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by ROE RICHMOND



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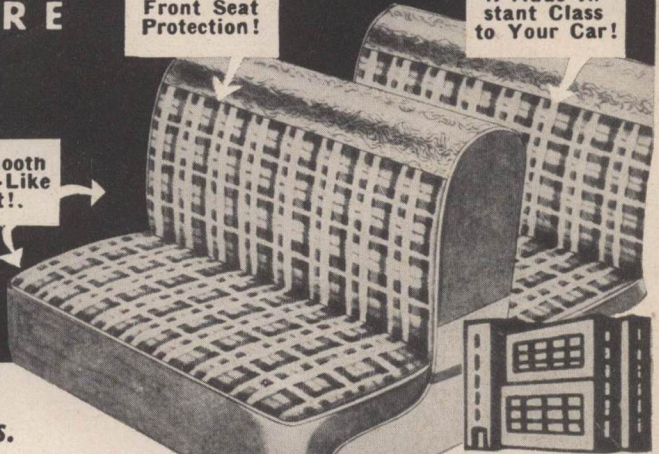
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ACTION STORIES

VOL 19, NO. 8 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • SUMMER—1950

► *Great Range Novel*

PILGRIM FROM TOMBSTONE *Roe Richmond* 4

Grimly he rode snake-sign on the killers, his hate a mad, clawing thing that screamed for payment in flaming lead and bright blood . . . and ahead of him the warning whisper sped: "Dig a bushwhack grave, owlhoots . . . Lenyard's ridin' for showdown!"

► *Two Gunsmoke Novelets*

THE SUNDANCE KID *Jay Drexel* 32

There are all sorts of gunmen . . . some tall and lean, some short and chesty; some looking like hungry wolves, others like sky-pilots. And now, gents, meet Carthy, Queen . . . who looks like a dusty, rag-down, grub-line kid . . .

DRIVE YOUR HERD—TO HELL! *Joseph Chadwick* 57

Rawhide Dan Macklin tried to warn them about the gun-hawk treachery that threatened to stampede the Magdalena into raging range-war . . . but they were too busy trying to kill him to listen!

► *Three Fast-moving Short Stories*

GUN-SLINGER'S GRUDGE *C. William Harrison* 24

Jig Duneen's hair-trigger wolf-pack cruised the street from both ends, hard eyes probing . . . They wanted a man named McBride. And on a rocky ledge high above town, a man named McBride rose to check his guns . . . They could have him . . .

LONGHORN FURY *C. M. Miller* 45

Two of a kind . . . the wily old cowpuncher and the stubborn, mossybacked longhorn . . . when they clashed in a battle of guts and range-savvy, the dudes could only stand and stare!

ONE LITTLE DOGIE *A. C. Abbott* 49

Tickets to Boothill? Hell yes—Davis and Ryan packed two holstersfull of 'em, to be delivered to a certain bushwhackin' coyote . . . front and plumb center!

► *Golden Saddle Western Classic*

SEÑORITA OF THE JUDAS GUNS *John Starr* 66

The law may kill a man, but a curse can never die. Five gun-jackals sold Red Lawler into Yuma for a pot of traitor's gold . . . and ten years later found that the blood-loot had bought them the vengeance of the Gun Ghost of the Brasadal

SEÑORITA OF THE JUDAS GUNS ©MCMXXIX by FICTION HOUSE, Inc.

"There's no such animal,"

he cried!



MY FRIEND and I were picking the ponies one day when I started telling him about a *sure thing* I heard about.



"You say it pays four bucks for every three?" he asked.

"Yep," I replied.

"And can't lose? It *automatically* wins? Must be illegal!"

"Not a bit," I replied. "In fact, the government very much approves..."

"Our government approves of a horse who can't lose..."

"Who said anything about a horse?" I asked.

"So what else could it be but a horse...?"

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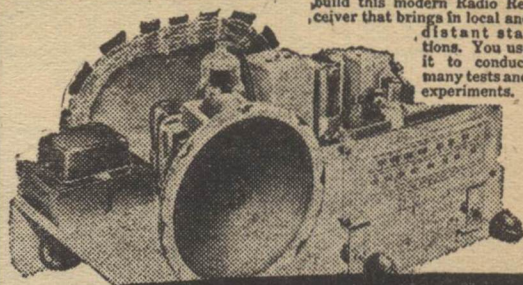
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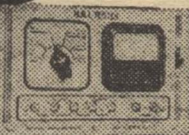
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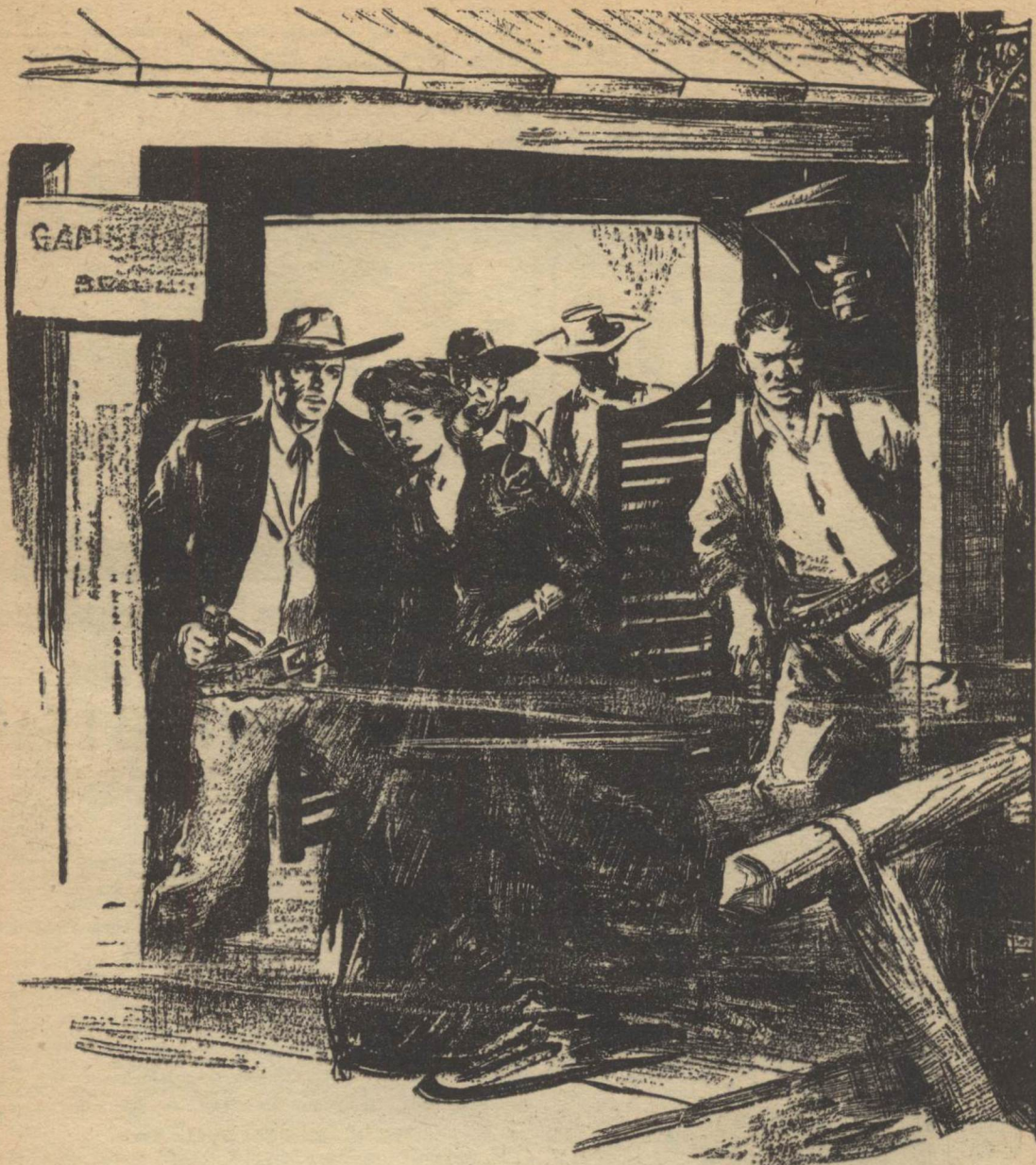
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Pilgrim From Tombstone

By ROE RICHMOND

LENYARD:

THAT LAST NIGHT ON THE trail it all came back to me just as it had been twenty years before when we lost our ranch on the Little Shoshone.

I could feel again the Arizona heat in the stage-coach, the gritty dust on everything, and smell the horses, sand and sage, sun-baked wood and leather. I could see the faces in the coach, sweaty and grimed, my mother pale and tired with that sad sweet smile, Lois delicate and



For twenty years he rode snake-sign on the killers, his hate a mad, clawing thing that screamed for payment in spitting lead and bright blood. The tally of vengeance was long past due. From Tombstone to brawling Elkhorn the word seared the owlhoot grapevine: "Kesselring—Cargile—fork a high-line trail! Lenyard's comin' for showdown!"

drooping like a wilted flower, Rufe keen and handsome and fearless . . . Heading for the fabulous boom town of Tombstone, hoping that things were going to come better for us from then on.

With the ranch gone we had moved into town. Dad couldn't settle down to

work for anybody else so he went out prospecting, but the rest of us had to take jobs in order to live. Mom cooked in the hotel and Lois waited on tables there. Rufe bucked baggage and freight for Wells Fargo, and I was a hostler at the corral. But when the ranch went we all

lost some part of ourselves, the family seemed to start breaking up, and it was never the same again.

Rufe was twenty, I was seventeen, Lois was fifteen. The folks had married young and weren't much over forty, still in the prime but broken up and aged some over losing our spread. Then Dad sent word that he had struck silver over Tombstone way, struck it rich, the real mother lode, and we were on our way to join him and help work the claim. Our hopes were high on that long trip by stage, in spite of the blasting sun and furnace heat, and the threat of Indian attacks. It looked like Indian country and it was, and Rufe and I packed the guns Dad had shown us how to use.

IT WAS EVENING when we pulled into Tombstone. There were three main street instead of one, all lighted up with kerosene flares and crowded with all kinds of people, and it looked like the biggest city in the world to us. There were buildings three-stories high, magnificent hotels like the Grand, Cosmopolitan and Occidental, elaborate saloons like the Alhambra, Oriental and Crystal Palace. There was even an opera house called the Bird Cage. Everybody acted drunk or crazy, as if some great celebration was going on, and we didn't know what to make of it.

Mom and Lois were scared sick. Rufe and I were just fascinated and excited, but we got worried when Dad wasn't there waiting to meet the stage-coach. Tombstone was like another world, and we felt small and lost and helpless in it, putting our luggage down on the plank sidewalk and not knowing what to do or where to go. Rufe asked a lot of people about Dad but nobody seemed to know him. In a place like that one man or one family didn't mean much. Some of the folks didn't even bother to answer Rufe.

Men and women trooped past yelling and laughing, pushing and jostling, stampeding like cattle along the arcades under the wooden awnings of Allen Street. The wide thoroughfare was jammed with riders, buckboards, carriages, freight and ore wagons. Music blared and gunshots sounded through the general uproar. Rufe

was getting mad and fingering his six-shooter. Lois started to cry a little. Mom tried to comfort her and began to cry herself. My own eyes smarted some and there was a lump in my throat.

Then a man wearing a marshal's badge came along, gaunt, easy-moving with a long sad face, tawny drooping mustache, eyes like an eagle, hair glinting yellow under his hat, and Rufe put our question to him. "Lenyard?" the marshal said, stroking his hard jaw and thinking. All at once his face changed and he swore under his breath, looking at Mom and Lois, drawing us away from them. "Boys, this is bad . . . But we buried a man named Lenyard last week. Big, dark, maybe forty-five. Somebody jumped his claim and shot him up." We just stood there, numb, frozen, shocked out of our senses. We knew it was true but we couldn't believe it.

The marshal took us to a small cheap hotel on a back street and got us rooms and said he would try to find the man who had been Dad's partner. The marshal was very nice and considerate, and his name was Wyatt Earp.

The next day Rufe and I went to the land office with him, but there was no claim filed in Dad's name. It was registered under the name of the partner, Kessel. It was legal, had not been changed, and there was nothing that could be done about it. Earp hadn't been able to locate this Kessel yet . . . He took us to the sidehill cemetery north of town and showed us the grave, marked by a pine slab with the name burnt into it. We couldn't believe that Dad was lying in under there.

A FEW NIGHTS LATER Rufe and I went back to Boot Hill and dug up the grave, sick and shaking with horror. A ghastly thing to do but we had to know for sure . . . It was Dad all right, we saw in the matchlight, and there were three bullet-holes in his back. According to Kessel there had been a fight, but we knew Dad would never turn his back on a fight, we knew it was murder . . . We filled the grave up as fast as we could, and we drank ourselves to sleep that night.

We didn't tell Mom or Lois, but I reckon they knew it was murder anyway. Those shots might as well have hit Mom too, because they killed her just as sure as they did Dad, only slower and harder. She died about a month later.

The family was really broken up then. Rufe got drunk and stayed drunk until he was shot to death in the Crystal Palace by a gunman called The Bat. Things were happening too fast for Lois and me, and we were about crazy by that time. I couldn't find The Bat any more than I could Kessel, and if I had I would have died there too . . .

I was working in a mine, and Lois had some kind of a job in the Alhambra. She got in trouble with a man, I guess, and disappeared all of a sudden. I hunted all over the West for her, but I never found her or learned what became of her. I came to think that Lois was either dead or worse than dead. So, just like that, the family was wiped out and I was left alone . . . Sometimes, floating about the country, I wished I was out of it and with them.

There were some close calls, a lot of them, but I never caught it, maybe because I didn't care a damn. I was an Indian scout for a time, and I served a hitch in the regular cavalry. Later there were gun battles all around the country, in El Paso, Hays, Abilene, Ogalala, Las Vegas, Dodge City and Albuquerque. I lived through them some way, and through the years I picked up scattered pieces of information and patched together the story of my father's silver strike and murder. It established a purpose in an otherwise pointless existence, gave me something to live for, an objective to drive toward.

It was what brought me, at last, on the trail to the town of Elkhorn on the Chippenhook River. And that last night out I lived it all over again in my mind.

THE TRAIL FADED at the edge of the redstone butte. I reined up there and stepped down, sore and cramped, relieved to get out of the saddle. The afternoon was pretty well burned away. I took a swallow of brackish water from the canteen and swabbed out Mate's mouth and nostrils. When the gelding whickered

in a begging way I poured some water into my hat and let him drink. It was fall but still hot in the Southwest country. Rolling a smoke I hunched my shoulders against the wind to get a light, and then I stood on the rim looking out over the broad sun-blistered valley. There it was at last.

The town was like hundreds of others I had seen, most of it strung along a single street, a few houses scattered off on the sides, a large stable and corral at the near northern end, a huge holding pen for cattle on the far southern side. Nothing to distinguish it, but Elkhorn was a very special town to me . . . The Chippenhook River, thinly screened with willows and cottonwoods, winds across the brown plain on the east. The Peloncillo Mountains loomed high and rugged on the western horizon, the sky above the peaks washed with changing colors from the lowering sun.

It had taken me long enough to get here. There's always something to interfere with a man's private life and plans. You get involved with people drifting around, a deal or a fight that isn't really your own. A man you like or one you hate, a woman that strikes a quick spark the instant she looks at you. I never chased them, but here and there I'd meet one with that look in her eyes and if she was attractive enough I'd quit roaming for a spell. But none of them ever lasted. Maybe because I didn't want them to.

Standing there on the rimrock over Elkhorn I took stock of myself and my life with some irony. Thirty-seven years and all I had to show for them was right here. The clothes on my back and another outfit in the pack. A big rawboned rangy buckskin named Mate, and a fine hand-tooled leather saddle. The lariat, the Winchester 44-40 in its scabbard, the Colt 44-40 sheathed on my right thigh and its twin in the saddlebag, a hunting knife. And in money, \$107 and some loose change. That was about all, that and the usual odds-and-ends . . . and my memories. I read or heard somewhere that memories are your richest possessions, and I had enough of them to make me a wealthy man. But it didn't seem like much to have accumulated in thirty-seven years.

The trail wound down the steep-sided butte in switchbacks. I swung back into the saddle and put Mate down over the edge. Once on the barren burned floor of the basin we cantered toward the village I had been so long in finding. A wagon road curved along the riverbank, diverging just north of the first houses to enter the main street while the stream meandered slightly east to bend around the outskirts. I noticed a large limestone mansion there, set apart on a broad sloping shelf over the Chippenhook and surrounded by an adobe wall with a great ironbound oaken gate for an entrance. The structure was entirely out of place in this raw crude frontier settlement.

Front Street was typical, however, lined closely with frame, log, adobe, and stone buildings, wooden awnings arched over the board sidewalks, tie rails crowded with saddle horses, buckboards and buggies. There were the usual stores, shops and saloons, an adobe-block bank, the rambling double-porched Union Hotel, a plain squat whitewashed church with a blunt square bell-tower.

I LOOKED AT THE SIGNS as I rode in, knowing that I looked like a saddle-tramp, trailworn and dust-covered, my clothes frayed and tattered from brush, chollas and chaparral. The same name appeared on several store fronts: Kesselring's Hardware, Kesselring's Grocery, Kesslering's General Merchandise, Kesselring's Stage and Freight Office . . . Farther on I saw a latticed opening to Gledhill's Livery Stable & Harness Shop, and I pointed Mate that way.

"Sponge him off, rub him down good, and grain him," I said. "He's come a long ways."

Gledhill, a short blocky bowlegged man with a square ugly face and mild blue eyes, nodded his hatless balding head and chewed his tobacco. "I reckon he has. And he could go a good ways yet if he had to. I'll treat him right, mister."

"This Kesselring," I said. "It looks like he owns everything but the saloons."

Gledhill grunted and spat. "Maybe owns them too, but wouldn't want his name on 'em."

"I'll probably be around for awhile," I told him.

"Ain't much here," Gledhill said. "I'll take good care of your horse. A pleasure with a horse like this."

"His name's Mate," I said. "Mine's Lenyard."

"Gledhill." He put out a strong stubby hand and we shook.

I walked back to a dry goods place that didn't have Kesselring's name on it and bought a new outfit, socks, underwear, pants, shirt, and scarf. After a couple of drinks in the Redwing Saloon I crossed toward Erwin's barbershop. Four men were loafing in the shade of the plank awning, hard-faced, cold-eyed, with a bitter insolence about their mouths, an arrogance of manner that I recognized at once. They didn't wear two guns but they most likely had extra ones and could use them left-handed. They were gun hands if I ever saw any.

"Howdy, stranger," greeted a big hulking giant with tangled red curls spilling under his pushed-back hat. Red Tonk Thornberry, I was to learn later.

"Howdy," I said, starting on by to the barbershop door.

The big man eased over in front of me. "No hurry, stranger. Erwin's busy right now. You just passin' through?"

"Staying over," I said.

"What's your business, mister?"

"Just that," I said flatly. "Mine."

Red Tonk Thornberry laughed. "You rile up awful easy. This ain't no place to get rough in, is it, Smiley?"

"None whatever," agreed the man called Smiley.

I looked him over, figuring I was likely to see a lot of these four if I stayed in Elkhorn. Smiley was medium-sized, plump, jovial looking with his rosy cheeks and ready smile. His name fitted him. He looked amiable, easy-going, and harmless. Only in his eyes did the boldness show.

The third member of the group, who would be identified as Cass Cargile, was tall, rangy, well built, and handsome, superbly sure of himself, conceit in his grin and the tilt of his blond head. Tough in spite of that conceit, I thought, a killer of men as well as ladies.

The fourth man was small, crooked and warped, with a narrow long-jawed face, pale fanatical eyes, and an evil twisted mouth. Lee Mapes, I would discover his name was, perhaps the most dangerous and deadly of the lot.

"Will you stand aside?" I asked the big red-head. "I'm too tired for games."

"Tired, huh?" said Thornberry. "Damned if you don't look it. Run along to the barber and get freshened up. We wouldn't want to bother a poor wornout rundown jasper, would we, boys?"

"He'll keep," Cass Cargile said, cool and disdainful.

LEE MAPES didn't speak but I could still feel his eyes after I was inside the shop and undressing for a bath in the back room. The warm water and soap felt wonderful and I stayed in the tub until it began to grow cold. After a brisk toweling I dressed in the clean clothes, threw away the old ones, had a shave and haircut, and felt like a wholly new man.

I asked Erwin about the four men who had accosted me out front. He told me their names and nothing more. For a barber he seemed unusually inclined to silence. I had my own hunch about those four, and it didn't make my prospects in Elkhorn any brighter at all.

They were gone when I stepped outside and that was a relief. I walked back to the livery to pick up my saddlebags and went on toward the hotel that overlooked a triangular plaza near the south end of the street. A long stone water-trough marked the center of the plaza. Across from the hotel were more saloons and stores, a dancehall and gambling house, and the solid adobe rectangle of the jail. I was almost to the Union steps when I met the sheriff.

"Howdy," he said pleasantly, stopping and sticking out a fleshy hand. "Hibriten's the name. Welcome to Elkhorn."

"Lenyard," I said, shaking with him. "Thanks, Sheriff. Awhile back four of your citizens had me thinking I wasn't so welcome."

Hibriten laughed. "Some of the boys got too much time on their hands. Always horsin' around like. Reckon they didn't

mean anythin' by it. You stoppin' long?"

"Maybe," I said. "A few days or a week." I couldn't see that it was any of his business either, but I knew they were funny about strangers in some of these towns. He probably owed his office to Kesselring, and Kesselring most likely wasn't fond of strangers.

"That's fine," said the sheriff. "Anythin' I can do for you just let me know. We're kinda out of the way here. Don't get many travelers."

Hibriten was a large broad man, beginning to go to fat but still strong enough physically, his eyes keen and alert. His ruddy face wore a thoughtful frown, a look slightly worried and harassed. Too many people telling him what to do, I thought, too many different and conflicting interests to please. Well, if a man wanted to hold public office he had to expect that.

"Thanks, Sheriff," I said again. "I'll see you around."

"Sure will," Hibriten said cheerily. "The hotel puts out a good meal, Lenyard. Mighty sweet little waitress too, name of Ginger Fergus."

I grinned dutifully and walked on. If I was beginning to look like a man that tinhorn gunsharps picked on, a man with nothing on his mind but pretty waitresses, perhaps I would get by here without any trouble . . . At the lobby desk I signed the book, took my key, and carried the bags upstairs.

It was a front corner room, one window looking north along Front Street, the other opening on the second-story veranda over the plaza. It was clean, comfortable and fairly pleasant. I didn't like the porch out side, but from the absence of furniture there I judged it was seldom used. Unbuckling my gun-belt and pulling off my boots and jacket, I stretched out on the bed, tired to the bone. Then next thing I knew somebody was pounding on the door, telling me I'd better get up if I wanted any supper.

GINGER FERGUS:

HE WAS THE LAST ONE IN the dining room. When I saw him something caught in my throat and I got

all shivery up my backbone. My heart jumped, my blood raced, and I almost dropped a trayful of dirty dishes. I was awful glad I had on my best clean gingham dress, and some of the perfume Cass Cargile brought me from St. Louis, and I had taken lots of pains with my hair that afternoon. But he didn't hardly look at me. He was nice and polite enough, but he didn't even see me. I could have cried right there.

He was big and tall, strong looking, easy and graceful, straight and dark with a clean glowing look about him. Not just scrubbed clean, but inside clean. His hair was a glistening black crest, still wet and rumpled a little above the sun-browned face, and he had black eyes that burned right through everything. He looked as if he would dance almost as well as he fought, and would know how to treat women and handle men. You couldn't tell if he was in the twenties or thirties. His fine nose was knocked out of line a bit, and a curved scar on one cheek made an extra crease there when he smiled, his teeth very white in the dark-tanned skin. But mostly he was serious, almost sad, and you knew there was something dark and heavy on his mind. You knew he had been through a lot and it had hurt him, but it hadn't bent him and nothing would ever break him all the way down.

Lenyard, they told me his name was when I asked in the kitchen. Nobody knew where he came from or what he was here for. His voice was soft and slow, he had nice manners and acted like a gentleman, and you could tell he came from a good family. I knew because my father had been a gentleman from a nice family, too. If he'd still been living I wouldn't have been a waitress either, but it broke his heart when Kesselring foreclosed the mortgage on the ranch. Dad didn't want to live after that, and he didn't live very long . . . For some reason I wanted this stranger to know about that and realize I wasn't any common ordinary cowtown waitress. I wanted to blurt it right out to him, but I wasn't quite that crazy. I hoped somebody else would tell him about me. It seemed important for him to know.

Lenyard had nice trim ears set straight on his head, and his big brown hands were beautifully shaped. He wasn't cocky and conceited like Cass Cargile, or as handsome as Cass, but he had a calm quiet kind of confidence. I had seen enough fighting men to know he was one, and I guessed a good one. Somewhere he probably had a reputation, maybe he was famous in parts of the West. Elkhorn was an out-of-the-way place and we didn't know much what was going on in the word . . . Lots of women must have loved this Lenyard—and lost him. I knew he wasn't married or tied down to anyone, because he had a free look on him, like a wild horse with thoroughbred blood. And I was glad, even if it wouldn't do me any good.

HE DIDN'T NOTICE me at all until he got through eating and finished a second cup of coffee, flicking a match with his thumbnail and setting fire to a long thin cigar. Then he looked at me and saw me for the first time, and his lean face lighted up like a boy's when he smiled, kind of a shy smile, the black eyes crinkling at the corners, the bronze cheeks creasing pleasantly. I felt dazzled and breathless and half-blind.

"Well," he said, "the sheriff was right, at that."

"What?" I said, feeling giddy and foolish. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking out loud."

"That's bad," I told him, the words just tumbling out.

"I know it," he said. "Very bad. I'll have to watch that."

"What did Hibriten say?" I asked, emphasizing the name with dislike. I never had any use for the sheriff since he served the papers on my father. Maybe Hibriten couldn't help it but everybody knew he was Kesselring's man, and he had hurt a lot of fine people for old Kesselring.

"Nothing but compliments," Lenyard said.

"I don't need *his* compliments!" I flared.

"Ah," he smiled again. "That red hair is not a false alarm, I see."

I touched my head self-consciously. "It's

not really red."

"It sure looks red to me. And I like it red."

"All right." I smiled back at him. "It's red then."

Lenyard sighed. "I thought I was tired enough to go right to bed tonight. But a red-haired girl with green eyes . . . Well, maybe you'd show me around town a little?"

I tried to hide how delighted and thrilled I was. "There's not much to see. And I don't go into most of these places."

"We could just walk some then."

I didn't want to be too eager and easy, and besides Cass Cargile would probably be around looking for me later, if he wasn't drunk or gambling or fighting or out with some dancehall girl. I knew it might cause trouble and I shouldn't go, but I wanted to more than anything. Men like Lenyard don't come along every day—or every year. And he might not ask me again . . .

"All right," I said, trying to act cool and poised. "In about an hour."

I paid the poor little odd-jobs woman to clean up my work in the kitchen, and I spent that hour bathing and dressing and fussing in front of the mirror. I'd never been so excited in my life. It made my eyes shine and my cheeks color up, and I looked as pretty as I ever had . . . I wanted Lenyard to like me, and his dark eyes told me he did when we met in the lobby.

We walked down one side of the street and back up the other, and I tried to tell him all I could think of that was interesting or funny about the town and the people in it, but it seemed awful small and shabby and dull. I was afraid we'd run into Cass Cargile and there'd be a fight. Cass didn't have any real claim on me, but he liked to act as if he did. I felt better when we didn't see Cass or the other three, Mapes, Smiley and Thornberry. A lot of men spotted us though, and I knew they'd do plenty of talking. It would get to Cass and he'd come gunning after Lenyard . . . So I told Lenyard about it, but he just laughed.

"Yes, I met Cargile and his pardners this afternoon. They wanted to run me

right out of town. What are those four doing here anyway?"

"Nobody seems to know," I said. "They just hang around drinking, gambling, starting fights, and chasing women."

"A great life," Lenyard grinned. "But somebody must pay them."

"I guess so." I didn't know how much to tell him. In Elkhorn you learn to be kind of close-mouthed.

"Kesselring, I reckon?"

"That'd be a good bet."

"Well, he's got a lot of holdings to protect," Lenyard said. "What kind of a man is he anyway?"

"Big," I said. "He owns about everything around here, and lots of ranches outside. Like the one my father had . . . He's quite religious and—"

"What's he really like, I mean?" Lenyard asked bluntly.

"About what you'd expect," I told him. "Cold and hard as a stone, and hungry . . . All he cares about is money and power. His son and daughter aren't so bad though."

"He has children then?"

"Grown up children. Marlene must be about thirty, and runs the General Merchandise. Walter's a couple years younger. He handles the stage and freight business. Old Luther's in the bank most of the time now. His wife is dead."

"Lute Kesselring," he said thoughtfully. "Wonder how he got his start?"

"Never heard," I said. "He had plenty when he landed here, they say. And he's been piling it up ever since."

"When did he come here?"

"Fifteen years ago or more." I said, getting tired of this. "Listen, if you want the story of Kesselring's life why don't you—?"

"Sorry," Lenyard said. "Sorry, Ginger." He smiled that smile, pressed my arm, and I wasn't mad any more. I was dizzy, light-headed, all melting inside and weak in the knees. No other man ever did that to me, not even Cass Cargile.

WE TURNED EAST out the River Road and walked to the bridge over the Chippenhook, leaning on the rail and watching the water ripple underneath, sil-

ver in the moonlight and making a silky sound. Over across the big Kesselring house stood like a white fort inside the adobe walls. A carriage clattered past toward the walled-in rise, and laughter trailed back on the night breeze. I knew it was Marlene and Walt but I didn't say so, and Lenyard wasn't asking any more questions . . . It was nice to be with him, but I had a queer hopeless feeling, as if I could never really reach him or get to know him. All he wanted from me was information, I thought.

We started back along the bridge and I stumbled on something and swayed against him. It was an accident but I wasn't sorry. His long arms went around me, strong but gentle, and mine crept about him of their own free will. I looked up at the lean strong lines of his face etched in moonlight and shadow. He said, "Ginger Fergus," and it was a lovely name the way he spoke it: He bent his head over me, and I raised my mouth to meet his . . . But a laughing voice called out, wrenching us apart, and Lenyard spun me away toward the other side of the bridge.

I had expected Cargile but it was Alton Smiley instead, coming coolly out from town toward us, smiling and easy-going as usual. "Romantic," he said. "Hate to interrupt it. But I had an idea you was Cass's girl."

"Don't be a fool!" I said. "Hasn't Cass got enough girls at the Paradise?"

"Sure he has," said Smiley. "But you're somethin' special, he's mighty particular of you, Ginger. Cass wouldn't want this goin' on. And me, I don't like it neither." He was at the end of the bridge now, plump face all smiles.

"You'd better head back where you came from, boy," Lenyard said, very quiet, but there was something deadly in his mild tone.

Smiley wagged his head. "I saw you first, mister, and you're all mine. Cass and Lee bein' out of town I'm takin' over. Stay where you are, Ginger. If you see this it'll maybe learn you not to fool around on Cass."

"I don't want to kill you, Smiley," said Lenyard. "Go back to town."

Smiley's grin widened way to his ears.

"Don't worry none about that, mister. This smilin' face has throwed a lot of good men off guard. You wanta start reachin'?"

"Waitin' on you," Lenyard said.

Smiley's plump hand jerked and his gun came clear. I tried to shut my eyes but the lids wouldn't work, and they stayed as open as my mouth. Lenyard had swiveled halfway around and his right hand was out level and flaming in front of him. Smiley staggered as the bullet struck him, and his own shot raked the floorboards of the bridge. Stumbling sideways, running spraddle-legged to keep his balance; Smiley reeled across and caught the rail on my side.

Panting and moaning Smiley heaved himself around to try another shot, but Lenyard's gun blasted once more and I heard the slug hit Smiley. Almost blind from the muzzle flashes I saw Smiley rear up and fall back on the rail, claw the air and shoot straight up at the moon, topple slowly backward and somersault into the river. There was a great splash that spattered water so high a few drops wet my numb face. I stood there blind and deaf and sick in the stillness.

"Sorry, Ginger," Lenyard said gently, suddenly beside me and staring downstream.

"Oh, it's all my fault!" I said miserably. "I should've known better. I *did* know better. But I——"

"Let's get back to the hotel."

I came to my senses then. "We'd better cut across the back way."

"That's right," he said, lifting me into a quick run off the bridge.

WE SLANTED across the flats toward a clump of cottonwoods, running hard. In the shadow of the trees we stopped to rest and get our breath back. Nobody was coming yet. Perhaps no one would come, but it was best not to take any chances . . . Keeping the cottonwoods between us and the road we moved on toward the rear of the Union Hotel. The moon was too bright now, and crisp dead leaves were blowing on the breeze.

"Too bad you had to see that," Lenyard said.

"I'm the one that should've been shot!" I said bitterly. "They'll know you did it. Nobody else in town would dare to lift a gun against Smiley or any of them."

We paused in another dark cluster of trees. Lenyard put his hand under my chin and tilted my head back, kissing me lightly on the mouth. "Unfinished business," he said, smiling gravely.

"Oh, Len!" I said, tightening my arms on him. "You'll have to fight them all now."

"I would have anyway," Lenyard said. "Come on, Ginger."

I guess I'd have stayed there all night if he hadn't prodded me along. Falling leaves whispered through the air, and dead leaves rustled under our feet. We passed between two sheds, crossed some cluttered backyards, and reached the rear of the hotel. I took his hand and led him up the back steps and in through the kitchen door.

The kitchen was empty except for the shrunken broken-down little odd-jobs woman, who was hunched over a table there, her drab untidy gray head pillowed on withered arms, a half-empty whiskey bottle beside her, the raw fumes reeking through the room. I was pulling Lenyard toward the back stairway when she raised her wasted wrinkled face, wet with tears. The bleary eyes filled with insane hate as she saw us, her lips snarling back on broken teeth, her whole face a twisted mask of fury. She gestured with a clawlike hand.

"Go 'way, leave me alone!" she wailed. Then her crazy eyes fixed on me. "Fool, fool!" she cried. "Runnin' with men! You know where that'll get you? . . ." She laughed wildly.

Lenyard was gazing at her as if fascinated. I said, "Come on, Len," and we started climbing the back stairs.

"Who's that, Ginger?" he asked.

"A poor lost soul," I said. "She works around here and drinks herself to sleep every night. I don't know what keeps her alive. The only name I know her by is Lois."

"Lois?" His fingers bit into my arm so deep that I couldn't help crying out softly. "Where'd she come from?"

"You're hurting me," I said. "I don't know where she came from. She used to

be a dancehall girl at the Paradise. She was beautiful then, dark, vivid, full of life and laughter. They say Cass Cargile either brought her here, or she came here after him. Anyway she was his girl once. When Cass dropped her she went all to pieces."

"God!" Lenyard said in a low terrible voice. "An old woman . . ."

"Only in her thirties, I think."

"Are you sure of that?" His face had changed so I hardly recognized him, and I couldn't understand this at all.

"That's what they say," I told him. "But what on earth——?"

"Nothing," Lenyard said harshly. "Never mind!"

He left me on the second floor without another word or a glance.

SHERIFF HIBRITEN:

THE MINUTE I LAID EYES ON this Lenyard I knew there was going to be trouble in Elkhorn. I don't know how or why, but I just *knew* . . . Thornberry, Cargile and them thought he was nothing but a fiddle-footed saddle tramp, but I knew better the minute I saw him. He was big and black and rangy, moving smooth, sure and easy like a big cat, and he was bad medicine. It's part of my job to size men up, and I tagged him tough right away. I was pretty tough myself in my younger days, and I could tell. Lenyard wasn't a man to drift footloose into a place like Elkhorn. He had a reason and purpose for coming here, and it spelt trouble and grief for somebody. There was going to be hell-a-popping in these parts and damn sudden.

I tried to be nice and friendly to him. Lenyard was agreeable enough but I could tell he thought I was being nosey and he didn't like it much. That's the way it is holding office. If you're friendly people figure you're horning in grubbing for votes, and if you ain't friendly they think you're puffed up and on the prod. A man in office is wrong no matter how he acts . . . Probably I shouldn't have mentioned Ginger Fergus to him, but I never allowed any one female meant much to Cass Cargile.

It was plain lucky that Cass and

Lee Mapes happened to be out of town that night of the shooting at the bridge. If them two had been on hand when the boys fished Alton Smiley out of the Chippenhook all hell would've busted loose. As it was Red Tonk Thornberry was all for going after Lenyard, but I finally talked him out of it, at least for the time being.

"You ain't that good with a gun, Tonk," I said. "If he took Smiley that simple what chance'd you have?"

"I'll kill him with my bare hands!" Thornberry gritted. Tonk had killed them that way before too, he was a holy terror in a rough-house brawl. I'd been a mighty strong man in my day, but never the equal of Red Tonk.

"Well, when you go after him leave off your gun," I said. "But you ain't goin' tonight, Tonk."

Thornberry didn't like it. "How long since you been givin' orders to me, Hibern?"

"Call it advice then," I said. "But I aim to find out more about this Lenyard before it comes to a showdown. And Lute Kesselring'll want to play it that way too."

Ever since I took office I'd been expecting somebody to hit town like this, hunting a man or men, and I reckon Lute Kesselring had the same thing in mind when he hired Mapes, Cargile, Smiley, and Thornberry. I knew right well there'd been some mighty shady spots in Kesselring's past life, even if he was a deacon in the church now. Right here in Elkhorn he'd pulled some pretty raw deals, and if he hadn't done murder himself he'd paid for it done.

Then there was Cass Cargile loading that poor girl Lois in here, dumping her in the Paradise, cutting loose from her, treating her worse'n a mangy dog, leaving her a half-crazy whiskey-soaked wreck . . . Them things generally catch up with a man sooner or later. I had an idea they was overhauling Kesselring or Cargile, or maybe both of them, right about now.

WHEN KESSELRING clomped into my office early the next morning, looking as if he hadn't shut an eye all night, I thought my hunch was fairly

accurate. He had aged ten years overnight.

"You arrested this stranger yet, Hi?" he wanted to know.

"What for?" I asked, feeling like baiting him a bit.

"*What for?*" Kesselring almost yelled. "He killed Smiley, didn't he?"

"Everybody thinks so, includin' me," I said. "But nobody's got any proof of it. If there was a witness it's the Fergus girl, and she ain't talkin'."

"Deputize my three boys," ordered Kesselring. "They'll make her talk!"

"No, Lute. I ain't deputizin' them hellions any more. They make a joke out of the sheriff's office."

Kesselring glared at me and I knew he was thinking about the next election, and for once I didn't give a damn. Eleven years is a long time to be under anybody's heel, and I was getting fed up to the ears. I had put a lot of good men out of business for Lute Kesselring, and done a lot of things that left me sick, sour, and hating myself.

"It's been a joke for eleven years, Hibern," he said, cold as ice. "And it's getting stale. Arrest him on suspicion then."

"I'll get around to that, Lute," I said.

"Wait'll Cass and Lee get back here," said Kesselring. "Who is this man anyway?"

"Lenyard's the name he goes under," I told him. "You ever know anybody by that name, Lute?" I couldn't be sure but I thought he aged ten more years in a few seconds.

"Never heard of it," Kesselring said, thumbing snuff up his wide nostrils. "A stray gunman most likely."

Luther Kesselring had been a big husky brute once, but now he was gaunt and haggard, lanky and stooped, his face and smoky eyes sunk in, making his big beak of a nose and the buck teeth stick out all the more. The thrust of his head always put me in mind of a vulture, and his mouth turned down on both sides like a carrion bird's. Besides owning most of Elkhorn he had claim to half the ranches on the outside range, but he'd never get all the money he wanted out of this world . . . Looking at him I wondered how in

hell I had ever stomached eleven years of it.

"If you don't take care of this Lenyard," said Kesselring, "I'll turn Cargile and Mapes loose the minute they get back to town."

"They won't be shootin' up any drunken cowhand this trip," I said. "You're liable not to get 'em back, Lute."

Kesselring measured me for a coffin. "I always knew you were a stupid fool, Hibriten. But I didn't know you were plain half-witted."

"Live and learn," I said, enjoying myself while I could.

Kesselring snuffed and sneezed. "You could live two hundred years and not learn a thing, Hibriten. But you aren't going to live that long." He stomped out of the office, his buzzard-head thrust forward as if he could smell the money in that bank he was heading for . . . I knew I'd never be elected sheriff again, and I was kind of glad. It had done something to me to see a man like Lenyard stand up to Kesselring's bunch. It would be something to be able to look myself in the eye in a mirror again.

I should have known that big Red Tonk Thornberry would go after Lenyard the first thing this morning. When that commotion broke out over in the Union House I knew what it was. With deputies Deakin and Rusk on my heels I ran across the plaza and up the porch steps into the hotel. At least Thornberry had sense enough not to wear a gun, I noticed right away.

Lenyard was unbuckling his own gun-belt as they faced one another in the lobby. "It's agreed then," said Lenyard. "The man that gets whipped leaves town?" He seemed cool and sure but he didn't know what he was up against. No one man had any chance barehanded against Red Tonk.

"That's right," grinned Thornberry. "Providin' he's able to go!"

WILMOTH, the proprietor, was trying to shoo them outside into the street, but they paid no attention to him. He started appealing to me just as Thornberry struck the first blow. Lenyard rolled

his head and it glanced off above his ear. It was too late then to stop it, and besides I wanted to see this. Thornberry was bigger, heavier, and stronger, but I figured Lenyard to give him plenty of fight. Any man that moves like a panther is hard to beat. If it got too bad we could always stop it, and I made up my mind not to let Lenyard get killed or ruined for life.

They circled and swung, missing and landing, warming up slow and careful, until Red Tonk saw an opening and whaled away at it with all of his two-hundred-and-twenty pounds in the punch. It sounded like a club and it knocked Lenyard back against the desk. The wooden counter gave with a tearing creaking crash, tipping halfway over under Lenyard's back.

Thornberry drove in to pin him there, but Lenyard came up fast, firing both fists, straightening Tonk up and jolting him back on his heels. Lenyard must have gone about one-ninety, outweighed by thirty pounds, but he could really hit and he was lightning-fast. Red Tonk was surprised, hurt and shaken. Before he recovered Lenyard was in on him ripping away with both hands. Tables and chairs went over as Lenyard beat him back against the wall.

Braced there Thornberry lifted his right leg quick and planted his boot in Lenyard's belly with a wicked kick. Lenyard stumbled back, doubled over in agony. Tonk followed on the jump, bringing an uppercut up from the floor. Lenyard's black head snapped and he stiffened up tall. Tonk threw one overhand and Lenyard lit on the back of his neck. I thought he was out cold and it was all over. But when Thornberry charged in to give him the boots Lenyard lashed out with his heels and kicked Tonk off, and Tonk tripped over a busted chair and went down.

Lenyard was up first, gliding in like a tiger, Thornberry was just rising when Lenyard caught him with a right that all but tore the red head off Tonk's shoulders. It stretched Tonk's neck a foot and sent him lurching through the open doorway into the small empty barroom off the lobby. Lenyard went through after him and we trailed along, half-expecting to

see Thornberry stretched flat. But Red Tonk was on his feet fighting back, and they slugged each other from wall to wall, upsetting chairs and overturning tables.

They were both streaming blood and sweat, their shirts hanging in stained tatters, and it couldn't last much longer at this rate. Thornberry swung himself off balance and wide open. Lenyard went in like a cougar for the kill, striking faster than you could see, slashing that curly red head left and right, smashing Tonk back into the bar. Wood splintered with a screech as the short bar was uprooted and driven against the back bar. The mirror cracked and bottles and glasses fell in glittering torrents to crash and jangle on the floor. Men in the crowd gulped painful-like to see all that liquor go to waste, and I was one of them.

RED TONK THORNBERRY crawled out of the ruins and came at Lenyard in a mad headlong lunge. Lenyard sidestepped, tripping Tonk and clipping him behind the ear at the same time. Tonk sprawled on top of a table that crumpled into kindling wood. He rolled and thrashed about in the wreckage, finally lurching onto his feet, soaked and blind with blood, pawing the air and looking for Lenyard. Even seeing it in front of my eyes I couldn't believe it. That Red Tonk was tough and game as they come, but what can you do against a black panther?

Lenyard strode forward and hit the big man with solid shattering force. Blood flew, the red head rocked, and Thornberry's broad shoulders slammed the wall with a jarring shock that made the whole building tremble. Tonk bounced a little, took one faltering step, and fell full length forward on his face, shuddered and was still.

Lenyard stood for a minute looking down at the red-headed giant. Then he turned to me, wiping blood and sweat from his eyes. "See that—he keeps—his word," Lenyard panted slowly, and walked out into the lobby.

Then I heard a hoarse voice whisper: "*Cass Cargile's comin'!*" And I followed Lenyard into the lobby just in time to see him take off for the front door. That was

the damndest thing I ever saw anywhere. Lenyard streaked through the crowded wondering people like a maniac, unarmed except for his raw swollen hands. And there was Cass Cargile at the bottom of the porch steps, just starting up.

The veranda was about six feet above street level, head high to a tall man like Cargile. This Lenyard took a great running leap, flying off the porch straight at Cargile. Cass tried to duck, dodge and draw, all at once, but he never had time. Lenyard's boots caught him high on the chest, almost up in the throat, and Cass went over backward, his hat sailing off, his brassy yellow head grinding into the gravel, his long legs in the air. Lenyard went tumbling end over end beyond him, dust clouding up in the street.

That was enough to break a man's neck, or at least his collarbone, but there was Cargile scrabbling around in the dirt, reaching for his gun and trying to get up. Lenyard was up ahead of him, racing back toward Cargile like a jungle cat, lashing out with his right leg as Cargile's gun came clear. The boot caught Cargile square under the jawbone, turning and bending his blond head, flinging him back into the sand. If Cass wasn't out before he sure would be now, I thought.

CARGILE'S GUN had slithered onto the slat sidewalk. Lenyard picked it up and stood there eyeing the man on the ground. Cass was struggling hard to get up, making it onto all fours, blood pouring from his mouth and nose. Cass Cargile was maybe a no-good, the ruination of women and cold-blooded killer of men, but he was tough and fearless, he had all kinds of guts.

I thought Lenyard was going to shoot him, and I yelled something and yanked my gun out, but he didn't fire. Lenyard just waited until Cass Cargile stood up, said something to him, and hammered the gun-barrel hard across Cargile's sun-bleached straw-colored head. Cass grunted and dropped as if he'd been shot through the brain. Lenyard tossed the gun down beside him and climbed the porch steps like an old tired man. I was standing at the top with my gun on him.

"Busy mornin', boy," I said. "You feel like restin'?"

"Maybe you want to lock me up?" he mumbled, holding a bloody handkerchief to his face.

"Maybe I'd better," I said, "before Lee Mapes comes along."

"Good idea," said Lenyard, glancing back down at Cargile. "I should've killed him, I suppose. But let him think things over awhile . . . Will you see that Thornberry leaves town, Sheriff?"

"He'll go," I said. "Tonk wouldn't stay after that trimmin'. Tonk's a man of his word anyway."

"That's good," Lenyard said. "Let me get my gun-belt and we'll go to jail."

He came out carrying his gun-belt in one big bloody hand, the people gaping at him with wide eyes and open mouths. I felt that way about him too. I never saw such a fighter as that Lenyard was . . . We walked across the triangle toward the jailhouse, Rusk and Deakin behind us covering our backs.

"You know Cargile somewhere before?" I asked him.

Lenyard shook his head, weaving a little as he walked.

"You ever know a girl named Lois, son?" I inquired.

"I had a sister named Lois," Lenyard said. "A long time ago. She's dead now. They're all dead."

I started to ask him if he had seen this Lois in the Union Hotel, but I changed my mind. I could tell he had seen her. He knew, and he *wished* she was dead . . . No wonder he had gone for Cargile empty-handed, I thought . . . And all at once I knew dead-certain which side I was on, and it was a mighty fine feeling.

"Cargile and Mapes came here with Kesselring, didn't they?" he said.

"About the same time," I said. "Smiley and Thornberry drifted in later."

"They ever call Mapes, 'The Bat'?"

"I've heard tell they used to. What makes you ask that?"

"A little gunman called The Bat killed my brother in Tombstone," Lenyard said, no expression in his voice or his battered face.

"Why don't you tell me the whole story, Lenyard?" I asked.

His black eyes burned coldly at me from the bruised lids. "Aren't you a Kesselring man, Sheriff?"

"I was, I reckon," I said slowly. "I ain't altogether proud of it, son. There comes a time when a man has to get up off his knees—or give up pretendin' to be a man. You can talk to me, Lenyard."

"Maybe I will," said Lenyard.

LUTHER KESSELRING:

AFTER ALL THESE YEARS THE ghost of a man risen from the grave had come back to haunt me. After twenty years of smooth sailing a storm was brewing, sudden, black and ominous. Everything was blowing up in my face, breaking down and crumbling away under my feet. And all on account of one lone man . . . I had almost forgotten the Lenyard incident. I couldn't have given you that name until I heard it spoken. Then it all came back in a dark chilling rush, like the cold evil breath from a tomb.

It didn't seem possible that one man could come and tear down everything I had built up with such care and effort, worked and planned so long and hard for through the years. I had created an empire in twenty years, and this penniless nobody was destroying it in a few short days. It wasn't fair or just or reasonable. It didn't make any sense at all . . . But already this man Lenyard had killed Smiley, driven Thornberry out of town, and gun-whipped Cargile with his own gun.

Perhaps I had done wrong, made mistakes, sinned in the past, but I had always repented my sins. Surely the good I had done far outweighed the evil. I brought religion to Elkhorn, built the church and paid the minister, did my best to lead a lawless people into the path of righteousness. I was a Godly man, faithful and devout, spending long hours in prayer and penance, worshiping the Lord and reading the Bible. It was against all justice that this sudden blight should be falling on me and mine and everything I owned. I was being betrayed.

The sheriff was one Judas, I knew . . .

Hibriten had Lenyard in jail, more for safe-keeping than anything else, refusing to let anyone see him. He wouldn't even let us into the jailhouse. Hibriten was turning on me like a fat grubby swine, after I had kept him feet-and-snout in the trough for nearly twelve years. A bad sign too, for the sheriff was one of those parasites who instinctively pick and play the winning side. Hibriten must figure Lenyard to win and wipe out my whole dynasty. Hibriten had always taken orders until now, bowing, scraping, smirking, gutless as a snail. Somehow he must have sponged up some courage from Lenyard.

IT WAS MADDENING to think of all I stood to lose to a worthless pauper who owned nothing more than a horse and a gun. This bank, three fine stores, a stage and freight business, ranches with great herds of cattle and horses, the grandest mansion in the Southwest. I thought with pride and pleasure of that big limestone house with its pillars of Carrara marble, its windows of French plateglass, the interior paneled with Circassian walnut, crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings, paintings, tapestries and mirrors on the walls, oriental rugs underfoot, the fireplaces, a big bronze piano with mother-of-pearl keys . . . Unbearable to think of losing all these things.

I had ordered Marlene and Walter to stay at home and posted riflemen on the walls. I was keeping Mapes and Cargile close beside me all the time. There was no telling when Hibriten would let Lenyard out. Any minute of the day or night might be my last. I had little faith left in Cargile, not much more in Mapes. All my safety and security was gone. People everywhere seemed to look at me as if I was already marked with death.

"It's your fault, Cargile," I accused. "Dragging that girl here and deserting her. Your weakness for the flesh has brought this on. Men will stand almost anything except molesting their women-folks."

"He isn't after me," Cargile said carelessly. "He could've killed me that mornin' in front of the hotel. It's you he wants,

Lute. It's you he's itchin' to put lead in."

I turned on Mapes. "And you, Lee. There was no need of killing that drunken brother of his in Tombstone. You wanted another easy notch in your gun, and you bring this down on our heads."

Mapes said nothing. He hardly ever talked, but the white fire in his queer pale eyes flickered through me, brushing my spine with ice and making my scalp quiver and creep. And Cargile said mockingly:

"Of course them three bullets in old man Lenyard's back had nothin' to do with this, Lute!"

"That was our start, you fool!" I said. "That was different, necessary and essential. We had to do that to lay the foundation. But you didn't have to ruin that little girl, Cargile. And Lee didn't have to shoot the other brother."

Lee Mapes spoke surprisingly, his voice rasping like a file on my raw nerves: "Explain that to Lenyard. He'll understand."

I tried to glare at his evil twisted face and gnarled body, but I couldn't hold it long. The pale light in those weird eyes was too much for me . . . Cass Cargile tossed his blond head and laughed loudly. These two were getting bolder and more independent with me every day. I had a quick stab of fear that they might desert me at any moment, leave me absolutely alone and unprotected, helpless and waiting for death.

"Have a drink, boys," I said, taking a bottle and glasses from the office cabinet. Their eyes were cold and scornful on my shaking hands as I poured two drinks. Suddenly I hated them more than I did this man Lenyard who had come to kill me.

Time lagged in that office. I tried to work on some ledgers but the neat figures no longer gave me satisfaction. I couldn't concentrate, I was too worried and scared. All I could think of was: *I'm going to die. Today, tomorrow, the next day, I'm going to die . . .* And I didn't want to die. I was only sixty-five, I had a lot to live for yet. It occurred to me that I had never taken time out to enjoy the riches I had gathered. I was always too busy making more money. My only pleasure had been in watching the fortune swell, like a miser

gloating over his hidden hoard of gold.

I should have treated Maude better, taken her on some of those trips she always wanted, been more considerate and sympathetic. She might be alive today if I had been kinder, instead of disregarding her entirely, freezing her out. Maude had been a good wife, but I'd taken her for granted, spared her no time or interest, practically forgotten her existence, devoted all my interest to business and the church. She was a woman who needed affection, and without it she wasted away, died . . . Well, I had lavished enough attention on Marlene and Walter. They'd be all right—unless that madman Lenyard shot them down, too. Perhaps I'd better send them away to St. Louis or Chicago or even New York.

"Don't drink too much, boys," I said.

Lee Mapes went on pouring whiskey without a word. Cass Cargile said: "Can't you afford it, Lute? You want us to buy this bottle?"

"Yes, yes, I'm stingy!" I said bitterly. "I pay you well for doing nothing for twenty years. The minute something big comes up you're no help whatever."

"Why don't you fire us then, Lute?" grinned Cargile.

I eyed him fiercely. Cargile was a handsome devil, even with that welted blue lump on his jawbone where Lenyard had kicked him. There was another gashed bunch on his blond head and his neck was stiff and lame. If he wasn't so tough it would have been broken. Some of the conceit and arrogance had been beaten out of him, but not much. Cass Cargile would be insolent, scornful, superior and mocking to the end.

Lee Mapes was as ugly and misshapen as Cass was good-looking and well built. Men were always arguing over which one was best with a gun. I would have chosen Mapes over any man in the West, but Cargile wasn't far behind the Bat. They both had their double-holstered belts on now . . . I suppose they had always resented me, but it was just beginning to show lately. I had used them, true, but it's a smart man's privilege to use those of lesser intelligence. There has to be leaders in life, and that was my rightful part.

THE SUNLIGHT was dimming at last as the afternoon faded. I had to get some things at the store, and I told Mapes to come with me while Cargile scouted the street to find out where Lenyard was. I had a gun in a shoulder-holster under my left arm but I didn't expect to use it. If you can hire guns there's no sense in using one yourself.

"Sure, Lute," Cass said, smiling. "If I see Lenyard I'll bring you his ears!"

Lee Mapes spoke for the second time that afternoon: "Watch out, Cass, he don't take both guns away from you this time."

Cargile's smile thinned out. "You're gettin' to be quite a funny man, Lee." He walked out while I was putting on my coat and hat.

Mapes and I went along the street to the wide front of Kesselring's General Merchandise. It looked like a big city store with large plateglass windows on each side of the entrance, the gilt-lettered sign above, and everything neat and orderly, spick and span, the way I liked Marlene to keep it. I was mighty proud of that place. It gave me a good warm feeling every time I saw it.

Inside we moved toward the grocery and canned goods department in the rear. I was surprised to find no customers there, and then angered to see no clerks in sight. Lax and lazy, I thought, because Marlene wasn't on duty . . . Lee Mapes loosened his guns and I was about to raise my voice when the door to the back office opened. A big rangy rawboned man stood there, black eyes blazing at us, lean scarred face set in hard bleak lines. I knew it was Lenyard, he took after his father. He could have shot us down but he made no motion toward his two guns. With his left hand behind him he locked the office door, and I realized the clerks were in there.

Lenyard walked toward us, slow, easy and deliberate. Lee Mapes had squared around to face him, elbows out, hands spread-fingered near his gun butts, wolf-eyes flaring palely, gargoyle-face unmoved. I was hanging onto the counter with both hands to hold myself erect. It was like seeing a ghost from the grave all right.

Lenyard came on in that slow measured stride, moving without effort. I wanted to scream but it stayed inside me, tearing dryly at my chest and throat. I tried to pray but the words wouldn't form in my head.

"All right, Bat," Lenyard said evenly. "You shot one Lenyard, drunk. Try this one sober."

Mapes' right hand clawed and hooked and the gun seemed to jump into it, but Lenyard was moving with him and even faster by a shade. The guns exploded almost together with a thundering roar that deafened me. Bright flame scorched past my cheek and caught Mapes as he started diving behind the counter, stopping him short, spinning him into the packed shelves that lined the wall. Lenyard was unhit, his Colt steady and blasting again.

MAPES, HIT AGAIN, fired back but the bullet only furrowed up splinters from the counter. Lenyard's gun flashed once more and Mapes jerked up rigid as the slug smashed him against the loaded shelves, spilling a flood of canned goods over his warped shuddering body. Mapes' gun-hand dropped, his knees jacked, and he went down in another shower of tinned foods and breaking bottles, half-buried at the foot of the wall.

I might have drawn and shot Lenyard but I couldn't move a muscle. Lenyard laughed softly and emptied his gun at those shelves, cans and jars dancing and flying apart as he raked them off in long rows. Then, calmly reloading, he stood staring at me with those intense black eyes.

"Go ahead," I panted, throat feeling paralyzed. "Get it done with."

Lenyard laughed again, silently. "Not yet, Kessel. I want you to die a few more times. I'm saving you for last . . . Who murdered my father, Kessel?"

I pointed down at Lee Mapes on the littered floor.

"And Cargile?" he said.

I nodded violently. "Yes, Cargile."

"And you?" he went on without mercy. "There were three holes in his back."

I moved my head up and down again. "They, they——" There was a tight choking band about my neck. "They made me—

fire the last one. He was—already dead." I told him the truth. It couldn't make any difference now. "If—if you want money? . . ." I blundered, wondering why somebody didn't come. Where was Cargile, Hibriten, and everyone else?

"Money?" he said with all the contempt in the world. "Money don't pay for the things you've done, old man."

Lenyard was lifting large oil lamps from their wall-brackets, lining up three of them on the counter, lighting them one after another. There was a crowd out front in the street, but nobody dared to come into the store.

"You go out the front way," Lenyard said. "I'll let them out of the office back there."

I shouted an involuntary protest as it came to me what he was going to do. Lenyard must have known how much I prized that store. "Yell if you want to," he said, hurling the first lamp at the clothes rack on the opposite wall. Quickly he dashed another onto a heap of baled cloth toward the front. The lamps shattered, spilling kerosene, and instant flames leaped up, spreading and soaring wildly as the oil soaked through the dry fabrics.

I screamed then and fled for the front door. Behind me Lenyard's gun began booming again, and the great plateglass windows splintered and cascaded in shining ragged shards of glass. I burst outside, tripped and fell in the dirt, scrambled up sobbing and moaning. With the draft from the broken windows the interior of Kesselring's General Merchandise was already a roaring flaming furnace. The walls were of adobe but the inside would be gutted completely.

"Cargile!" I howled. "Where are you, Cargile?"

In the crowd behind me there was loud jeering laughter.

LENYARD:

IT WAS A PLEASANT DREAM, full of golden sunshine torn by clean breezes, the bright music of water running in a stony bed, rolling prairie land and hazy tiers of snow-peaked mountains in the distance. We were back on the

ranch, all of us, young and happy and very much alive, a family close-knit and complete in itself.

Real as anything was the long low one-story ranch house, the unfinished end porch and incomplete flagstone walk. Cottonwoods shading the yard, friendly figures moving around the barn and stable, corrals, sheds and out-buildings. Horses sleek and shining and frisky in the pasture, red cattle grazing on a far slope. The Little Shoshone River with its dammed-up pool where we bathed and swam. A pinto pony named Paint, my first horse.

Dad strode through the dream, big and strong, dark and hawk-faced, laughing in sunlight and corral dust. And Mother with her sweet sad smile and tired fading eyes, patient and thoughtful and kind. Rufe romping wildly about, a whiplash of a boy, full of fire and fun and gaiety. And little Lois, dark and vivid, shy and demure, trying to tell me something . . . Fear in her eyes all at once, trying to warn me, her mouth opening to scream.

I woke with a start, tense, shivering, waiting for that scream. I was back in my room at the front corner of the second floor in the Union Hotel. I tried to drift off into the dream again, but it was gone from me . . . There was a slow creaking sound from the porch outside my front window, then another, and I knew that was what had wakened me and was keeping me awake. Somebody was prowling out there. I should have stayed in the jailhouse as Hibriten wanted me to . . . A chill prickled up my spine and made my scalp crawl tight and quivering.

I reached for the gun on the chair beside the bed, wide awake and watching the opened front window. Slow and careful, I eased myself out of bed and crept to the side wall. Leaning there I pulled on my pants and boots, strapped the gun-belt around my hips, slipped the buckskin jacket on over my undershirt. Barely breathing I waited by the wall, one .44 ready in my right hand . . . Odd how often I dreamed about that lost ranch on the Shoshone and those people twenty years dead.

Boards groaned and creaked again on the veranda. A shadow edged the window

and steel glinted in the dim light. Vivid orange fire burst across the sill and lighted the room, the bullet slashing into the empty bed. The gun-barrel swerved my way, and I lined my Colt on it. Before I could trigger there was another shot outside, coming from the hall door that opened onto the porch, I estimated.

A man cursed in startled disgust, bumping and scraping the outer wall, away from the window and out of range. Flame spurted across the window toward the doorway. There was a low stricken gasp as the roar died away, the limp thud of a falling body, the quick trampling rush of boots.

I reached the sill in time to see a man's hands disappear over the side. Crawling through I heard the beat of running boots on the ground below, the heavy stamp as they struck the plank walk. Plunging to the rail I searched for a target, glimpsed the blur of a moving figure, and fired as it rounded the corner and vanished into the unlighted stretch of Front Street.

I WAS ASTRADDLE of the rail when a moaning sound halted me, and I saw the body lying on the threshold between porch and hall. Swinging back onto the veranda I went to the doorway. It was a woman, small and shapeless and broken on the floor. I knelt down and lifted the light ragged bundle in my arms. It was Lois, my sister. Her eyes were open, very sane and serene now, full recognition in them this time. Her face was smooth and relaxed, calm and peaceful, the fury and madness gone forever. She tried to speak, murmuring my name, "Paul . . ." A dark gush washed out the rest of her words.

"Lois," I said. "Little Lois."

I wiped the blood gently from her mouth and chin. She smiled up at me, looking almost like herself in that moment, the ghost of the lovely young girl I remembered. I held her tenderly, my eyes brimming and smarting, a terrible tearing grief inside me. I held her there until she died.

Climbing over the rail I slid down the corner post, dropping the last of the distance, stumbling to my knees. I knew it

must have been Cass Cargile, come to kill me in my sleep, the man who had turned my sister's life into a hideous hell and finally ended it . . . I raced for the corner, a gun swinging in each hand. Front Street looked deserted, the whole town asleep, no lights anywhere. A stocky form emerged in front of the livery stable, and I slowed down and put the guns on it.

"Not me, Lenyard," said Gledhill. "Your man's over there." He pointed across to the plain white square of the church. "Cargile. Gettin' religion all of a sudden. But I reckon too late."

"Thanks, Gledhill," I said

"I'll go around back and flush him out if you want," Gledhill said, a hopeful note in his voice.

"Thanks again," I said. "But I'd rather settle it alone."

"Afraid of that." Gledhill shifted his chew and spat sadly. "Might try the belfry, Len."

Beyond all fear I struck straight across the empty street toward the church, expecting a burst from the front windows or door or the tower, but not caring much. Sure that I would live long enough to kill Cargile, even if I was shot through the heart.

I made the steps without drawing any fire. Pushing the door open I pulled to one side, but no shots came. Moving inside I dodged away from the door, leaving it open to let more light filter in, holding my breath and listening hard, my eyes sweeping the gloomy vestibule. There were faint noises overhead. I saw the ladder leading up to the belfry and paced softly toward it.

Crouching near the lower rungs I peered up the ladder but could see nothing in the upper blackness. The sounds of climbing continued. Standing directly under that dark hole in the ceiling I fired straight up and heard the bullet clang against the iron bell. Cargile blazed back down at me, the lead burning close and splintering the boards under my feet.

I turned the right-hand Colt loose again, hammering shots up the ladder as fast as I could trigger, setting the bell to ringing wildly in the night. There was a sudden dark downward rush from above, hurtling

heavy and fast, as Cargile was ripped loose from the ladder, falling like a landslide. I jumped desperately away but his legs slammed my shoulder, just enough to break the force of his fall and knock me headfirst into a corner. Even so he landed with a sodden smash that shook the whole church, and I thought he was dead for sure.

Flinging myself around I came up in a balanced crouch, breathless and groggy from the impact. Cargile was alive and moving, rolling and threshing about on the floor, moaning in agony but rearing up on his knees. His gun roared red, blinding and deafening in the narrow anteroom, and I felt the hot breath of the bullet fan my cheek. In a flare of hate and fury I cut loose with my left-hand gun then and blasted Cargile to pieces against the foot of the ladder, his fine body bucking and writhing on the vestibule floor, his blond head coming to rest at last on the bottom rung.

RELOADING automatically I stood there swaying and breathing hard, sick with the reek of powder-smoke, staring down at Cass Cargile. No matter what you felt or thought or said about him, Cargile was as tough as they ever make them . . . Sheathing the guns I walked to the door on stiff numb legs of wood, stepping outside and inhaling the night air.

Flame jetted at me from the corner on my left. Spinning and drawing right-handed I saw the lanky stooped shape of Luther Kesselring, a gun wavering in his hand, his face livid and twisted above the black broadcloth, his eyes shining insanely.

"Drop it," I said wearily, striding across the steps toward him.

"Heathen!" he cried. "Desecrating the House of God!" He fired once more, but he couldn't hold the gun anywhere near straight.

Reaching him I slapped his face so hard his head bounced on the wall. The gun clattered down and Kesselring sagged loosely against the cornice, gaunt hands fluttering feebly in front of his body.

"The devil himself," mumbled Kessel-

ring. "Merciful Father . . ."

I slapped him again to shut him up. His face straightened out some, and sanity came back into his eyes. "Shoot and be done with it, man," Kesselring panted.

I shook my head slowly. "No, there's been enough of that. You won't live too long anyway, Kessel."

He stared at me, wagging his head and looking foolish, unable to believe he wasn't going to die right there.

"While you're alive," I said, "try doing some good with that money of yours."

"Anything," he said eagerly. "Anything you say. Anything you want."

"I'll take a share of that silver mine money," I said. "It belonged to my father anyway . . . But there are other people, too. You've got to help some of the others you've hurt, Kessel."

"I will, I will!" he cried. "I promise I will."

"I'll hang around awhile to see that you do," I told him. "Now get along home."

"You—you won't shoot me in the back?"

I laughed shortly. "I'm all through shooting for awhile—I hope. Go on home, Kessel. I'll see you in the bank tomorrow,"

I WATCHED HIM out of sight, picked up his gun then and started diagonally across the street toward the plaza and the Union Hotel. At the corner Ginger Fergus came running into my arms.

"You're all right, Lenny?" she said anxiously. "Thank God you're not hurt!" We walked on slowly with our arms around each other. Lights were beginning to show now as people got up to see what all the shooting was about. Ginger said:

"You saw—Lois?"



I nodded. "She saved my life, Ginger. She knew me—at the end."

Ginger Fergus shuddered, tightening her arm on my waist and pressing her face against my shoulder. Lamplight from a window touched her hair with red-gold. After a time she whispered:

"What are you going to do now, Len?"

I smiled and brushed my lips across the fragrance of her bright head. "We're going to start living, Ginger—a new life. You might say I'm just coming into an inheritance. That silver my dad struck twenty years ago is going to start paying off."

Ginger looked at the lights and activity in the sheriff's office. "You sure you won't have any trouble with the law, Lenny?"

I showed her the deputy's badge Hibriten had pinned inside my jacket.

Gun-Slinger's Grudge

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Jig Duneen's hair-trigger wolf-pack cruised the street from both ends, hard eyes probing every building and alley . . . They wanted a man named McBride. And on a rocky ledge high above town, a man named McBride rose to check his guns . . . They could have him. . . .

ALL THAT AFTERNOON SAM McBride lay stretched out on the ledge above the town, drawing water now and then from his canteen and, after the water was gone, sucking on a small pebble to keep the saliva flowing. The sun had beaten him bitterly during those long hours, baking the rocks and granite ledge so that heat had come against him from all sides.

He hadn't minded it much at the beginning. It was curiosity more than the demands of caution that had made him take his position on this ledge just below the rim of the mesa wall. He hadn't really put much faith in those rumors that Jig Duneen was sending his Bridle Bit riders to town to hunt him down and give him a working over. Or kill him.

Talk was loose in this country—too loose. There were too many idle hours for men to squat on their heels and chew on the petty jealousies and the beggarly dissatisfactions that centered in this town. Cheap talk often caused trouble, and maybe that was what had pushed this on as far as it had gone. Still, McBride had not put much stock in the rumors that Duneen's crew was out to get him.

But now Sam McBride was not so sure. Hazardville's cluster of adobe and front-flared frame buildings was three hundred feet below him, flanking the new railroad spur and straddling the dry bed of Bonita creek.

It was significant, McBride thought, that Jig Duneen had brought half of his crew into town from the country road, and that Roy Stoltz had led the rest of the Bridle Bit riders out of the dry hills to the east of the mesa. That might mean nothing, or it might mean everything.

But lodged deep in McBride's mind was

the fact that those two groups had worked the street from both ends, stopping in at each store and saloon until they finally came together in front of the courthouse. That did mean something. They had been combing the town for some person, but had failed to find him. And now Duneen's men were staked out along the street, narrowly watching the town's thin current of traffic. And waiting.

THE SUN was down, but heat still boiled out of the rocks. Thirst nagged Sam McBride's throat, and the skin across his wrists and the back of his neck was tight from sunburn. He was a long-boned, rangy man with patience that had its limits. He studied the town uneasily, and then angry resentment came up through his uncertainty and the situation which caused it. He hadn't wanted any trouble with Duneen. All he had asked for from this country was a chance to work out his own tangles, and in his book that right belonged to all men.

McBride had one last look at the town's dusty street, and pushed up from the ledge. He stretched the cramps out of his muscles, picked up the empty canteen, and climbed upward through the rocks. His chestnut mare was grazing some distance back from the rim, hidden from the mesa road by a thick stand of buckbrush.

McBride freed the tie rope, mounted, and picked his way through the brush to the road. It was a narrow, rutty way, seldom used and over-grown with weeds since Duneen's greedy mill saws had cleaned off the last of the timber three years ago.

The road stepped down the face of the mesa in a series of switchbacks, and at the bottom of it McBride found old Jess



*Bishop moved murderously . . .
his gun was clear of leather . . .*

Kennett waiting for him.

"Kind of figured you'd come this way," Kennett said. He was short and wrinkled, bent-shouldered and cheerless. He had a habit when nervous of pulling on the fingers of his right hand, popping the knuckles. He was nervous now; he betrayed that in the restless shifting of his eyes.

"This old lumber road gives a man a chance of looking the town over before riding in. It's also the most likely way for a man to put the town behind him without being seen."

Sam McBride smiled faintly. "It is, at that."

Old Kennett swore impatiently. "Damn it, Sam, listen to what I told you. I ain't makin' it any plainer."

"I know—I know," McBride said. He watched the old man for a minute. Then he said, "Why should I dodge Jig Duneen?"

Kennett's voice was sharp and fretful. "You ought to know the answer to that."

McBride held his tone steady. "Because

I gave those Hat valley nesters the idea of cutting irrigation ditches out from the creek so they'd have enough water for their crops? Is that why?"

Old Kennett looked across his shoulder toward the town. He had taken a risk coming out here, and he was beginning to chafe under it.

"Only one of the reasons, Sam."

"No reason at all, Jess," McBride said. "I only tipped the nesters off to something they should have seen all the time. It's nothing to set Jig Duneen after me."

KENNETT'S thin shoulders moved against the misery of his impatience to have this over with. He had never been a man to talk out of turn, and he had broken a rule in coming here. It could hurt him, this ride he had made out here to warn McBride. He knew that, and was harassed by it. Jig Duneen was a man who accepted favors thanklessly, but never forgot an effrontery.

Kennett said irritably, "Jig Duneen has been the big wheel around here ever since

this country was opened up. He owns the finest ranch, the fastest horses, and the best crew of riders. How he got them is past history and don't matter now. He's done a few good things for this country, and he's never let us forget it. He can't stand any man who won't walk in his shade—and that is what put him down on you."

There was humor in McBride's eyes, thin and wry. "Too bad," he murmured, "but nothing to fight about."

"That's *your* idea," Kennett said shortly. "Not Duneen's. Folks used to look him up when they had a problem, but now they turn to you. Duneen can't stand the light shining on anyone but him. You were a peace officer in a tough town before you came here to settle down. But your reputation followed you here, and there are men who'd like to take over your record. A scalp like yours is worth a dozen small ones to some men."

McBride said nothing. He remembered.

"Roy Stoltz is one of them," Jess Kennett said. "You'll know the others that Duneen imported."

It was all he had to say. He stared at McBride briefly, then swung his horse and pointed it off through the willows. He would let Duneen's crowd see him ride into town along the country road, a different route from that which the man they hunted would take. McBride noted this with narrowing grinness. He had never before realized how much weight Jig Duneen threw in this country, or how wary small merchants like Jess Kennett were of cross-graining Duneen's powerful Bridle Bit. It was a thing to know and remember.

McBride rode out of the low-lands that footed the mesa, and slanted his mount up the slope of the bench to the town. Darkness obscured his coming. He rode out of an alley that flanked the Tincup saloon, paused for a minute, uncertain of how he should handle this. He didn't want trouble, but he would not run from it. He swung his horse to the hitch rail in front of the saloon, with a sudden feeling of impatience for all this. A man did a tough job, taking long chances in doing it, and forever after was haunted by the reputation he had

built up. He wondered bitterly why that had to be.

IT WAS a slack night for the saloon. Abe Gilliam and Johnny Wetherfall sat at one of the tables, nursing their drinks over a game of penny-ante poker that drew interest from neither man. On his way to the bar, McBride paused at the table.

"How's that mare making out, Johnny?"

He was thin and young, this Johnny Wetherfall, with a love for all animals and a passion for horses. "Just fine, Mr. McBride. You know, I've never heard of a bone-break healing up like that one is in Gray Lady. If it wasn't for you, I'd have had to shoot her. It's what Duneen said——"

Something changed in Johnny's eyes, turned uncomfortable. "A trick a fellow in Kansas showed me once," McBride said, and he was trying to draw that feeling of friendly ease back into the atmosphere. "All I did was set the break; it was you that did the important work. You've got a way with animals, Johnny. You ever think of becoming a veterinarian?"

Johnny bent a card in his hand, straightened it. "Takes time and money to learn, Mr. McBride. I asked Mr. Duneen about it once, but——" He moved his shoulders, and didn't finish.

It was always Duneen in this town, McBride thought. Did Jig Duneen like the idea of this, or would Duneen approve and support that, or would Duneen agree to something else. Always Duneen. It would seem that the Bridle Bit owner had made himself the hub around which this entire county revolved. If Duneen approved, a program was acted upon; if he frowned then the thing was dropped. McBride didn't like that. It was wrong for one man to have such a hold on a town.

He said, "I know a vet over at Prescott, a friend of mine. He's getting old, and would be glad to school a likely young man, just to have the help. You want, I'll write him a letter about you, Johnny."

Johnny was pleased. He showed it in his eyes. Then he remembered that his

father depended on Bridle Bit for most of his blacksmith business, and he showed that in his eyes—an uncertainty that was rooted in his knowledge of the importance of keeping in Jig Duneen's good favor.

"I'll think it over, Mr. McBride. But thanks, anyhow."

Abe Gilliam raised his weather-seamed face. "I've been thinking about that money you let me have, Sam. You're not charging me interest for the loan, and that ain't right."

"You can drive a beef over to my place some time, if that's what's bothering you. I didn't ask to be paid for the use of that money—glad I was able to do you a turn."

Abe Gilliam cleared his throat. "Business is business, and I git to thinking that a loan ought to be handled through a bank . . ."

That was Duneen again. Duneen's bank and Duneen's town, with every man in it jumping when Duneen pulled the string. McBride's patience was beginning to unravel. "Six percent interest per month is a rough price. Yours to pay if you can't stand without Jig Duneen propping you. Your right to say, Abe."

"Well," Gilliam said, and he looked down into the hard palm of his hand. "I've got to get my winter feed from Bridle Bit, and if anything ever happened to shut me off—well, that's how it is, Sam."

McBride's smile was gray. "It seems that a man can live a free life in this town," he said, "if he'll put his soul up for bond." He heeled around, and went to the bar. "I'd like to buy a drink," he said to the man behind the counter. "Or do I first have to ask permission from Bridle Bit?"

Dutch Wilhite, who owned the saloon and would not sell himself to any man, flushed resentfully. "Take it easy with that, Sam." He reached behind the bar for a bottle, and then his hand changed direction and moved toward that place below the counter where he kept the loaded shotgun.

McBride heard the faint slapping of the batwing doors behind him, then. He heard that sound, and through the backbar mirror saw the thin dry little man who had stepped through the doorway and halted

there.

"Why ask the barkeep a question about Bridle Bit, mister?" The words came through lips that scarcely moved. "Why not ask a man who works for the brand?"

McBRIDE turned slowly, remembering the coiled danger that had been behind other tight-edged voices like this stranger possessed, and careful to keep his hands in sight. Then recognition came to him, an incredible thing that spanned a thousand miles to a marshal's office in a Kansas town and the wanted dodgers tacked to the wall. But the man's stunted body, his thin dry features, and the low-laced hang of his guns gave credibility to what lunged through McBride's mind. This venom-eyed weasel was Lee Bishop! And if this one was in town, then Roe Tyree would be somewhere near.

Lee Bishop's lips smiled faintly; his eyes didn't, remaining cold and flat. "I've been a long while trying to meet up with you, McBride. For a reason you probably already know. Dode Jenkins was a friend of mine."

McBride remembered. A gunslinger who had let a few drinks and a murderous reputation carry him too high and too far—that had been Dode Jenkins.

"Jenkins spread himself once too often that night. I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen. He had to make something out of it."

Lee Bishop said softly, "Dode's mistake was over-betting his hand. He went after you without first finding out what you've got. I wouldn't make that mistake with you, McBride." Then he changed that, to be more explicit. "I *haven't* made Dode's mistake."

There was no temper in Lee Bishop, no nerves. He had let McBride know what this was all about, that old score which had nagged him so long, and now he was waiting. He was letting the silence and the steady malice in his stare pile pressure against his man. But McBride had bucked this kind of tiger before; he could stand to the pressure without bending or breaking—ready, but without the strained nerve tension that could cramp a man's muscles when he needed flexibility and

speed.

It was those who watched who couldn't stand this silent pressure of dangerous waiting. Abe Gilliam's chair scraped on the floor, and he stood up jerkily. His voice, when he spoke, was too loud to be natural. It was hoarse.

"Johnny, if you're going to look over that heifer of mine we'd better get going."

It was the hollow excuse of a man trying desperately to protect his own hide by remaining neutral, of a man letting a friend down by pretending not to see this trouble.

Johnny Wetherfall released a long sigh. "Well, Abe—I reckon." He stood up, looking uncomfortably toward McBride.

Abe Gilliam moved his feet tentatively. Lee Bishop said narrowly, "Leave your gun on the table when you go."

Abe Gilliam pretended anger. "Now look here, stranger . . ."

The banty killer said coldly, "Gun on the table, and keep your distance when you go around me to the door. That, or stay in here and take your chances."

Gilliam was a man trapped by his own weakness. He could no longer pretend. He rolled his eyes bitterly toward McBride, and his voice was hoarse.

"Sam, I don't like doing this. But I've got a wife and kids, and the way things are . . . a man's family comes first, Sam."

"This isn't yours," McBride said quietly. "It's not your tangle, Abe."

Self-contempt was in Abe Gilliam's low oath. He lifted his gun with guarded care, and laid it on the table in front of him. His voice was a croak. "Coming, Johnny?"

"Well, Abe . . ."

"Move along," Bishop snapped.

GILLIAM stepped around the table, and a plea was in the glance he threw over his shoulder to Johnny Wetherfall. He wanted company as he walked out of the saloon, but Johnny was not going with him. The doors slapped softly behind Gilliam, and Johnny stood emptily at the poker table. Lee Bishop wasn't watching him. Johnny raised one hand slowly, took the cigaret out of his mouth, and flipped it to the killer's feet.

Bishop sneered. "I know where you

are, kid. You won't cut any ice at all in this." Then his tight-lidded glance tilted across McBride's shoulder to where the barkeep stood with one hand hidden below the counter. "That shotgun you're thinking about can buy you a lot of trouble, friend. Get your hands up where I can watch them."

Dutch Wilhite spoke flatly through the hush. "Don't tell me what to do in my own place, stranger. Sam——" Temper rankled his tone. "What do you want me to do, Sam?"

McBride said, "I'll have my drink, Dutch."

"But this little banty——"

"The drink, Dutch. That's all."

The saloon man slid a glass across the mahogany, set the bottle beside it. McBride reached around, and picked them up. He watched Bishop steadily.

"I didn't expect you to ride a thousand miles just to settle Dode Jenkins' score."

The little gunman grinned thinly. "I didn't. Dode had his chance, but he couldn't deliver. I might have let that ride, except for this job. I'm working for Bridle Bit now."

McBride tilted the bottle to the glass. "I imagine it'll be the usual short-term job."

"Short," Bishop said, "but high pay. How much longer do you want to keep talking, McBride?"

"Getting nervous, Lee?"

"If that's your idea, you're riding the wrong horse," the banty sneered. "I'll oblige you, McBride. I've always wondered if you're as heavy as everyone thinks."

He was a thin man, with narrow shoulders; he was compact, whippy, bright-eyed. McBride raised the glass, and had his drink. He couldn't see any sign of Roe Tyree staked out at the door or one of the windows. But he knew that gunman would be somewhere out there on the street, probably with Jig Duneen.

He said drily, "Duneen must be mighty short of hands this season to go to the trouble of importing you and Tyree."

A mocking malice stirred the surface of Lee Bishop's eyes. "The best is always worth the trouble and price. You ought to

know that, McBride. Only it wasn't Duneen hired us. It was his foreman, Roy Stoltz. That mean anything to you?"

"Nothing particular." McBride poured a second drink. He reached his hand around, setting the bottle on the counter. Then hand and arm jerked, and he hurled the bottle at the gunman. Bishop moved, murderously. His gun was clear of leather—he was that fast—when the bottle smashed into his belt buckle. Breath exploded from his lungs, and pain kinked him forward, still trying to get his gun up.

McBride went across the saloon in swift lunging strides. He kicked the gun out of the killers hand, and then slashed his open knuckles viciously across Bishop's mouth. The man's head jerked around under the impact. McBride brought it back again with another open-handed slap. He was cruel in his contempt of the little killer, snapping the narrow features back and forth with short, open-hand blows. Hatred pinched all but the lust to kill out of Bishop's small eyes, but he couldn't get away to draw his other gun. He had to take McBride's contempt and those slashing knuckles that drew blood from his mouth and nose and sent short, harsh echoes through the silence.

Then McBride jerked the killer close and pinned his hands behind him. Dutch Wilhite came running around the end of the bar.

"I'll go after the sheriff."

"No," McBride said. He heaved the banty gunman up, chest high. "Where is Duneen?"

"At the Exchange, probably." The saloonman showed his temper with a sudden flare of cursing. "Damn it, Sam, don't be a fool! Put this weasel behind bars before you brace Duneen."

McBride went out of the saloon, walking heavily. The street was dark except for window lights that slanted yellow smears across the dust. Voices laced the darkness, and a feeling of tension was clamped down on the town.

McBride turned along the plank walk, passing frame buildings that were flare-fronted in a vain attempt to make much of



this straggling range town. Virg Shea was standing in the blackness of his saddle shop when McBride passed. Shea peered at the little shape carried high in McBride's hands, showed startled alarm in his oath.

"Lord a'mighty, Sam! What are you aimin' to do?"

McBride made no answer. He was thinking of the Bridle Bit foreman who had farmed in Lee Bishop and Roe Tyree to do his own dirty work. He was thinking of Jig Duneen, who had shackled this town with his own greed and hungry pride, of shoestring merchants and ranchers like old Jess Kennett and Abe Gilliam who were forced to cater Duneen's favor and arrogance in order to survive. He was remembering the nesters along Bonita-creek and his own meager acres back there in the hills, and he tramped along the street with a head of bitter anger building up in him. It wasn't right for one man to have to bow to another in order to cut his own mark. But that was what Duneen expected, humility from his neighbors and a place in the sun for himself.

The Exchange was a broad, square-framed saloon, bright-lighted at this hour and alive with the trade brought in by Bridle Bit riders. The clamor thinned out and dropped abruptly away as McBride entered. Men at the tables looked around, saw trouble in McBride's big-boned shape, got quickly out of their chairs, and were instantly carried off by the swift current that flowed away toward the side walls.

The Bridle Bit crew was at the bar, flanking Jig Duneen on both sides. The sudden fall of silence unsettled their nerves and one man said petulantly: "What the hell?"

McBride raised his voice, coldly. "Around here, Duneen."

THE MEN at the bar jerked around—and froze. One fellow whistled softly, and then even that small sound was gone. McBride saw Roy Stoltz over there, and he saw Roe Tyree's slab shape beside the Bridle Bit ramrod.

Jig Duneen was the last to come around from the bar, deliberately and with the

self-sure arrogance that was his nature. He was a small man with a ramrod back, blunt features, and a sparse saddle of roan hair across his balding head. He held his head stiffly high, as does a short man who is conscious of the tallness of men around him, and his hard black eyes widened slightly as McBride stepped forward.

McBride dumped Lee Bishop to the floor at Duneen's feet. "I believe this baby is yours, Duneen."

The effrontery in McBride's tone was plain, and Duneen's temper flared at it. "What is the meaning of this? That's my rider you're man-handling."

"Figured you'd claim him," said McBride, and his voice turned short and cross. "Your choice of men is nothing to be proud of, Duneen. But I'll hand you this—you get the best when you decide to hire some gunslingers. They don't come any better than Lee Bishop and Roe Tyree."

Duneen stared up at him. Lee Bishop rolled over and got to his feet. He wiped a sleeve across his mouth, looked down at the streaks of blood, and raised hot, murderous eyes to McBride.

The Bridle Bit owner said rashly, "When I need gunwork done, I'll do it myself! Bishop and Tyree? These new men are Bill Stevens and Pecos-somebody."

McBride's smile was tight, without humor in it. "Ask them." He watched Roe Tyree step out from the bar, a loose, sliding movement that put him at Bishop's side. The little killer began cursing in a crazed, vicious monotone, ready to break and go for his gun. McBride, in that moment, tried to decide between the two men, but there was no choice. He would be lucky, he thought emptily, to get even one of them.

"Ask them, Duneen!"

The cowman's hard-lidded stare whipped to his foreman. "What about this, Stoltz?"

"You wanted a couple bruisers hired to give McBride a working over. You wanted this fellow set down in his place——"

"I didn't tell you to get murderers for the job!" His voice sharpened, turned brittle. "It's about time you learned to

wear the right size britches, Stoltz. You're fired! And take these two-bit killers with you when you go."

He was a short man with a tall voice, but this time he was talking against something bigger than he was. Roy Stoltz made no move away from the bar. Anger darkened the man's heavy features, then hatred.

"You think you're God, don't you?" he sneered.

IT WAS Stoltz who broke first. Then Lee Bishop and Roe Tyree followed. But Stoltz's temper was a wild, senseless thing, like a maddened bull plunging around for room before he made his rush. He swung his big arm savagely to clear his way, and in doing that he knocked Lee Bishop off balance.

Bishop's slug whipped the air at McBride's face. McBride's lifting gun slammed a slug into Roe Tyree; he changed the angle of his weapon and let Bishop have a bullet. The little man went down, but Tyree refused to fall. He swayed back, bracing himself against the rail, and McBride saw the black burst of the shot. The blow clubbed against his shoulder, and he could smell the dust of the saloon floor.

He raised his head, intent on getting loose another shot, but somehow he had lost his gun. There were shots and shouts around him—Johnny Wetherfall's thin-edged yell. Roe Tyree was down, and Roy Stoltz was sagging against the bar, mouth open and eyes empty. Jig Duneen had a smoking gun in his hand, and Johnny Wetherfall was shouting at him.

"Drop that, Duneen! There's a limit how much this town will take from you. Drop that gun, or we'll drop you!"

The rancher lowered his weapon. He turned, with shock loosening the hard

muscles of his face as he stared at the merchants and county men crowding into the saloon.

McBride pushed up from the floor, and got to his feet. He had a hole in him, but it didn't bother much. Not yet. He steadied himself, and looked at Jig Duneen. The man had walked too high, and he had tripped. He had bulled his neighbors aside, and now they stood up against him, angry and defiant. He had built his castle on pride, his empire on the glossy falseness of personal greatness and superiority, and now the foundation had been knocked out from under all that, crashing the wreckage down upon him.

McBride said, without rancor, "Every man has his rights, Duneen, and no man is bigger or better than an honest neighbor. A hard lesson to learn, maybe, but a good one."

The rancher sheathed his gun, and for a moment looked at the floor. Then he raised his eyes, looking grimly at McBride, and he spoke through the uncertainty that was in them.

"This town can't get along without me."

"There's truth in that," McBride said quietly. "But you can't get along without the town. We'd like to have you at the next meeting of the Town Council, Duneen."

He waited a minute. And then because he knew the importance of gentling a bronc horse instead of breaking its spirit permanently, he said, "The Council is meeting to decide about the new school. We thought you might have some ideas about it."

Duneen raised his head, and his shoulders leveled, with pride but none of the old arrogance.

"I believe I have at that," he said. "We'll all get our heads together Saturday night, and see what we can figure."

THE SUNDANCE KID

By JAY DREXEL



There are all sorts of gunmen . . . some tall and lean, some short and chesty; some looking like hungry wolves, others like hungry sky-pilots. And now, gents, meet Carthy Queen . . . who looks like a dusty, rag-down, grub-line kid . . .

THE KID CAME QUARTERING briskly into town, straight in the saddle, as if he had something in mind or someplace to go. Slow Anders, who was a thin, hairy man back-tilted in a chair in front of the ONCE AGAIN, saw that horse and rider had the gray of lava dust in crease and hollow and judged they'd used yesterday and last night to cut the corner of Devil's Share. Moving behind lids narrowed against the July's high-noon glare, his slate-colored gaze watched them down the hill. The kid swung down, slowly, at the L-shaped watering trough in front of Ned's Mercantile.

There was in Slow Anders a mild liking for anyone who had too much gumption to come dragging into Stirrup the way a person normally would after crossing the Share. This, along with the fact that strangers were seldom uninteresting and

sometimes exciting, brought his attention into focus. He watched as the kid carefully let the bay gelding drink half its fill and afterwards moved it down the rail to some tree-shade. Then the kid looked aimlessly about and caught sight of the tin-plate liquor bottle nailed to the wooden awning of the ONCE AGAIN. He headed back up-hill, plodding in the sand.

Slow stood up, folded his *EXAMINER*, and said howdy.

The kid said, "Likewise. Nice day."

Slow said, "Ain't it, though," and followed the other inside. The newcomer blew out his breath and filled his lungs again with the cool air of the saloon. Slow went behind the bar and brought out some private stock from a drawer. He filled a shot-glass and said, "First for strangers on the house."

The kid looked appreciatively at Slow over the lifted glass. "Nice town, too."

HE WAS BIG, Slow saw, with long legs, but not gawky. He had wide shoulders beneath a faded shirt, and his blue eyes were the color the shirt might once have been. Slow's first sight had made him out about twenty-five; now he



saw he was younger, maybe about nineteen or so.

"I needed that," the kid said. He set down the glass and fingered his pockets, bringing out a silver dollar. Slow noticed that he hadn't known exactly where it was, and there wasn't any clink when he found it. Slow filled the shot-glass again, made change from his own pocket, and said casually, "You ought to've skirted toward the mountains. Even the folks hereabout that know the layout of the Share go round it unless they're in a hell of a hurry." Slow wondered, with mixed curiosity and skepticism, if the kid was in that kind of hurry.

"I been in deserts before," said the kid.

"The Share ain't really a desert," Slow explained, as if the kid hadn't just finished finding out for himself. "It's all gulches and dead-end canyons. Lots of men been lost there. You seen deserts, hunh. You from down South?"

"I saw some bones," the kid said. "I was riding the ridges."

"That was the smart thing to do," Slow said absently. "Always sight on the mountains and you're bound to get out." He cleared his throat and abandoned indirection. "You just riding through?"

The kid doffed his flat-brimmed Stetson and laid it on the bar; his hair was yellow and cut short. He scrubbed a thumb across his lips, where the liquor itched at a sun-split. "I'm looking for a job. Know of any?"

"A job, hunh . . ." Slow's interest waned. *Just another grub-line kid*, he thought, *too old to stay at home, too young to punch cattle*. He reached lazily for the bar-rag. "Why, yeah, I know of a couple around town. There's—"

The kid's face was without caution, but his voice came a little flat. "Cowhand. Know of any?"

"I was getting to that," Slow said mildly. "There's no range work I know of." He swabbed some of the kid's lava dust from the bar, nailed the rag, and half-turned to take a cigar from the china cup on the back-board. He saw in the mirror that the kid's face and shoulders had gone limp and tired. He struck a match on his pants and turned around again, and

the kid was standing as straight as ever. Slow puffed longer than was necessary to get the cigar lit, controlling the corners of his mouth.

The kid spoke with a certain restraint. "Where can I find somebody who could tell me for certain?"

"Well . . ." A mild devil was in Slow, tempting him to send the kid looking for Luke Farrel with his story. He could fairly see Farrel's expression when the kid said that level "cowhand". Trouble was, the kid was evidently without skin on that score and might back-sass Farrel and get himself killed. Or one of Farrel's gunmen might want a little snack before lunch and brace the kid for practice. Slow remembered that Tom Tarrat and the other small valley ranchers were gathered in the hotel this afternoon. Tom Tarrat could peg this kid down without getting fatal about it. Or that girl, Nan Kittering; she'd once tongue-lashed Luke Farrel into his saddle and out of town for an indiscretion. Slow said, "You go over to the hotel and ask for Tom Tarrat. He'll tell you all you ought to know."

The kid said thanks and turned and walked out. Something about his silhouette between the shoved-aside batwings caught Slow's eye for the first time, and, after the chesty shadow moved away from the green-painted windows, Slow let loose a lively cannonade of chuckles. "Nice kid," he grinned at his encircled reflection as he ducked the shot-glass in the pail of dubious water under the bar, "but he sure can run off at the head. Cowhand! He better save and buy a gun first!"

CARTHY QUEEN cut across and down the sloping main street toward the Mercantile, feeling the tiredness in his bones and suspecting that before the sun set he'd probably be trailing again, a damn-sight tireder still. Dust grated under his eyelids and he knew without having to look that he was burned red beneath his shirt. The topside of his tongue felt muddy. His pants hurt from thirty-eight hours in a blistering saddle.

He stopped by his horse to pull his spurs out of a saddlebag and strap them on. They'd started searing through his

bootleather out in the Share, but now he didn't feel right somehow without their solid jingle. Then he folded up the off foreleg to examine the hoof and decided that the man who'd sold him the gelding as a good dry-country mount had a clear conscience.

This off his mind, he looked around and made for the only two storey building in sight, a bleak, brown affair at the town's only intersection, guessing correctly that it must be the hotel. He turned into the lobby, feeling relief from the sun. The screen-door slapped shut behind him, and a lanky, balding man in shirt-sleeves looked up from the oaken roll-top behind the counter and said, "Yes, son?"

A resigned something stirred the mildness of Carthy's blue eyes. He asked, "Could you tell me where I'll find Tom Tarrat?"

The man got up and put his elbows on the counter. This brought his right hand close to the butt of the .44 that stuck out of his waistband, left of center. His eyes looked pleasant, but a wariness was in them. "Why do you want to see Tom Tarrat?"

Carthy looked at the man and decided he was too tired to raise a dander. Besides, he was beginning to feel and recognize something of the atmosphere of this hotel. It was very quiet, so quiet that he distinctly heard the blown snort of his gelding, outside and up-street, as it resented a fly. Yet Carthy knew he'd heard a murmur of voices as he'd entered . . . before the screen-door had slammed.

The shirt-sleeved man's eyes sharpened as Carthy hesitated, then flicked minutely toward the drawn sliding-doors at the far end of the lobby and back to Carthy's face. Carthy said *Uh-huh* to himself, and said aloud, "I want to talk to him about a job."

The man studied Carthy's face some more, then relaxed. "I can tell you, he hasn't any."

"I'd like him to tell me," said Carthy, not inclined to give too much ground.

"Believe me, son, he doesn't need any-one."

"You his foreman?"

The man's eyes dropped to Carthy's

gunless hips and he sighed, "You look harmless enough, I guess," and elbowed up the drop-board to come outside the counter. Carthy followed him silently to the sliding-doors, waited there while the man rapped twice and then once. Somebody on the other side said, "Joe?" and Carthy's companion said, "Yes." He opened the doors and beckoned Carthy before him.

It was the dining room of the hotel, and Carthy Queen got about to the edge of the faded axminster rug before the fragrance of steaks and potatoes and corn-bread and stewed tomatoes brought him to an undecided halt. He stood there, eyelids drooping, and knew for the first time what a hunger he'd built up in the past two days of sweating, aching, sleepless travel. His belly twisted hotly into itself.

A voice said, "Who is this kid, Joe? Why bring him in here?" and Carthy's eyes snapped open with chagrin. He took another step forward, lurched with more self-consciousness than anything else, and tangled with a chair. With a clatter he was down, the man beside him exclaiming angrily and trying to catch him with out-swept arm.

At the table against the far wall, away from the open windows, a man in town blacks rose to his feet with gun in hand. He called, "What the hell, Joe, can't you handle a drunk?"

Joe snapped, "I didn't know he was drunk!"

The man at the table hiked out his chair with his foot. He sat down again, and raised his voice to someone in the kitchen: "Hey, Max . . . come get this fried kid out of here."

CARTHY QUEEN was on his feet by this time, fighting down a miserable embarrassment. Flushing to his collar, he stooped for his hat, righting the chair as he straightened. Then he felt Joe's tight grip under his arm and heard the man's muttered, "C'mon, son, let's walk a little." Carthy shook off the hand and said, "Wait!" He took another step toward the table.

A man laughed and said, "Better get, son . . . Max is coming to take care of

you."

Carthy said apologetically, "I'm not drunk and I'll leave peaceably if I'm not wanted. First I want to see Tom Tarrat."

He was up close to the table now, and he saw there were four men and a girl seated around it. There were plates of food, smelling deliciously, and a jug of milk with glasses, and the gleam of silverware. Heavy, unsheathed sixguns bulked on the white cloth, even in front of the girl, and Carthy caught her eyes in passing and saw no scorn or amusement in them.

A large, gaunt, gray man in range clothes creaked his chair as he shifted to have a better look at Carthy. "I'm Tom Tarrat," he said.

"The barkeep sent me here," said Carthy. "I'm looking for a job. I'm a good hand."

The short silence that followed made Carthy Queen uncomfortably aware of his saddle-tramp appearance. He wished fervently that he'd been able to put up at the hotel and wash and change into the clean outfit in his roll.

Tom Tarrat's drill-steel eyes rested briefly on Carthy's gunless middle, and there was a kind of bitter humor in them. "Slow Anders' idea of a joke, I suppose. You don't look to be exactly the kind of hand I could use right now, son."

"I'm a good hand," repeated Carthy.

A broad, wedge-shaped man appeared in the kitchen door. He wore a white apron and a sagging gunbelt strapped over it. His unhurried glance measured Carthy up and down as he said, "Ja?"

Tom Tarrat moved a hand. "It's okay, Max . . ." He looked back at Carthy. "You hungry, kid?"

"No," said Carthy. He saw Max go back into the kitchen and stand, judging by his shadow, just inside the door where he could listen. Joe had already gone out, carefully shutting the sliding-doors behind him.

"There's food to spare." Tom Tarrat's eyes were shrewd.

Carthy was hot, tired and in no mood to be twitted on principles. "I've come here from Nevada without once begging a handout," he said shortly, "and I don't

figure to start now. You got a job, Mister Tarrat? Have any of these other gentlemen got one?"

"How about me?" the girl said, with a half-smile. "I run a little outfit."

"You got a job?" said Carthy bluntly. He felt that, though she probably did have a place, she was quibbling.

The girl frowned. "No."

Carthy said, "This is one hell of a town and one hell of a way to treat a man." He swung on his heel and started for the door.

Tom Tarrat's voice stopped him with what were probably the only words that could have stopped him, such was his temper. Tom Tarrat's voice said, "You're on. Forty a month and found. The found starts now. Come back and sit down."

CARTHY LISTENED as he ate, opening his mouth only for food after introductions were made.

"Luke wanted those bulls to breed up his herds," Tom Tarrat was saying. "He lost heavy in that blizzard last year—" his voice had the cut of contempt a cowman reserves specially for inept or inconsiderate handling of beefstock—"If that crew of his knew cows like they know guns, they'd never have let 'em get up in the foothills . . . but that's aside. I figure by now he's found out I ran my surlies through the Pass and sold 'em at Lordsville, like I said I would. Now Luke'll have to breed this spring with whatever he's got, which ain't much, or else pay twenty times the dog's rate he offered me and bring in some more."

"Somebody had to do it," a man said, and a growl of approval went around the table. "'Bout time he was bucked," said another, and the third said half-heartedly, "That'll show him."

"Bueno," said the girl. "It sure will. Now that we've showed fight, maybe he'll stop just pushing us around. Maybe he'll stop blocking water and firing haystacks and start a shooting war."

Carthy was watching her when she spoke. There was a hard, tough little smile on her lips, and he found himself anxious to smile along with it. She was pretty and not too mannish, he decided, in spite

of her scarred denims and shapeless blue shirt. Her dark brown hair was carefully gathered in back and fastened with a clamp-band of Navajo workmanship, and her eyes, when the light caught them right, were a startling shade of gray.

Tom Tarrat had fallen silent. It caught and held, until one of the other men said hesitantly, "Range war, Nan? I don't reckon Luke'd start anything like that, particular now he knows we ain't no longer buffaloed."

"Aren't you?" the girl, Nan, murmured. "I'll give you ten to one on that. I sure as hell am. Luke Farrel's been working too long and too hard to own this valley. He's sent four of us small ranchers skedaddling in three months." She shook her head and her eyes flashed that gray fire. "Chousing off a few bulls he wants in the middle of the night is just running against rope. We're due to get throwed."

Tom Tarrat ended his meditation to say tiredly, "Nan's right, men. I didn't ask you here to give you any good news. I wanted to tell you I think I've set hell in motion."

At this point, Carthy Queen felt impelled to ask, "Why doesn't somebody walk up to this Luke Farrel and bait him?"

"Son," Tom Tarrat said, after a respectful moment, "Luke is gunswift. So's his crew, and they're always around. And none of us is."

Now that he'd horned in, Carthy had a few more questions that puzzled him. "Why don't you hire outside help?"

"We have, twice," Tom Tarrat went on patiently. "As soon as they got here, Luke Farrel doubled what we were able to pay 'em. They thanked us for putting them onto a good thing."

"You got no Marshal?" Carthy persisted.

The man in town blacks, who'd silently pinched tiny peaks in the tablecloth throughout the discussion, thumbed his braided vest from beneath his coat to disclose a shield. "Just to round out your picture of the situation, Queen," he said dryly, "I was Mart Haines' deputy the day we buried him. I tried to do a job, but lately Farrel's been pushing me to

become a citizen. My wife and kid think it's a good idea."

Carthy pushed back his plate, feeling warm and a little reckless. "Seems to me," he stated, "that unless Farrel's got more men than I ever heard of, you people ought to be able to throw down on him." A significant, almost guilty silence prompted him to add, "Or can't you buy bullets in this town?"

"Seems to me," said Max, from the doorway where he'd been listening, "that for bub who don't wear no gun at all, you sound tough like girl gopher. Or are you afraid to buy gun?"

IN THE SILENCE that followed, Carthy got up and said, "No," and headed for the wide man. Max moved out of the door to meet him, dropping a big hand to his waist to unbuckle his gunbelt.

They met halfway between door and table. There was a moment's footwork while each measured the other. Then Max brought up a calculated roundhouse left that whistled past Carthy's ear as he crouched under it and moved in. Max looked surprised and started a right hook. Swaying to one side, Carthy chopped his left hand over the upswinging wrist, grabbed it and pulled viciously downward and to his right. Max teetered forward unsteadily and Carthy's right fist exploded squarely on the shelf of the wide man's jaw.

Carthy was suddenly aware that Max was grinning and muttering "Ja . . . ja!" but Carthy was following through and there was no time to feel amazement. As Max's head jerked with the force of the first blow, Carthy caught him with a smashing back-hand slap. At the same time he twisted the captured arm, snapping it upward and out so that Max's feet left the floor and he was literally turned sideways in the air before crashing shoulder and buttocks on the floor with an impact that brought a tinkle from the cut-glass chandelier.

He was up immediately like a grizzly-sized rubber ball, that grin still on him. Carthy Queen shrugged mentally and started forward, carefully guarded, to take his licking. Then his amazement struck

home, for Max's thick arms waved him away and Max was grinning and nodding his head at those at the table. "Ja . . . ja," he was saying; "the little boy can fight! Max thought he was blab-mouth who needs Max to teach him lesson! But no . . ."

Some of the men at the table were chuckling, though worried gloom still underlay their amusement like deep water beneath ripples. Even Tom Tarrat's grim, carven features had relaxed into a near-smile. Carthy glanced over and saw the dance of humor in the girl's gray eyes too.

That tears it, he thought, and got his hat from the shelf on the wall behind him. Putting it on, he brushed four fingers along the brim to snap it and said, as steadily as he could, "I'll be in that saloon across the way, Mister Tarrat, when you're ready to give me any orders. Or tell me the way to get to your outfit . . . I can't shake this crazy town too soon to suit me!"

Max roared with laughter. He dropped a hand on Carthy's shoulder and gripped, and Carthy felt the animal strength that could have toyed with him if Max had chosen to continue the fracas. Then Max went back into the kitchen, wheezing, and Carthy turned to leave, but once more Tom Tarrat's voice stopped him. "Son—"

Carthy waited, fighting down puzzlement and fury, as the tall, gray man rose. Tom Tarrat had one hand in the pocket of his mackinaw, and Carthy thought he looked ill at ease.

"We were laughing with Max," the rancher said, "That's the first time he's been floored in about five years. If he can laugh at it, we can." There was respect in his eyes now, but a gentleness too, as they brushed Carthy's bare hips. "You're a nice kid . . . you got the ways of a man. But this is a tough place to be right now, even so. Why don't you ride on a ways . . . I have a friend in Lordsville who might be able to put you on."

Carthy spaced his words with a certain air of introspection. "I thought I was working for you. Or was that another joke?"

Tom Tarrat pulled a leather poke from

the pocket. "No joke, kid. I hired you . . . now I'm firing you. You got a square meal out of it, which was the main idea, and—let's see, about—"

As Tom Tarrat began to count out silver dollars, thereby proving himself a bad mathematician and a generous man, Carthy Queen turned white, spun to yank open the sliding-doors, and walked out.

HIS HORSE was standing, hip-shot in front of the Mercantile, browsing for edibles among the tough weeds that bunched out from beneath the boardwalk.

Carthy Queen swung aboard with one thought in mind—to put a hill, or better yet a mountain, between himself and Stirrup before nightfall. He gathered the reins and jerked his hat-brim and touched spurs to flank . . . and just as abruptly pulled in. The thin, hairy barkeep from the ONCE AGAIN had ducked out of an alley, across the boardwalk, and was planted in his path.

"Well?" asked Carthy uncharitably.

The man looked nervously up. "Any luck?"

"Yup. The quickest, easiest job I ever had. I'll mail you your cut."

"No call to get nasty," Slow Anders said gruffly. "How about a drink to set you up for the trail?"

"Is that what you came skooting out to say, mister?" Carthy's horse was inching, anxious to work the mud out of its joints. Carthy moved to rein past the man.

"Wait—" Slow Anders grabbed the bridle and was helped backward a few feet before the puzzled gelding stopped—"you damn fool!" Carthy's bleak, questioning stare held him wordless for a second. "I mean . . . look, kid, there's going to be a little trouble hereabout in a few minutes."

"Luke Farrel?"

Slow Anders blinked. "How'd you know?"

"Part of my job," said Carthy bitterly. He swung down and tied up again, this time at the down-hill end of the ONCE AGAIN's straggling rail. He stepped up to the boardwalk, pausing to let his gaze drift to right and left of him. The length of the street was deserted. Late afternoon shadows made brown bars across it, and a

cool breeze was gusting down from the mountains above to raise an unruly family of dust-devils. "Where is everybody?"

Slow Anders moved a hand futilely. "Hiding. Luke and his crew are just outside of town. I reckon he got wind of the meeting in the hotel and aims to show us all what he thinks of it."

Carthy's face took on muscular hollows between the bones of cheek and jaw; it gave him an older, harder aspect. "Do Tom Tarrat and the others know?"

"By now, I reckon. I sent my swamper to warn them first and then everybody else." Slow Anders took hold of Carthy's sleeve, his eyes uneasily on the hotel. "You better come inside, son, where it's safe."

Carthy braced against the urging hand. "Don't you aim to do anything about all this?"

Slow Anders turned, genuinely surprised. Then his eyes grew sullen and shuttled away from Carthy. "Sure . . . I reckon I'll mind my own business, same as everybody else. Luke's just out for a little fun." He fell silent.

Finally Carthy spat at the boardwalk. "Where's Farrel now?"

Slow Anders said in a low voice, "C'mon and see," and pushed through the batwings.

Carthy followed the barkeep into the cool, sour-smoke gloom of the stock room at the rear of the ONCE AGAIN. There was a small, lopsided window cut into the planking and, at Slow Anders' gesture, Carthy half-pulled himself over onto a stack of liquor boxes to look through it.

The rear of the ONCE AGAIN faced over a rain ditch; beyond that was a long sandy slope that gave onto green grass and trees where a creek meandered a hundred or so yards away.

Under these trees, in various positions, was a group of about ten men. Some lay prone on back or stomach. Others squatted in the grass or leaned against the shady trunks, checking guns. There was a murmur of voices, and occasionally a harsh laugh or loud remark sounded out. Carthy saw the off-yellow gleam of bottles.

"They been likkering up down there," said Slow Anders; "I just happened to

notice 'em when I came back for sawdust. They're primed . . . if you'd ridden out that way, they'd have et you alive."

Carthy thought, *So the girl was right . . . about running against rope.* He asked in a slate-dead voice, "Which one's Farrel?"

Slow Anders crowded his shoulders past Carthy and peered at the knot of men down the slope. "That big man in the *tejano* brush jacket. That's Luke."

The men were in activity now, mounting up. A faint shot was the signal for the popping of many guns. The horsemen split into two parties, one heading out of sight along the sage-dotted sand flats that bordered the Share to the mountains, the other splashing across the creek and trotting leisurely up the rise toward the uphill end of town and the ONCE AGAIN.

Slow Anders grunted. "They're goin' to dust Stirrup from both ends to discourage any butting in. Then they'll go after the hotel."

He turned around, but Carthy Queen wasn't there.

"WHAT THE HELL kind of town is this!" thought Carthy angrily as he led his gelding into the ONCE AGAIN. He met Slow Anders coming surprisedly from the back room, and the question was so plain in his face that Anders' expression blanked out and he didn't meet Carthy's eyes.

He growled, "You can hole up here 'til it blows over." Eyeing the horse, he went behind the bar to get a cigar from the china cup.

Carthy said, "Thanks," acidly, and anchored the gelding to a wooden post at the end of the bar. He opened his off saddlebag and took out his gunbelt and buckled it about his hips, hiking it this way and that until it set right. Then he unwrapped his big Colt from the oil-skin that had protected it on the dusty, gritty trek through Devil's Share. He eared back the hammer and let it fall on the riding-empty. It snapped cleanly. He moved the cylinder back a pace to put the empty chamber under the pin, and thumbed the hammer again to be sure. Then he filled the chamber from his belt.

Slow Anders was watching with an almost imbecile expression. He'd started to light the cigar and it dangled down from his lips, the match still poised several inches above it. Now he dropped the match and put his palms flat on the bar, leaning forward, the unlit cigar in his mouth. He said incredulously, "Are you crazy, kid?"

Carthy's temper flared. "Somebody is! Somebody sure as hell is!" He leathered the gun and threw down on the Currier and Ives above the bar in a practice draw that was just a blur of blue cloth and steel.

Slow Anders came around the bar hastily, his voice placating: "Kid, it's no good. You'll just get us all killed!"

"You're already dead, mister!" Carthy's tone was a slap. "What're you walking around for like a man? Go lie down in Boothill!" He spat again, not aiming particularly for the cuspidor, and raked the thin man with his eyes. Slow Anders started to say something and Carthy snapped, "Let it ride! Let it ride!" and turned away.

Slow Anders scuffed sawdust moving behind the bar to get another match for his cigar. He saw his eyes in the mirror as he struck the light, and presently the match seared sulphur into his fingers. He waited for it to go out there. Then, still held by that brutal, indicting gaze, he deliberately scissored the cigar from his mouth and held it almost at arm's length, as if it were an unclean thing. He dropped it and said softly, "You're crazy, kid . . . hell-crazy, like I used to be. I wonder how fast old Slow could move now, if he went hell-crazy again!"

The last of this was muffled, and Carthy turned around; he saw that Slow Anders was head and shoulders under the bar, fumbling for something that seemed to be tangled with some wire between two beer kegs. When Slow reappeared, it was with a big sawed-off shotgun in his hand. He broke it, blew twin plumes of dust from the barrels and slapped the stock. He raised his eyebrows at Carthy and said, "It probably will be."

"What?" asked Carthy.

"Hell and crazy." Slow Anders pulled open a drawer and rummaged for shells.

"Probably will be, at that," murmured

Carthy.

Slow Anders grunted as he found the almost forgotten box of blaze-bellies. He came around the bar, shoving them in his pockets. Together they moved to the front of the ONCE AGAIN and stood against the wall beside one of the green-painted windows, listening to the far-off gunshots.

There was a heavy clumping on the boardwalk. A shadow fell under the batwings, and Slow Anders banged the shotgun he'd been loading shut like a jack-knife and brought it to bear. Carthy stood loosely, his right hand hanging free.

Big Max strode in. He wore the gunbelt again, but the apron was missing. His eyes were instantly drawn to Carthy's weighted middle. He nodded. "Ja, I knew it."

"Are they in town yet?" Carthy Queen asked.

"Nein. But they come. I am in the hotel and I say it is better if we catch them in crossfire, but the others don't want to fight. Afraid. They make puddles. Only the girl—" Max's eyes sparkled—"she pick up her rifle and say damn if she don't put bullet in somebody. But the others, they take it away from her. They hope Luke Farrel just raise hell and go away without killing nobody. Max, he don't think so."

"Me neither," said Carthy. "Looks like pay-off to me."

"So I come over here to draw fire from the hotel. Max, he's tired of taking crap. Maybe if they see somebody else fight, they get up on hind legs too."

"That figures," said Carthy.

Max's lips skinned back from white, spade teeth. He was twirling his gun by the trigger guard and each thud of butt into palm was a little angrier. "Farrel's men see Max crossing the street and shoot, but they are drunk like schwein. They only hit my leg."

Carthy looked down, shocked, and saw the spreading stain of crimson. "Bad?"

"Bah! It comes in one side, Max throws it out the other!"

The gunshots were close at hand now, and the dull thunder of hooves on sand; a moment later five horsemen stormed

through the jack-brush litter of the rain ditch, flickered hugely past the side windows of the ONCE AGAIN, swerved wide of the sagging porch corner and went at a hard gallop down the hill into town. Dust boiled at their passing, and several well-thrown shots took the big, green-painted windows from their frames and onto the floor like mountain water. Gun-sound retreated, echoing madly between false-fronts.

Some of the dust came through the jagged openings and danced in the slanting yellow bars of sunlight. Slow Anders wiped his mouth with a hairy arm. "You know," he told Carthy and Max, "I'm kind o' glad they did that."

He lifted the shotgun, cocked it with two deliberate clicks, and sighted at the dwindling riders.

Carthy held up his hand. "Let's hold off and see what happens. Let 'em bunch up with the others first."

THOUGH THEY encountered no opposition, as they had expected none, Luke Farrel's men drew up at a discreet distance from the hotel and contented themselves for a while shouting insults and taunts, Farrel himself sitting his horse easily and confidently among them.

This began to pall, and they started to work in earnest. They routed their mounts into an alley and scattered. No shouting now, but deadly silence. From various vantage points along the opposite boardwalk they began sniping at the hotel. First they broke all the street windows. Then, since no live targets were to be seen, they shot at the swinging signs and the tin chimney and made as much noise as possible.

Watching this, from the batwings of the ONCE AGAIN, Carthy Queen began to hate the man who would turn loose a thing like this on a group of middle-aged men and a girl. More, there were probably other women among the hotel guests. He watched carefully for any sign of return fire from Tom Tarrat and the others. There was none. The broken windows stared dumbly across the street into the gunsmoke. Carthy moved his gaze to the big man in the *tejano* brush jacket. Luke

Farrel was sauntering among his men, goading them and laughing with them, snapping an occasional shot at the silent hotel. He had a big, rich voice.

"Aiyah-h-h!" Carthy heard Luke Farrel shout. "Aiyah-yah-yah-yah!"

Carthy Queen sucked in his lower lip and bit it. He plucked at his gun to see that it rode free. *You run against rope just right*, he thought, *and you can break it . . . but you got to hit it just right, and at the right time. I'll have the setting sun at my back. That's good. But he's downhill from me. That's bad.*

He walked out of the ONCE AGAIN and teetered on the edge of the boardwalk a second while he took breath through his teeth. He saw Luke Farrel reload and holster his gun and stand studying the hotel, as if contemplating going over to it and walking in; but some caution must have dwelt in the man, for he turned to rejoin his crew, whipping out that big rebel yell.

Carthy stepped down and walked to the center of the street and squatted on his heels. From the corner of his eye, he saw Slow Anders peering over the tops of the batwings. The thin man's whisper had an edge of horror. "You wanta getcher head blown off, kid! What in hell are you trying to do?"

"Hitting it right, I hope," Carthy said without turning, "and counting on curiosity."

As he'd expected, it didn't take long for Luke Farrel's gunmen to spot him. A tall, blond man with a Colt in each hand happened to glance up the hill. He saw Carthy and stared. Carthy waved at him. The tall man turned away and Carthy heard the nasal, Texas drone of his voice. The other gunmen stopped potting at the hotel and swung around to face up the street. In the sudden quiet, Farrel's "Aiyah-h-h!" trailed off as he too turned to see what had happened.

CARTHY ROSE to his feet. His gun was holstered and his arms folded, and he hoped sight of this would reassure the men who watched him. If it didn't and gunplay commenced, the range was long and tricky and his chances of getting back

inside the ONCE AGAIN uninjured were good.

He counted off five more silent seconds and decided that curiosity was paying off. He started down the hill toward the clot of men across from the hotel. The slope was irregular, and he had to put each foot down deliberately to keep his pace.

Luke Farrel's big voice floated in the hot, quiet air. "You'd better clear off, son."

Carthy saw faces forming behind the broken glass of the hotel windows—Joe, Tom Tarrat, the Marshal, others he hadn't seen before—but he was too far away to make out expressions. He wondered where the girl was.

"What do you want?" Luke Farrel called.

Carthy didn't answer. He was measuring distances and angles. He kept going.

"You'd better stop right there, son." Farrel sounded impatient, irritated. "What do you want?"

Carthy was close enough now to speak normally. He said simply, "You."

One of Farrel's gunmen laughed, a harsh, flat sound. It set off a mutter of comment among the group. Carthy noted the man who had laughed, a young Mexican with baleful, wolfish eyes, and pegged him as dangerous. The Mexican saw him looking, lifted a shoulder, spat contemptuously. Carthy heard Farrel's reply, muffled by surprise: "Come right ahead, then . . ." The tall figure in the brush jacket detached itself from the group and walked to the center of the street. Farrel's face, light and handsome in a florid, self-assured way, was puzzled, but without fear of any kind. He studied Carthy's face as the other drew nearer. "Who are you, kid?" he said. "I don't know you."

"Carthy Queen. You've been shooting at my friends." Carthy stopped at about a dozen paces. He stood relaxed, facing a little to the left of the big man, his right hand limp at arm's length an inch or so in front of his gunbutt. "Suppose you get out of town and let them alone."

Luke Farrel froze as he observed Carthy's stance. A new estimation of Carthy flickered in his face. He said slowly, "You're a little mixed up, Queen.

I give orders, not take them."

"Not this time," said Carthy. The big man was stalling, building up a reaction to the challenge, and he decided to help it along so he could figure it closer. He added, "Never took any yet from a skunk."

Farrel's eyes were hard and speculative. "Maybe I'm a man-eating tiger."

"Maybe I'm a tiger-eating man," replied Carthy.

Luke Farrel murmured "We'll see!" and went into a half-spin and drew. Carthy sagged his knees and sliced his right hand to holster; he had his gun out before Farrel's hand passed his belt. He put a bullet over the other's right shoulder, twitched his wrist to drive the next one into the bridge of Farrel's nose. Farrel's head snapped back, but his crouch bent him awkwardly forward into the dust without a sound, the weight of his dead hand forcing his half-drawn gun back into leather.

BY THIS TIME Carthy was moving, fast. Hand-hurdling the hitchrail of the Mercantile, he took two long steps and left the ground in a broadjump. He hit hard on the weed-grown dirt of the narrow corridor between the Mercantile and Wells-Fargo, rolled and was up and running, blue eyes blazing in search of a good place to hole up for a shoot-out. His back muscles quivered, but no bullet came screaming after him. *I reckon*, he thought, *none of them wants to be the first to follow me in here!*

Rounding the rear corner of the Mercantile, he saw, instead of the block-long alley he'd expected, that the space behind the row of buildings was squared off into boarded yards. He holstered his gun and sighted on the nearest fence and started for it at an angle, skipping once to get a jumping run under him. He reached the fence . . . and broke stride, shoving at it with his hands to veer off. He came to a stop, leaning against the white-washed slab-boards of the Mercantile's store-shed, and grinned tiredly.

"Rope's broke," he told a knot-hole.

From the street, he heard Max's chesty

bellow, the bark of a .44 expertly fanned, the thump of Slow Anders' sawed-off—and bursting with pent-up fury, the angry crackle of shots from the direction of the hotel.

He reloaded feverishly and ducked back up the corridor toward the street. An explosive cursing and the crunch of boot-heels on broken glass put him on guard, and when two of Luke Farrel's gunmen came bounding off the porch of Wells-Fargo and into the corridor, Carthy was waiting for them. One was the young Mexican. He hissed like a cat, gun coming up. Carthy shot first, tagging him in mid-air, dropping him in a heap against the nest of coke-cans by Wells-Fargo's side door. The other, the blond Texan, threw down his guns with a curse. His pale blue eyes were rounded, showing their whites. He sidled crab-wise around Carthy, then ran head up and legs pumping toward the yard at the rear. Carthy let him go. He ejected the spent shell, crammed a fresh one through the gate of his Colt, and made a dash for the watering trough in front of the Mercantile. He skidded knees and elbows in the dust.

Stinging gunsmoke curled along at ground-level, like the ghosts of snakes, and Carthy reached up and dipped out water from the trough and splashed his eyes. Then he raised his head above the edge of his L-shaped bulwark and looked about with interest.

He saw Tom Tarrat, bending his height behind a thick oak table that made an effective shield half-in and half-out of the hotel doorway. The gaunt rancher was letting his old Navy Colt buck the hammer, emptying the cylinder in less than two seconds and then ducking to reload again. Beside him, slouched against the door-jamb, was the man who had been deputy the day they buried Mart Haines. He shot painfully and ineffectually, his bullet-torn right arm scarcely able to hold his gun at the recoil.

Carthy looked for the girl, Nan. She was leaning head and shoulders out of the hotel's round attic window. As Carthy watched she picked off a Farrel gunman in mid-stride with a rifle and looked angrily about for a new target. She saw

Carthy and stared. Carthy stared back for a second, then lifted to his knees and looked for a target of his own. He found one, began to heat his iron.

IT TOOK no more than twenty seconds from the time Carthy dropped Luke Farrel for the dead man's crew, abruptly sobered and withered to a third of their former strength, to throw down their guns and yell for mercy before the powder-smoke and red flame that burst and tore at them from every side. They formed a sullen group in the middle of the street, milling as each tried to force his way to the center in case more shooting started up.

Carthy got to his feet and went out to meet Slow Anders and Max, coming at a trot from the ONCE AGAIN. Concussion still rocked and rang his skull like a bell. Slow Anders was shaking his head, the smoking shotgun cradled under one arm. He nudged Luke Farrel with his boot-toe and looked at Carthy.

"That was a damn fool thing to do," he said flatly. "You oughta be dead right now!"

Carthy's gun was too hot to reload with comfort, so he shoved it in its holster. "They were so surprised when I got him," he denied, "I could have walked off the street and they'd never have hit me."

"You were sure you'd get him, hunh."

"No. But he was sure I wouldn't."

"I didn't see you walking," grunted Max.

Carthy grinned. "Hate to dawdle."

"Ja . . . you sure do."

They stood and talked for a few minutes. Men were all around them. They made a close, quiet island in the crowding and shouting. Slow Anders had a pint on his hip, and they had a more-than-welcome drink "on the house". Then a whistle, and the sound of his name, brought Carthy's head up.

Tom Tarrat called from the hotel porch, "Come on over here, Mister Queen, if you please. I see that you are a good hand, and I've got some orders for you."

Carthy said, "Excuse me," to Slow Anders and Max. He went over to stand at the foot of the hotel steps, hat in hand,

as befits a cowhand in the presence of his employer.

"First off, we'd better ride out to my place by daylight," said Tom Tarrat, "so's you'll get to know the way." He put on his hat and turned to the Marshal whose torn arm was getting whiskey-and-linen from Nan and the clucking *patronne* of the Corona Hash-House. "You can clean up this mess, Harry? There's really a lot to do out at the ranch. Things'll be picking up around here."

Harry nodded. "I'll clean up," he said grimly, "and bury them that might stink in jail."

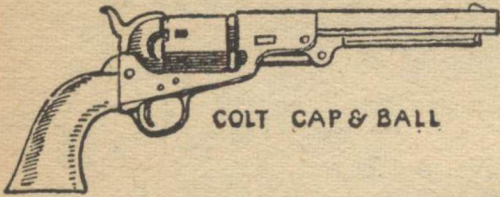
Tom Tarrat put a hand on the wounded man's shoulder, then turned and said to Carthy, "Let's go." He descended the steps and walked a few paces and stopped, looking around as he realized that Carthy

hadn't moved to accompany him.

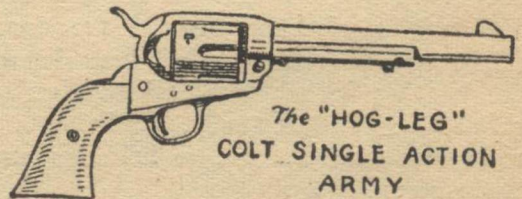
He saw Carthy and Nan talking soberly, the boy leaning on the porch rail as she worked on Harry's bandage. Tom Tarrat listened to their words for a few moments, thinking *He's got the ways of a man, more ways than one*. He caught Harry's amused gaze and raised his eyebrows helplessly. "I reckon," he said, "that Nan'll be buckboarding out past my place in an hour or so to get to her own . . . our outfits are back to back. If you got anything you want to do in town, I mean."

"My horse is tired," agreed Carthy Queen, "if the lady doesn't mind."

Tom Tarrat gave a grunt that said the lady, far from minding, would probably drive to his place roundabout by the way of Lordsville and the Pass, and mounted to ride.



COLT CAP & BALL



The "HOG-LEG"
COLT SINGLE ACTION
ARMY

LONGHORN FURY

By C. M. MILLER

Two of a kind . . . the wily old cow-puncher and the stubborn, mossybacked longhorn . . . when they clashed in a battle of guts and range-savvy, the dudes could only stand and stare!



His wide horns were down ready to gut out Pop's horse with one sweep . . .

IN THE CHILL DARKNESS BEFORE dawn Pop Warner opened his eyes and there above him, as they had always been, were the bright stars. But this time they were different. It wasn't the stars that had changed; the change was in him. For this was his last day.

He flung back the blanket, pulled on his cold-stiffened boots and walked out by the remuda, a slim wiry figure in the darkness.

He looked off toward the snow-tipped peaks to the west, and there, coming over a hill lighted by the setting moon, was Old

Longhorn. For a moment, as if looking down on the world, Old Longhorn stood there, a massive longhorn bull with a spread of horn that reached nearly six feet. He swung his head this way and that, testing the wind, then moved off back of the hill, a relic of the past.

Pop shrugged. He was like that old bull, a relic of the past.

The remainder of the camp was coming awake now. Curses at the chill of boots on bare feet, cigarettes glowing, the cook stirring up his fire, pots and pans rattling; then suddenly breakfast was ready and Pop turned slowly toward the chuck wagon.

Young Jake Trimble was there, his face freshly washed, his wet, black hair slicked back. "Well, Pop," he greeted, "pretty soft. No bucking the brush after today."

POP GRUNTED and walked on and filled his plate with steak and eggs, and the other hands watched him in silence. Sixty three, tough, wiry as whang and with a face burned brown by the wind and sun, he was old to these men. Too old. He was something out of the past.

Young Jake must have sensed the feeling in Pop for he came over as if to fill his coffee cup.

"Pop," he said softly, "I think I'm doing what is right. I'm offering you everything I can. A pension, free food, a free house. The life of Riley. Everything!"

Pop stuffed half an egg into his mouth to keep himself from snapping back an answer.

Young Jake went on. "The west is changing, Pop. When you and dad came to this country you stocked your range with longhorns. Now we've got whiteface. More beef. Better meat. They're not so tough to handle."

Pop stuffed in steak and nodded. He had to admit white face were better beef than longhorns, but Young Jake had not said anything about cattle still being four-legged critters. He had not said a word about how old Jake Trimble and he, Pop, had built the JT from nothing to one of

the biggest ranches in Montana. And they'd done it with longhorns!

Pop and Jake had come here together way back—well, anyway it was too far back to remember. But Pop hadn't the head for business that Jake had. Pop had had his own spread then, then one day Jake had come over.

"Bill," he had said. Pop had been called Bill then. Bill Warner. "I hate to see you starving over here. You and me have been friends too long. You know cattle from the ground up but you don't know how to market 'em. I'm not bad at marketing them, but I ain't the cattle man you are. I'll give you ten thousand for what you got here and you throw in with me. You can run my place. Write your own ticket. Take any pay you want. Run the JT to suit yourself. I'll do the marketing."

It had been generous of Jake, for what Pop had then was not worth ten thousand. It was not worth half that and Jake knew it, but it was just his way of being decent about it.

Pop took the ten thousand and sent it to relatives back east. They had spent the money and now they were all dead.

"You ain't listening to me, Pop," Young Jake complained.

Pop jumped as if he had heard a rattler buzz. He had forgotten about Young Jake.

"As I was saying, Pop, we'll finish the roundup today. We've got those west hills to comb and we're through and from then on you lead the life of Riley."

"That's what your dad said once."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking out loud." Pop was choking back what he really wanted to say.

H E'D BEEN AFRAID of this. Ever since old Jake's horse rolled on him and killed him and Young Jake came back from that eastern college to run the place, nothing had been the same. Young Jake had modern ideas. Young men for young jobs. The older ones could not take it. Pop was the last one of the old hands on the JT, and tomorrow he was going. Pensioned off! The life of Riley!

He snorted his indignation and turned away, leaving Young Jake standing there,

and went to the remuda for his horse. The other men must have sensed Pop's feelings for they said little while they saddled up, then Young Jake came over again.

"Comb those west hills," he said to the men, "and we're through. Whoever finds that whiteface bull I bought bring him right in. I want him."

Pop had one foot in the stirrup. "You say them west hills, Jake?"

"The west hills."

Pop took his foot down, went to his bed roll and dug out his sixgun. He was buckling it on when he came back. In his saddle, he checked the loads. Young Jake put a hand on Pop's bony knee.

"Why the gun, Pop?"

"Better wear one in them hills," Pop warned. "They ain't always safe."

Jake laughed shortly. "There aren't any train robbers now, Pop."

"Too modern, huh? They belong in the past, huh? Like me."

"I didn't say that."

"You just the same as. Anyway you better wear a gun. So had these others."

Jake got into his saddle and started west and the others followed. Only Pop was wearing a gun. Even the other hands would not take his advice. It was old stuff. And him with not a gray hair in his head!

It was noon when Pop drifted in with his gather and ran them into the herd. Without a word, he rode on to the wagon for his dinner, but he could not help noticing that he had brought in far more cattle than any of the others.

The big, whiteface bull had been brought in and stood roped and tied. Young Jake was there and a half dozen of the other hands and Pop joined them.

"He cost me five thousand dollars," Jake was proud of that bull. "And he's worth every cent of it."

Pop had to admit that it was a fine bull. The horns were short and straight and thick, not like the old longhorns. The critter was thick too, and heavy. And he stood tied as tame as any lamb you ever saw.

"We're going to dehorn him," Young Jake went on. "He might gut out a horse some day. No use to take chances."

AGAIN Pop started to say something, then his lips shut tight. He dug out the makin's and stood there fighting within himself. His pride told him to keep his mouth shut; but his good sense told him to speak up. At last he blurted. "Flies will get in him."

Jake laughed. "Nowadays we got ways of preventing that."

Pop winced. He knew that, had known it for years, but that wasn't what he had in mind anyway.

The bull's horns were too thick for clippers. One of the men came from the chuck wagon with a meat saw.

"We'll tie his head to the wagon," Jake said. "Then rope and tie his legs. It shouldn't be too hard."

"I wouldn't do it." That was Pop swallowing his pride. "He can't gut a horse. He's too heavy and too slow. A horse can dance rings around him any day. But he'll be running in the west hills, won't he?"

"Sure," Jake said. "That's why I bought him."

"Then I wouldn't dehorn him. He might need 'em."

Jake laughed. That laugh cut Pop. He knew Jake didn't mean for the laugh to hurt, but it had. It showed Pop just how little he had to say about the JT now. How little? Nothing!

He ate and got a fresh horse and headed back toward the west hills. He knew those hills like he knew the lines in his palm, for once they had been part of the spread old Jake had bought from him. And now he was heading in to comb them for the last time.

He snorted, blew his nose and jerked his battered old black hat down hard. "Damn me," he grunted, "for an old fool. I'm getting pretty soft about some lumpy hills."

Just before he rode out of sight of the chuck wagon he looked back. The big whiteface bull was heading for the hills and he was shaking his thick head from side to side as if trying to get the hurt out of it. His horns were gone.

Pop rode on. There was a cut back here with good grass, and cattle liked to herd there. It was sheltered even in winter. He headed for the cut and was zigzagging

down a brushy slope when suddenly he heard a snort up ahead.

The brush crashed. Pop's horse snorted and pricked up its ears. Then Pop saw Old Longhorn out there ahead. He was a shaggy, red-eyed wild thing, as wild and woolly as a grizzly. He must be close to twenty years old, Pop guessed, and he could still stick up his tail and run. He did then, and disappeared quickly down the slope.

There were a lot of cattle in the cut and on the brushy slopes on either side and it was within an hour of sunset before Pop finished his gather and started toward the camp. He was at the fringes of the hills, nearly ready to drive out onto open country, when he heard the ruckus.

The deep bellow of an angry bull. The scream of a pain-ridden horse. A man's yell. That was all, but it told Pop the whole story. Hadn't he heard it all before and in these very hills? A heifer, a young one, that he had missed in his pickup was back there in the brush and that had been the start of it.

HE SPUN HIS HORSE around and, hunkered low away from the brush, drove up the slope and into the little clearing.

It was just as he had suspected. The young heifer was standing over there by the edge of the brush and Old Longhorn and the whiteface were fighting for her favor. Jake had ridden onto the scene and Old Longhorn had turned on him too.

Jake didn't have a gun. Old Longhorn had raked Jake's horse. Jake had slipped off. Now Young Jake was treed. He was up there straddling a limb and his horse, horn-raked and bleeding on the hindleg, was standing there trembling while Old Longhorn and the whiteface fought it out.

But the whiteface was hornless and helpless. As Pop rode into the clearing the two bulls charged and came together with a thudding shock. The whiteface was set back on his heels. Old Longhorn twitched about, ready to rip the helpless whiteface bull wide open with his horns.

Pop yelled. The longhorn whirled to

face this new menace. Then, with blood in his eye and his tail raised high, he charged Pop. Pop giggered his horse around, dodged the charge and reached for his rope.

Then the young heifer bawled. It was a low, come-on kind of sound and the whiteface bull started toward her. Instantly Old Longhorn changed the direction of his charge and went for the whiteface.

"Kill him!" Jake yelled. "Kill that old bull before he gets the whiteface."

Pop was calmly building his loop. "I told you to pack a gun up here," he said.

Then the two bulls came together head on. At the same instant Pop flipped his rope. The loop picked up Old Longhorn's hind legs and sent him spinning.

Young Jake hit the ground with his feet and jumped for his saddle.

"Chase that heifer into the herd," Pop ordered. "Take your dang whiteface bull with her. And remember what I said about not dehornin' a bull you let run in these hills."

Young Jake meekly did as he was told and when he came back Pop was still holding Old Longhorn's legs on a tight rope.

"Shoot him," Jake said. "You got a gun, Kill him."

Pop gave his rope a flip and freed the longhorn, who instantly lunged to his feet and made for the brush.

"Son," Pop said soberly. "That old Longhorn is like me. He's part of the range that ain't modern and I ain't takin' him out of it."

Jake sat there looking at Pop as if seeing him for the first time. "You—you hate it that bad, Pop?"

Pop took a long time to put his rope back on his saddle. "Son," he said, "that's the ways with some of us. We were born on the range and we want to die on the range—our range."

Jake gathered up his reins. "Well, we've got to get on with branding. I wish you'd take over there, Pop. I just remembered, I've got to go to town."

Pop smiled to himself. The JT was going to be the same old place again.



ONE LITTLE DOGIE

By A. C. ABBOTT

Tickets to Boothill? Hell yes—Davis and Ryan packed two holstersfull of 'em, to be delivered to a certain bushwhackin' coyote . . . front and plumb center!

PECOS RYAN PULLED UP TO let his horse drink out of the rapidly dwindling Lost River. "It doesn't look," he drawled wearily, "like we were goin' to find a job in this blasted country. We been huntin' for two days now, and all we've acquired is a forty dollar thirst."

"I don't want a job on this doggoned range, anyhow," replied Curly Davis. "Too dead and dry."

They had found the Lost River country

a forbidding one of rough sage hills, jagged canyons, and thick junipers, right now in the grip of a terrible drouth. The body of surface water which was the source of Lost River was rapidly drying up, and the river itself had become a shallow creek of sluggish muddy water. It was a hard country for a pair of fiddle-footed cowhands whose shirts were faded and whose leather chaps showed hard wear.

"This country's goin' to hell," Curly murmured morosely, easing the hat on his damp straw-colored hair.

"Done gone," corrected Pecos. "Let's go on over to Pat Morrow's place and get a drink of water. That river ain't runnin' fast enough to suit me."

PAT MORROW'S ranch house stood in a clump of trees on the north bank of Lost River, facing a brushy, rocky bluff that jutted up on the south side of the stream. The door of the frame house was ajar, the sunlight beating mercilessly down on the space of floor that was visible. Flies buzzed steadily. A small child cried piteously somewhere inside the house.

Pecos threw a long leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground to rap his hard knuckles against the door casing. "Hello the house," he called pleasantly.

The child's crying ceased abruptly, and in the strained silence that followed they heard a heavy, blood curdling groan.

Pecos turned to look sharply at Curly, who was staring back at him wide-eyed. "Sounded like a woman," he whispered huskily.

Pecos grunted incoherently and shoved a shoulder against the door. It splintered open. At first glance he thought the interior of the neat room was undisturbed. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to the faint gloom, he saw the body of a man stretched on the floor before an open window. A quick examination told him that Pat Morrow had died instantly from a heavy caliber bullet through his chest. An instant later he found Mrs. Morrow, lying farther from the window in an everwidening pool of blood. Beside her sat little Patty, dressed in cotton overalls, her yellow curls tousled, her blue eyes red from the tears that streaked down across her cheeks.

"My Mommy hu'ts," she said, her little chin quivering.

Mrs. Morrow, too, had been shot and was obviously dying.

"Who did this, ma'am?" Pecos demanded quietly.

"Don't know," she replied huskily. "Came through window. Take care of—my baby."

Curly flashed one look at the two-year-old child, said, "Good Lord!" and looked out the window.

"Please!" The woman's voice became momentarily stronger. "There's no one else. Please—find her a—good home." She reached out a trembling hand toward Pecos and he took it quickly.

"We'll do it, ma'am," he said evenly. "We sure will. I promise."

"Thank God." Mrs. Morrow seemed to relax, her eyes closed, and Pecos thought she was dead. Then he heard her whisper, "I can—go now."

Pecos Ryan abruptly stood up, his lean face expressionless but his gray eyes as hard as granite. "Hell!" he bit out savagely. Emotions strange to him welled up in his throat and choked him, and again he said, "Hell!"

"That covers it," Curly agreed grimly, and he clumsily picked up the little girl, who was starting to wail again.

So engrossed were they with their bitter thoughts that they did not hear the horses approaching until they pulled to a sliding halt before the door.

"I'm sure I heard shootin' over here," said a brittle voice. "I was comin' over to investigate when I met you folks. I wonder—"

Dave Morrow, a cousin of Pat's strode into the room, followed immediately by Sheriff Joe Saunders, his daughter Lou, and Johnny Powell, a bow-legged, brown-faced cowboy who worked for Pat Morrow.

Dave Morrow was a lithe middle-aged man whose dark face and black eyes showed nothing. He wore two guns; and now, before anyone else could move, he whipped out one of them and threw down on Pecos and Curly.

"What the hell you doin' here?" he demanded harshly. "What's come off?"

"Take a look," Pecos said coldly. "We just got here ourselves."

"Good Lord!" breathed Johnny in a strangled voice as he saw the bodies on the floor. Lou Saunders threw a hand over her mouth and whirled away toward the door, her red hair flashing wildly.

"What happened?" The sheriff was a big man, grey-haired and gruff, and there

was no friendliness in the piercing eyes he turned on the two cowboys.

"We rode up after a drink," Pecos said quietly. "Heard a groan and came in—"

"The hell you say!" Deliberately Dave Morrow drew his other gun and took a long stride that carried him away from the sheriff. "Joe, Pat had a lot of gold hid around this cabin. I know these two strangers are broke because they hit me up for a job yesterday. I reckon we got here before they had a chance to look for the money."

"The hell you say!" Curly retorted. Carefully he set Patty down on her two feet and stepped away from her. "Take a look around for signs, mister, before you start accusin' anybody. We didn't do this job."

"I'm afraid you'll have to prove that," Saunders said levelly. "You're under arrest."

"Arrest hell!" Morrow said harshly. "Johnny, get a rope! We know how—"

"Johnny, stay where you are! I said they were under arrest and I meant it. Get 'em up, you two." Saunders drew his gun and stepped forward. "You'll get a chance to prove your innocence."

PECOS RYAN shot swift glances at the men before him. Johnny Powell stood rigid, his bronzed face set in hard lines. Dave Morrow's face was distorted with rage, but he grinned tauntingly as he met Pecos' gaze; and Pecos read that grin for what it meant.

He glanced at Curly and saw that his partner had come to the same conclusion. If the sheriff did succeed in getting them to town, they'd be promptly lynched with no chance to defend themselves. Any chance they had would have to come now, before they were disarmed.

Slowly he lifted his arms to shoulder level. "Kinda hard to prove your innocence," he drawled coolly, "when you're danglin' from a rope."

He appeared resigned, but when Saunders stepped forward to take his gun, he exploded into action. His left hand flashed down to grab the sheriff's gun and at the same time he swerved to the side so that Saunder's instinctive shot breathed

past him to thud into the wall. Curly threw himself to the floor as Dave's gun roared, and the bullet zinged out through a back window.

Then Pecos had the struggling infuriated sheriff in front of him, helpless under the pressure of a long arm around his throat. He had his gun out, but he didn't want to shoot.

"Drop it!" he yelled at Dave.

But Morrow swung his gun, snapping another shot at Curly as that individual came off the floor in a long leap, his gun flashing out and exploding.

Johnny leaped at Pecos, ignoring the gun. With a savage curse, Pecos flung the sheriff from him and lunged to meet Johnny, his gun flashing up and down in a swift arc that caught the young cowpuncher squarely on top of the head. As Johnny crashed to the floor, Pecos swung back toward Saunders, who was slowly getting up, swearing furiously.

Morrow was down, but Curly straightened from a brief examination to say curtly, "Just creased him. Let's get out of this corral."

"Come on in, ma'am," Pecos said politely to Lou Saunders, who stood in the doorway, her face ashen. She edged around the corner of the door and dropped weakly into a chair.

Working swiftly Pecos tied the sheriff to a chair, while Curly performed a like service for Lou. Then they gathered up all the guns, shoved them into a sack, and prepared to leave. Pecos picked up the little girl.

"Where you takin' that kid?" Saunders demanded hotly.

"With us."

"What for?"

"Ransom!" snapped Curly with a vicious scowl. "When you dig up all that gold around here, let us know and we'll bring her back—maybe."

"You cowards!" Lou Saunders' face was white but it was tightly set. "You sneaking cowards! Don't take that baby." Her voice broke. "She's so little."

Pecos hesitated, eyeing this girl keenly. For a moment he was tempted to leave the baby, but he really knew nothing about Lou Saunders and he had promised the

mother—He shook his head. "We'll take care of her, ma'am."

"You yellow skunk!" Saunders choked out. "Takin' that kid so we can't shoot at you. You won't get away with it!"

"Maybe not," Pecos conceded with a faint grin, "but we'll sure have a lot of fun tryin'."

Pecos carried the child while Curly carried the sack of guns; and, herding the extra saddled horses ahead of them, they set off down the river at a hard gallop.

TWO HOURS LATER they were still riding, without, however, the extra horses and the guns. The former had been set free—The latter were in the bottom of the only deep hole they could find left in the river.

"Dammit, Pecos," Curly said irritably, "we ought to be foggin' it out of the country, don't you know it? Instead of circlin' back here like a couple of locoed mavericks!"

"With our description on dodgers all over the country for female murder? Huh-uh!"

It was nearly sunset. They had made a wide circle, killing their tracks in the river and on rocky ground, and now they were climbing the rough brushy bluff directly overlooking Pat Morrow's ranch. Little Pat sat in front of Pecos in the saddle, gripping the horn with both tiny fists, having a wonderful time.

"That's what's worryin' me," Curly admitted with a slight shiver. "Why don't we at least head for the mountains?"

"That's where the sheriff headed, ain't it? That's the logical place, and that's why we're not goin' there. Only way to win a game of hide and seek is to hide where nobody'll think of seekin'."

"Well—" Curly cuffed his hat over one eye and scratched the back of his head before reaching for tobacco. "We'll sure be handy for 'em anyway. Right in their own front yard. Good big trees here, too," he added admiringly.

The bluff proved to be heavily covered with junipers and buck brush with huge jumbles of rock that afforded perfect cover. They dismounted a good distance back from the edge and left their horses

to graze with reins dragging. With Pecos carrying Pat, they made their way cautiously to the edge of the bluff and scrutinized the deserted ranch below them. Then Pecos cut for the signs he felt sure would be there.

He soon found what he was looking for: the spot in soft ground where a man had knelt to fire a rifle. It was almost dark now, but by bending close he could make out clearly the print of the right foot and the left knee.

"Left handed jigger," he commented.

Curly squinted down at the ranch, mentally judging distances. "I don't crave to tangle with him even if he shoots with his feet," he said finally. "He puts altogether too clear an address on his bullets. That's a long shot, don't you know it?"

"I wonder," Pecos mused aloud, "if they'll ever notice that those folks were killed with a rifle instead of a sixgun."

"What good would that do? We're both packin' saddle guns."

"Yeah," Pecos admitted, "but I can't hit much with mine."

"Well, now, there's the answer!" Curly's voice was thick with sarcasm. "You just run down and tell the sheriff that. He'll drop the charges, I'm sure."

Pecos had set Pat on the ground while he examined the tracks, and now he saw that she was asleep, her head tipped over at a painful angle.

"Poor little devil," he muttered. "Curly, do you know anything about heifers this size?"

"Hell no! Don't you?"

Pecos squinted at his partner in supreme disgust. "Just where," he asked carefully, "did you think I'd pick up information along them lines?"

"Well," Curly murmured dubiously, "I hope she's house broke."

DARKNESS HAD FALLEN thick and black when Pecos left Curly with Pat and made his way on foot down to the ranch house.

"She ought to have a sweater," he had said solicitously, "and some kind of fitten grub. Them little teeth of hers weren't made for jerky."

"Ahuh," Curly agreed sourly. "My

teeth can handle it all right, but my stomach is sure gettin' sick of it. Steal some man-sized grub while you're at it, will you?"

Pecos gained the shelter of trees and brush behind the house just as Johnny, Sheriff Saunders and Lou rode up

"We'll head on for town," Saunders said wearily. "Keep your eyes peeled, Johnny. They might come back after that dinero."

"Let 'em," Johnny retorted grimly. "The damn drifters. If they hurt that kid, they're goin' to hear somethin', and it won't be the moon comin' up!"

"They won't get far." Saunders' voice carried a metallic ring. "I wanted to arrest 'em; but now, by hell, when we catch 'em, I'll turn in my badge and help haul on the rope."

"Be careful, Johnny," Lou said, and there was a softness in her voice that told Pecos a good many things.

Saunders and his daughter turned toward the town of Lost River while Johnny went on into the house. Pecos ran quietly across the yard and was standing just inside the closed door when Johnny lit the hanging lamp.

"Don't move," Pecos warned coldly. "Just keep your hands up there."

Johnny swore viciously, but he kept his hands in the air while Pecos lifted the gun from his holster. And he saw then that Johnny was left handed. He kept the gun in his hand as he stepped back.

"All right," he said softly. "You lead the way. I want a sweater for that little kid. Also some grub. I reckon you know what kind of stuff she feeds on."

Johnny Powell had nothing to say while he got the designated articles, but the rigidity of his muscles told Pecos that one moment of laxity here would be fatal. Johnny was a clean cut young cowboy, although his face right now was hard as rock.

"Where were you this afternoon?" Pecos asked, when the things he wanted were in a sack on the living room table.

"If it's any of your business," Johnny said coldly, "I was ridin' the range east of here. I met the sheriff and Lou as I was headin' home."

"Where did Morrow come in?"

"He rode up to us 'bout a half mile from here. Said he'd heard shootin'."

"Ahuh. Who'll take charge of this ranch now, you or Morrow?"

Johnny's eyes were glittering and he was apparently having difficulty in keeping his voice level. "Dave, I suppose. He's the only relative I know of. His range joins this one on the north."

"And he'll get custody of Pat," Pecos mused, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He was remembering the look on Lou Saunders' face, the taunting grin worn by Morrow. If he were to choose a guardian for Pat, it wouldn't be Morrow. "Lou Saunders—"

Johnny cut him off with a fierce gesture. "Keep your tongue off her name!"

Pecos grinned. He liked Johnny Powell for that remark, but he couldn't forget that the cowboy was left handed. "I reckon you know where Pat Morrow kept that gold," he said slowly. "Kinda handy to have a couple of strangers come along to fill the noose, wasn't it? Or did you know we were comin'?"

"I didn't. You'll have a hell of a time makin' anybody believe I killed those folks. I worked for 'em!"

"That's just what I'm talkin' about, young feller. In case you don't know, they were killed with a rifle, fired from that bluff over yonder. And the tracks show plain that the man behind the rifle was left handed!"

Johnny's eyes narrowed instantly, and Pecos saw a thought leap into them. "I could come a lot nearer believin' you," he said, breathing hard, "if you hadn't taken that baby. That hobbled your bronc."

PECOS picked up the sack and backed toward the door. "Mrs. Morrow was still alive when we got here this afternoon," he said slowly. "She asked us to find a home for that kid—to take care of her. And I reckon we'll do it." He was still thinking of Lou Saunders and the way she had looked at the little girl. "You and Lou Saunders goin' to get married?"

"None of your damn business!"

"I'm makin' it my business, cowboy,"

Pecos drawled coolly. "I'll see you again."

Johnny laughed shortly. "I'll be watchin' for you."

Pecos stepped outside, slammed the door behind him, and leaped into the darkness. The light in the house went out. Almost immediately afterward, he heard Johnny speak to his horse, still standing in the yard. Then the clatter of hoofs told that he was heading toward town at a run.

The next morning before daylight Pecos and Curly rode down to the river to water their horses. They had withdrawn deeper into the jagged country to sleep, but now they were heading back to the promontory from which they could keep watch on all movements around them. Pat still slept soundly in the crook of Pecos' arm.

"It's dangerous," Curly murmured softly, "goin' back up there this mornin'. They know now that we were there yesterday."

"That's why they won't think we'll be there today," Pecos returned. "Besides, I want to see somethin'."

While his horse drank, there came to his ears the gurgle of steadily running water which didn't fit in with the sight of the sluggish river. Leaning far from the saddle, he located the source of the sound: a big spring that bubbled out of the bank. He pointed it out to Curly.

"I'll bet that's always been under the water level," he mused, with a tingle of excitement. "Wonder if anyone knows it's here."

"Ye-a-ah." Curly drew in a deep breath. "That makes a gold mine out of this ranch in times like these. I wonder."

But they had no time to discuss the possibilities. Day was breaking, and they had to reach cover before daylight revealed their presence to any passing riders.

It was light when they reached the top of the bluff, and they rode directly to the spot where they had found the print of the rifleman. All sign of his presence had been rubbed out during the night. Pecos straightened with a snort.

"Then it was Johnny!" Curly breathed exultantly.

Pecos had whirled his horse to ride back toward the rocks when the buzz of a

rattlesnake sent the animal sideways in a wild instinctive jump. At the same time Pecos felt a burn like a hot iron along his left side, then heard the spiteful crack of a rifle.

He and Curly jumped their horses into the rocks and flashed out of the saddle, reaching for their carbines. Pat grunted a couple of times but went back to sleep, and Pecos laid her carefully under a tree, his coat under her.

For thirty minutes they stalked the hidden rifleman, but all they found at the end of that time was the spot where he had been. After that one shot, he had jumped his horse and fogged out, apparently, not caring to engage in a rifle duel with the odds two to one.

"Our left handed friend," Pecos grunted.

Curly grinned. "What'll you take for that horse you're ridin'?"

"He ain't for sale," Pecos said quickly. "But I'll sell that kid—cheap. I'm goin' to deposit her in a bank somewhere before she stops a bullet."

"Put her in a checking account," advised Curly, "so we can get her out in a hurry. I don't think there's any good homes in this damn country."

"There may be one," Pecos said softly. "Just one."

THE TOWN OF LOST RIVER was little more than a collection of scattered frame buildings, badly in need of paint. It was situated in a shallow basin on the river, surrounded by jagged hills. Heavy growths of juniper and scrub pine encroached on the weathered houses and fenced in the barren yards.

From the two days they had spent riding for jobs, Pecos knew the location of the sheriff's house, on the outskirts of town, set back from the road in a thick clump of trees.

It was nearing sunset when the two cowboys dismounted in the trees behind the house and scouted the place with painstaking care. The only horse in the sheriff's private corral was the gaunt sorrel Lou had been riding yesterday.

"I hope," said Curly wearily, "that that red-headed filly in there hasn't got a gun.

What do you do if a woman starts shoot-in' at you?"

"Just pray that she hasn't had much practice."

Picking up the little girl, whose tummy was full of milk from a bawling, struggling range cow, Pecos strode boldly toward the house, Curly beside him. They reached the back door without being detected and walked in as if they owned the place.

The kitchen was small but light and neatly arranged. Pecos paused, listening to footsteps in the front part of the house, wondering who was making them. Then Lou Saunders appeared in the doorway and stopped short with an audible gasp.

"Howdy, ma'am," Pecos drawled quietly, doffing his hat. "You here alone?"

"Ye— No!"

Pecos grinned. "You don't need to be afraid of us, ma'am. We just came to bring this youngster. Will you take care of her for a few days?"

"Of course." A little color was returning to Lou's face and she moved farther into the kitchen. "Johnny said last night that you—I didn't believe it."

"It's true, ma'am. We promised Mrs. Morrow that we'd take care of Pat and find her a good home, but—well—Somebody's been heavin' lead at us, and we were afraid she'd get hit."

Lou Saunders fumbled to a chair and sat down, staring at them with troubled eyes. Pecos put Pat down on the floor, and the youngster promptly ambled over to Lou and crawled into her lap.

Pecos grinned. "You're the only person I've met who looked like you'd take good care of that kid, and I guess she knows it."

"Wait. Let me think." Lou put her arms around the baby and rested her chin on the child's head. "This doesn't make sense."

Curly laughed softly. "We were goin' to keep her for ransom, ma'am, but we sure hate to milk cows, especially when they don't want to be milked."

"Where's Johnny, ma'am?" Pecos asked quietly.

"Are you looking for him?"

"I reckon."

Lou came to her feet instantly. "He didn't do that! He said you thought so. He came back here last night and stayed in town."

"Stayed here?"

"No, he got a room above the saloon."

"Then you don't know that he *stayed* in town?"

Lou's chin came up defiantly. "He said he did and that's enough for me. He's out with Dad now, somewhere. He didn't do it, I tell you!"

"I can't be sure he didn't," Pecos said coldly, "but I'm damn good and sure *we* didn't. I want to talk to that jigger."

"He's not the only left handed man in the country," Lou flared.

"Name a few others."

"I—I—" Lou swallowed hard. Then she burst out, "Johnny's good. You can't prove your innocence by killing him."

Curly, standing by the window, suddenly swore. "We got comp'ny, Pecos, The sheriff and Johnny."

Pecos took a long stride toward Lou, his face hard. "I'll make you a deal," he said coldly. "I'll believe you if you'll believe me. Will your Dad listen to reason?"

"I—I—No, I don't think so. He'll kill you."

Curly swung away from the window, and his voice was urgent. "Make up your mind, cowboy. Do somethin'!"

Pecos felt a moment of panic, but he kept his eyes glued to Lou Saunderson's strained face. The elusive ideas that had churned through his head all morning had finally focused, and he thought he knew who had killed the Morrrows. He had to believe in Lou Saunders, and he had to stake his life on a slender chance of proving what he believed. If his idea didn't work or if he had misjudged this red-headed girl, he'd soon be too damned dead to care.

Drawing his gun, he lunged past Lou toward the door to the living room with Curly close behind him. "Let 'em come in!" he ordered harshly.

BLACK NIGHT found Pecos Ryan reeling drunkenly in the saddle on a horse that stumbled with weariness, sweat dripping from its belly. The front of his

shirt was soggy with wet blood and his holster was empty.

He pulled up before a ranch house that showed a dull gleam of light and dropped out of the saddle, staggering to stay on his feet. He wondered how close the sheriff was behind him. Fumbling his way across the porch, he found the door and shoved into a small, crudely furnished living room. He saw Dave Morrow whirl away from a table, saw the surprised look that streaked across his face before his left hand flashed down toward a gun.

Pecos swore thickly and lifted a hand in protest. Then his knees buckled and he sprawled heavily on his face. Dave Morrow strode across the room, stuck a boot under his shoulder and rolled him over roughly.

"What happened to you?" he demanded harshly.

Pecos didn't answer, merely staring dully while he fought to control his labored breathing.

"Somebody put a bullet in you, huh?" Dave Morrow said with unconcealed satisfaction. He swept up the gun in his hand. "Well, here's another!"

"Wait." Pecos swallowed painfully and rubbed the back of his hand across his dry lips. "It can't—matter now. They got my pard. You—shot at us—this mornin'?"

Morrow laughed shortly. "You're right, it can't matter now. Sure, I shot at you. Would have got you too, if your horse hadn't spooked. I heard Johnny tell the sheriff you'd found my tracks."

"I finally remembered you—drew your left gun—first. You wanted that spring?"

"So you found that too, huh? Sure, I wanted it and I'll get it. I'll be Patty's guardian."

"I had it—figured right," Pecos said wearily.

"I knew you were dangerous," Morrow said, his voice tight. "That's why I tried to kill you. But, by hell, you won't be dangerous much longer!"

His black eyes glittered as he lifted the gun to a level, and Pecos looked up into the yawning muzzle. For a moment his breath caught in his throat. Then Sheriff

Saunders' voice cut in sharply.

"Lift 'em, Dave!"

Morrow whirled to face the sound. Saunders leaned in through an open window, his rifle levelled. Johnny Powell appeared at another window, and Curly Davis flung himself through the door, gun in hand.

For a moment Dave Morrow stood petrified. Then he whirled back, screaming a curse and firing at the spot where Pecos had been. But Pecos wasn't there. He was on his knees, his hand emerging from his bloody shirt with a gun that spouted flame the moment it cleared. Three other guns blasted at the same time, and Dave Morrow crashed to the floor.

The echoes had barely died when Pecos Ryan picked himself up, glanced around the room, and grunted belligerently, "You sure took your time about gettin' here. Holy cow, but that cannon looked big!"

Then they were all in the room, the sheriff advancing with hand extended. "I'm glad we took a chance on you, Ryan. It sure worked out."

"I just gambled," Pecos said with a grin, "that a girl like your daughter couldn't be in love with a skunk."

"Ahuh." Saunders grinned, but sobered quickly. "If the court appoints Johnny administrator for Pat, as I reckon it will, he'll be needing a couple of good hands to help him with these two ranches."

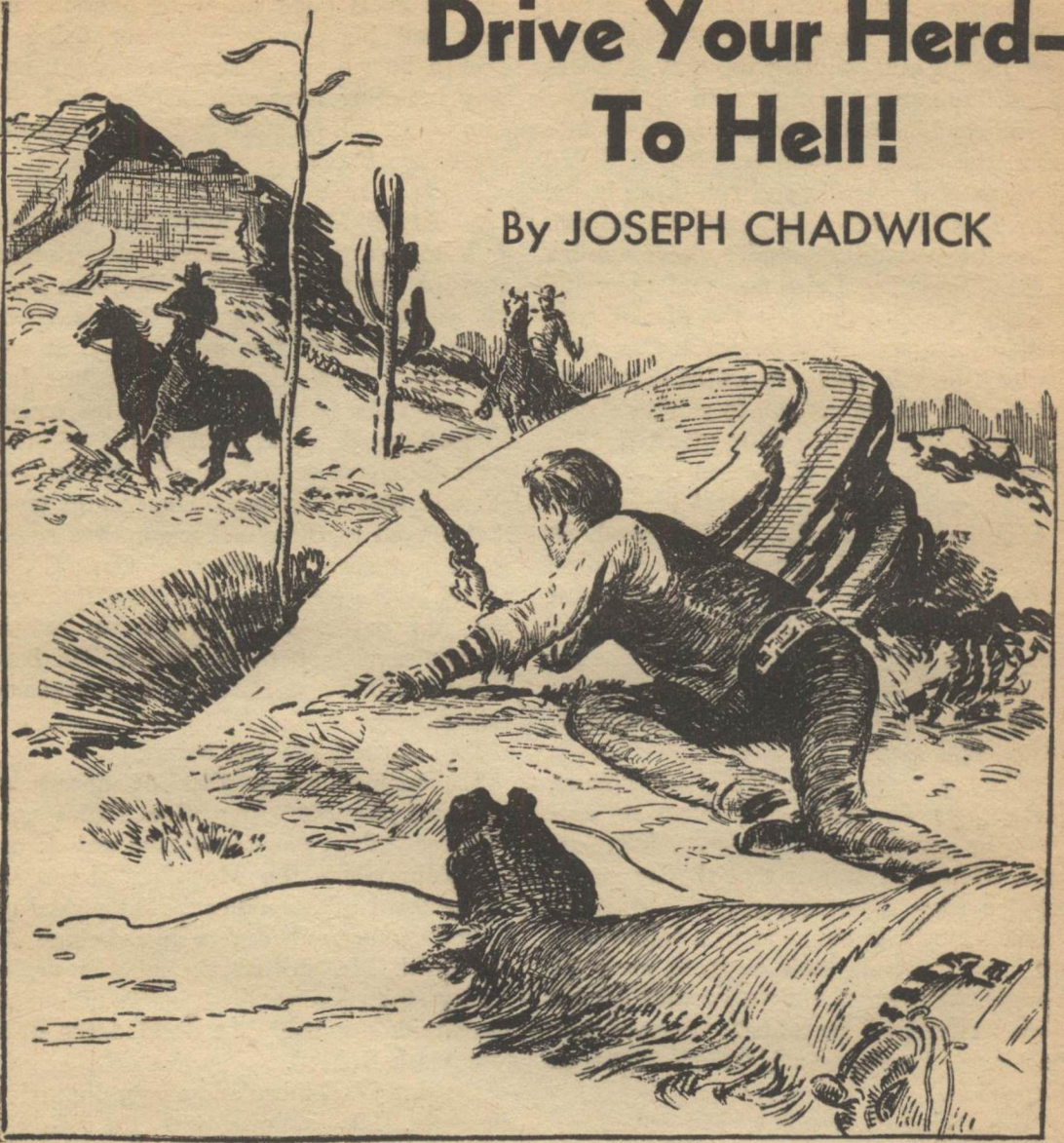
"We're awful good hands," Curly said solemnly, "only I'm not bunkin' with him any more till he gets that jackrabbit blood out of his shirt."

"Say, Pecos—" Johnny shifted his weight awkwardly to one leg and scratched the back of his head vigorously. "Lou and I are gettin' married pretty soon. And, well, we figured on raisin' a family and she said last night that one extra—You see, we—" He stopped, his face flaming in hopeless embarrassment.

Pecos grinned broadly and reached for tobacco. "Mrs. Morrow couldn't have wanted a better home for her, Johnny," he said with relief. "I reckon you and Lou can start your herd with one little dogie."

Drive Your Herd- To Hell!

By JOSEPH CHADWICK



Rawhide Dan Macklin tried to tell them about the gun-wolf treachery that threatened to stampede the Magdalena into flaming range-war . . . but they were too busy trying to kill him to listen!

THE BRISTOW-JARRETT FEUD dated back to the 1880's. In those days disputes were settled with sixshooters, and the Government was just a rumor nobody bothered about. But times changed. The old-timers were gone, the sixgun was no longer the law, and the Government was as close as the nearest district grazier. Still, the Bristows and the Jarretts—it was the third generation now—hadn't forgotten the bitterness of the past.

Dan Macklin swore when he heard the old trouble had broken out again. He considered the ancient feud a senseless thing, but he was more concerned because it was being renewed on the Magdalena Stock Driveway. As a member of the United States Grazing Service, Dan was supposed to keep the Driveway clear of trouble—all sorts of trouble.

Dan heard about the feud flare-up from Ed Clynch, of the Lazy-C outfit. Clynch

had a small herd on the trail, and he was traveling fast. He'd passed the Bristow and Jarrett outfits along the way. He was a mealy-mouthed man, with a habitual smirk on his lank face. He liked to talk poor; he wore a shapeless hat, a faded shirt, patchel overalls, and run-down boots. Dan Macklin had never seen Ed Clynch when the man didn't need a shave—and a bath. Like the Bristows and Jarretts, Clynch owned a ranch in the Mogollons.

"Had a poor calf crop again this year, mister," he told Dan—he called everybody 'mister.' "I should've kept to raising sheep, I reckon. But when a little man's got big neighbors who hate sheepmen . . . Well, you know how it is, mister."

Dan was eyeing the Lazy-C herd. It was made up of about three hundred prime steers. The only trouble was that Clynch and his four Mexican riders were driving the cattle too fast, working the fat off them.

"Where are your boys, Ed?" Dan asked. "Russ and Arch?"

"They quit me, mister," Clynch whined. "Like boys do when they come of age. They lit out for big wages. Ain't seen them lately, but I hear that they're working for some firm that trucks cattle and sheep. Left their old man in a lurch, they did." He paused, took a fresh chew of tobacco. "Passed the Bristow and Jarrett herds yesterday," he added. "Seemed like they were having some trouble between themselves."

"What kind of trouble?" Dan asked.

"Don't rightly know, mister," Ed Clynch replied. "Seems like the Bristow outfit claimed that the Jarrett crew stampeded the Slash-B herd the night before. The Slash-B herd was sure scattered, anyways. And there was a lot of fight talk going on. Well, I've got to be on my way, mister. I'm in a hurry to get my herd to Magdalena."

Dan nodded, watched the man ride after his herd.

Those vaqueros were really hazing the Lazy-C steers along. Dan could have told their owner that by trailing slower, he'd get his herd to Magdalena in better shape and receive a higher price from the stock dealers. But Ed Clynch wasn't the sort to

act on even good advice. No doubt the man had his own reasons for being in such a hurry . . . The next instant Dan was frowning over what Clynch had told him about the Bristow and Jarrett outfits. He didn't like it.

A FEW MILES SOUTH, Dan put his gray up a pinon- and juniper-studded rise and took his binoculars from his saddle-bag. He focused the glasses on a big herd about two miles away. It was the Jarrett herd—the MJ. Burly Bart Jarrett would be bossing it. Maybe his younger brothers, Jess and Matt, would be in the crew. There were a dozen MJ riders. The remuda was a big one. The pickup truck that served as the chuckwagon was somewhat in the lead. Baldheaded Curly Yates would be the cook . . . Dan Macklin knew the MJ outfit. He'd grown up at the Jarrett ranch, where his father had been foreman. Dan and Bart had been boyhood friends.

Dan shifted his binoculars.

He commanded a view of dozens of miles of the San Augustine Plains, and the fenced driveway ran all the way across the plains from the Mogollon Mountains to the town of Magdalena. Dan picked up a band of sheep about five miles behind the MJ herd. He shifted the glasses again, finally sighted a herd of cattle near Flat Rock tank—probably, he decided, the Bristow Slash-B herd.

He put his binoculars away, lighted a cigarette. His impulse was to ride the other way. He knew that a man couldn't step into a feud and remain neutral. One side was bound to be in the wrong, and Dan had a hunch that in this case it was apt to be the Jarrett outfit. Being friendly with Bart Jarrett, he didn't like the idea of going against the MJ. It would be easier to ride the other way, and pretend that he hadn't heard of the Bristow-Jarrett trail-trouble.

But that would be shirking his duty.

Dan deadened his unsmoked cigarette on his boot heel, and rode down from the high point. He'd play it neutral, give both the MJ and the Slash-B notice to forget their grudge while they were on the Magdalena Driveway . . .

BIG, RED-HAIRED Bart Jarrett was riding point with young Jess. The third brother, Matt, who'd been named for MJ's founder, now dead some twenty years, was the outfit's wrangler. Bart swung out of the plodding herd's way, reining in facing Dan Macklin. He said, "Who told you? That gossipy old fool, Ed Clynych?"

Bart Jarrett should have been the one named for old Matt Jarrett. He was like his grandfather—tough, short-tempered, a hard-living buckaroo. His father, Walt, had been killed about six years ago, shot down from ambush, and Bart had set out to wipe out the Slash-B outfit. He'd been stopped just in time, when it was discovered that not a Bristow but a rustler named Briggs had killed Walt Jarrett . . . Dan recalled that Bart hadn't come to the funeral. He'd gone out and gotten drunk, to drown his grief. Even now, when drinking, Bart got it into his head that the Bristows had been somehow responsible for his father's death.

Dan knew that he had to be careful how he handled Bart. He didn't want the man to lose his temper. When Bart got mad, he started drinking—and then anything was apt to happen. Dan said, "I don't put much stock in what Ed Clynych says, *amigo*."

"Sure; he's a born liar."

"But the Slash-B herd did stampede?"

"It stampeded, all right. But no MJ hand did the spooking," Bart growled. "I'll whip the man who says I'd do such a lowdown trick."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Those Bristows had better take it, too."

Dan nodded. He decided that Bart had a fair grip on his temper, and so risked saying, "Jess and Matt are a little wild. They were weaned on stories about that loco feud. You sure one of them didn't slip out of your camp the other night—just for some fun?"

Bart's face was always ruddy. Now it turned a brighter red. He swore, said, "That's fine talk to come from a man who grew up on the MJ. If there's anything I hate, it's a man who won't take his friends' word. You got some reason for siding the Bristows, Dan?"

"I'm not siding them, Bart."

"It sure sounds that way."

"You're going off half-cocked," Dan said. "I'm not siding the Bristows or you Jarretts, but I'm going to get at the bottom of this thing before it leads to something worse. Right now, I'm riding to meet the Slash-B and hear the Bristows' side of the story."

"Maybe I'd better ride with you," Bart growled. "To make sure they don't fill you with a pack of Bristow lies!"

THE SLASH-B OUTFIT was heading for the Flat Rock well, and evidently intended to make night camp there. The old-fashioned Slash-B chuck wagon was already halted within bucket-carrying distance of the windmill and concrete water tank. The *remuda*, under a Mexican wrangler, was coming up ahead of the herd. The Slash-B was trailing five hundred steers to Magdalena. The point rider was mounted on a paint pony, and he came loping forward on seeing Dan Macklin and Bart Jarrett.

"Who's this kid?" Dan asked. "A Bristow?"

"That kid," Bart drawled, "Is Tom Bristow's daughter, Jodie."

"A girl?"

"Sure. You ought to remember her. Tom used to let her ride with him when she was in pig-tails," Bart said. "She's grown up. Been away to school the past couple of years . . . But she sure can still ride!"

There was admiration in Bart Jarrett's voice. It was in his eyes too, Dan saw on glancing at him. Dan had never expected to see a Jarrett impressed by a Bristow. He was surprised. He was surprised too that Jodie Bristow should be traveling with a trail herd—and riding point like a cowhand. "Where's Tom?" Dan asked. "And her brother, Sam?"

Bart shrugged. He was too busy watching the girl to answer, and she was, Dan admitted to himself, worth watching. Old Jeff Bristow, who'd founded the Slash-B and feuded with old Matt Jarrett, had been a shaggy brute of a man right up to his last days. His son Tom and his grandson Sam weren't much better looking. But Jodie Bristow was a beauty.

Even in man's clothes.

She had wide gray eyes, a full red mouth, a wealth of tawny blonde hair. She was slender yet nicely rounded. Prettied up, dressed as a girl should dress, she would out-shine every other girl within a hundred miles of the Magdalena Drive-way. Right now, however, she was dusty as any trail-hand. She looked hot; her face was flushed. She also looked angry. She reined in, said sharply, "Well, what do you MJ riders want? More trouble?"

Bart didn't say anything. He just stared and grinned.

Dan said, "I'm the district grazier, Miss Bristow. I brought Bart along. I'd like to settle whatever trouble has come up between his outfit and the Slash-B. Is your father with the herd? Or your brother?"

The girl shifted her angry gaze from Bart to Dan. Her tone became more civil, but not much more. "Dad and Sam are out searching for some missing Slash-Bs," she said. "We lost forty head in that stampede the MJ crew started. Forty steers!"

Dan said, "That's queer." And Bart Jarrett muttered, "Queer nothing." He was baiting the girl. "These Bristows just can't see for looking."

"You, Bart Jarrett!" the girl said furiously. "If I were a man—"

Bart roared with laughter. He was like that, as quick to joke and laugh as to fly into a rage. Dan saw a couple of riders loping in from the rough country of the shaggy Montosos, and said, "Here come Tom and young Sam. Bart, you watch your tongue. Let me do the talking."

TOM BRISTOW was a rawboned man. His face looked as though it had been rough-chiseled out of granite. It was all blunt angles. His son, a youth of about twenty, would look like Tom in another dozen years. Both men were wearing guns. They had rifles in their saddle boots. They were in a sour mood, and Tom Bristow growled, "Not a trace of a steer, Jodie."

He dismounted, flung his mount's reins to Sam, told the youth to put up the horses. He removed his hat, pulled out a bandanna, and mopped sweat from his

brow. There was a black scowl on his face as he glanced at Bart Jarrett, then looked at Dan Macklin.

"You know what happened, Macklin?"

"Not all of it, I guess," Dan said, swinging down. "Let's hunt some shade and talk it over. Bart, come along."

Bart dismounted, followed them over to the shady side of the chuck wagon. The girl Jodie stayed where she was, but her angry gaze followed Bart Jarrett. Dan rolled a smoke, lighted up, and said, "The Slash-B herd stampeded the night before last. Ed Clynch told me that much. He said too that you Bristows blame the Jarretts. Bart here denies that."

"It was Matt Jarrett," Tom Bristow said stonily. "My boy Sam saw him riding close to our camp just before dark."

"You put it up to Matt?" Dan asked.

"He claimed that he was hoping my girl Jodie would ride out and meet him," Bristow muttered. "I say he was prowling for no good. He knows Jodie wouldn't take up with a Jarrett."

"Matt was back in camp before that herd stampeded," Bart cut in.

"So you say," said Bristow. "Maybe both of you are lying."

Dan saw the warning signs: Bart's face reddening, his eyes glinting, his jaw-line turning lumpy. Tom Bristow didn't notice, or didn't realize how trigger-quick Bart's temper was. Bart struck out, a blow to the chin, and the Slash-B's owner fell as though clubbed.

Bart was a dirty fighter when in a rage, and he started to boot the fallen man. Dan caught hold of him, reeled him about. "That's enough, Bart!" he muttered.

Bart cursed, yelled, "I'll whip any man who calls me a liar!"

He was crazy mad. Putting a big hand against Dan's chest, he shoved violently. Dan was braced, however, and didn't give ground or release his grip on Bart's left arm. Bart's right fist came driving up. It caught Dan on the chin, rocked his head back. The pain was sharp, and it cut loose Dan's temper. He let go of Bart, and slammed into him.

He staggered the MJ owner with a right and a left to the face, reeled him back against the chuck wagon with a blow to

the middle. Bart hung there for a moment, shock on his heavy face. He said thickly, "Why, you damn' ingrate! You've gone over to the Bristows!" He shoved away from the wagon, lunging forward with his head down and his thick shoulders hunched. And his fists lashing out.

Dan took a battering. He was knocked to his knees. Blood from a cut over his left eye trickled down his face. Bart launched a kick at him. Dan grabbed at the man's leg, caught hold, hung on. He reared up, levering up on Bart's left. He upset the MJ owner, and Bart rolled in the dust.

Young Sam Bristow said, his voice unsteady, "Call it quits, or I'll pull the trigger!" He had his sixgun in his hand. His voice, rather than the words, stopped Bart Jarrett. The youth was jumpy enough to pull the trigger.

Bart picked his hat out of the dust, rose slowly.

He gazed uneasily at Sam Bristow, and began backing off toward his horse. He swung to the saddle, then looked at Dan Macklin. "You and the MJ are through," he said thickly. "From now on, keep out of my way."

He spoke flatly, meaning what he said.

He swung his horse about, rode off.

Dan looked bleakly after him. Bart Jarrett had been the closest friend he'd ever had. And he'd always considered the MJ his home.

DAN SPENT THE NIGHT at the Slash-B camp, eating Bristow chuck and listening to the full story of the stampede. Tom Bristow and the entire Slash-B crew were dead certain that a rider had spooked the cattle. It had happened at midnight, when trail cattle were easy to stampede. The herd had headed for the rough country at the foot of the Montosos. The cattle had scattered over a wide area before running themselves out. It had taken the crew a whole day to gather them in, and then the tally had been forty head short . . . Forty steers made a loss that hurt.

The missing cattle worried Tom Bristow, and puzzled Dan Macklin.

In the morning, when he mounted his

gray, he told the Slash-B owner, "I'll have a look. Maybe I can locate your missing steers."

He rode off as the Slash-B herd was strung out on the trail.

The bed ground from which the cattle had stampeded was ten miles south, and Dan located the spot easily enough. He trailed toward the Montosos, noting the hoof tracks left by the cattle and the Slash-B riders, but he sighted no stray stock.

He spent most of the day riding slowly through one small canyon after another. Late in the afternoon, he was caught up by hunger and started chewing a strip of jerky from his saddle-bag. There was water and grass nearby, so he off-saddled and turned his horse loose. He was rolling a cigarette when a prospector leading a mule descended one of the canyon's sloping walls.

The prospector's sudden appearance didn't surprise Dan, for Magdalena was partly a mining town and the mountains all through New Mexico were scarred with old diggings. In fact, Dan knew the man as Hank Bishop. They passed a casual greeting, and Hank began removing the mule's pack. He was going to camp there, so Dan gathered brush and built a fire for him. The old man was grateful and became more friendly.

"Looking for something?" Hank asked, filling his coffee pot.

"Some missing cattle," Dan replied. "Forty Slash-B steers."

"You won't find them in these hills."

Dan said, "No?" and waited.

The prospector got his bacon into the skillet before continuing, then said, "Two nights ago, it was. I was camped in Black Sheep Canyon. That's about a mile from here. Two riders came along with some cattle in the middle of the night. Woke me up. They didn't see me, but I got a good look at them. I kept quiet, because I knew something queer was going on. Riders don't drive cattle into a wild place like the Black Sheep for any good reason. It's wild country. I got curious, and in the morning I did some trailing . . ."

As Hank told it, he had followed the tracks of cattle and riders out of Black

Sheep Canyon. The trail had led through the mountains by a devious route, then into a small canyon opening onto the San Augustine Plains. About five miles above the Black Sheep Canyon, Hank had taken to cover on a slope. He'd seen the cattle being loaded into four trucks. The trucks had driven out despite the fact that it was daylight and the cattle certainly stolen. They had rolled across a half mile of flats to the highway, which here ran through the middle of the stock driveway. They had been headed toward Magdalena. The two horsemen had also headed up-trail.

"You recognize the riders, Hank?" Dan asked.

"Saw them in Magdalena a time or two, but I don't know their names," the prospector replied. "But their horses were branded with a big off-center 'C'—"

He etched the brand in the dust.

"The Lazy-C," Dan said. "Ed Clynch's iron."

It wasn't a puzzle now, and none of the Jarrett's had done the stampeding. Ed Clynch had said that his outfit had been camped nearby when the Slash-B herd had been spooked. He had also told Dan that his two sons were now working for a firm that hauled stock to the railroad. Ed Clynch was neighbor to both the Bristows and the Jarrets, and so knew about the feud. Nobody living today knew why old Jeff Bristow and old Matt Jarrett had fallen out back in the 'Eighties, but everybody knew that the two families still didn't like each other. The sly-eyed, whiny-voiced Ed Clynch had decided to make use of that feud. He'd trailed his herd along close behind the Slash-B and MJ outfits, waiting his chance. He'd had it all planned. He'd spooked the Slash-B cattle, and his two sons did the actual stealing. It was the modern way to rustle stock . . . Cut a small bunch from a herd, drive them to a safe place, where trucks were waiting, and rush them to a dealer who wasn't particular about brands . . . Ed Clynch had gone a step farther. He'd kept suspicion from being thrown on himself by fixing it so that the Jarretts were blamed.

"You'll tell it to the law, Hank?" Dan asked.

Hank replied that he would, and stated that he was now on his way to Magdalena. "Ain't you staying for supper?" he added.

Dan wasn't staying.

He was already going to catch up his horse.

THE SLASH-B OUTFIT, having trailed all day, had gained another ten miles or more, and it was long after dark when Dan located the new camp. He told Tom Bristow, "I found out what happened to your missing steers," and explained what he had learned from Hank Bishop.

Bristow swore and threatened to go after Ed Clynch with a gun, but Dan argued him out of it. Since the rustling had occurred on the Driveway, Dan reasoned that it was for him to handle. Sam and Jodie were listening, and the girl said, "Then the Jarretts had nothing to do with it?"

Dan told her that was so. He got a bait of grub from the Slash-B chuck wagon, and asked for a fresh mount. When he had shifted his saddle from the tired gray to a rangy Slash-B dun, he told the Bristows that he would stop at the MJ camp and tell the Jarretts what he had learned.

It had begun to blow, and a spattering of rain fell as he rode out. He hadn't gone far when Jodie Bristow came loping up behind him. Coming alongside, she said, "Mind if I ride with you as far as the MJ camp? We Bristows owe the Jarretts an apology, and I can humble myself easier than Dad or Sam."

Dan said that he was glad to have her along, and he meant it. He lived a lonely life; he seldom had the company of an attractive girl, and never one as good-looking as Jodie Bristow. He suddenly wondered if she had suitors . . . The rain began to fall in earnest, in a heavy down-pour, and the low places became awash. The night was murky dark. They rode slowly, almost feeling their way, and after nearly two hours Dan feared that they had missed the MJ camp.

The MJ outfit had been trailing about five miles ahead of the Slash-B the day before, and Dan knew that he and the girl had covered more than that distance.

He reined in finally, lifted his voice above the roar of the rain. "We've missed it, sure. You want me to take you back?"

Jodie peered about. "There's a camp-fire ahead," she said.

Dan saw it, then. A pinpoint of light through the curtain of rain.

They rode on and came to the Lazy-C camp. Two of the Mexicans were riding night herd. The other two and Ed Clynch were huddled about the fire over which a canvas tarpaulin had been stretched on poles. Dan was surprised. Clynch had been in a hurry to reach Magdalena yesterday; he'd been moving fast. But he hadn't traveled far since yesterday.

Dan dismounted but didn't step under the tarp shelter. He said flatly, "You know the rules, Clynch. Ten miles a day for cattle on the Driveway. You sure didn't make ten miles since this morning."

Clynch's lank face took on a hangdog look. "Most days I drive twelve miles or more, mister," he said. "Figured you wouldn't mind if I slowed up a little today—to save my horses and cattle. You won't take away my permit, will you, mister?"

Dan knew that there was some truth in that. The Lazy-C had been driving farther most days than the regulation ten miles. He said, "I'm not revoking your permit for that, but from now on you'd better abide by the rules. You seen the MJ outfit?"

"Come to think of it, I did. It's about two miles behind us," Clynch replied. "But if you're looking for Bart Jarrett, he's not at the camp. The MJ pickup truck passed by here about sundown, headed for Magdalena. All three of the Jarretts and a couple of the MJ hands were in it. Something wrong, mister?"

Dan ignored the question.

He was suddenly uneasy. Knowing Bart Jarrett, he could guess why the MJ's boss and some of the crew had gone to town. Bart would have been brooding over that trouble at the Slash-B camp last night, and brooding had gotten him in a mood for a drunk. It wasn't something unusual. Outfits using trucks for chuck wagons were in the habit of doing that during the last couple nights on the trail—driving into

town for some fun. Only Bart didn't drink for fun. He hit the bottle when something bothered him. Dan didn't like it.

He forced his attention back on Ed Clynch. "What's the name of that trucking firm your sons are working for?" he asked.

Clynch's eyes narrowed down. "Bolton Express Company," he said slowly. "Mark Bolton, the livestock dealer, is head of it. Why you asking that?"

Dan knew Mark Bolton. The man was a shady customer, but it had never been proved that he was a crook. This might turn out to be bigger than Dan had thought. He might be able to turn Bolton over to the sheriff for receiving stolen stock. He told Ed Clynch, "Just curious. I want a word with Russ and Arch when I get back to Magdalena. And I'll see you there, too, when you get in with your herd."

He turned away, mounted.

He told Jodie about the MJ camp being a couple miles back the trail, and that Bart Jarrett and his brothers had driven to town. He was worrying about Bart, about what Bart might get it into his head to do—if he got drunk. He said, "I'll take you back to the Slash-B, then go on to Magdalena. I want to see what Bart's up too."

Jodie saw that he was worried, and said that she could find her way back. When Dan wouldn't hear to that, she told him firmly, "Then I'll ride to town with you. Dad knows I'm with you. He won't worry."

"All right," Dan said. "Let's go.

It was a twenty-mile ride to Magdalena.

THEY HAD COVERED half that distance when they saw the rain-blurred lights of a car or truck. The vehicle was traveling fast. It bounced and lurched over the rough terrain, for there was no paved highway here, and it was going to pass some distance to the left of Dan and the girl. It was the MJ pickup truck, Dan was sure. He reached for his saddle gun, quickly fired three shots into the air.

But the truck didn't stop for the signal. It didn't even slow up. As it raced by, Dan

growled, "That crazy Bart!" He felt like taking a shot at the truck. It was gone from sight almost at once, for it showed no taillights. Jodie had reined in beside Dan, and now he heard her teeth chattering. She was shivering violently. Dan himself was wet and cold.

"What are we going to do?" Jodie asked. "Turn back?"

"Maybe it's all right, now that Bart's heading back to camp so early," he said. He suddenly realized that it was raining harder, that it was a regular cloudburst. "We'd better find shelter. We'll head for the Payson ranch. It's only three or four miles."

They swung west, Jodie showing a sudden relief, and the Payson Ranch fence was only two miles. They found the gate, went on to the ranch headquarters, and even though it was after midnight, the Paysons welcomed them . . . The rain let up just before dawn.

Dan and Jodie had breakfast with the Paysons, then saddled their horses and rode south. They passed the Lazy-C herd on the move, but the Mexicans were handling it alone. Ed Clynch had ridden out. Toward Magdalena, one vaquero told Dan. About ten minutes later, topping a rolling swell in the plains, they saw the MJ herd scattered over a wide area. Jodie gasped, "It—It's been stampeded!"

Dan nodded jerkily. He could see the MJ crew riding about, gathering up bunches of cattle and throwing them back onto the night's bed ground. Dan lifted his horse into a lope, and Jodie followed close behind him. They came upon Bart Jarrett, and the burly MJ boss looked as though he had been drinking heavily last night. His eyes were bloodshot, and a muscle at the corner of his mouth kept jerking. He was wearing a sixgun, and now he reached for it.

"I warned you to keep away from the MJ!" he told Dan, almost shouting. "Get out, dammit! And take that Bristow girl with you!"

"Now, hold on, Bart—"

"Get moving," Bart said wildly, and cocked the gun.

He looked crazy-mad-enough to shoot, and Dan knew that it was only sensible to

obey. He swung his horse away. Jodie lingered, said furiously, "Listen here, Bart Jarrett; you're wrong if you think we Bristows stampeded your cattle!"

Bart swore, and retorted, "You tell Tom Bristow that I'm coming after him with my crew at my back, soon as I gather my cattle! I'm settling with you Bristows for once and for all!"

He kicked spurs to his horse, rode away from the girl.

Dan said, "Jodie, ride for your camp. Tell Tom and Sam to clear out—fast. Bart means what he says. There's only one way to stop him, and it's up to me." He paused, feeling the hurt of his broken friendship with Bart Jarrett. "This is more of the Clynches' work," he went on. "This time I'm going to catch them at it. That way, I can make Bart see reason."

He swung away, not waiting to see if the girl obeyed.

DAN FOUND THE TRAIL, all right, after hours of painstaking searching through the rough country. It led through a chain of small canyons linked by narrow rock-walled passages. He had no difficulty tracking the two riders and—again—about forty head of cattle. It was high noon when, as he entered a broader canyon, the shot blasted.

Dan gave a violent start, reached for his rifle.

But the shot hadn't been aimed at him. It had been a warning signal. There was a guard posted on a slope, amid some stunted junipers. Below, midway through the canyon, a group of men stopped loading cattle onto the four trucks there. Four jumped into the cabs, started up the motors, and pulled out in a dust-rising hurry. Two others ran for their ground-hitched horses.

Dan didn't care about the fleeing trucks. Their owner, Mark Bolton, could be dealt with later. It was the two horsemen—Russ and Arch Clynch—whom Dan wanted to get hold of. And the man hidden among the trees on the slope. That would be Ed Clynch himself, who hadn't gone to Magdalena as his Mexicans had said . . . Dan had to take them, else he'd have no chance of keeping Bart Jarrett from carrying out

his threat of gunning for the Bristows. But it wasn't going to be easy. Ed Clynch knew that Dan Macklin had grown suspicious; the grazier had given him reason to know that, by asking about his sons, Ed might even try to shoot it out . . .

As Dan rode down toward Russ and Arch, the old man's rifle cracked again. It was either good or lucky shooting. The slug drilled Dan's Slash-B dun horse squarely through the head. The animal dropped, and Dan threw himself from the saddle just in time to avoid being pinned beneath the briefly thrashing body. He rolled over, stretched out behind a flat boulder. By now Russ and Arch were firing at him.

Dan fired twice at the Clynch sons, but then Ed's shots made him drop down. He waited a minute while Ed's 30-30 slugs hit the boulder and kicked up dust about it. Then he tried a shot at the clump of trees. It missed. He couldn't line his sights on the old man. In fact, he was boxed in. The odds were against him, and it would be only a matter of time before one of those probing bullets found him . . . He was trapped. The Clynches wouldn't quit until he was dead.

It wasn't fear that came to Dan Macklin, but a leaden despair.

He was far from ready to die. It suddenly seemed to him that he'd hardly gotten around to living. For some strange reason he thought of Jodie Bristow. Last night, riding with her through the rain, he'd come to realize that he'd always been lonely. He'd even told himself that he would like to share his life with her. *What life?* Dan asked himself.

A slug from Ed Clynch's rifle creased his left thigh, and the feel of it was like the touch of a red-hot branding iron. Ed yelled, "Get behind him, boys! Take the spying son from behind!" Dan couldn't see them now. The trap was being sprung.

Suddenly another gun opened up, and Ed Clynch let out a scared howl.

A rider came pounding up behind Dan. It was Bart Jarrett, a wild look on his face.

"Hell! I can trail rustlers, too!" he shouted, and his gun roared again. One

of the Clynch boys screamed in agony. Up on the slope, Old Ed broke from cover and threw up empty hands.

Three more riders came up—Tom Bristow, his boy Sam, and Jodie. Tom shouted, "You need any help?" Both he and Sam had their guns out. But Dan Macklin knew that it had been Jodie who had brought them into the back country—to side him. The thought pleased him. But no help was needed from the Bristows. Ed Clynch and his boy Russ surrendered, and Arch lay wounded.

Bart gave him a sheepish grin, and said, "This was a lesson to me, bucko. I'll know better than to doubt a friend of the MJ again. Shake on it?"

They shook on it.

A bullet-creased thigh, Dan Macklin figured, was a small price to pay for salvaging a life-long friendship . . .

IT WAS ONE EVENING in Magdalena, after the Slash-B and MJ cattle had been shipped. Dan Macklin stopped in at Tobin's general store and bought a five-pound box of candy. He walked with it under his arm to the hotel, and reached it just as Bart Jarrett was about to enter. Bart too had something under his arm. It looked like, and was, a big box of candy. Each man stepped back, eying the other warily.

"Where do you think you're going?" Bart growled.

"My business," Dan retorted.

Bart scowled, his temper rising. "Look; don't let it be Jodie Bristow," he said flatly. "I'm figuring on putting my loop on her, and I'll whip the first man who tries to beat my time!"

"I'll call you on that, you loud-talking cowpoke."

"Why, you—"

Bart fell silent abruptly, for the hotel door had opened and Jodie stood there. She was all prettied up in woman-fashion. "Fighting again, you two?" she asked, and smilingly studied them—as though making her woman's choice. Dan couldn't tell what was in her eyes, but he was sure that Bart Jarrett couldn't tell, either. He grabbed at hope.



SEÑORITA of the JUDAS GUNS

By JOHN STARR

HIS OWN GANG HATED HIM, even worse than the law hated and feared Red Lawler. They had seen samples of his merciless punishment when some luckless one of his outlaw band crossed Red's steel will. They had stood by, helpless snarling, afraid, while he maimed or killed some one of his outlaw band that had violated his laws.

Red Lawler would fight any man alive with any sort of weapon that man might name. And in the end, before Red Lawler had finished, he would kill that man.

Only because of that gang hatred, and with the help of Red's own men could the law ever hope to exact its payment for the many crimes which the red-haired giant had committed.

A GOLDEN SADDLE CLASSIC



Suddenly the place roared with the blaze of guns . . . the tinkle of shattered glass . . .

The law may kill a man, but a curse can never die. Five gun-jackals sold Red Lawler into Yuma for a pot of traitor's gold . . . and ten years later found that the blood-loot had bought them the vengeance of the Gun Ghost of the Brasada!

Even with the help of Red's men, the law might still have failed—had it not been for Juana, the little half-breed girl who was Red Lawler's sweetheart. Juana sold out her lover for a pair of red slippers, a hat full of silver money, and an assortment of cheap trinkets.

Juana had never heard of Judas and the thirty pieces of silver. But she later

threw the coveted red slippers and the silver dollars and the tawdry trinkets as far as she could fling them out across the muddy surface of the Colorado River, there where it whispers along the clay banks below Yuma. Then she tried to jump in after the stuff so that she might drown and go to hell where Red told her she belonged. It was Red Lawler, himself,

ACTION STORIES' HALL OF FAME

who kept her from it. Red, lying there in the brush, with half a dozen lead slugs in his tough body.

"Jumpin' off like that is no way," he gritted. "If I live, I'm gonna need yuh."

It was hot and sultry and dark as sin. The humid air, there along the river, was pregnant with the rank odor of arrow weeds. Juana's hands tried vainly to stop the blood that came, hot and sticky, from the bullet holes. Over and over again she explained how they had trapped her into it. Finally Red Lawler slapped her into silence.

The posse kept edging closer through the hot night. Fifty men or more, heavily armed, grimly determined to capture the wounded outlaw who had ridden there for love, and found death lurking in the shadows behind Juana's adobe hut. The spot was on the river bank, almost within rifle-shot of the dread prison that stood on the red-clay banks above. . . .

Red Lawler fought there in the muggy blackness, until the last of his ammunition was gone. Then he told them to come on and get him. But even then they were afraid. They waited until daylight, when they came upon him, more dead than alive, lying unconscious, his head pillowed in the lap of the half-breed girl who had betrayed him.

RED LAWLER was tough. The Yuma doctors said they had never seen a human being who could live with so much lead in his system. He would lie back on his hospital cot and curse them when their skilled hands dressed his wounds. And even before he was out of danger, he tried to escape.

But the law guarded him too closely. Day and night, never relaxing their vigilance, two men stood guard by his cot. His arms and legs were manacled to the heavy iron cot. He cursed the guards with a cold fury that made them uneasy.

No one ever came to visit him. Juana had vanished. Red did not own a single friend in all the world who cared whether or not he died. Only Juana cared, and she had disappeared, no man knew where. The four members of Red Lawler's gang

who had aided the law in trapping their leader—they too had vanished. They had split their share of the reward money and had gone away. Desperately wounded as he was, they feared Red Lawler and what he might do if the chance ever offered.

Later, when the wounds in his tough body were healed, Red Lawler was brought up for trial. He was sentenced to life imprisonment at the State Penitentiary at Yuma.

Yuma, the hardest prison in the United States. Yuma, where the terrific heat killed a white man in a few years. Far better to be hung than to serve a life sentence at Yuma.

Red Lawler fought like a maniac. He cursed the judge and almost killed one of his guards before he was subdued and dragged out of the packed courtroom.

It was a foregone conclusion that Red Lawler would serve a lot of his time in the darkness of "solitary." He would never miss a chance to attempt escape. He would never be anything but tough.

All of which proved true. There were weeks when Red Lawler never saw day light. He would be taken from his black dungeon, blind as a mole, his body filthy with dirt and vermin, his hair and beard matted like the hair of some horrible animal. Slitted, bloodshot eyes squinting, his hairy mouth snarling, heavy chains clanking with each dragging step, he still fought his guards—until he fell, slobbering and frothing at the mouth, trying to bite anyone that came near.

He fought every effort they made to help him. He cursed them and tried to kill his guards and fellow prisoners. Red Lawler was, by a far margin, the toughest of the many tough men sent to Yuma for their crimes against society.

There are no longer any prisons such as the old Yuma pen. Yuma, with its thick walls, its windowless dungeons, its torture chains—its filth and lack of sanitation. Yuma, where men were penned up like vicious animals, the sick with the well—where the summer heat reached one hundred and twenty, with a humidity that is stifling. Where men stricken with prison plague died like flies.

Yet Red Lawler did more than ten

years there, and most of those terrible years were spent in solitary And in the end, he escaped.

A ragged, filthy slinking thing of bones covered with dirt-caked hide was Red Lawler now. More animal than man, he hid in the arrow weeds and brush along the river bank. His skinny hands tore up green grass and shoved it into the bearded mouth. Red Lawler had not smelled fresh air for ten years. The taste of grass was a miracle.

There were stars up there in the velvet night. . . . The muddy river whispering its way to the Gulf. . . . The smell of rank vegetation. After ten black years of hell.

Weak, racked with the cough of prison plague, a shambling old man whose matted beard and hair was colorless and stringy, he crept away into the night. Tomorrow they would miss him. But tonight belonged to the wreck of humanity that had once been the notorious Red Lawler. Tonight he was free.

Free! He lay there on the ground, chewing grass, smelling of the fresh earth that he clawed up, dipping his hands into the water that lapped the grassy bank. Then he crawled away and was swallowed by the black night.

THEY never caught Red Lawler. Some bones, found in the silt and slime of an irrigation canal a month later, were found and buried in the little cemetery under the prison hill. So far as the law was concerned, Red Lawler was dead and buried. A town reporter who remembered wrote a half column on the notorious Red Lawler, who now lay buried in the prison cemetery.

Red Lawler was dead. The Law had been paid in full. Another chapter of the West's outlaw history was finished. So on and so on. A tenderfoot visitor started gathering data for a biography of the late Red Lawler. Some idiot even wrote a poem of sentimental nature about the red-haired outlaw and the beautiful Mexican *senorita* who had been the cause of his downfall—then had waited all those ten years and aided in his escape.

As a matter of fact, Juana had never been beautiful. Just an ordinary brown-skinned, brown-eyed, black-haired, half-breed girl. But her body had been young and desirable to the outlaw who had owned and left a dozen or more like her.

And as for her helping this wreck of an old man escape, that was even more ridiculous than the poet's description of the breed girl's beauty. Red Lawler had managed his own escape. He had managed to hide in a load of refuse that was being hauled to the dump down the river. A prosaic, if somewhat odorous manner of escape—though there is a story of his life that tells how he spent ten years tunneling under the prison wall.

* * *

So much for Red Lawler. He was never again heard of, so far as the Law has written record. Let his name and his deeds stay buried with the dusty bones in the little graveyard there under the prison hill at Yuma. The curious might even be able, by some stretching of the imagination, to place his grave among those inside the fence that is now broken.

You may visit the ruins of the old Yuma prison and pick your way around through the cells that now are used by wandering hoboos who pause there to cook a meal and scratch their name with countless other names on the hard, grim old walls of the cells whose steel doors yawn open on rusted hinges. Those of romantic temperament might conjure up whatever dreams they wish as they stand there on the old hill above the grim little cluster of weather-beaten headboards that mark the graves of dead criminals.

It is an unpleasant spot, even under the turquoise Arizona sky. There lingers a dismal sort of hush there among the broken, scarred walls—the hush of death that has forever silenced the groans and curses of men who once dwelt there. The shadows under the sun-baked walls are not soft shadows. If it is true that the ghosts of tortured souls return at night, then it would not be a pleasant spot after night-fall.

Red Lawler did ten years there. His record stops there at the neglected old cemetery. So be it. Red Lawler is dead.

II

FAR BELOW THE MEXICAN border, at the other edge of a treeless desert of sand that shimmers in the heat waves, lies the drab little village of Cholla. In under the granite nose of a bleak mountain, it squats, treeless and barren, ugly and uninviting. Its one street is like a ragged old scar. Its buildings are flat, unpainted, built of sun-baked adobe and weather-marked beams. They are doorless, save for sun-faded blankets or strips of dirty canvas, for wood is scarce there.

Mexican wood choppers fetch down burro loads of twisted mesquite limbs for fuel. There is not a planed board in the whole town. There is not a tree to give shade. There are only the adobe walls of the squalid houses in which live the Mexicans and the renegade whites who have come there and never expect to leave.

Beans and chili peppers and onions grow in small gardens. Not a single flower blooms. There are mangy dogs and some burros and wild hogs that wallow and grunt and sleep in the street. There are a few dirty children. The women are tired looking, with sad, hopeless eyes. There are Mexican men who seldom smile and never laugh.

They carry guns and ugly bladed knives and these men come and go by night, like ugly shadows. There are girls of thirteen and fourteen who are already mothers of babies that mostly die for lack of decent nourishment.

It is an ugly spot, even to the man who has, by some queer fate, survived the journey across the desert and comes, black of tongue, weak and half crazy from the heat and thirst and the brain-torturing visions of mirage, to Cholla.

He finds scant welcome from the men and women there. They stare at him with hard eyes, wondering what manner of hell upon earth has ever sent him to this place that holds nothing of life save living death. They will show him the spring of warmish water that supplies the town.

If he has money or some similar equivalent, he can have mescal or pulque or tequila to set his brain afire with delirium.

If he lives, he will be fed tortillas made of mesquite bean paste, beans and chili and jerked goat meat. If he stays on, he may find a woman who will cook his meals and bear his children and bury him when he dies.

If he is able-bodied and has nerve and a gun, he may join up with the handful of renegades that live back in the hills from where they occasionally ride down on scrubby horses to steal whatever they can from travelers passing on the other side of the mountains.

When business across the mountain is slack, these outlaws drink and fight and kill one another, riding up and down the crooked street of Cholla on their halfbroken horses, whooping and shooting and finally falling off onto the ground to sleep until the drunken stupor lifts from their crazy brains. Then they ride back to their camp in the hills where there is pasture for their horses.

That is Cholla—Cholla, where nothing save the sun-drenched air is clean, where the scum of the white desperadoes have been driven into exile to die.

In more than a few respects, death is far more preferable than life at Cholla where living has been stripped of everything that men hold dear. No penal colony ever held less of life's desires than the terrible little village there on the rim of the desert. It is a settlement of bitterness and hate, where men go insane because of the terrific beating down of a merciless sun that blazes out of a sky that never holds a cloud. Never in the memory of men has there been rain there.

Perhaps the place is cursed, as the Mexicans claim it is. It is a spot set aside for the living dead. There is a story concerning its origin that may be true. This story claims its founders were men and women tainted with leprosy—that this dread disease kills those who do not die more violent deaths.

Once a man goes there, he can never return to civilization. There is always a Mexican soldier on guard at the other edge of that terrible desert, ready to shoot down any who attempt to break their exile at Cholla.

The day that Red Lawler was sent to

Yuma prison for life, he stood there in the courtroom and, in a terrible, rage-choked voice, vowed that before he died he would send four men to the living death of Cholla. Those four were the members of his own gang who had betrayed him. And when he had sent them there, he vowed he would send after them a woman.

That woman was the luckless Juana, the 'breed girl who had been Red Lawler's sweetheart. . . .

ONE year after the date of Red Lawler's escape from Yuma, a stranger appeared at the border town of Mescalara. A tall, stoop shouldered man with snow white hair and mustache, his face had been so scarred and battered that nothing remained of his original features except a square, jutting jaw and a pair of slitted eyes that were greenish in color. When he spoke, which was seldom, the rasping harshness of it made listeners draw away from him. It was like no human sound.

There was a bony strength to his spare body, and his movements were swift and sure without ever seeming abrupt. He was well dressed in black broadcloth and a wide-brimmed black hat. His shirt was white and spotlessly clean. His boots were polished. Under each arm he carried a Colt gun in holsters that were strapped across his chest in an ingenious manner. His long tailed coat hid the guns from the casual glance of strangers.

He had plenty of money which he spent with neither stinginess nor freedom. He gambled, claiming gambling as his chosen profession. Yet he never seemed to win much. And there was but mediocre skill in the manner with which his gnarled, scarred hands handled a deck of cards. He drank but little, and when he did drink, never watered his raw whiskey. Because he volunteered no name, Mescalara gave him the sobriquet of "Deacon."

He had come in on the stage from Benson, by way of Tombstone. Where he had come from before he stepped on the stage at Benson, no man knew. Nor did any one voice whatever curiosity they felt. The

Southwest was not in the habit of asking questions of strangers. Not even the officers of the law were apt to question a man unless he did some wrong that demanded their attention. Then they did their asking behind a cocked gun.

The Deacon took a room above the Palace saloon and gambling house. The Palace was owned by Diamond Jack Lanning, gambler and gunman, whose past was clouded in spots by strange contacts with outlaws, though that was no terrible disgrace in that day of the Southwest's red sunset, when there was but a thinly drawn line between law and lawless methods. The day of the gunman and swaggering desperado was passing. Red Lawler some eleven years before, had been the last of the open desperadoes.

Open lawbreaking was scowled upon by those courageous men sworn by their oath of office to uphold the word of the law to its last letter. Though it was free and easy and each frontier town could point out newly dug graves in its boothill cemetery, still the law was creeping into power, and men of Red Lawler's stamp were no longer countenanced.

Diamond Jack Lanning was well content to bury his past under a flashy air of bluff respectability. There was some talk of running him for mayor. Few men really know that Jack Lanning, under another name, had been a member of Red Lawler's gang—that he had given his word, after he and his friends had aided in sending the terrible Red to Yuma, to lead a life of reasonable respectability.

Diamond Jack Lanning was a big, florid-faced man, overweight from soft living and prosperity. His manner was that bluff, meaningless cordiality of many an old time saloon man. A handshake and a drink for the stranger who looked like money. One of his several henchmen took care of the bums and the luckless devil who had squandered his last dollar in drunken revelry. A not uncommon type of saloon keeper, Diamond Jack Lanning.

His partner, known to many as Lanning's Shadow, was a hatchet-faced, gimlet-eyed man of small stature and deadly prowess with knife or gun. His name there in Mescalara was Phil Phelan. Time

had been when the frontier towns along the old outlaw trail that stretched northward from New Mexico to Canada knew this lipless, quick-triggered gentleman as Nick Philips, one of the Red Lawler gang.

He had followed the fortunes of Jack Lanning and was now that florid saloon man's right bower. It was hinted that his trigger finger was as deadly as ever, but that the manner of his performance was less spectacular and more furtive. It could never be proved that Phelan had killed any of the several luckless men who had been found somewhere beyond the outskirts of Mescalara, stone dead in the gray dawn that followed some night's quarrel at the Palace,

PHIL PHELAN was standing at the bar with Diamond Jack Lanning that evening when the Deacon first stepped through the swinging doors of the Palace.

"Who's that?" grunted Lanning.

Phelan shrugged his slim shoulders and picked his gold-filled teeth with a turkey-quill toothpick. A man of few words was Phil Phelan, once the Nick Philips of the Red Lawler gang. He left his watered drink untouched on the bar and moved away. Phelan liked to size up his strangers from some unobtrusive position, leaving the open-handed greetings to his partner.

The scar-faced man in black came on to the bar. He gave Jack Lanning a short glance that, brief though it was, missed no detail of the saloon keeper's face or manner. He was about to order a single drink when the red-faced Lanning stepped up, a thick, diamond-ringed hand outthrust toward the stranger.

"I'm Jack Lanning, stranger. This is my joint. The house always buys the first drink and the last 'un. What'll it be?"

The scar-faced man smiled grimly, but made no motion to take the proffered hand of the saloon keeper.

"I make it a point never to shake hands," he explained. "No offense meant to nobody. Just my way. I'll take whiskey."

"Two whiskeys," boomed Lanning as the bartender came up. "Outa my private bottle, Joel."

The Deacon gave the bartender that

same short glance of quick appraisal that he had used in sizing up Jack Lanning. Joel Travis, the bald-headed, blunt-faced bartender was another of Diamond Jack Lanning's silent partners in the business. By the same token, the blunt-featured Joel had been a member of the old Red Lawler gang. A hard fighting, treacherous sort, Joel Travis. He was known throughout the Southwest as the man who had killed Black Jack Tupper, down in San Antone.

Tupper had been a bad man with a killer's record. Joel Travis had killed him after the two had quarreled over some woman. It had been claimed by Tupper's friends that Joel Travis bribed the woman to fix Black Jack's gun. But that was never definitely proven and the long-headed Joel had taken the woman and quit Texas before Tupper's friends could avenge the passing of the famous bad-man.

Joel openly claimed much of the credit for Red Lawler's capture, now that Red was dead and buried in the Yuma prison graveyard.

JOEL TRAVIS shoved out an ornate bottle and two glasses. The Deacon poured out a drink and shoved the bottle into Jack Lanning's thick hand. Joel filled a third glass with beer without awaiting further invitation. The Deacon's slitted eyes, from under battered brows that hid their glance, watched the soft-footed Phil Phelan saunter up and step in behind. As if by instinct, the Deacon took a step backward and took in the hatchet-faced Phil with his glance.

"Meet Phil Phelan, my pardner," boomed Jack Lanning's heavy voice. "What's the name, stranger?"

"A gent outside called me Deacon as I got off the stage. That'll do fer want of a better name."

"Deacon it is," chuckled Lanning. "Joel, give Phil a drink. It might fetch a smile on his face, though I doubt it. Phil'd make a fust rate undertaker, Deacon. Solemn as hell."

"I can't recollect where our trails has crossed," spoke Phil Phelan. "There's somethin' familiar about you, stranger."

"Ever bin in Cholla?" inquired the Deacon flatly, without a smile.

"Lord, no."

"Neither have I," admitted the Deacon. "So I reckon that musta bin where we met."

Diamond Jack Lanning laughed loudly—a trifle too loudly. Phelan scowled at his watered whiskey, and his lipless mouth twitched upward at one corner. Joel polished an already spotless bar with his white towel. There was something about this black-garbed stranger with the horribly scarred face that made the dispenser of drinks feel uneasy. Men never spoke of Cholla, here at the Palace. The name of that dread place always brought back the chilling memory of the terrible Red Lawler and his vow to send his former associates to Cholla. It was like the mention of an unforgotten curse.

Red Lawler was dead. But his memory, to the three men who heard the grisly joke about Cholla, was fresh as yesterday.

Another man, who sat playing cards with several others, had looked up suddenly at mention of the dread name of Cholla—a swarthy man with graying black hair and opaque black eyes. Santos, fourth member of the old Red Lawler gang, looked up from his cards and into a pair of slitted greenish eyes. His dark skin seemed a little pale, and his tight-lipped Texican mouth was taut and grim. His right hand had slid instinctively to a hidden gun.

But there was nothing about the black-clad man with the battered face to bring memory of the grinning, boisterous, hard-drinking, swaggering Red Lawler. This man in black was an old man. His hair and mustache were white as snow. That battered face could not be the handsome, bold-featured face of Red Lawler.

Santos scowled and went back to his cards, vaguely uncomfortable and annoyed. That name Cholla had given him a bad start. Hell, Red Lawler was dead. Santos picked up an untouched drink at his elbow and gulped it down.

The Deacon and the others drank—drank in silence and without even the customary, "Here's how."

III

IT HAD BEEN SAID OF RED LAWLER, outlaw leader, that he could look into a man's brain and read that brain as a student reads a book. He had made a practice of studying every man under his red command. He knew their courage, their false courage, and their weak spot of cowardice. He could tell a man wherein his greatest fear lay. That was one of the reasons why his men so hated him.

He would reach into their innermost hearts and drag forth their cowardice, flaunting it so that others might see just what a thing it was. It was the theory of Red Lawler, student of mankind, that no man living was free from the taint of cowardice. That, in the being of every man, there lay hidden a fear of something.

Red Lawler would watch a man without seeming to be watching. And before long he would somehow pull apart the barrier that hid that man's fear. If he so chose, he would replace that barrier, and the man would never know that Red Lawler had seen that cowering creature inside his heart. Or, if the whim so moved the big red-haired outlaw, he would reach into that man's heart, as a magician might reach into a black bag, and drag forth that bit of cowardice as your magician brings out his kicking white rabbit for the audience to see.

In some ways, Red Lawler was a sort of super-man. His brain was an alert, carefully sharpened bit of mechanism. He read everything he could find, devouring what pleased his fancy, casting aside the rest as useless, like some epicure at a feast. He could talk with keen intelligence on a score of subjects. Save that fate had cast him in the role of an outlaw, Red Lawler would have carved his niche in the world, in some one of a dozen high professions.

His parentage, his past, was a mystery. There were times when the cloak of illiterate speech fell away and he would talk with the glib ease of a professor on a lecture platform. He was generous to the point of lunacy, some times. There were times when he excused faults that to others seemed beyond excusing—or he would

throttle a man because of something that, to another man, would seem trivial.

Some said that he was a millionaire—that he followed the outlaw trail purely from craving for excitement. It was a known fact that, when Red Lawler was sent to prison, he had cached a large fortune somewhere—a fortune that would be hunted always. It may have been that Red Lawler was a little insane. A man of mystery, a man of strange power, a man of terrible purpose.

But Red Lawler was dead.

Those four men at Mescalara who had known Red Lawler, knew that he was dead. Of that fact they had made certain. One of them had visited the Yuma prison and had been shown the record of Red Lawler. Also there was a certain guard there who had, for the past ten years, received certain gifts from the four members of the old Red Lawler gang. And in return for these certain donations, this burly brute had taken advantage of every opportunity to make Red Lawler's prison life as unpleasant as possible.

He would have the big outlaw strung up by the thumbs and would rip the prisoner's back with a rawhide blacksnake until the blood stood in a puddle about the tortured man's ankles. He would taunt Red into a terrible fury and then beat him into insensibility. There were other tricks of torture meant to break a strong man's body and twist his brain. And once, when he thought Red Lawler was dying, he had let slip the information that Red's former companions were footing the bill of torture.

Red Lawler was dead. Diamond Jack Lanning, Phil Phelan, Joel Travis and the swarthy Santos had made sure of that. Only his memory lived to haunt them.

Juana, the little 'breed girl, had disappeared after Red Lawler's capture. Nobody knew where she had gone or what had become of her. Nobody cared, after she had fulfilled her duty as betrayer of her lover. None of the four had ever afterward given her a thought.

THE four former outlaws, under their thin guise of respectability, were

prospering at Mescalara. The Palace was a veritable gold mine. Its doors never closed. Its gambling games ran from one dawn to the next, the dealers working four hour shifts. The bar receipts ran into real money. Then there were the percentage girls who fattened each night's proceeds. The Palace was better than a bonanza gold mine to its four owners.

Now came this scar-faced man in black—the Deacon. And into the hearts of the four former outlaws there crept a sinister sort of chill. An uneasiness that none of the four could name. The Deacon moved about with the aimlessness of a restless spirit unwanted in hell. Grim, unsmiling, unsociable, aimless of purpose. Like a ghost of a restless past that should stay buried.

There was nothing offensive in his manner. He gambled a little, drank sparingly, and kept aloof from the boisterous drinking bouts. He treated the percentage girls with a grave courtesy, bought them an occasional drink or a meal. He seldom spoke to anyone and spent most of his time sitting at some far table, alone, a drink gone stale at his elbow, watching the crowd, his slitted eyes like thin slices of greenish light under the battered brows.

"That damned old buzzard gives me the jimmies," snarled Santos. "Every time I'm gettin' a streak of luck, he sits into the game or stands around starin' at me. And my luck goes out the window."

The luck of Santos lay in the fact that he was diabolically clever with a deck of cards. A past master at card manipulation. A skilled cheat. In all his career at tin-horn gambling he had been caught but once. On that occasion, many years before. Red Lawler had been sitting in the game—Red and Lanning and Joel Travis.

Santos had won heavily.

When the game was over, and the clever sharper was alone with Red Lawler, the bandit leader had taken the deck of cards and with an uncanny dexterity, had duplicated each of Santos's hidden tricks. Red had handed him back the cards with a queer smile that chilled the gambler's heart. He had taken back from the pile of Santos' winnings, the exact

amount of his individual loss.

"Crook those others as much as you damn' please, my amigo," Red Lawler had told him. "But may the devil have mercy on your soul if ever you turn the wrong card up in a game where I'm sitting. Remember that, my amigo."

Santos had never ceased to remember. Under the watching, mocking eyes of Red Lawler, the gambler's deft fingers would suddenly grow clumsy. He would push back his chair and quit whenever Red Lawler was watching the game.

And now, after eleven years, when Santos was again reaping golden harvest with his crooked cards, this black-clad man with the scarred face had come to ruin his game. This white-haired old coot would stand around watching with his slitted eyes until the gambler's hands became moist of palm and clumsy. Santos, with some muttered curse, would give his chair to a house man and quit the game. The Deacon would smile queerly and turn away.

Santos proposed that Phil Phelan take over the Deacon some night. "Take the damned, snake-eyed old walrus for a walk in the moonlight. Send me the bill. I'd donate five hundred dollars to a good cause."

Phil Phelan shrugged his slim shoulders. "Five hundred wouldn't be tobacco money where they'd put me fer croakin' that son."

"What do you mean, Phil?"

But Phil Phelan was not a garrulous man. There was, along his back trail, a certain little episode that he had told himself was buried along with the molding bones of Red Lawler. It had to do with the cold-blooded murder of a United States Marshal in San Francisco. Red Lawler had somehow learned the details of that killing that was still an unbalanced entry on the books of the United States Government. Phil Phelan could never quite explain to his own mind why he had told Red Lawler about it when Red had begun his devilish probing into Phil's heart. It was as if Red had used some sort of hypnotic power. But told he had, in all its damning details. And Red Lawler had never again broached the dread subject

in any manner. So far as Phil Phelan could know, Red Lawler had carried the secret to his grave.

NOW had come this black-clad man with the battered face. And one evening when the Deacon was alone with Phil Phelan, the scar-faced man had taken from his coat pocket a memorandum slip—a small slip of excellent bond paper that bore the seal of the U. S. Government at the top. It was a neatly printed memorandum dealing with the murder of that United States Marshal.

The Deacon had taken it from the shaking fingers of Phil Phelan and touched a match to it. Across the gray ashes of the burnt paper, the slitted eyes of the mysterious Deacon had met the frightened eyes of Phil Phelan, killer. Not a word was spoken. And after a moment that seemed eternity to the killer, who saw a picture of the gallows in the other man's eyes, the Deacon pushed back his chair and bowed formally.

"I expect to be around Mescalara for some time," he said in that toneless, terrible voice he so seldom used. "I shall come and go. Should anything happen to my health, Phelan, I should feel quite upset about what might occur to you. I think we shall understand one another better from now on. Good evening."

That was all. But for Phil Phelan's peace of mind, that was more than enough. Phil Phelan had always had a horror of being hanged.

"If you want the Deacon bumped off Santos," said Phil Phelan, "do your own work on him."

Phil Phelan voiced something along the same line of thought when Diamond Jack Lanning branched the subject of the Deacon.

"He hangs around like a damned buzzard waitin' for somethin' to die, Phil. Rub him out."

"Do your own damned rubbin', Jack. Count me out."

"Scared, Phil?" sneered the kingpin of the Palace combine.

"You're damned right I'm scared." And without another word Phil Phelan had walked away, leaving Diamond Jack

Lanning and Joel Travis staring after him, wonder and fear in their eyes.

"Then it's up to you, Joel. Get the damned old buzzard where his galluses cross. I'll see that you get the breaks."

"How much in it, Jack?"

"A thousand bucks."

"Double it and I'll call the bet."

"Two thousand it is. The Deacon is bad for the business here."

IV

JOEL TRAVIS WAS SMILING AS he untied his bar apron. It was almost midnight. Diamond Jack Lanning put a supernumerary on shift in Joel's place. He watched Joel go into the little office and change his white bartender's jacket for his salt-and-pepper street coat. Joel was quite a dresser—a ladies' man. Joel would not be working alone on the little homicide bargain. He would use a certain clever lady of Mescalara honky-tonks to aid him in erasing the Deacon. He would cut the clever lady in on the winnings; five hundred for her, fifteen hundred in his own pocket.

"Five hundred berries," he explained to the little lady, "is damn' good money for one beer with a few drops of something in to flavor it. Take it or leave it, kiddo."

"Trot over your sap, Joel. I'm in need of some new dresses."

"Now," smiled Joel, "you're talkin' sense. It's the old gloom they call the Deacon. Know him?"

"Who don't? Him and his undertaker coat. Me and the Deacon is pals. Sure, Joel trot him over. I'll tidy up the parlor and get the other girls outa the way."

The trap laid, Joel Travis steered the Deacon over to the Red Lantern. Joel, in that wise manner he was wont to assume, had hinted to the Deacon that the little lady who was hostess at the Red Lantern had taken a shine to the Deacon—that she had made Joel promise to fetch the Deacon over for a swell little feed. There was wine waiting on cracked ice. Chicken fried as only the Red Lantern negress cook could fry spring chicken that had been fattened on buttermilk. There would be other trimmings. Moreover when

the little lady of the Red Lantern took a shine to a gent, he was more than just plain lucky. He was rolling in milk and honey. He was the blond-haired boy with the diamond-studded shirt front.

So Joel Travis, his well oiled and newly cleaned bulldog revolver hung up his coat sleeve by an elastic band that would slide the weapon in a split second into his swift hand, piloted the Deacon over across the dark alleyways to the door of the Red Lantern. No lamb being led to slaughter had ever gone with less guile than the Deacon, who confessed a passion for rare wine, delicious chicken and the entertaining company of such a clever lady as was the young and strikingly beautiful young woman who guided the destinies of the Red Lantern.

A mulatto girl opened the door, and the Deacon entered the Red Lantern with Joel Travis. It was a few minutes past midnight.

The door was closed and locked behind them.

LATER, an hour or so later, Diamond Jack Lanning sauntered over to the Red Lantern. He was informed by the mulatto girl that the landlady had issued positive orders that nobody was to be admitted. Nobody. "Yes, suh. De madam was givin' a extra special pahty. Birthday pahty."

Diamond Jack Lanning smiled and chuckled to himself as he strolled back to the Palace. He was at peace with himself and the world in general. Joel Travis knew his ladies. Better that Lanning keep his fingers out of the fire. Nor was he at all worried when neither the Deacon nor Joel Travis put in an appearance the rest of the night.

The following day gave no sign of the two men. The doors of the Red Lantern were barred. No one answered the door bell—the only door bell in Mescalara. Tawdry looking in the revealing light of day, was the Red Lantern. Its dingy brick walls were uninviting and shabby looking. The red curtains were tightly drawn. Not a sound came from inside. But there was nothing so unusual about its daytime silence. Houses such as the Red Lantern

were never awake until lamplight.

But Diamond Jack Lanning spent a restless, uneasy afternoon. He hung around the bar, waiting for Joel Travis, or for some word from Joel. Lanning drank much more than his customary three fingers of Bourbon each hour.

Finally, at dusk, he went back over to the Red Lantern. The mulatto maid did not answer the bell. In her stead was another maid. She had been hired, so she explained, the night before. No, the madam was not up yet. No, suh, she hadn't seen Mistah Joel Travis.

Against her protests, Diamond Jack Lanning strode down the hall, to the rear apartments which were occupied by the lady who ran the Red Lantern. The door was locked. Lanning opened it with a heavy chair and strode inside, filled with indignation and a little fear he could not name.

The rooms were empty. There, on the table stood the soiled dishes and remnants of a feast. Stale wine stood in the three glasses. The ice in the metal buckets had melted around the bottles and spilled on the turkey-red rug. There was absolutely no trace of the lady or her two guests at the midnight feast. All three had vanished.

Mescalara never saw the clever little lady of the Red Lantern again. She had vanished forever. Nor did Mescalara ever again see Joel Travis. He, too, had disappeared.

TEN days later, at that hour of the night when the Palace was going full blast, a black-clad, scar-faced man stepped through the swinging doors. The Deacon had come back to Mescalara.

Diamond Jack Lanning reeled a little and gripped the sinewy arm of Phil Phelan. "Look!"

Phil Phelan disengaged the jeweled hand of his partner. "That's my gun arm, you damned fool." His voice was cold, with the hint of sneering triumph.

"I'd say, Lanning," he said dispassionately, "that you are just two thousand berries winner. I think we've seen the last of Joel. He pulled that same one on Black Jack Tupper at San Antone. He lacked the originality to change his tactics. The drinks are on you, amigo."

The Deacon came directly up to where the two men stood. There was nothing in his manner to indicate that he had even been absent from town. He nodded to the two partners and glanced swiftly at Santos who sat at his eternal card game, his dark face a trifle pale.

Diamond Jack Lanning tried to force something of heartiness into his voice. "Howdy, Deacon. Have a drink? Long time no see yuh."

"I'll take whiskey. Long time? That all depends, my amigo, upon where you spend the time. If a man's in good company, time slips by mighty fast. But there are other places, Yuma prison or Cholla, for instance, when a day is a hell of a long time to stay."

"What in hell do you know about Yuma—or Cholla?" Lanning's red face took on a mottled appearance.

"I have been to both places, my amigo. And I have come back from both places. You look unwell, Lanning. Heart trouble?"

The Deacon reached for the bar bottle and poured himself a stiff drink. Lanning muttered something and filled his own glass. Phil Phelan looked slightly amused and somewhat uneasy.

Santos, with a growled oath, shoved back his chair and nodded curtly for one of his men to take his place. The Deacon beckoned the swarthy gambler with a little gesture. Santos came up to the bar, a dangerous glint in his opaque eyes.

"You seem to be annoyed, my amigo?" smiled the Deacon grimly.

"That ugly mug of yours is a jinx," snarled the gambler. "If I had my way, you'd be out in the street with the rest of the bums."

"A gambler," rasped the voice of the Deacon, "is supposed to be a man that will take a chance. Tonight, my fine amigo, if you have that instinct and the guts to back your cards, you and I will gamble. I'll give you that chance to put me out in the street where you claim I belong."

"I don't get yuh, mister." Santos eyed the scar-faced man. Santos was by every instinct a gambler. He had a certain brand of nerve that was like finely tempered steel. There was a chill to the Deacon's eyes.

"I have money, Santos. Enough money to cover any bet you can make. I'll gamble with that money. One of us will go broke. Whoever loses, loses more than his money. The last hand we play will be to see who takes the other man's life. Santos, I think you're too damned much of a coward to call my bluff."

"Am I?" The gambler's face twitched with livid anger. He dared not refuse that proposition and stay in Mescalara. "Am I? You lie, you buzzard! I'm calling you. Do you hear that, you old four-flusher? I'm calling."

The Deacon nodded, his green eyes slitted. "Drink on it, Santos. Join Lanning and Phelan and me in this little drink."

So they drank, the Deacon and the three men who had once been members of the Red Lawler gang—drank in a silence that was tense and unpleasant.

V

MESCALARA still recalls that game of cards between Santos and the scar-faced Deacon. The few bar flies who had heard the Deacon's proposal, spread the news. There was to be a game for high stakes—the highest stakes ever played for at the Palace. The loser of that card game was to die. The game would commence at midnight, thus giving both men a few brief hours to prepare to meet the loser's fate.

Santos, Lanning, Phil Phelan and the Deacon had emptied their glasses, and the Deacon had left them with the promise to return at midnight with money enough to call any bet Santos might make.

Left alone, the three ex-outlaws had gone into quick conference. Santos appeared to his two partners.

"I want a bankroll." He was nervous, his dark face taut and grim looking. "I'll need fat money if that old son is well heeled."

"You got the house bank behind yuh," growled Diamond Jack Lanning. "But may God help you, Santos, if you don't take that old coot to a cleanin'."

"Better save out breakfast money," sneered Phil Phelan, "the Deacon is no slouch. He out-foxed Joel."

"Joel," sneered Santos, "used a woman. She double-crossed him, that's all." He held out his long-fingered hands. "I use these. And they don't ever fail. They'll win his last dollar. And when I've finished bustin' him, I'll take these same two hands and kill him like I'd kill a snake. Joel always was a fool."

Lanning nodded. "Joel was stuck on that woman. It looks now like she'd made a sucker outa him. You got this old buzzard sewed in a sack if you play it right. No more booze. You'll stay sober tonight. You'll win or I'll save the Deacon the trouble of rubbing you out. Think that over when you stack the deck on him."

Phil Phelan smiled crookedly. "He said he'd bin to Yuma—and to Cholla. Somehow I don't reckon he lied. I'd like to ask him if he knew Red Lawler at Yuma."

Santos whirled on Phelan with a snarl. "Damn you for a fool. Are you tryin' to pass a jinx on me?"

"Better take something for yore nerves, Santos. You act like a superstitious, greaser. I'd bet a lot that the Deacon has done time. If he did it at Yuma, he mighta met Red. And Red mighta tipped him off to stuff. That's what I'm drivin' at. Deacon knows a lot. A hell of a lot. Enough to run a nasty bluff on us, anyhow. He out-smarted Joel. He'll lick you, Santos, if you get superstitious."

Phil Phelan took a banknote from his pocket, smoothed it out, and passed it to Diamond Jack Lanning. Lanning looked from the wrinkled greenback into Phil's mocking eyes.

"Well? What's this?"

"Money." Phil Phelan rolled a thin cigaret and lit it. His lipless mouth twisted unpleasantly. "The Deacon passed it to pay for that round of drinks. Look at the serial number on that piece of green money, then try to remember what the number means."

Black Jack Lanning's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. "It's from that Santa Fe job we pulled with Red."

PHIL PHELAN nodded and reclaimed the bill from Lanning's diamond-studded hand. "It's bin made to look like it has bin in circulation a long time. But

it hasn't. It's bin cached, along with more like it, for better than ten years. I tell you, gents, our Deacon met Red Lawler at Yuma. Red has tipped him off to his old cache. This Deacon has mebbys promised Red to hunt us down and finish us. Damn him, he's got my number. He's got a line on you two boys. And if Santos don't put out our Deacon's light, then it's up to you and me, Jack, to do the trick. This Deacon is about as safe as a charge of powder with a short fuse lit. Santos, it's up to you. I wish you nothin' but plenty luck."

The Palace was packed when the tall, grim form of the Deacon came through the swinging doors a few minutes before midnight. He seemed to be the only man in the place who was not tense. Walking up to where Santos stood at the bar with Lanning and Phil Phelan, he nodded to them, his battered face expressionless. His quick glance passed from the three partners to the packed crowd beyond.

"Supposing you give us a private room, Lanning," he rasped, "where we won't be bothered by this mob. It's up to Santos whether he and I go in there with our guns or without 'em. Lock us in that room and keep the key. Only the winner will come out, perhaps. *Quien sabe?* Do you agree on those terms, my amigo?"

"Suits me," sneered Santos. "Leave our guns out here. We'll both come out, win or lose. But the winner has the right to get his gun from behind the bar. The loser stays without his six-shooter. Does that go?"

The Deacon nodded. Before any man could follow the swift movement of his two scarred hands, the Deacon had slid his guns out and laid them on the bar. It was a dramatic bit of work that brought a pleased gasp of admiration from the crowd. The white-haired old hellion had guts—guts and a pair of fast hands. The Deacon's grim mouth twitched into a queer smile as the murmur of admiration swept across the crowd. They would see to it that he got fair play. The little gesture had won him their backing.

Diamond Jack Lanning, Phil Phelan, the scowling Santos did not discount that scoring. The crowd, made up of all manner

of men, would demand that the Deacon get a fair deal—which was not exactly in keeping with their planning. Santos laid a .45 and a stubby Derringer on the bar. The Deacon reached into his pocket and brought forth another weapon. It was the bulldog pistol once owned by Joel Travis. To it was fastened a length of elastic. He smiled crookedly at the three partners as he placed the gun on the bar.

"A keepsake," he rasped. "I took it off a man that don't need it any longer. Joel Travis has done took up residence at a town called Cholla, down across the line. I'm ready, gentlemen."

Lanning led the way to a card room at the rear of the Palace. His red face was mottled, and his eyes shifted uneasily. Behind him walked Santos and the Deacon. The crowd followed close on their heels. Phil Phelan alone remained at the deserted bar. He poured himself a stiff drink, downed it at a gulp, and followed it with a second jolt of raw whiskey.

He examined the bulldog revolver that had belonged to Joel Travis. Its chambers were filled. There was no burnt powder fouling the barrel. The gun had not been fired.

He laid it down and picked up one of the pair of Colt six-shooters belonging to the Deacon. Blue of finish, with ivory handles worn yellow with age. Heavy, clumsy, except in expert hands. Big calibre weapons of death. Phil Phelan, without looking up, knew that a pair of eyes watched him. He laid down the guns and slowly turned to face a man he had never remembered seeing before—a tall, raw-boned man with corn-colored hair and steel blue eyes.

The man's homely, big-featured face was good natured looking. But there was a grimness to the eyes and mouth, an unpleasant sort of honest courage that was disconcerting.

LANNING was returning now, followed by the crowd. Santos and the Deacon had gone into their room there at the far end of the gambling hall. A few men stood curiously about the locked door. The bulk of the crowd were returning for

refreshments.

The big man with the steady eyes of steely blue grinned good humoredly and strode up to the bar. Phelan's hat brim came to the man's shoulder.

"Good guns the old feller packs," rumbled the stranger. "From where I stood, seemed like he knowed how tuh handle 'em too. Dunno as I ever seen faster hands except onct. Onct, up at Sacramento, when ol' Red Lawler stuck up a gamblin' house, he made just such a play."

"Who the hell do you happen to be, stranger?" snapped Phil Phelan, his nerves scraped raw.

The big stranger lifted back the edge of a weatherbeaten coat. Phil Phelan was staring at the badge of a U. S. Marshal. Phelan stepped back as the man might recoil from the swing of a gallows' rope. The law officer grinned.

"Still kinda scared uh the Jawn Law, are yuh, Philips? Dunno as I blame yuh much. So long as you boys go straight, I don't reckon yuh need worry. Old indictments as dusty as yourn is too expensive fer to monkey with. I'm just here in Mescalara fer pleasure, yuh might say."

"Drink?" Phil Phelan had gathered in the frayed ends of his split nerves. His gash of a mouth was smiling. Lanning came up, and Phil winked at the tall marshal.

"Jack, shake hands with the Law." He chuckled as Lanning gave a quick start. The U. S. Marshal laughed.

"Belly up to the bar," boomed Diamond Jack Lanning, when he had shaken hands with the marshal. "This is a real night, eh, Marshal?"

"Glad I happened in," grinned the big man.

"Santos and the Deacon are locked in, doing a little two-handed gambling. One of 'em is goin' to lose."

This was the sort of sport that quickened the pulse of the rough men who roamed the frontier towns. The law, in such cases, stepped back. If two men wished to gamble away their chance of living, that was their own affair. John Law was content to be a spectator. Life was cheap. Colonel Colt still reigned. A man was as good as the speed of his gun hand

if he lived along the Mexican border those days.

This tall law officer with the steel blue eyes, holder of a roving commission that led him to far corners of the country, might be here on pleasure. More likely he had some task to fulfil. But he would be very careful to keep his hands clean of any quarrel that did not concern his immediate chore here.

Lanning knew that. Phil Phelan knew it. But Phil's mind was not at rest. The sight of that badge sent a cold shiver down his spine. Santos and the Deacon became a minor issue. Phil Phelan was concerned only with the fact that he did not wish to stretch hangman's rope.

But the big law officer seemed concerned only in seeing that the two ivory-handled guns belonging to the Deacon were properly cared for. He picked them up and handed them carefully to the bartender.

"Put them on that shelf, then keep yore own and every other man's paws off them two guns. They belong to a hell of a brave man."

He drank with Lanning and Phil Phelan and swapped idle chatter with some cowmen who were celebrating. But his blue eyes kept straying to that locked door at the far end of the gambling hall—though that two-handed game would, in all probability, last many hours. There was a buzzer that connected card room and bar. When that sounded, the game would be over.

VI

AN HOUR WENT BY—TWO hours. Inside the locked card room Santos and the Deacon played for the highest stakes ever wagered in Mescalara. The crowd could not seem to regain its gaiety or boisterous noise. Fiddlers and accordion players labored indifferently in an effort to entice the customers onto the dance floor. But nobody wanted to dance.

The percentage girls whispered and laughed a little hysterically. They spoke often of the Red Lantern and wondered what had happened there. News had spread that the Deacon had sent Joel Travis to

Cholla. Had he? Had he really done that? Some doubted, while others believed that the dandified Joel was now one of the living dead who had crossed the desert and now dwelt there among the lepers.

What of the woman who had run the Red Lantern? What had the Deacon done to her?

"Nothing, dearie," purred one of the girls from that house. "The Deacon and her was old pals. She's gone to Paris or the Argentine. Never mind how I know. And with her went the little high-brown gal that acted as maid at the Red Lantern. Some dames do get the breaks. Joel? Just another sucker she played. Who blames her? What did he ever do for anybody but Joel Travis?"

They kept watching that closed door. There were quite a few bets being made. It was past two o'clock in the morning. Other gambling games were idle. Sallow-faced gamblers, their pallor made more ghastly by the tint of their green eyeshades, sat at their empty tables, toying with cards—watching, like so many cats waiting at a rat hole.

The bar was doing a brisk trade. The waiting demanded the relaxation of booze. Phil Phelan paced about like some animal, his face drawn and hard looking, his eyes seldom leaving the U. S. Marshal who swapped yarns with the cowmen of whose fraternity he was so obviously a member.

Diamond Jack Lanning stood alone at the bar, silent, surly, unapproachable. Once, when a drunk jostled him unintentionally, Lanning knocked the luckless fellow cold with a single, swift blow. The crowd kept clear of him. They thought he was worrying about the money Santos had carried into the card room in the black satchel.

Perhaps he *was* worried about the money. A nice fortune had been in that satchel. And its safety rested with the skill of Santos. But there was something else that had pulled the nerves of the blustering Diamond Jack Lanning, something that had to do with the haunting memory of Red Lawler—Red's terrible ability to hate. That threat he had made to

send every one of his betrayers to Cholla. . . .

Who was the Deacon? What had he meant when he tossed Joel's gun on the bar and said that about Joel Travis being in Cholla? Bluff? Had the Deacon met Red Lawler at Yuma and given him a promise to carry on Red's work of vindication?

What the hell ailed Phil Phelan? Phil acted for all the world like a man about to die. A man who walked on the edge of the abyss of death. Phil avoided Lanning. He kept to himself, walking around like some restless animal ready to spring. Watching that big John Law. Watching that locked door. Drinking too much. . . . That reminded Diamond Jack Lanning.

"Whiskey," he snarled at the bartender who now worked in Joel's place. "And leave the bottle sit here. Then get to hell up there and take care of the trade. Quit gawkin'. Get ta hell away from me, or I'll knock yore damned ears off with this bottle."

NERVES. . . . Ghosts. . . . There had been something between Red Lawler and Jack Lanning that no living man on earth had ever known. Only Red had known. Memory of that thing was haunting Diamond Jack Lanning now. Tonight, after all these years.

Red Lawler was dead and in his grave. No other man had known that secret. And yet that old coot called the Deacon had let drop a word that brought back the black secret—like a flash of swift lightning. It was when Lanning was unlocking the door of the card room. Santos and the Deacon stood waiting. The Deacon had been standing almost at Jack Lanning's back. It was sort of dark, there in the short hallway. Other men were behind the Deacon and Santos. It might have been anyone of the crowd who spoke—except that Lanning could not ever be mistaken in that rasping, grating toneless voice of the scar-faced Deacon.

It had spoken one word—the name of a woman who had been Lanning's lawful wife. Her name was Charlotte. Lanning had fallen for the charms of a younger and more beautiful woman and had got

rid of her. He had hired a pair of Mexicans to steal her and take her to Cholla—Cholla, from where no man or woman ever returned. When the two Mexicans reported for the balance of their infamous pay, Lanning had shot them down, claiming they attacked him. Nobody living knew, so far as Jack Lanning could learn.

Then one night when they were riding along together in the moonlight, across the Mohave Desert, Red Lawler had told Jack Lanning that he had once been to Cholla and had come back from there; that he had met there a woman called Charlotte.

"I told her, Lanning, that if I got back from Cholla, I'd find you. I'd tell you I'd seen her and that she was waiting for you there. I half promised, Jack, that I might some day send you to her. And she promised to wait for you."

Lanning had gone clammy under Red Lawler's grisly words—half jesting, yet perhaps in deadly earnest. No man but Red Lawler knew how much of that promise to the doomed woman had been truth. That was Red Lawler's way. Red had never again mentioned Charlotte or Cholla to Jack Lanning.

And tonight, as Diamond Jack Lanning was unlocking the door of that card room, and the mysterious Deacon had stood behind him in the shadow, the Deacon's gritty, sepulchral voice had spoken so that no ears but those of Diamond Jack Lanning could have heard.

"There is a woman named Charlotte waiting at Cholla!"

Dead man's secret—voiced in a dead man's tone. Lanning had jerked upright to stare, horribly scared, into the unfathomable green slits that were the Deacon's eyes.

"Unlock the door, my amigo, Santos and I are waitin'."

DIAMOND JACK LANNING NOW wondered if he might be going crazy. Since Joel Travis had vanished Lanning had been drinking heavily. Beginning with absinthe and whiskey before breakfast, continuing all day and far into each night.

Absinthe was tricky stuff—dope. It set men's brains afire with queer hallucinations sometimes. It painted pictures of unrealities. It must be that the damned stuff had eaten away some of Diamond Jack Lanning's sanity. He'd imagined that the Deacon had spoken that brief sentence. Nobody but Red Lawler knew that Charlotte was at Cholla, waiting. And Red Lawler was dead—dead as hell. Queer thing, how booze would drive a man nutty. Look at Phil Phelan, pacing around like a caged wolf, lean, gray of face, ready to kill, to die killing. Phil couldn't handle whiskey like other men. Phil was too high-strung to stand booze. . . .

The sound of the buzzer jerked Lanning about. He did not even take notice of his spilled liquor. Phil Phelan, too, had halted his pacing. He stood there, his cold, glittering eyes on the locked door, his hand on his gun. He was ready to kill—ready to die killing.

"There'll be no damned tricks, Lanning," boomed the U. S. Marshal. The big officer, followed by the cowmen and others of the crowd whose code demanded fair play, pressed forward. Diamond Jack Lanning and Phil Phelan crossed glances. They were beaten unless Santos had won. Lanning's hand shook as he fitted the key into the lock. He stepped back. Someone was turning the knob from the inside of that silent room.

The door opened and Santos stepped out, the Deacon just behind him. Santos' face was as gray as slate. His eyes looked lifeless, sunken. The Deacon's scarred face was grim, unsmiling, devoid of expression. His green slits of eyes traveled from Lanning to Phil Phelan.

"Santos lost," he said flatly. "His life belongs to me. But I don't want the dirty blood of a card cheat's life. I'm letting Santos live."

"You damned fiend!" whispered Santos huskily. "Lord, boys—he's sendin' me to Cholla!"

As the Deacon gripped the gambler's arm and firmly piloted him through the crowd that parted to give them passage-way, Lanning and Phelan stood aside with the others. The tall U. S. Marshal handed the Deacon his guns. Through the hushed

silence that was broken only by the quick breathing of men and the clump of two pairs of boot heels, the Deacon led Santos out through the door and into the black night beyond.

Mescalara would never again see Santos. He rode with the terrible scar-faced man in black—into the desert night, bound for the dread spot of Cholla.

VII

PHIL PHELAN AND DIAMOND

Jack Lanning sat together in that same back room where Santos had lost his chance of life. The Deacon had taken not a dollar of the money for which the two had gambled. What had happened behind that locked door, what bets had been laid, what words passed across the green baize table, no man save Santos and the Deacon knew. Santos was gone. With him had gone the sinister Deacon. There had been no promise on the part of the scar-faced man that he would return. Two weeks and a day had gone by, and there was no hint of the Deacon's return, or intention to return, to Mescalara.

"Odd," rasped Phil Phelan, as if musing aloud, "that the big U. S. Marshal faded out that night and never come back. I'm wonderin', Lanning, if the big son really was an officer uh the law."

"Who in hell gives a damn?" snarled Diamond Jack Lanning. "That croakin' buzzard called the Deacon is my worry. By Heaven, Phil, I'm killin' him on sight. I can't stand the pressure no longer."

"Yuh need another drink," sneered Phil Phelan whose face was drawn and haggard looking. "Yo're shakin' like an old coot with the palsy."

"While yo're so damned steady, I suppose?" snapped Lanning. "God, Phil, this business is drivin' me loco. Can't sleep at night. When I do, it's like havin' the snakes. My grub stays like a hunk of cold lead in my belly. I'm set tuh pull out. You kin stay if yuh want. I'll make you a present uh the Palace."

"I'll be just as kind hearted as you are, pardner. I'll hand 'er right back."

Phil Phelan tried to laugh, failed, and shut up, tight-lipped. He fished into his

vest pocket and took a small capsule. He swallowed it quickly, washing it down with whiskey. Phil Phelan had been taking these pills for a week or more. They soothed his nerves better than liquor. Morphine, probably. He'd gotten the stuff from the one doctor in Mescalara. The doc said he used the same thing for his own nerves after he'd bin on a big bender. They staved off the tortures of delirium tremens.

"When shall we pull out, Phil?"

"We ain't pullin' out. No man yet ever made me run, except John Law."

"And Red Lawler," added Diamond Jack Lanning with a sneer.

"Red Lawler is dead," snapped Phelan.

"Red's dead and gone to hell," agreed Lanning, as if he had repeated that sentence to himself a thousand times. "But it looks like he'd hired himself a ghost. There's somethin' about that old Deacon that gives a man the creeps. He says he was at Yuma—that he's bin to Cholla and come back from there. I never saw a man that ever escaped from Cholla. I'd as lief believe that a man could come back from hell."

Phil Phelan nodded. "The damned old son may be lyin'. He's never proved he'd bin to Yuma or to Cholla, either." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Hear anything from Butch Flanders?"

Butch Flanders was the prison guard they had bribed to torture Red Lawler.

Lanning shook his head, and his scowl became blacker. "I wrote to the warden. He sent word back that Butch Flanders left about a month ago. He disappeared—without drawin' the pay he had comin'. Nobody knows where he went, ner how. He just disappeared. But there was plenty men that hated Butch. Any one of a hundred ex-cons mighta croaked him and dumped his carcass in the river. They all hated him."

Phil Phelan's drug-brightened eyes snapped. "I asked the Deacon once, if he knew Butch Flanders. He said he did. 'Butch,' says the Deacon, smiling that damned smile of his, 'is not at Yuma any more. He has took up his claim at Cholla.' And he walked off."

"That's why you asked me to write the warden at Yuma?" gritted Lanning.

Phil Phelan nodded. "I wanted to check up on that detail. I was hopin' to prove the damned old coot a liar."

A HEAVY silence held the two former outlaws. Diamond Jack Lanning took another drink. Phil Phelan, his nerves steadied by the drug, smoked one thin cigaret after another. Lanning's black cigar was cold, its end a soggy mat in his clenched teeth.

"I'm quitting Mescalara tonight, Phil. I can't stand it. I'm goin' somewhere and enjoy my money."

"We've sunk a lot in this damned joint. We're settin' purty. I'm not lettin' a white-headed old fool run me out. I'm stickin', and yo're stickin' with me. And if the Deacon shows his ugly mug here in Mescalara, that'll be his sorrow." Phil got to his feet.

"I gotta get my pill box loaded again at the doc's. I'll be back over in about an hour. If I run into mister Deacon, I'll fetch back his ugly carcass and we'll lay it on the pool table for the boys to look at. But I don't think he's idiot enough to show here any more. He knows we'll hand him his one way ticket tuh hell when he steps in. Adios. I'll be back over before the night gits started."

He gave a quick look to his guns and went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Alone in the card-room, Diamond Jack Lanning downed two more stiff drinks of whiskey spiked with absinthe. The stuff sent a faint glow of warmth over his body. He smiled and straightened his red tie with its huge horseshoe pin of chipped diamonds. Into his feverish brain came an idea that narrowed his brooding eyes.

Phil Phelan was too hopped to have any real sense. Phil was lightning with his gun. Like a gray streak when he went into action. He might stand an even chance with the fast guns of the Deacon. Not so, Jack Lanning. Lanning was clumsy with a gun until he had the gun spitting fire. He was slow on the draw, and no amount of practice had ever made him fast with his shooting iron, as the West gauged speed.

Plainly, it was Diamond Jack Lanning's move. He'd leave Phil to hold the empty sack. He'd clean out the safe, get in his top buggy, and give his team of bays their head. No horseflesh in the Southwest could catch the dust of the bays if they were given an hour's start. To hell with Phil Phelan. Let him stay and keep the Palace. It was a gold mine. He wasn't leaving Phil strapped. He'd leave the house bank-roll for the gambling layouts. There was a cellar stocked with all kinds of booze.

Phil was welcome to it all. It was Diamond Jack Lanning who had made the Palace what it was. He'd hand the Palace and its good-will to Phil Phelan. As for Diamond Jack Lanning, well, New York was a real burg. He'd always had it back in his mind to go there. And this seemed the fitting and proper time for the movement eastward.

Diamond Jack Lanning took the black satchel from under the office desk. He spun the combination of the big steel safe. Less than five minutes later, Diamond Jack Lanning was walking swiftly down the alley to his private quarters. There were a few things he did not care to leave behind: A brand new suit; a few expensive ties; his new boots and a beaver hat; silver toilet articles; some silk shirts. They were packed and ready. He could find his traveling bag without even striking a light.

That bag had been packed and ready for several days, even as the team of blood bays had been harnessed every evening.

The house was dark. The heavy shades pulled tight. There was the stale odor of cigar smoke and whiskey, faintly weighted with perfume. Lanning groped in the closet for the packed bag. A pair of hands, like the grip of steel claws, closed around Lanning's soft throat. His thin cry was muffled by the clothes that hung in the closet.

A gag was tied into the saloon man's gaping mouth. Rawhide thongs pinioned his arms. Half conscious, he heard a rattling whisper in his ear.

"Goin' on a little visit, Lanning. Excuse the hurry, but there's a lady waiting at the other end of the long trail. Charlotte, Lanning. She's waiting for you at Cholla!"

VIII

MEN HAD CALLED PHIL Phelan some hard names. Many had claimed that he was a thief, a man without honor, a killer who shot from the dark. A few men had called Phil Phelan a coward. Those few had lied. Thief, killer, a man without honor, yes. But Phil Phelan was not a coward.

He had killed two or three men from ambush because he figured that they would kill him that same way if he did not beat them at their own game. It had ever been his contention that only fools risked their lives for the sake of a silly code of fair play; that if he hated a man bad enough to kill, he would do that killing with the least possible danger to himself.

Whenever Phil Phelan figured that he was the faster man, he gave the other fellow a chance to face him in the open. That man would die thinking that Phil had given him an even break. Those who watched said that it had been an even fight. Save for the speed of Phil Phelan's gun hand, a speed which the killer had perfected and gauged to the mere thread of a split second, the fight had been fair.

There was moreover, always that element of luck in such an affair.

There is no man living who does not have an occasional day when his mind and muscles refuse to co-ordinate with their usual smoothness. But as Phil Phelan's mathematical mind reckoned, that odd chance was the only chance he took when he stood on his feet and swapped bullets with another man. Yet Phil Phelan was not a coward.

There had been times when the fight, and the manner of fighting, had not been of Phil Phelan's choosing; when the hail of hot lead broke like a sudden storm out of a blue sky; when God and the devil gambled for the souls of fighting men—and fate or luck or whatever men might choose to term it, decided which should die.

Phil Phelan had been in such fights and had not, by word or action, shown the yellow taint of cowardice. He had fought without flinching. Those few who termed him a coward should not discount those

times.

Red Lawler, who hated Phil Phelan as no living man had ever hated the tight lipped gunman, said of Phil Phelan, that if he were caught in a tight, he'd rather have Phil with him than to have the aid of half a dozen other gun fighters. Red Lawler had never discounted Phil Phelan's courage or his cool headedness in a gun scrap. The two had fought, back to back, against appalling odds, when defeat seemed inevitable. Phil had never whimpered, never weakened. His gun barrel had grown hot in defense of Red Lawler, and Red never forgot.

Red had never thanked Phil Phelan. That is to say, the big red-haired giant had not used up any words of sentiment. Later, shortly before Red's capture, on a certain dark night Phil Phelan had lain in ambush waiting for Red to pass so that he might kill him from the shadows, on that night. Red had failed to come that way, and Phil had returned to camp with a clean gun and disappointment in his heart. Then Red Lawler had laughed. Joel Travis and Santos and Jack Lanning were there at the fire. Red stood with his back against a big pine.

"Don't ever try any more of your damned bushwhacking tricks on me, my amigo," Red Lawler had said. "I don't like it. I'd hate to kill you, because you're a hell of a good man in a tight."

There was a gun in the outlaw leader's hand. Phil Phelan knew that his life hung by the slender thread of Red's whim. Red had slowly put away his gun, chuckling at Phil's discomfiture. The incident was closed. But Phil Phelan knew that Red Lawler had chosen that way of thanking him.

Those that labeled Phil Phelan coward might have gained something by being there that night so long ago. They would have seen the lipless outlaw stand without trembling, without flinching, in that moment when he looked into the eyes of death. No, Phil Phelan was not a coward.

HE was no coward now at Mescalara, when he found that Diamond Jack Lanning had gone away. Phil Phelan stood there in Lanning's deserted room.

There, on the table, stood the black satchel filled with money that Lanning had planned to take with him. There was Lanning's traveling bag, packed, locked, strapped. Phil Phelan cursed the panicky Lanning with a toneless, voiceless snarling. Then the brief spell of anger left. Phil smiled and picked up the penciled note that lay on the table, weighted down with Lanning's own gun. His hand was steady.

The note was without formal beginning or signature at the end.

"Jack Lanning," so ran the note, "has gone with me to Cholla. I will be back in ten days. You and I will have a medicine talk. Because you are always standing in the shadow of the gallows, would advise against any hasty action of any description. Do nothing until we have talked together."

Phil Phelan burned the note. He took the box of pills from his vest pocket and tossed its contents into the brass cuspidor beside the table. Then he picked up the black satchel with its money and walked out of Lanning's cabin.

Back at the Palace, Phil Phelan put the money in the safe, then called every one up for a drink. He seemed in a good humor. His nervousness was gone, and in its stead had come a grim sort of jubilation. Diamond Jack Lanning had gone. He would never again return to Mescalara. The Palace and all it contained, good and bad, belonged to Phil Phelan.

"Lanning's gone. I'm the one and only ramrod here. Drink hearty, gents, and have another." He locked the cash register.

"Give the boys whatever they want. Everything is on the house. Gents, come git your poison."

Behind his smile lay a queer sort of lonesomeness. Here were a hundred men drinking his whiskey, telling him what a hot sport he was. And Phil Phelan could not claim one real friend among the lot. That was life. How many real friends can any man claim? Damned few. Preacher or sinner, rich man or beggar, how many friends can he claim? There would not be one among this lot to say a kind word for Phil Phelan when that killer had gone.

Take Diamond Jack Lanning. Lanning

had given them whiskey, had fed some of them, given them beds. But no man-jack of them asked where Lanning had gone, or how, or why. Lanning was gone—just as yesterday was gone—and without causing any more comment than the passing of another day. Phil's thin smile became a sneer. Damn 'em. Damn every last man of the pack.

"Belly up to the bar, men. Drink all you kin hold. Drink till yuh fall down and git tromped on, down there in the dirt and spilt beer and spit. Git as drunk as you kin git. It's free. Belly up, gents!"

He walked off to sit at a far table with a bottle of whiskey and a glass for company. There was a lonesome hollow in the heart of Phil Phelan that needed filling. For lack of a better thing, the killer used whiskey to fill its emptiness. His brooding, bitter eyes watched the mob as it milled about the bar, laughing, snarling, jostling. Animals. . . . Drunks. . . . Hogs at a dirty trough. The percentage women hung to them, pitiful bits of human wreckage washed up on an unclean shore.

PHIL PHELAN, wrapped in brooding thought, hardly noticed that a girl had slipped into an empty chair at his table. He looked at her casually, without really seeing her.

"Step up and drink, sister."

She made no reply. Phil Phelan gave her another look. Probably she'd be just another woman after the price of a ticket that would take her somewhere away from Mescalara. . . . There was something vaguely familiar about the soft oval of her dark-skinned face. Something in her large dark eyes stirred some forgotten memory. Her red mouth was trying to smile.

"Who are you?" Phil Phelan asked abruptly.

"Juana. Juana Romano. . . . You do not, per'aps, remember?"

"Can't say I do. Juana Romano. Nope. You win, sister."

"Below Yuma, on the Colorado Reeve. Per'aps ten, eleven year. I was veree young then. Fourteen, I guess. You pay me some monee to help you an' the other men keel Red Lawler. You forget, senor?"

Phil Phelan stared hard at the girl who had now become a woman—a woman with sad eyes and a pitiful sort of smile. Yes, he remembered, now. He had sometimes wondered where she had gone, after that night when the humid river air stunk with the sickish odor of arrow-weeds and fresh blood. The sticky blackness had been ripped with gunfire, hoarse shouts, the screams of a woman. He remembered Juana's hysterical screams as she threw the red slippers and the cheap trinkets and the silver dollars out into the river. . . . He could hear Red Lawler's husky, pain-racked cursing as he shut her up and kept her from jumping into the river. Phil Phelan had wondered more than once about Juana. . . .

"I remember, sister. Bin a long time since that night. You've changed a lot. You've growed up into a right purty thing. Good clothes, too. You bin workin' here, Juana?"

She smiled a little and shook her head. "No. I do not work here. I jus' come here tonight."

A glint of suspicion flashed in the cold eyes of Phil Phelan. "Who sent you here?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Juana shrugged her pretty shoulders, and her red mouth made a wry little grimace. "Who knows? Red Lawler, per'aps."

"Red Lawler is dead—dead as hell."

"He ees dead, yes."

"Then how could Red send you here to find me?"

Again that shrug of her shoulders. "*Quien sabe, senior?*"

Juana had all the exasperating reticence of the Indian. After an hour of bullying and coaxing and attempts at bribery and threats of torture, Phil Phelan gave up in disgust. Juana simply refused to elaborate on that simple opaque statement that Red Lawler had perhaps sent her.

"What do you want of me, Juana?" He drew a roll of bills from his pocket. "Money?"

"*Madre de Dios, no!*" She recoiled as if he held a snake in his hand.

"You came here for something," he insisted. "What is it you want?"

"I do not want notheeng." Juana got to

her feet, a slim, graceful little figure, decently dressed, prettier than the average girl. She had learned cleanliness and how to dress. Suffering had lent character to her face. There was intelligence there in her dark eyes. *JD*

Phil Phelan would have been astounded to know that this girl had been living right here in Mescalara for the past eleven years, and that she had watched him and his three partners—because Red Lawler had made her promise to watch them. She was never, he had told her, to lose track of the four traitors whose treachery had sent him to Yuma. As long as she lived, she must watch. She must keep a contact, always, between those men and Red Lawler.

There was a certain hiding place where she would find money that was more than enough to keep her a lifetime. She was to take this money as she needed it, like drawing from a bank. On the first day of each month, Juana was to go, under the cover of night, to that place and get what money she would need for another month. She would leave a note there telling Red where she lived and where his four enemies lived. Next visit, because that note had been uncalled for, she would destroy it and leave a fresh note. This she had done through ten long years, even after she had read in the newspapers that Red Lawler was dead.

Then one night, six months ago, she had found her last note gone, and in its stead a brief penciled message with curt instructions to purchase some certain articles of men's apparel, some ammunition, some food and medicines.

JUANA'S visits to that spot had become weekly ones. Always she was to remain hidden under the darkness of night. . . . To come alone. . . . To say no word to anyone. . . . To do exactly as the notes told her to do.

In return for this trouble, rewarding her doglike fidelity throughout the past ten years, Juana Romano was to be sent, at the end of her period of usefulness, to Cholla. Juana knew that. She made no complaint. She had committed a terrible crime against the man she loved, and she was willing to pay her penalty.

Then had come that note telling her to go to the Palace; to go there each night; to sit and talk a little while with Phil Phelan.

So Juana had obeyed. She had come here to the Palace and had talked to Phil Phelan. Following her instructions, she had told the gunman just so much, nothing more. Enough to upset Phelan's peace of mind—not enough to give him a thread of a clue to hang onto. For a 'breed girl, Juana was mighty clever.

"You don't go any place," said Phil Phelan flatly, "till you tell me why you come here. Come clean, sister, or I might make you damn' sorry you ever looked me up."

Juana looked at him unflinchingly. "I am not afraid of you, senior. I am not afraid to die. Some day I must go across the desert to Cholla, to die there. Already three men go there to die. Red Lawler swear that they go there. They have gone to Cholla, no? The next man to go ees you, senior. After that, Juana Romano ees go to Cholla. Are you scare', senior?"

"So Joel and Santos and Lanning went to Cholla, did they? How do you know?"

"I have on my head the ears that hear. A swore-oath like Red Lawler make ees a terrible theeng. Even when he ees dead, that swore-oath ees get carried out, no? You and me, we are lef' behin'. Soon we also go to Cholla. A verree evil place, that Cholla. Sometimes, when I think een the dark, I feel verree sad that I mus' go to Cholla. Tell me, senior, do you also be sad sometimes because you have done bad theengs?"

"If you gotta weep," suggested Phil Phelan acidly, "go out in the alley an' lean across the rain barrel. No, I ain't sad. And I ain't scared. And if that Deacon buzzard sent you here tuh feel my pulse, go back and tell him that I'm waitin' for him—that I'm killin' him on sight. Tell him that, sister, that Phil Phelan is killin' him on sight." Phil jerked a thumb toward the door. "Hit the trail, Juana."

"*Buenas noches, senior!*" Juana left him sitting there. She would come back again tomorrow night. And the night after that. Juana would come to the Palace every night until Phil Phelan was sent to Cholla.

Nor did it ever occur to the girl that things might happen any other way. Her life, together with the lives of the four men who had been disloyal to Red Lawler was dedicated to the fulfilment of a sworn oath. An oath is a terrible thing. Its fulfilment is as inevitable as the setting of the sun. It was not for Juana to question the working of a sworn oath.

Juana slipped out the back door into the dark alley. She halted long enough to remove her high-heeled red slippers and silk stockings. With them tucked under her arm, she walked swiftly away, keeping always in the shadow. Once she halted, her shadow melting into the black mouth of a doorway. A man, almost running in his haste, passed on down the alley. The man was Phil Phelan. Juana smiled to herself in the darkness as she watched him out of sight. Then she picked another course, taking care that she was not followed. In due time she reached an adobe hut in the Mexican end of town.

IX

PHIL PHELAN RETURNING empty handed to the Palace, resumed his seat at the table. He tossed off a stiff drink, then sat back, hatbrim shading his brooding eyes. Juana's visit had upset him more than he would admit even to himself. His shifting eyes studied the crowd that surged about the bar. His right hand kept touching the butt of his gun. He gave a slight start when his searching eyes picked out from the rest of that crowd the tall, rawboned U. S. Marshal with the blue eyes and wide mouth.

The law officer stood talking and laughing with a group of unshaven, roughly clad men of the cattle trails. Why was that man back in Mescalara? Did his presence here have any connection with the mysterious appearance of Juana?

Phil Phelan took another drink, then strode over to the group of half-sober cattlemen. The U. S. Marshal nodded and grinned.

"Howdy, Philips."

Philips! Nobody ever called Phelan by that old name. A little shiver—a premonition of evil—slid along Phil Phelan's

spine.

"I'm all right," said the gunman coldly. "How's tricks with the Law?"

"Same old seven and six. Can't kick much. I hear yo're the lone daddy uh this joint. Where's Lanning?"

"Gone." Phil Phelan was in an ugly humor.

"Where'd he go?"

"Yonderly." Phil Phelan smiled thinly. "Did yuh want him on any particular business?"

"Me? Nope. Just wondered what boogered him away from his gold mine. This place had order do a rattlin' good business. Wisht I owned it. It'd beat my wages all holler." He laughed easily. The sound of the big marshal's laugh only irritated Phil Phelan the more.

"Did you want to see me about anything?" he asked flatly.

"Me?" The big man grinned and shook his head. "Nope. Just dropped in. One uh these visits fer pleasure. Seen that Deacon gent lately?"

"Not lately. Why?"

"Just a-wonderin' some. What's his right name, anyhow?"

"Get me the correct answer to that, mister," said Phelan, "and I'll make you a present of a nice piece of change."

"I'll let yuh know," grinned the big marshal, "when I git his brand." He seemed amused at Phil Phelan's annoyance. The gunman turned abruptly and went into the office. The marshal's eyes followed him.

"A BAD actor in his day, was that gent," he told the cowmen. "When his name was Philips and he rode with Red Lawler. There's still a thousand dollars on him."

"Why don't yuh collect?" asked one of the cowpunchers.

"He's worth more to us where he is, mebbys. I got orders to let him stay where he is an' keep my paws off. Let's talk about cattle, boys. And let's have another drink. It takes a long time fer a drink tuh hit my toes, I'm that far between my feet and what I calls my head."

"You always was a caution, Ben. Never could figger yuh. Can't figger now why

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yo're here. Why don't yuh come on back to the ranch where yuh belong, instead uh paradin' aroun' wearin' that badge. Shucks, you ain't no more of a United States Marshal than—"

"Hush up, bonehead. Want me shot?"

"Excuse me, Ben. That done slipped. But I wish yuh'd tell a man somethin'."

"Kain't make out tuh do 'er, boys. I promised tuh keep shut. All I know is that the dirty son that killed my brother Buck in 'Frisco is somewhere in Mescalara and I'm to foller orders if I want the skunk sent tuh hell." He led the way to the bar.

"What's Phil Phelan got to do with it, Ben?"

"Dunno, boys, but I hope tuh learn. Anyhow, orders is tuh watch him like I'd watch a snake. Kill him if he makes a bad play. And tuh take orders from this ol' cuss they call Deacon. This Deacon party is a warthog. He's tuh show up in a few days. He done shanghaied this Lanning skunk an' has took him acrost the line, bound for Cholla. Leastways, so the Deacon tells me when him an' Lanning stop at my camp, yonder side uh the border. Lanning looks more dead than livin', but the Deacon is chipper as a lark. Cracks jokes an' joshes Lanning about the wife that's a-waitin' fer him. Lanning tries suicide, but the Deacon stops him. Says he has done made his arrangements, an' them arrangements calls fer a live man instead of a stiff. It was kinda horrible, just lookin' at Lanning. I'd hate tuh have that Deacon gent dislikin' me. Here's howdy, gents. Let's drink."

They stood there at the end of the bar. The last part of the big man's speech had carried to the listening ears of Phil Phelan. The gunman's lean face twisted in a grimace of hate. He felt trapped, helpless. The only way out of the Deacon's trap was fast gunplay, and this would be one time when Phil Phelan would not have the advantage—one time when he would stand on his feet and fight like a man, odds even.

Phil had not heard the tall man admit the fact that the badge he wore belonged to his murdered brother. But he did know that the big, blue-eyed man would stand alongside the Deacon. With him would be

arranged the cowmen. Phil Phelan would be forced to fight fair. . . .

All right, let 'em open the jack-pot. Phil Phelan's guns could call any man's bets. So be it, and to hell with the hindmost. Phil Phelan lit a fresh cigaret and swaggered out from behind the bar. He walked squarely up to the big marshal.

"IF yuh stick around here a few days, big feller, you'll mebbys see a show. The Deacon and me are due to lock horns. When we do, stand aside and let yore friends foller suit, because hell's gonna crack open. I don't know just how you stand with the Deacon, nor why yo're here. But that badge pinned to yore brisket don't buy yore way into any man's personal business. What lays between me and the Deacon don't take in anybody else. Have I explained myself clear?"

"I reckon. And so long as the Deacon gits a fair shake, me and these boys stands off yonder like part uh the scenery uh the wild an' wooly West. But when I see snake sign, whenever the sign tells me that this ol' Deacon party is gittin' the dirty end of the stick, I'll take chips in the game. And no tinhorn sports is gonna feel happy if they try stoppin' me."

He grinned widely, but sometimes those big, grinning kind are the worst in a fight. Phil walked away, feeling that he had come off second best in the verbal tilt. It was that damn' tin star that threw the odds that way. Well, law badges don't make a man bullet proof.

Phil Phelan moved through the crowds. Now and then he paused to say something in a low tone to some one of the mob that was not as drunk as he might seem to be. These were the gunmen who protected the games at the Palace. They were quiet, cold eyed gents who drank but never seemed to get drunk, recruited, in the main, from the gambling fraternity—killers working under salaries, about half a dozen in all. They were Phil Phelan's protection, and to each one he passed word to be on the lookout for almost anything; to keep their eyes open, their ears listening, and their guns ready.

The Deacon had asked Phil Phelan for a medicine talk. But Phil had no intention

granting that interview. When the Deacon came through those swinging doors, he'd better come a-shootin'.

X

FOR NINE DAYS AND NINE nights, Phil Phelan waited for the coming of the Deacon—waited with nerves pulled taut. No pugilist training for championship fight could have kept himself better conditioned to that fine point of perfection that goes for success.

Not that Phil Phelan kept in physical trim. He was not of athletic build. He was not fighting the Deacon with his fists. He was fighting with his brain and his gun. So he kept that brain alert and nervous. His nerves were so finely keyed that the least sound brought the gunman about, crouched, his gun in his hand.

His face had taken on a grayish tint, his eyes were sunken in behind faintly flushed cheekbones. He spoke to nobody, kept apart from every one, drank alone and with studied regularity. Enough to keep his nerves steady, not enough to let them relax.

Mescalara watched. Mescalara knew for whom Phil Phelan waited. Many bets were laid. Men talked of nothing else. The gambling games there at the Palace were poorly patronized because men wanted to be watching when the sinister Deacon stepped through the short, swinging doors of the Palace. They stood about in groups drinking, talking, sometimes quarreling.

Each night, between supper time and midnight, Juana Romano came into the Palace. Always alone, always in black, always wearing red slippers. Sometimes she came no farther than the door. Other times she would walk over to the table where Phil Phelan sat alone. And for some odd reason, the gunman did not seem to resent these visits.

"Back again, Juana?"

"Si, senior, You theenk eet weel be tonight that we go to Cholla?" She did not seem afraid—only sad, and a little lonesome, perhaps. Phil almost pitied her. She was waiting for death to call her. She had told him that much. She had asked him if he knew anything about



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Cholla. She had heard her own people tell horrible tales concerning Cholla. It did not seem that the *Senor Dios* would permit the existence of such a place that held nothing but suffering and sin and sorrow.

"I'm not goin' there to Cholla, kid," Phil would tell her. "Neither will you, if you trail yore bets with mine. How'd you like to go north with me some day next week? Dodge City, Denver, some where away from Mescalara? You're a good lookin' little package when yuh don't weep. Built like a quarter mare. All yuh need is the glad rags to make you into a winner. I'll take you along when I go."

Juana would smile sadly and shake her head. "You forget about that swore-oath Red Lawler make. We are to go to Cholla."

Phil Phelan, was not in any sense of the word, a ladies' man. He kept away from women. They dragged a man into trouble, made him soft-hearted and slow with a gun. They took all and gave nothing real in return. A few dollars would buy their kisses. Phil bought what he wanted, then went his way, unhampered by sentiment. But he liked this queer little Mex chicken with her sad eyes and soft red lips that were not for sale. She had sense and nerve and a certain appeal that made a man think. She'd had her lesson, too. Even when Red was dead, she was willing to pay. Juana was game.

Phil was always a little sorry when she quit his table and said good-night in her soft little voice. She left an emptiness behind her that Phil Phelan's heart had never before felt for any woman. He called himself a fool, then waited impatiently for her to come again. He pitied her, and pity was a new emotion in the heart of the thin-lipped killer.

He told himself that when he had rubbed out the Deacon, he'd take time to annex this little 'breed girl. Nor did it occur to him that she might not return his advances. Phil's being was untroubled by fine ideas of love. Women had their price tags. Some ran into more money than others. That was the only difference. He'd croak the Deacon and that would end this damned Cholla nonsense. Red

Lawler had hired this tough old coot to carry out his vengeance. So far, the Deacon had cut the raffle. But he couldn't always be lucky. Phil Phelan was not afraid of him. Let him come. Let him step into it. Phil Phelan was ready.

THE tenth night was slipping toward dawn. Phil Phelan did not take his eyes from the front door. The crowd were painstakingly keeping out of the line of fire between the door and Phil Phelan's table. The back doors were locked and guarded. Juana had failed to appear. Her absence stirred a vague uneasiness inside the killer's breast. He was wishing he'd kept shadowing her, as he had that first night, till he found where she lived. But some queer kink in his reasoning had held him back. After that once, Phil had made no attempt to follow Juana.

The hands of the clock above the back-bar said three-thirty. Phil Phelan sat there at his table. There was a tall glass of watered whiskey on the table in front of him. His right hand was on the moist butt of his gun. It had rested there most of the night. Let the Deacon step through that door and he would be dead the next instant. That was as certain as tomorrow.

The tall U. S. Marshal, and his friends moved here and there, joshing, drinking some, watching Phil Phelan's hired gunmen. The big psuedo-officer kept his own attention riveted on Phil.

Three-thirty. From outside, there in the darkness of the deserted street, there came the pounding of a horse's hoofs. The sounds stopped at the long hitch-rack in front of the Palace. An ominous hush filled the big gambling place. The Deacon had returned to Mescalara. The eyes of every man there focused on the door.

Phil Phelan had eased back his chair and stood crouched behind the table, his cocked gun in his hand. A tense, gray-faced statue of crouching death.

Suddenly the place roared with the blaze of guns—the tinkle of shattered glass. The room was plunged in darkness. Out of the sticky black silence came the quick breathing of men, the strong taint of burnt gunpowder. Phil Phelan's rasping voice called for light. No man there dared risk so

much as a sputtering match.

Then, out of that damned blackness, came a sepulchral voice—the voice of the Deacon. It seemed to fill the room, and no man there could spot the place where the speaker stood.

"Whoever strikes a light will be killed! Remember that, men. I come here to talk to Phil Phelan. I can talk in the dark as well as I can in the light. Stand where you are, Phelan. I kin see you, plain as day. You are quitting your table and heading for the end of the bar. If I wanted to kill you, I could do it now. Stand where yuh are. Stand still, you fool! . . . No? Then I'll stop yuh!"

The flash of a gun ripped the blackness. Phil Phelan snarled with pain as his gun dropped to the floor from a nerveless hand. The Deacon's bullet had caught Phelan in the shoulder, the heavy slug smashing the bone. Phelan, helpless, fear freezing him to the spot, stood there, swaying a little, filling his left hand with a short-barreled bulldog revolver.

"You never could shoot left-handed, you damn' fool," gritted the Deacon's voice. "Drop that gun, Phil. If you don't. I'll smash that arm and turn you over to the law. You know what I mean. You remember a piece of paper I showed you. Drop that gun. Drop it, or so help me God, I'll see you hung!"

"YOU win." Phelan's voice was choked with hate. The bulldog revolver clattered to the floor. There came the soft sound of footsteps. A brief scuffle. Then the Deacon's voice, horrible in its triumph, sinister in its lack of tone—a dead man's voice.

"Phil Phelan is goin' with me through that door. Anybody that tries to stop me and him gets shot down. The man that lights a match will be killed. Ben, I'm turning over this place to you. Stay here till I come back in a few days. I'll be back. But Phil Phelan won't ever come back. Phil is goin' with me to Cholla to think over his many sins. Keep the way clear to the door, you men. Gents, the night's drinks are on me. Adios, my amigos!"

No man lit a match. No man moved as

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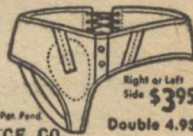
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the Deacon's boots and Phil Phelan's boots sounded their march step in that brief journey to the door. Phil Phelan spoke no word. The big man's grip on his left arm was like a steel band. Three horses stood at the hitchrack. Someone sat in one saddle, holding the bridle reins of the other two horses. It was too dark to make out that third rider. But somehow Phil Phelan knew that it must be Juana Romano, straight in the saddle, unflinching, silent.

The Deacon lifted Phil into the empty saddle, then swung up onto the third horse. The three rode in silence down the deserted street. No man moved to stop them. Five minutes later they were swallowed by the black desert night.

Phil Phelan, last of the Red Lawler gang, was headed for Cholla. With him rode little Juana. Behind, gun in hand, rode the Deacon. No word broke the black silence. To the south, yonder side of the treeless desert, lay Cholla—Cholla, dwelling place of the living dead.

The terrible vow made by Red Lawler had been fulfilled.

XI

A MAN WITH A HORRIBLY scarred face, garbed in somber black, stood with his back against a sun-baked adobe wall. In each battered hand was a long-barreled gun. A giant hackberry tree cast a cool shadow on the grassy sod on the bank of a crystal-clear stream.

Seated in this shade were four men and two women. The men were Joel Travis, Santos, Diamond Jack Lanning and Phil Phelan. Phelan's injured shoulder was swathed in snowy white bandages that gave off the odor of antiseptic. Beside Lanning, her white hand gripped in his, sat a gray-haired woman who had once been beautiful and would even now, with rest and some decent care from the understanding hands of another of her own sex, be strikingly handsome. The woman's free hand clasped the brown one of Juana Romano. The four men and two women never took their eyes from the scarred face of the Deacon.

His scarred face did not change expression as he slowly, deliberately un-

loaded the two guns, then tossed them into the creek. His gnarled hands spread in an expressive gesture. No one spoke. They watched, fascinated, as they might have stared at some miracle of God's.

The scarred face smiled at them. "It is still a long day's march to Cholla, my amigos. None of us, excepting Charlotte Lanning and I, have ever been across that desert and inside the hell-hole of Cholla. No man or woman of you has ever been locked in solitary at Yuma. I was shut inside there for ten years, my amigos. You sent me there. . . . I am Red Lawler."

He stood there, his scarred face calm. They eyed him, in silence. There was nothing there in that terribly maimed face to remind them of the handsome, bold-featured, red-haired outlaw leader. He stood before them, a terrible, yet unbelievably pitiful figure. White of hair, gaunt, alone—his back to the tree. But the four men knew him now. Not the Red Lawler of the old days. Not the laughing, swearing, fighting, cruel-handed Red Lawler. This was a straight-backed old man, with white hair and a face marred by the fists and clubs of prison guards.

He took off his own coat and stripped to the waist. He showed them the terrible scars put there by the rawhide lash of Yuma. They stared at him without speaking, while he put on his undershirt and shirt and coat.

"Yes, my amigos, I am Red Lawler. I spent ten years planning what I would do to you. I began with Butch Flanders. I started him across this desert to Cholla—by the main route, not this one. Perhaps he got there. Or he may have died en route. But he never came back, I know that.

"Then I began on you four. One by one I took you out of Mescalara and brought you here. I'd located this spot years ago when I took Charlotte out of Cholla. I had grub here to last a long time. One by one I took you out of Mescalara and fetched you here. It was my plan to drive you across the desert from here to Cholla. And there, till you died, you would suffer just a slight taste of what was mine for ten years at Yuma.

"You are here. You can't go back.

Those blue peaks mark Cholla. Can any one of you give me a single reason why you should not go on to Cholla?"

"None of us men," said Phil Phelan slowly, "will welch. I'll take my medicine. And I'll see that the other three men take theirs. But, Red, don't send the women. Charlotte doesn't deserve that. And Juana Romano is the gamest, squarest woman I have ever known. Don't send her, Red. I'll go to Cholla or I'll swing on the gallows and never whine. But yo're makin' a terrible mistake when yuh send that girl tuh Cholla."

"I'll go where Jack goes," said Charlotte. "I've never quit loving the big bum, Red. He'll need me to look after him, there at Cholla."

The scar-faced outlaw nodded. "Women are like that, sometimes. Juana, Phil Phelan has spoken nothing I did not already know. You've been clean. You've served your sentence. You will go back to Mescalara."

"Weeth you?" she asked quietly.

"No. I'm not going back. My trail takes me another way."


"Then, if you allow, that ees also Juana's way. To Cholla, to any place, eet does not matter. Jus' so long I can be weeth you. I wait many years. Why? Because I love only that one man. That man I do great sin to. I go weeth you. Beat on me, keeck me, keel me. But weeth Red Lawler ees stay Juana. . . . Because I love heem."

A DARK stain flushed the scarred face. Juana rose and came to him. She took one of his scarred hands in both of hers and held it against her tear-wet cheek.

"That decides it," he said, something of the terrible harshness gone from his voice. "We all go on together from here. In exiling you, I've handed the same sentence to Red Lawler. Sooner or later someone would recognize me. I'd go back to Yuma. But before we leave this spot, I must know this: Is there a man here who thinks he has the right to stand up and fight me for his life?"

"Not . . . any more, Red." It was Lanning who spoke. He got to his feet and

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walked up to the scar-faced man. Without a word he held out his hand. Red Lawler's face twitched a little with some emotion as he gripped the hand of the man he had sworn to kill. Santos, Joel and finally Phil Phelan came up. For once in their lives, these men were sincere.

"Red," said Phil Phelan, "us boys had it ribbed to kill you before we left this spot. When you throwed away yore guns you gave us that chance. But we can't do 'er now. We know you've bin in hell and come back. It has changed yuh, Red. Any one of us will go into hell and back for you now. Only don't quit us, Red. Stay somewhere near Cholla."

Red Lawler's scarred face was a study. Tears coursed down across the battered cheeks.

"God," he said huskily, his mouth smiling queerly, "I never thought I'd go soft like this. I reckon hell does that to a man's heart. We're leaving here early in the mornin', my amigos—not for Mescalara, nor not for Cholla. But at the east end of that mountain range is the prettiest spot God ever made. Palm trees, water, wild fruit, a strip of white sand where a blue ocean rolls in. There's good soil there, and there's game of all kinds, and fish. Some Mexicans live there. Now and then a boat drops anchor off shore and a trader stops.

"I've money enough for us all. You'll like those Mexican folks there. It's as near Paradise as ever a bunch of homeless renegades could wish for. It's the

kind of medicine we all need to make us forget. Santos and Phil and Joel can find themselves a guitar apiece and go a-courtin'. We'll all be married and raise kids that don't ever need know we've been wrong. Can you see anything that will keep us from being happy?"

"Not so long as you stay with us, Red."

"Red Lawler is dead—buried there at Yuma. Deacon Lawler leads his followers to peace and happiness, but no gold."

That night, around the campfire, they were as happy as if God had blessed them with a miracle. Perhaps He had. They were pilgrims, bound for Paradise.

In due time a note was handed by a Mexican boy to Ben, the psuedo-United States Marshal at Mescalara. It read as follows:

Dear Sir:

The figures below are the combination to the safe at the Palace. In behalf of the owners, whose signatures are below mine, I wish to present you with the Palace. Our good will and best wishes go with it. What's there is yours. The man who killed your brother at Frisco is dead—as dead as Red Lawler.

Thanks for shooting out the lights for me. If any one should think to inquire about any of us, tell the curious that we have taken up permanent residence at a spot called Paradise. Paradise, geographically speaking, lies on the further side of Hell. To reach it, one passes through Hell.

I sign myself,

Happily,

The Deacon.



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most any part of the body with

SPOT REDUCER

Like a magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. In most parts of your body where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercises or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

Thousands have lost weight this way—in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, neck, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage,

screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The "Spot Reducer" can be used in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room. It breaks down fatty tissues, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased, awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat. Two weeks after using the "Spot Reducer" look in the mirror and see a more glamorous, better, firmer, slimmer figure that will delight you. You have nothing to lose but weight for the "Spot Reducer" is sold on a



Marie Hammel, New York, N. Y., says: "I used to wear a size 20 dress, now I wear size 14, thanks to the Spot Reducer. It was fun and I enjoyed it."

Money Back Guarantee with a 10-Day Free Trial

If the "Spot Reducer" doesn't do the wonders for you as it has for others, if you don't lose weight and inches where you want to lose it most, if you're not 100% delighted with the results, your money will be returned at once.

A large size jar of Special Formula Body Massage Cream will be included FREE with your order for the "Spot Reducer."

MAIL COUPON NOW!

● The "Spot Reducer" Co., Dept. 237
 ● 1025 Broad St., Newark, New Jersey
 ● Send me at once, for \$2 cash, check, or money order, the "Spot Reducer" and your famous Special Formula Body Massage Cream, postpaid. If I am not 100% satisfied, my money will be refunded.
 ● Name
 ● Address
 ● City State



Miss Nancy Mace, Bronx, N. Y., says: "I went from size 16 dress to a size 12 with the use of the Spot Reducer. I am glad I used it."



RESEARCH EXPERT SAYS:

AMAZING NEW SCIENTIFIC FORMULA (Contains no Alcohol)

destroys these hair-killing germs:

Staphylococcus
Albus



Morococcus



Microbacillus



Pityriusporum
Ovale



NOTHING CAN DO MORE TO

**SAVE
YOUR
HAIR**

Look for these symptoms. **ITCHY SCALP, DANDRUFF, UNPLEASANT HEAD ODORS, HEAD SCALES, HAIR LOSS!** It may be nature's warning of approaching baldness. Be guided by NATURE'S WARNING! Do as thousands do: start using the **NEW AND IMPROVED, AMAZING, SCIENTIFIC HAIR RESEARCH FORMULA** (it contains no alcohol).

**NEW FORMULA GIVES
BETTER RESULTS**

It kills quickly and efficiently millions of trouble-breeding bacteria. This new and improved **HAIR RESEARCH FORMULA** now **KILLS safely** and quickly **ALL FOUR** types of these destructive hair germs. Many medical authorities know that these hair-destroying germs are a significant cause of baldness. Do what science knows nothing better for you to do: **KILL THESE GERMS**, they may **DESTROY** your **HAIR GROWTH**. Act now, mail coupon below and test it at home for 10 days **FREE** at our expense. **NO OTHER FORMULA** known to science can do more to **SAVE YOUR HAIR!**

GET FIVE IMMEDIATE BENEFITS

- (1) **KILL** the four types of germs that may be retarding your normal hair growth.
- (2) **HELP** stop scalp itch and burn.
- (3) **FOLLOW** the instructions of the treatment and start enjoying healthful massage action.
- (4) **HELPS** bring **HAIR-NOURISHING** blood to scalp.
- (5) **HELPS** remove ugly loose **DANDRUFF**.

Don't wait till you get **BALD!** It's *too late* then. Remember, science knows no cure for baldness. The **NEW AND IMPROVED HAIR RESEARCH FORMULA** that contains no alcohol, helps keep your scalp (that may be sick) free of loose dandruff, seborrhea, and helps stop the hair loss they cause. With this formula your hair will *appear* thicker, more alive and attractive almost from the first time you use it.

HAIR RESEARCH CO., Dept. 65
1025 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey

SATISFIED USERS SAY

"Nothing I have ever used has done more for my hair"—A. P., Trenton, N. J.

"My friends remark how much better my hair looks after using your formula for only two weeks"—A. L., Boston, Mass.

"No Hair Expert I have ever gone to has done as much for me"—H. H., Chicago, Ill.

"I was skeptical at first but took a chance, now after ten days' trial I am convinced. Nothing has ever helped me more than your treatment"—J. S., Los Angeles, Calif.



**MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE
WITH A 10-DAY FREE TRIAL**

If the **NEW AND IMPROVED AMAZING SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH FORMULA** doesn't live up to your expectations, if you don't feel it's the best thing you ever did for your hair, if your hair and scalp don't appear improved, if you are not 100% delighted with it, if after using it 10 days you don't see an improvement, return the unused portion and your money will be refunded in full. You have nothing to lose, you are the sole judge. **SO DON'T DELAY, MAIL COUPON TODAY!**

SENT ON APPROVAL!

HAIR RESEARCH CO., Dept. 65
1025 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey

Rush one month's supply of your **NEW AND IMPROVED AMAZING SCIENTIFIC HAIR RESEARCH FORMULA** at once. I enclose \$2.00 cash, check or money order, ship prepaid. My money will be refunded if not satisfied.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

I enclose \$5. Send three months' supply. I understand if not delighted with the **NEW AND IMPROVED HAIR FORMULA**, I can return it after 10 days for full purchase price refund.