipped it gratefully. It had grown really cold on the way down.

AL SEELEY was standing with his hands deep in his pockets, looking down at the ground as he stood near one of the fires. He said grimly,

"Hell, there's no use cryin' over it. Satana's gone an' we can't track him any more than we can track down a flyin' eagle. Reckon we'll just have to wait till he strikes again, Lieutenant." He paused and he added tersely. "Only thing is I'd hate like hell to be sittin' in some prospector's camp or some lonely ranch house waitin' fer him to come up with his devils."

Garrett looked into the empty cup in his hands, for the first time the full implication of his failure hitting him. He'd allowed a terrible killer to escape, and it meant more murders along the frontier, more innocent families wiped out, more tortures, indescribable. This had not been simply another skirmish with Indian forces to be taken up at a later date. Men, women and children were going to die because he'd failed. Al Seeley knew that; his command knew that.

They were bringing up the horses now, and Garrett saw to the comfort of his wounded before returning back to the camp at the rancher's place. He recognized the fact that there was nothing for him to do now but return to Fort Apache with his command. No one knew when or where Satana would strike again. Seeley had stated that he was returning to the Reservation with his police.

True to his word, at dawn the next morning when Garrett rolled out of his blanket, he learned that Seeley and his Apaches were gone. He returned to Fort Apache where his wounded had the benefit of a doctor's care.

IV

THE LONG WAIT STARTED then, and with it came the monotony. Garrett sent patrols out to look for sign. He had a few Apache scouts with him now, Indians sent out from the Reservation to help him track down Satana, but they found nothing. Satana, as far as the army was concerned, had utterly disappeared from the face of the earth.



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Vet?.....

A courier came in with the report that tremendous things were happening in the north country where a very large army of white soldiers was marching out against the Sioux-Cheyenne federation. There were rumors of a great battle having been fought.

There was a message, also from the commanding officer at Fort Anderson that Garrett should redouble his efforts to bring in Satana. He was asked if he needed any more men, and he replied in the negative. It was not the number of men who would capture or kill the renegade; it was someone who knew how to apprehend him.

With the waiting returned also the old bitterness. He rebelled at the inactivity, the waiting for an old reprobate of an Indian to murder someone. He sent out more patrols with the Apache scouts accompanying them. He went out with the patrols, himself, but they found nothing.

There were rumors that Satana was up in the Twin Forks country, and then that he'd been seen in the vicinity of the Double X ranch. The heat and the terrible monotony began to have its effect after three weeks. Very definitely Garrett was coming to the conclusion that he should tender his resignation. He hadn't deserved an assignment like this.

THERE was no indication that after he'd caught up with Satana that he'd be returned to civilization. They hadn't returned his father, and his father had died at this outpost.

The ranchers in the vicinity wanted the army here to protect them against Satana and any other renegades coming up from Mexico, or deserting the various Reservations. They'd petitioned the army for this protection, and there was the possibility that the southern department would keep him here indefinitely to die on the limb.

He managed to keep the men busy every moment, knowing that idleness worked on them also. They rebuilt sections of the stockade wall; they repaired the barracks his father had built so many years before; they dug a drainage ditch from the stables, something his father had never gotten around to.

While he worked he was not idle other ways. He learned more about this country and the Apaches who lived in it. He got information from Sergeant Mattock and from other veterans in the troop; he spoke to the Apache scouts, some of whom spoke fairly good English, and he learned the Apache side of the story—the familiar story of misrule of Indian Agents and of graft, of crooked politics.

Al Seeley came upon him once while he was patiently trying to learn a few Apache words from one of the scouts. Seeley came in with a half dozen of his police, still on the lookout for Satana, following every lead.

In reply to Garrett's query where he thought the Indian might be, Seeley shrugged and said, "Top o' some damned mesa we never heard of, or maybe down in a lost canyon, makin' mescal. Maybe he even got scared off and went all the way back to the Sierra Madres. Nobody knows."

Garrett considered this last supposition. If Satana had actually gone to Mexico, it meant that the danger was over here, but they didn't know. It might be another year or more before he came north again out of his mountain fastness; he might never come again, and he, Garrett Owen, would be sitting in the cell that was Fort Apache, waiting, trying not to go mad.

Seeley looked around the post, examined the improvements, smoked his Mexican cigarettes, and said nothing. He disappeared just as mysteriously as he came.

Garrett sent a request back to Fort Anderson for a transfer, if it was possible. It was hopeful wishing and he knew it, but it was something to hope for and it occupied his mind for a week or so while waiting for the reply from his commanding officer. They were very short of experienced officers; he'd been sent down from the Department of the Platte for that very reason, and there was little hope that he'd be transferred elsewhere. He wondered if his father had ever asked for a transfer after they'd sent him to Arizona. He hadn't heard.

The department rejected his request. Garrett stared at the written piece of pa-

per as if it was his death warrant. He'd expected it, but when it came it was still like a fist in the stomach.

The day had been a particularly trying one. It was mid-summer now, with the sun coming up early in the morning, beating down on the post all the day—a dry, searing heat, a cloudless blue sky, a tremendous silence in this dead land.

Lieutenant Garrett Owen went into the office, sat down woodenly at his father's desk, and wrote out his resignation. The courier was returning in the morning. He would take the paper back to civilization with him.

At roll-call that night he watched the flag come down from the pole, and he listened to Sergeant Mattock read the roll. When the men broke up and headed for the mess hall some of them were singing softly as they walked. Garrett was thinking that there was no resigning for enlisted men. They served out their term whether they liked their station or not. These men did not seem to particularly mind.

He could hear their laughter in the mess hall. Corporal Shannon, a wit in the company, was telling a story. After a while when they'd finished eating a quartet started to sing.

Garrett went back to his office and looked at the white envelope on his desk. He'd decided many years ago to follow in his father's footsteps and make a career out of the army, but that was all over now. He'd heard of officers breaking up mentally because of dissatisfaction with their posts. He didn't want that to happen to him. He tried to tell himself that he was justified in his act.

HE WAS sitting at the desk when the orderly came in with the word that Seeley had just ridden into the post. The scout was waiting on the piazza when Garrett came out. It was dark now with the yellow lights from the barracks and the mess hall illuminating the wooden boardwalk around the parade grounds.

Seeley's police were squatting on the grounds as usual, and Garrett could see the red glow of their cigarettes. Seeley's

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white mule was tied to the porch, his long ears twitching.

Garrett said, "All right, Seeley."

The scout's voice was hard, brittle. He said, "Four teamsters murdered up on Silver Creek; a rancher at Twin Forks burned out, two of his riders cut to pieces, his little boy missing; the stage eastbound for Tucson chased for half a dozen miles. Six passengers in it. They're alive because fifteen Double X riders happened to be crossing the stage road. All in twenty-four hours."

Garrett thought for a moment. "If they were chasing the stage," he said, "it means that they're mounted again."

"They're mounted," Seeley nodded, "an' ridin' like hell. They must o' picked up their horses off the open range. That's the way they work. They ride a horse until they're hungry an' then they eat it. Then they pick up another one free o' charge."

"Silver Creek, Twin Forks, the stage road to Tucson," Garrett repeated. "They're pretty widely separated."

"That's the damn trouble," Seeley growled. "I kin only guess which way he'll head next, an' when I go that way I might be headin' in the wrong direction. If we make too many mistakes now it's that many more people slaughtered by the devil."

"If he's mounted," Garrett said thoughtfully, "he'll leave tracks. We might be able to follow him part of the way."

"Until he gets in the mountains," Seeley said tersely. "Up there on the ridges he kin see you comin' thirty miles off. He stops makin' tracks then. He splits up his bucks in groups of three, four, a half dozen, an' you got maybe six bands o' murderers runnin' around instead o' one. You don't know where to hell to watch fer 'em."

"You have any suggestions?" Garrett asked him.

"You're the general," Seeley said sourly. "I was thinkin' though that Satana always liked to raid stage coaches. He damn near caught the eastbound this afternoon. Halliday uses big mules to pull his Concords, an' Satana would rather eat mule meat than buffalo steak. He

kind o' likes to run them coaches, too. It's like a game for him."

"We'll follow the next stage out at a distance," Garrett suggested. "When we see Satana come down from the mountains to chase it we go after him and we don't stop running until we catch up to him—if it takes a month."

Seeley shook his head. "Stage road runs along the base o' the Buckskin Mountains," he stated. "It's open country fer fifty miles. Satana could see you if you were twenty miles behind the coach an' he wouldn't go near it. If you got farther back than that he'd have the coach overturned an' everybody in it cut to pieces before you could come up to help."

GARRETT went back into the office, Seeley following him. He stood in front of his desk, looking down at the white envelope there, not seeing it. He said finally, "How many would you say Satana has in his band now?"

"Twenty-five of 'em chasin' that stage," Al Seeley said.

"And how many men could squeeze into a Concord coach?" Garrett wanted to know.

Seeley looked at him quickly. "Reckon nine inside," he said. "Two up on the seat, makes eleven." He added thoughtfully, "Another one in the rear boot an' one in the front is thirteen."

"That should be enough," Garrett said.

Seeley was looking at him, new respect in his eyes. He said slowly, "You figure it'll work, Lieutenant?"

"Satana likes to chase stages," Garrett said. "He might regret chasing this one."

Seeley grinned. "Your father never thought o' that one," he chuckled, "an' he had a lot o' ideas as to how to trap Satana."

"I'll meet you in Cardwell," Garrett said. "I'll bring a dozen of my best riflemen with me. Can you handle six horses, Seeley?"

"Used to drive a coach for Halliday," Seeley said dryly. He looked at Garrett closely and he said, "You figure on goin' along yourself?"

"It's my idea," Garrett said.

Seeley looked at his brown hands.

"They're two to one," he murmured, "and a hell of a lot o' things kin happen there you didn't figure on. Ain't nobody comin' out to help us when the fightin' starts."

"We'll take care of ourselves," Garrett told him. He picked up the envelope and slipped it absently into a drawer.

Al Seeley rode away ten minutes later, and Garrett sent out a call for Sergeant Mattock.

When the veteran cavalryman came in, Garrett said to him, "Pick out the twelve best shots in the Troop. I'm taking them to Cardwell with me in the morning. We'll pull out an hour before dawn. While I'm gone, Sergeant, you'll be in command of the post."

Mattock saluted and went out. He was the perfect non-com. There was curiosity in his eyes, but he asked no questions.

In the morning just before he left, Garrett gave the man a brief sketch of the plan he had in mind. He said,

"According to our calculations Satana should attack us in the vicinity of Red Rocks. We shall be passing the Rocks at one o'clock in the afternoon. Seeley figured the time. You will bring thirty men, Sergeant, and arrange your time to reach the Rocks about two o'clock. If it comes to a pitched fight we might need your help. At any rate we'll need your horses to chase the ones that get away."

Mattock saluted. He had something to say, but he wasn't quite sure that he had the right to say it.

"Questions?" Garrett smiled.

"Might be safer, sir," Sergeant Mattock stated, "if I arrived at one with the reinforcements."

Garrett shook his head. "You'd scare him off, Sergeant," he explained. "We have to get him right up close to the coach."

Mattock saluted again and went out. Garrett left the post ten minutes later, and it was still quite dark. The sun came up as they were moving into the Sulphur Hills, and with the sun came the heat again.

Garrett glanced back at the twelve

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bronzed men riding, column of twos, behind him. They were seasoned Indian fighters and this project pleased them. They'd been chasing Satana a good many years; they'd seen the results of his ravages. This day they anticipated coming to grips with him.

V

CARDWELL, THE LITTLE MINING town, was an another hour's ride on the other side of Sulphur Hills. Garrett entered it at ten in the morning, riding down the single dusty street, his coming attracting little attention.

He went straight to the stage office and found Al Seeley inside, talking with the agent, Ed Littlefield. Littlefield shook hands warmly. He was a slender man, quiet-spoken, brown-eyed.

He said, "Reckon this is a kind of risky business, Lieutenant. I was going to ask you for an armed escort for our stages leaving Cardwell. I guess we're going to have that escort inside the coach."

"We're hoping for success," Garrett told him. "Is your stage in, Mr. Littlefield?"

"Holding it in the yard," the agent explained. "Passengers are staying over in Cardwell a day or two. None of them are too anxious to move out now that they know Satana is on the loose."

"Can you fix me up with civilian clothes?" Garrett asked him. "I'll be sitting up on the seat with Seeley."

Littlefield glanced at Seeley approvingly. He said, "We can do that, Lieutenant. Will you step out into the wagon shed?"

When Garrett came back, dressed in coarse flannel pants and a gray shirt, Al Seeley was standing outside the office tossing his knife into the top of a barrel, pulling it out again. There was a frown on the man's face. Garrett said to him. "Anything wrong?"

"One o' my boys just rode in from the Reservation," Seeley said grimly. "He says about forty young bucks just jumped the line. They could be either headin' for Mexico or joinin' up with Satana. I don't figure they'll have time to find Satana's band before we meet up with him

though. They were headin' south an' Satana is north o' the Reservation."

"That'll be another job for you when we get back," Garrett murmured.

Seeley smiled coldly, "When we get back," he repeated.

Garrett watched the twelve troopers piling into the coach. They managed to get ten inside with one man in each boot. The leather flaps were pulled down across the windows as if to keep out the sun.

Seeley climbed up on the seat, picked up the reins, and kicked loose the brake. Garrett sat next to him, a Henry rifle across his knees, acting as express messenger. The Apaches would be expecting that. They'd attacked the stage the previous day with a guard up on the seat with the driver.

Ed Littlefield waved a hand to them as the coach rolled under the archway and into the street. The six mules in the traces kicked up fine, thin dust as they left town and took the stage road east.

Seeley handled the reins dexterously. Garrett settled back on the seat. He examined the Henry rifle carefully and he placed his cartridge belt on the coach roof behind him.

He had nearly two hours to think now and do nothing else. Seeley was positive Satana was in the Buckskin Mountains, and high up on the ridges he would not fail to spot the stage when it finally emerged on the open plains along the base of the mountains. Satana would not attack anywhere else, according to Seeley, but in that area adjacent to the mountains. He was close to his holes then, and he could scoot back like a rat if trouble developed.

"We'll let them get up as close as we can," Garrett said, "before the boys inside open up. We want to get most of them with the first blast, particularly Satana."

"When they start shootin'," Seeley advised, "you better git down flat on top o' the coach, Lieutenant. There's a couple o' sandbags I put under them tarpaulins. They'll help a little."

Off to the south and the west Garrett could see the mottled Buckskin Range, grassless, treeless, a mass of rock shimmering in the hot sun. They were still a

full hour from the range, but the mountains looked closer.

Seeley spat once and said softly, "Reck-on they see us, Lieutenant."

"How——?" Garrett started to say, and then he saw it also, the thin column of white wood smoke lifting up against the vivid blue of the sky.

"Smoke talk," Seeley murmured. "You'll see another one in a few minutes."

THE second column of smoke came from a point probably a half dozen miles to the north of the first, along the rim of the mountains.

"Satana's got 'em scattered a little," Seeley explained. "They'll come together now and they'll jump us when we get even with 'em."

Garrett watched the smoke intently, and he scarcely heard what Seeley was saying.

"Reminds me o' the time the Department tried to transfer your father to a soft spot back east," Seeley was saying. "We was chasin' Satana's smoke signals tryin' to work in close on him, but the little devil sent up smoke all over the mountains—a dozen fires goin' at once. He damn near drove us crazy. It was his little idea of a joke."

It took a little while for that first remark Seeley had made to sink in. Garrett turned his head to look at the man. He said slowly, "The Department tried to transfer my father?"

"Twice," Seeley explained. "Thought you knew about that, Lieutenant. First time they wanted to give him that easy post back east 'cause they figured he was gettin' too old fer active duty, especially Indian huntin'. Your dad wrote 'em a blisterin' letter, tellin' 'em off. He told 'em if they sent some damned inexperienced West Point graduate out here Satana would drive him crazy in six months. He'd have his troopers in the wrong place all the time, and the Apaches would clean out every settler in the country."

Garrett Owen moistened his lips. He said slowly, "Did Satana do much damage while my father was in command of Fort Apache?"

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"Killed six people," Seeley said. "He'd o' murdered a hundred an' six if your father hadn't kept him on the run so much every time he come north. Your dad never give him time to settle down to nice murderin'. Satana got disgusted after a while an' he stayed down in Mexico to kill greasers. Reckon he thought they was easier."

Garrett looked down at the gun in his lap. He was thinking what would happen when the harassed Department received his resignation. They'd have to send out an inexperienced Second Lieutenant to take over his command, and while the young man was blundering his way through Satana would be murdering right and left.

"My—my father must have liked this country," Garrett said.

"Hell no," Seeley grinned. "Always called it the 'devil's backyard.' He had his little joke about it. Said even the animals stayed clear of it. The Apaches like it but they ain't men and they ain't animals."

"But he stayed," Garrett murmured, "until he died, and he could have gotten away."

"He was a soldier," Al Seeley said quietly, "a damned good soldier."

THE smoke signals had stopped now. Garrett sat swaying with the movement of the coach. He remembered his mother saying now that his father always had trouble with his eyes, and he'd been afflicted with terrific headaches. The blinding sunlight of this vast country had undoubtedly tortured him, but he'd fought to stay at his post because he thought he was needed, that he could do the job better than any other man. There had been glory connected with his work here; there had been no flag-waving and no brevets for him. He'd died comparatively unnoticed, but Al Seeley, who knew, claimed he'd saved the lives of dozens and dozens of people.

They were coming abreast of the mountains now, and Garrett called down to the men inside the coach,

"They've spotted us and I think they'll attack. Don't start shooting until I give

the word. We want them to come up even with us."

He was thinking of his father when the first Apache shot out of the rocks at the base of the Buckskin Mountains, screaming insanely, firing with his rifle.

The ball passed far over their heads. Other riders tore from cover as Al Seeley started to wield the whip and the six mules lunged into the traces.

The big Concord began to pick up speed. Seeley said succinctly, "Git back, Lieutenant. Work on 'em."

Garrett rolled back to the roof of the coach. He lay flat on his stomach and he pushed his Henry rifle between the sand sacks Seeley so thoughtfully had provided.

The sudden spurt of the coach had given them a start on the Apaches, but they were coming up fast. Garrett counted twenty-five of them as he lined his gun on the leader, an almost naked young buck with a red bandeau, riding a big bay range horse.

When he squeezed the trigger, the buck slumped forward on the neck of the bay, hung there for a moment and then slipped to the ground. Seeley had his head turned at the moment as he guided the team. He yelled, "Nice shootin', Lieutenant."

The Apaches dropped back a little, but Garrett had gotten a good look at the renegades. They had on no warpaint as did the northern tribes, but they didn't need paint. Their faces were hideous with hate and the lust for blood. A few of them wore old army shirts with their breechclouts, but the others were almost completely naked. They rode with wild abandon; they rode their horses savagely, unmercifully, whipping them with heavily knotted buckskin quirts.

Seeley called back, "Feller in the rear, ridin' the sorrel is Satana. You'll always find him on a slow horse so he don't git too close to the bullets. He's right in on top o' things, though, when the murderin' starts."

Garrett had seen the infamous renegade—a weazened old man in a blue flannel army shirt he'd undoubtedly taken from a dead cavalryman. He was riding somewhat in the rear, always keeping cover behind the younger bucks riding ahead.

THE two dozen odd Apaches split into two wings and started to come up on either side of the coach rather than chase it from the rear, and this was the thing Garrett had hoped for. At a signal from him the men inside the Concord were to tear down the leathern curtains and fire point-blank at the Apaches when they came in for the kill. Seeley was to stop the coach completely to steady their aim and enable the men in the boots to emerge to take part in the fight. The object was to get Satana. If twenty of the Apaches were killed and Satana escaped the whole plan could be counted as a failure. Satana could always draw more young bucks from the Reservations, and in a short time he would be at full strength again, ready for marauding.

"Comin' in close again," Seeley called back. He deliberately slowed down the speed of his fast-moving mules to enable the Apaches to catch up. The two wings were beginning to swing in toward the coach.

The screaming was getting on Garrett's nerves and he wished they'd come in fast. He was watching for Satana in the army shirt. The old man was still out of rifle range, but he was beginning to edge in closer. Garrett contemplated the advisability of sending a shot at him, trying to pick him off at the distance. He decided against it. The bullet might make Satana wary; he'd stay farther back than ever, and when the real fight began he might tear back into the mountains before they got a clean shot at him.

"Get ready," Garrett called down. He didn't need to tell them. The insane screams were coming closer. The point riders of the two wings were already cutting across in the direction of the road to stop the coach mules.

Garrett took careful aim and managed to hit another of the Apache riders. The Indian jerked his head as the bullet struck him in the body. He managed to stay on his mount, but he was swaying as the animal took him away from the coach.

The Apaches swooped in hard after that last shot, and Garrett was about to tell Seeley to stop altogether when he heard

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the scout's muffled oath. Seeley was stopping—very abruptly, his brake screeching.

The renegade Apaches were screaming triumphantly now. Garrett turned his head. He felt a little sick at what he saw. Between forty and fifty Apache riders were streaming out of a defile in the mountains, cutting directly across the path of the oncoming stage.

Al Seeley said, "Them bucks that jumped the Reservation. They're in with Satana." There was bitterness in his voice.

"Stop the coach," Garrett said grimly.

The mules had stopped galloping when Seeley started to apply the brakes. They were walking now, and Seeley stopped them altogether. Garrett said, "Cut the mules loose, Seeley."

He called down to the men in the coach. "Everybody out. Crawl under the coach. Start firing."

The ten troopers inside leaped through the door, ducked under the coach, and started to fire at the astonished Apaches. The two men in the coach boots scrambled from their hiding places to join them. The heavy army carbines started to bang.

Seeley was slashing at straps with his knife, cutting them, unhooking the mules as fast as he could. Some of the Apaches started to chase the mules as the three separate teams broke away from the coach with Seeley slapping at them with his hat.

Working very fast, Garrett rolled the sandbags from the top of the coach and then scrambled down himself. The troopers were squatting beneath the coach firing steadily. The few sandbags Garrett had thrown down were arranged between the wheels and they provided some protection.

The main body of Apaches tried a concerted drive to overwhelm the small body of defenders at the coach. They came on screaming—almost fifty strong, reinforced by Satana's renegades on the wings.

Coolly, steadily the troopers fired and reloaded. White gunsmoke enshrouded the coach after awhile, making them poor targets for the Apache guns. Garrett saw at least a dozen Indians knocked from their horses. Others were wounded and swaying as they rode away, and the backbone of the attack was broken.

Al Seeley, who had dropped down next to Garrett, and was firing with a Henry rifle, said quietly, "Reckon they got enough for a spell, Lieutenant, but they'll be back."

Garrett gave the order to dig in. Knives flashed out and the troopers hastily constructed a rude earthwork fortification just outside the coach. The sandbags were lifted up on top of the mounds.

The heat was terrific now. Garrett took stock of his command. One man had sustained an arm wound, but that was all. They were in good shape, fairly well protected now, and full of fight.

The Apaches had gathered around Satana and were holding a consultation before continuing with the attack. It was evident that they did not like to charge directly into those deadly guns. Sergeant Mattock had picked his men carefully. They were all first rate shots, and they weren't wasting lead.

"Sergeant Mattock is coming up with reinforcements in an hour or so," Garrett said. "We should be able to hold out that long without any trouble."

"Damned good thing," Seeley commented. "We got one canteen o' water with us an' it's hotter than hell here."

The Apaches seemed in no apparent hurry giving the cavalrymen plenty of time to dig in. The troopers joked, but Seeley was watching the horsemen out on the plains, a frown on his face.

HE said to Garrett, "I don't like it, Lieutenant. Satana's nobody's fool. He knows damned well we were workin' a trap on him with United States troopers. He must know that there's more men comin' up. He'd like to git us because he'd rather murder a trooper than eat a mule. He's got somethin' up his sleeve."

"What can he do?" Garrett wanted to know. "We're dug in and we're under cover while he's in the open. He knows we have excellent marksmen in this group and we have plenty of ammunition."

"He'll think o' somethin'," Seeley growled. "He always has."

Satana didn't disappoint them. In a few minutes Garrett saw a number of the

Apaches dismount. They gathered up a few dry mesquite sticks and in a moment had a small fire blazing.

The party dismounted and they began to creep in, taking cover behind every rock and indentation. Seeley muttered, "What in hell is he doin' now?"

THEY didn't have long to wait. Two young bucks from behind the cover of a big boulder began to shoot burning arrows up into the air. The first two arrows went wide of the mark, but the third struck the roof of the Concord coach with a thud.

All talk stopped underneath the coach when the Apaches started to shoot the arrows. Garrett could almost hear the heavy breathing of the men.

Corporal Shannon, who was with this contingent, said quietly, "I'd like permission to go up and put out that fire, Lieutenant."

Before Garrett could say anything, Al Seeley growled, "They got this coach covered from every angle. You pop your head up an' you're dead. They'll be shootin' arrows at it until she catches anyway, an' you can't sit up there like a turkey on a fence."

Another arrow struck the roof of the coach, and they could hear the flames begin to crackle. The Concord was as dry as tinder from constant exposure to the hot Arizona sun, and Garrett realized in a matter of minutes they would be crouching under a blazing inferno.

The Apaches started to howl when they saw the flames. They were all dismounted now creeping up close, firing into the coach.

Garrett said to Seeley, "You see Santana?"

"Layin' behind that clump o' black rock," the scout said grimly. "He's still out o' range." Even as he spoke Garrett saw the tawny brown shape slide out from among the rocks, race forward a dozen yards and then disappear behind a small rise in the ground. "He's comin' fer the kill," Seeley growled. "Reckon if I kin get a bullet into that dog I won't mind dyin'."

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"You might have your chance," Garrett murmured. "They're pretty far from the horses now." He listened to the flames crackling overhead.

Seeley said tersely, "What do you have in mind Lieutenant?"

"We're going out two by two," Garrett said. He lifted his voice so that the other men could hear him. He pointed to the clump of black rock behind which Satana had been hiding. "We're heading for those rocks," he explained. "I think they'll give us enough cover until Sergeant Mattock comes up."

"If we kin get there," Seeley chuckled. "Them rocks are nearly two hundred yards away, Lieutenant."

Garrett nodded. "If we all charge out at once," he stated, "they'll shoot us down because we'll be easy targets. We're going out in pairs. The first two men will run twenty yards and drop on the ground. The moment they drop the next two will dart out and run the same distance, dropping on the ground a few yards to the rear of the first pair. Then the first pair leap up and run twenty more yards before falling down flat. Two more men run from the coach and drop behind the second pair out.

"Then the second pair race up to the first two and the first two advance twenty more yards before falling flat. In that way we'll have different groups of men running all the time, progressing toward the rocks in short bounds. It might prove confusing to the Apaches. I don't imagine they're too good shots to begin with, and by the time they get their guns lined on two runners those men will be down on the ground and two others on the run."

Al Seeley stared at him, and then a big grin spread across his face. He said softly, "Kind o' wish your dad was here to see this, Lieutenant. Reckon he'd be kind o' proud."

"The first two men out will have it the hardest," Garrett went on calmly. "They'll have to clear the way as they go. Seeley, you and Corporal Shannon will form that first team. You both have Army Colts. You'll be needing them more than your rifles."

"Yes, sir," Shannon said. He was grin-

ning, anxious to go, very pleased with the plan.

"Some of us will be hit," Garrett stated "but the others keep going. Once we get in among the rocks we can protect the wounded with our guns so that Satana can't finish them off."

Al Seeley was examining his Colt when Garrett lined up the seven pairs of men. He intended to bring up the rear himself, running with one of the troopers, but even as he spoke he realized something was missing. They needed a diversion. There was the possibility the first two men out would be shot down because the Apaches were waiting for that first break.

Looking out between the sandbags, listening to the crackle of the flames overhead, Garrett saw Satana leave his second position and scoot in a lateral direction for about fifteen yards, dropping down behind scattered rocks again. He was thinking that Satana was the one they had to get this afternoon—even though they were all killed doing it.

"Ready to go," Seeley said. He had his rifle in one hand and the Colt gun in the other. Corporal Shannon squatted beside him, very cool, a grin on his face.

Garrett rubbed the barrel of his own Colt gun. He hadn't fired with it yet, and the cylinder contained six bullets. It might only take one to kill Satana, and he would have his diversion whether he reached the Apache or not. He said quietly, "Start running."

EVEN before Seeley and Shannon could clear the wheels, he'd slipped out himself, darting under the two front wheels. He was out in the open and running before Seeley and Shannon had straightened themselves out. He heard Seeley's astonished yell and he kept going, running faster with each stride that he took, heading straight in Satana's direction.

The guns started to crack on both sides of him. He felt the breath of one bullet; another ticked his leg, and he was mortally afraid of that—afraid that he'd be hit in the legs and wouldn't be able to go on. He was confident that if anything struck him above the waist and it was not

a mortal wound he could keep going and get close enough to the murderous Satana to empty his revolver into him.

He had to get past one Apache directly in his path. He ran straight for this man. The Apaches were yelling excitedly. Seeley and Shannon had made their twenty yards and were down. The second pair was sprinting out from beneath the burning coach, hurling themselves to the ground as they came up close to Seeley and Shannon.

The scout and the red-headed corporal sprang up instantly and sprinted forward again just as two more men left the coach and darted forward. There were six men running in relay, and then eight, and then ten. The Colt guns were booming, too, as troopers opened up as they ran.

Garrett started to zig-zag as he neared the Indian in front of him. The Apache was squatting behind a low rock, part of his brown body showing. He had his rifle up and he was trying to cover Garrett, the barrel moving back and forth, glinting in the hot sun.

Running at top speed, Garrett sent one shot at the man, knowing that there was a slim chance of hitting him while he was on the run himself, but hoping he could spoil the Indian's aim.

His slug kicked up sand directly into the face of the Apache. His rifle cracked, but the bullet was wide of the mark. Garrett put a bullet through him as he raced past the spot. The Apache started to rise from the ground as he was hit, and Garrett saw the hole in his bare chest. He kept running, drawing much of the Apache fire toward him, providing the diversion he had realized was necessary.

A bullet struck him in the left forearm; another knocked off the heel of his right boot, nearly upsetting him, but he righted himself and plunged on. He could see Satana's face up ahead of him, peering out through a crevice between two rocks.

The Apache chief was looking down the sight of his gun. There was a long jagged scar across his forehead below the red bandeau. It ran down over the corner of his right eye. The eyes were small, yellowish, filled with hate.

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Garrett remembered that he had only four bullets left in the Colt gun.

He didn't want to waste any now until he was up close—close enough, if possible, to set his man on fire with the flash! He was thinking of all the murders accredited to Satana—murders not only of men, but of women and innocent children.

Satana's rifle cracked with Garrett still fifteen yards away from him. The bullet shattered Garrett's left shoulder. He felt the shock of it; it spun him half-around and he nearly fell, but righting himself, he kept going. He kept going, stumbling forward, pointing the gun at Satana's evil face.

The Apache was trying to line him up for a second shot with his Henry repeater when Garrett's bullet struck him in the face. A red mist was coming up in front of Garrett's eyes as he fell forward, pointing the gun still at Satana, who was less than six feet away. He squeezed the trigger before he went unconscious. He was squeezing it, squeezing it again, when the darkness came.

HE HEARD Al Seeley's voice then—low, coming from the distance, bringing him back to earth. Then he heard Sergeant Mattock speak and he tried to reason the thing out. Seeley was supposed to be in the cover of the black rocks, if he'd made it, and Mattock was still on the way from Fort Apache.

Garrett opened his eyes. Someone was working on his shoulder. He lay in the shade of a big rock—a black rock. The company doctor was bandaging the shoulder, smiling down at him. Sergeant Mat-

tock was squatting at his feet with Al Seeley.

The scout said calmly, "Reckon he's all right now, Sergeant. He'll take a hell of a lot o' killin'."

Garrett moistened his lips. He'd said to Mattock, "You're early, Sergeant."

The grizzled sergeant scratched his jaw. "My watch must have been a little fast, Lieutenant," he apologized.

"Damned good," Seeley murmured, "that he came out of them hills when he did, Lieutenant. We had ten of our boys up here, with two of 'em wounded twenty an' thirty yards from the rocks. We were able to cover them with our guns, but you was out o' sight an' them Apaches were headed your way. Reckon they didn't like what you did to Satana."

"He's dead?" Garrett asked.

"Hell," Seeley grinned, "we figure so, but we had a time recognizin' him with that ugly face shot away."

"They were on foot and in open country when we came out of the defile," Sergeant Mattock explained. "I'd say we accounted for half of them, Lieutenant, and the others are running for the border."

Garrett smiled and closed his eyes again. The doctor was saying, "A few weeks rest will put you back in shape, Lieutenant. Your shoulder might be a little stiff, but that's all."

Garrett nodded. He was thinking that before he had his rest at the post there was a little business he had to attend to. He had to burn up a white envelope he'd left in a drawer in his father's desk. He had the feeling that his father would like that.



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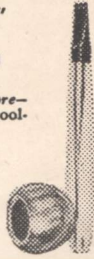
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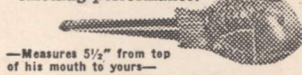
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