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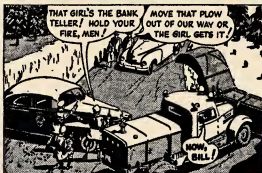
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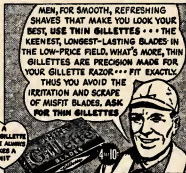


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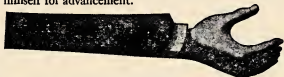
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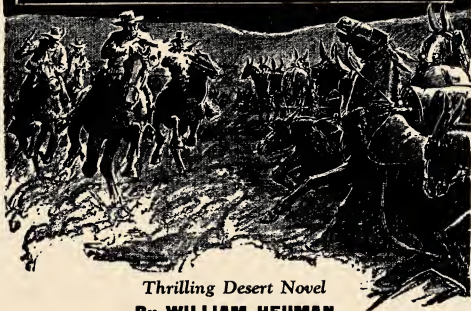
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DEATH VALLEY GUN-MASTER



Thrilling Desert Novel
By WILLIAM HEUMAN

Chapter I

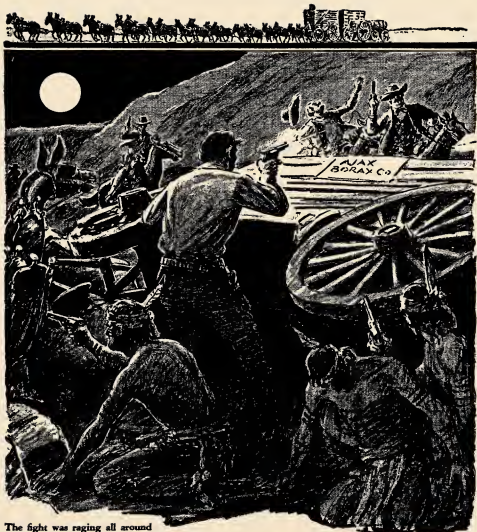
ROLLING THE DEVIL'S FREIGHT

THE HEAT came in irregular waves, rolling in from the desert, burning, drying, pressing down like a weight, making it almost painful to breathe. But in the shade under the awnings along the street it was cool, and this was a revelation to Grady Harrigan, lately of Idaho.

He stood under the awning at the edge of the boardwalk, a cigar in his wide mouth, big hands in his pants pockets, sniffing this hot air coming in from Death Valley.

Off in the distance he could hear the rattle of chains and the rumble of heavy vehicles, and then a man stuck his head out of the window of a second-story room directly across the road and yelled, "Ajax wagons right on time!"

There was flurry of excitement at the other end of town, and Grady Harrigan looked that way, curiosity in his flinty blue eyes. He was big in his worn boots, a solid man in the shoulders and in the waist. He still wore his black frock coat, despite the heat, because he'd only been



The fight was raging all around them now and Grady could see Corcoran's bulky figure coming straight at him.

Hard Luck Harrigan they called him, after the railroads pushed him out of the stage business and a drouth busted his two-bit short line to hell-an'-gone. But Grady Harrigan swore that it would take more than a hundred blood-mad, desert-hardened killers to keep him from tooling his Death Valley freighters plumb through the dead center of Boothill to Sage City—and to win himself a new name in the bargain!

in Sage City for an hour and he'd taken no rooms as yet and he had no place to leave the coat.

Men stepped out of the saloons along this main street of the desert town and looked toward the south. The street was wide, and they could look past the fringe of rickety, sun-bleached structures at the end of town and across an expanse of sagebrush and greasewood where the road out of Death Valley cut as straight as an arrow into the town.

A long string of mules, twenty teams, was hauling two huge wagons and a smaller water wagon, a column of white alkali dust trailing behind them as they moved.

Incredulously, Grady Harrigan watched the big juggernauts move into the main street. Up north he'd heard rumors of these twenty-mule teams hauling borax out of Death Valley, out of the pit of hell. He'd spoken to a man in Big Springs who'd been to Southern California and who had actually seen the tremendous four-ton wagons, six feet deep, four feet wide and with a sixteen-foot-long bed, two of them capable of hauling out forty-five thousand pounds of borax at one time.

Roughly, Grady calculated the value of this carload selling for ten cents a pound at the railhead, and which he'd been informed up north could be scooped up by Chinese labor in the marshes, put through a reduction mill set up in the Valley, and hauled out for one cent a pound net.

Watching the tremendous wagons roll by a few minutes later, the driver grinning and waving at friends, face and clothing heavily impregnated with alkali, Grady knew that this was the business for him. He fingered the three silver dollars in his pocket, and he tried to forget the Pioneer Stage Line in Montana which he'd run up to a twenty-five thousand dollar concern, and then watched go into the hands of receivers when the railroad arrived. He had a momentary vision, too, of the narrow-gauge, short-line railroad he'd built in Nevada, which had collapsed also when a drouth came to the land and the settlers moved out, and with them his hauling business. Two rusted steel rails stretching across the northern Nevada desert remained as a memorial to Hard Luck Harrigan's Consolidated Nevada Short Line.

A bartender came out of the Crown

Saloon directly behind Grady, stood there watching the big wagons, and said quietly, "Anyone can make a fortune in that stuff, but it takes a *man* to snake it out."

Grady Harrigan took his cigar from his mouth and flicked ash into the dust of the street. He said, "How many outfits in this town hauling borax?"

"Were three," the bartender said, "but Ajax bought out the Lamonte interests, and that leaves Ajax an' Condor Borax cuttin' each other's throats."

Grady nodded. He reasoned logically that Ajax was the big outfit, the moneyed interests capable of buying out competitors, and that Condor was the smaller company providing the only competition, with the big Ajax Borax trying to run them out of business. It was an old story in the stage line business, in the railroad field: the big man ate the small man, the strong conquered the weak.

There was, however, one angle which Grady had always liked, and for that reason he had invariably cast his interest with the weak. If the weak conquered, there were rich rewards for every man connected with the enterprise, because the outfit was small and suddenly it had become big. This was not true of the big company, usually filled with men who were seeking the same thing, and there were not enough ripe plums to go around.

Another factor, and one which he tried to minimize without success, was the natural preference a strong man has to line himself up with the weak. He'd felt this pull many times in the past, and invariably he'd made his decision to side with the weak even though that decision often left him in the hole and gained for him the name Hard Luck Harrigan.

Walking back into the saloon after the ponderous wagons had rolled down to the railroad siding, he heard a man say, "Ajax is still keepin' up its schedule." He said it as if he'd expected the outfit to come in late this afternoon and was surprised that it had arrived on time.

Another man said, "That damn Corcoran ain't the only one can run borax out o' hell."

"They won't keep it up." the first man growled, "an' the only way anybody kin make profits in the Valley is to keep schedules an' roll that stuff out regular."

GRADY HARRIGAN had a glass of warmish beer at the bar and then wiped his lips with a handkerchief. It was past two o'clock in the afternoon and the heat in the sun was becoming almost unbearable.

He went out on the walk again and turned left. On the way up from the railroad that morning he'd seen the sign "Condor Borax Company" over a door on the main street. There had been a wagon yard to the right of the office building, and he'd heard a blacksmith hammering as he went past. He'd seen the corral near the big wagon sheds filled with mules.

Two wagons were being rigged up now as he passed the yard again. He watched the teams of mules coming out of the corrals, walking to their positions and waiting to be hooked on to the long chain. The driver and his assistant were checking the water wagon.

Grady went up the flight of three wooden steps and pushed in through the door to the office. A big man with short-cropped, sand-colored hair was talking with a clerk near the big counter. He straightened up when Grady came through the door and measured him with a pair of cool, greenish eyes.

The clerk, whose back was turned to Grady, said, "All right, Mr. Corcoran."

Corcoran looked down at Grady's trousers and worn boots. He had a black cigar in his mouth, and he took it out now and tossed it into a spittoon.

"What in hell do you want?" he said sourly.

Grady looked at him coolly. He said, "First of all a civil tone of voice."

The clerk spun around then, a bespectacled man with a wisp of brown mustache. Corcoran came out to the counter and stood there, big hands resting heavily on the wood, a frown on his face.

"You looking for work?" he growled.

"I might be," Grady admitted.

"Get the hell around to the back yard," Corcoran said with relish. "Grayson might be hiring some chinese to scoop up borax in the Valley."

Grady Harrigan studied the big man leisurely, recognizing his type immediately. Corcoran was a man who loved power, loved to have men under him, and he liked to see them squirm.

"Well," Corcoran grinned, "you want work?"

"Kind of changed my mind," Grady said. "I'm particular who I work for."

Corcoran's grin disappeared, and the corners of his thick-lipped mouth came down. He said grimly, "You particular who punches your damned nose in, friend?"

"I'm particular about that, too," Grady admitted.

"From the looks of it," Corcoran chuckled, referring to the break in the bridge of Grady's nose, "it's been done before."

"And it won't be done again," Grady smiled. "Not here."

The red started to come into Corcoran's wide face, and Grady almost had to smile at the situation. He'd seen this thing happen before; it was the old story of two men whose temperaments clashed even before words had been spoken or action taken. He'd looked at Corcoran bending over the clerk at the desk and he'd told himself he didn't like the man. Corcoran sizing him up as he came through the door, undoubtedly felt the same way.

"Now," Corcoran was saying softly, "we have a big yard in the back there, Buck. If you—"

A man was calling from the inner office, "Mr. Corcoran—Mr. Corcoran."

It was a petulant voice, the voice of an old man who wanted his way. Corcoran hesitated, stared at Grady for a long moment in silence, and then disappeared through the door.

The clerk said, "Mister, I'd get out of here if I were you."

Grady nodded. "I can be found in the Crown Saloon tonight," he said "if anybody's interested."

He went out the door and down the steps, blinking in the bright sunshine. Outside the Stallion Saloon he asked a man where Ajax Borax yards were located. He went across town then to the west side, spotting the big yards as he turned the corner off Main Street. There was an arch across the opening to the yard, high enough for the ponderous wagons to go through, and the words "Ajax Borax Company" were painted on a sign across the arch.

The yard was somewhat bigger than that of Condor, and it had a more settled appearance as if it had been there longer. At Condor he'd noticed that the wagon sheds were new structures.

A group of men were gathered around

one of the wagons as Grady came through the entrance way. They were facing the arch, watching him, and one man was standing before a wagon-wheel hub, eighteen inches high. He had an oil can in his hands and he was preparing to shoot oil into the hub through a hole which had been bored into it.

There was a side door to the office and Grady headed toward this, a small smile on his face. He had the feeling that these men had been waiting for him to come through the entrance way, and that they meant trouble.

A giant of a man with flaxen hair and huge ham-like hands lifted his voice and called sharply, "All right, Jack."

Grady stopped. The big man weighed at least two hundred and thirty pounds, with a huge trunk of a body, solid, oak-like legs and tremendous arms. His red flannel shirt was rolled up at the sleeves, revealing corded forearms, the most powerful Grady had ever seen in his life.

The giant said tersely, "Come steppin', Jack." He was not a bad-looking man, light-complexioned, grown eyes to match the hair, a solid, square-cut chin with a cleft in the middle of it.

Grady walked toward the group, and he noticed the grins on the faces of some of them. The blacksmith had come out of his shop to stand with this crowd. He had a bald head, face smudged with soot, and he wore an old leather apron. His white teeth flashed in the darkness of his sooty face.

Grady said pleasantly, "What can I do for you boys?"

"Lookin' for work?" the big man asked softly.

"You do the hiring?" Grady countered. He stopped about a yard away from the giant, his hands in his pockets, the coat pulled away from his front. He carried a Smith & Wesson .44 in the waistband.

The giant grinned at the circle of men. He said, "Now he's askin' me if I do the hirin'."

A man on the outskirts of the crowd said tersely, "Don't waste any time with him, George. I saw him comin' out o' the Condor office. He's another one of 'em. He'll poison our water holes; he'll bribe our Chinese to lay down on the job."

Grady Harrigan glanced at this man coolly, and then back at the giant.

"So you came out o' the Condor office, friend?" George said softly.

"That's right," Grady admitted. He wasn't quite ready for the next move, and he hadn't expected such incredible quickness in a man of George's size. The giant slipped in like a big cat, swung his right hand for Grady's jaw and knocked him down on his haunches.

IT WAS NOT a powerful punch, and Grady realized it had not been meant to knock him out or do any great harm. As one man slapped another to invite hostilities, George knocked his man down gently for the same reason.

"A damned spy from Condor," George scowled, "comin' in here to wreck our outfit."

Grady rubbed his jaw gently and climbed to his feet without haste. He slapped the dust of the yard from the seat of his pants and then turned and walked toward the wagon tongue.

They thought he was leaving the yard because the arch was in that direction, but he stopped at the wagon tongue and started to take off his coat. A man in the crowd had begun to jeer, but he stopped very suddenly on a false note.

Grady Harrigan took the gun from his waistband and placed it on top of the black frock coat which he'd folded carefully and draped over the wagon tongue. He walked back toward the crowd then, rolling up his sleeves.

He said pleasantly, "George, I'll pay that back."

He saw the reluctant admiration come into the giant's brown eyes. He was at least forty pounds lighter than the giant and inches shorter. He looked even lighter than his hundred and ninety pounds because the weight was evenly distributed. He had steel in his forearms and the power extended back through the upper arm muscles and into the shoulders. He'd worked for six months alongside the Irish paddies building a railroad across the salt desert; he'd swung a pickaxe for weeks at a stretch, grading roads over which stage coaches could run in the more isolated parts of the country.

"You're a Condor man, ain't you?" big George asked suddenly.

"We'll talk about that," Grady grinned,

"after I repay you for that punch in the face."

He moved in then, hitting sharply with both fists at George's face. A lighter man, he was even faster than the big man on his feet, and he got in two solid blows before George could ward him off.

The big man settled himself in fighting pose then, head lowered, huge fists knotted. He swung his right for Grady's head, and Grady half-parried it. A glancing blow to the left side of his face swept him off his feet again. He went down and rolled, but George made no attempt to leap on him, and he liked the man immediately.

"Now," George growled, "there ain't no use—"

Grady came up off the ground like a cat, slashing in with a terrific left-hand punch at George's chin. The fist landed solidly, and there was a roar of surprise from the crowd which had gathered, as George staggered back against the huge wagon wheel and slumped to the ground.

Men were running from all directions now, coming out of the wagon sheds, running around the corrals, yelling excitedly. George's mouth was wide open in amazement, and Grady Harrigan realized that this was the first time the giant had ever been knocked off his feet in a brawl.

George got up, shaking his head a little, unhurt. He grinned again and then rushed. Grady tried to get out of the way of this juggernaut, but George was coming too fast, slugging with his big fists, two hundred and thirty pounds of fury.

Savagely, Grady slammed his right fist into George's midsection, but the giant could not be stopped. He hit Grady with a flurry of fists, knocking him backward, falling over him as he went down, but again he refused to take advantage of the smaller man when he had him on the ground.

George rolled off, blood trickling from a cut on his chin. He was rubbing his stomach gingerly, and breathing heavily. Grady's nose was bleeding now where George's tremendous elbow had come in contact with it. He had another bad bruise under his left eye.

They squared off again, watching each other carefully, and Grady saw the respect in the big man's eyes. He leaped in with that same terrific speed, shooting his right for George's face, catching him on the

left cheekbone, and again George staggered backward, clutching wildly at the air to keep himself from falling.

A man yelled in incredulous astonishment, "Hell—George!"

George tore in, knocking Grady off his feet with a sweep of his left arm. He lunged past Grady, off-balance, plunging into the crowd of men, knocking them down like so many tenpins.

Grady got up, dusting himself calmly, and waited for George to get up. The big man came out of the crowd, frowning, and then Grady spotted the girl pushing through the crowd, face tense. She had copper-colored hair and violet blue eyes, flashing now with anger. Two red spots gleamed in her tanned cheeks.

"George Buckmaster," she said tersely, "I'll have no fighting in this yard."

The giant turned around, crestfallen. He grinned sheepishly as he said, "Miss Townsend, this chap's been wipin' the damned yard with me. Glad you came along."

Grady felt the girl's eyes on him now. He was dabbing at his bleeding nose with a handkerchief, watching her with interest. She was tall, but not too slender. He figured her age to be about twenty-three or four. There was no ring on her finger. She stood very straight, with a yellow pencil stuck in her hair, some inkstains on her fingertips. The mouth was well-shaped, and there was strength in it.

She said quietly, "I'm not asking my driver for the cause of this fight because I realize he will fight for any reason, no matter how ludicrous." There was a guffaw from the crowd, and Buckmaster grinned like a big boy who was being reprimanded mildly by his schoolteacher.

Miss Townsend said to Grady, "I would like to hear your explanation for this fight in my yards."

Grady's gray eyes widened perceptibly. He said coolly, "I came looking for work, Miss Townsend."

"You should have come to the front door," the girl frowned.

Grady shrugged. "Over at Condor Box," he stated, "I was told to get the hell around to the side door."

The men in the yard laughed at this and George Buckmaster looked at him curiously.

"Begging your pardon for the language,"

Grady added as a sudden after-thought.

Buckmaster put in quickly, "We figured this chap to be another one o' them damned spies, Miss Townsend, like the chap I kicked out o' the yard last week when he started that fire in the No. 4 shed."

"Then Condor didn't sign you on?" the girl asked Grady.

"Corcoran told me I could work with the Chinese in the Valley," Grady said. He saw the hardness come into her eyes when he mentioned Corcoran's name.

Miss Townsend said quietly. "I'll see you in the office." She walked away, walking with a long, mannish stride, and Grady watched her enter the side door of the office.

George Buckmaster came over and extended his big hand. "Reckon I had the wrong man this time," he chuckled. "You're the toughest hombre I ever run up against."

Grady nodded. "You must have missed out on your dinner today, George," he said, "or I wouldn't have lasted this long."

He saw the gratification come into the giant's brown eyes. Buckmaster waved a hand deprecatingly. He said, "I'll leave it to the boys. You had me whipped proper, mister."

Grady slipped on his coat, and he watched the crowd breaking up, going back to their jobs. He liked the looks of these men; he'd had a crew like this when he was building his short line across Nevada. They were tough, resourceful, willing to work and willing to fight. Those were good signs in men.

Chapter II

SLUGGING IT OUT

GRADY WENT into the office and he found Miss Townsend sitting at a desk in a corner. There were two other desks, but they were empty. The room was big with the shades pulled down on the west side. The heat was heavy here.

Hat in hand, Grady took the seat she pointed to. He said, "Kind of surprised to find a woman running a borax outfit."

"My father organized Ajax," Judy Townsend said. "When he died a year ago I carried on the work. I thought he would like it that way." She looked at him steadily

and said, "Have you worked in the borax field before?"

Grady shook his head. "Stage lines," he said, "railroad, silver-mining, but no borax." He saw the quick interest come into her eyes.

"You were not by any chance a division superintendent on a stage line?" she asked.

Grady smiled. "It was my own line," he said. "I set it up, the stations, the schedules."

She was watching him closely now, toying with a pencil. "What happened?" she asked.

"Railroad came too quick," Grady shrugged, "five years sooner than I expected. We went broke."

"What about the railroad?" Judy Townsend wanted to know. He saw the sympathy in her eyes, and it was a nice thing.

"I organized my own short line," Grady told her, "narrow gauge, a hundred-mile run from a newly-settled area to a larger line. I figured on selling my right of way to the larger company when they realized I had a valuable holding."

"It didn't work out?"

"Drouth," Grady smiled. "The tracks are still there. No people."

The girl nodded. "You've had your bad luck," she stated. She leaned forward a little. "You've met Mr. Corcoran over at Condor?"

"We met," Grady said dryly.

"Jasper Corcoran worked for Ajax until six months ago," Judy Townsend said grimly. "He resigned to work for Condor Borax which was organized by an old enemy of my father's, a Mr. Felix Crane. Five years ago Crane was running borax out of Death Valley, but he couldn't show profits and he gave it up. Now he's back."

"Corcoran was your superintendent?" Grady asked.

The girl nodded. "He knows the Valley and he knows the business. He's taken away a lot of old Ajax hands, and he's trying to cut into us at every turn."

"Poisoning the water holes?" Grady asked slowly. "Burning your wagon sheds?"

"We lost fifteen valuable mules up at our Salt Creek station," Judy Townsend said grimly. "We tested the water there and it was found to be poisoned. My father had had that well dug six years ago, and

up to now the water was always good."

"What is Corcoran after?" Grady asked.

The girl hesitated. "I know he despises Mr. Crane, who is incapable of running the company himself. I believe some day Corcoran will buy or drive Mr. Crane out of business and he will try to set himself up as a monopoly in Death Valley. He wants to break Ajax and any other company in competition with him. Then, as the only operator, running borax out of the Valley, he can also control the price."

"Can he do it?" Grady wanted to know.

Judy Townsend regarded him steadily. "I have not had a superintendent since Jasper Corcoran resigned. We've tried to keep up our schedules, but the entire chain needs a shake-up. I can't leave the office myself and many times I'm called east for conferences with Eastern buyers."

"Nobody in this town you could hire?" Grady asked.

"No one I could trust well enough to refuse Felix Crane's bribes or Jasper Corcoran's threats," Miss Townsend said.

"I'd like that job," Grady said.

The girl reached for a big ledger book. She said without looking at him, "I intended to offer it to you."

Grady Harrigan listened while she explained the system her father had set up when he first came to the Valley. It was one hundred and sixty miles from the reducing plant in the Valley out to the railhead at Sage City. A graded road had been laid out through the desert, with stations along the way, some of the stops at natural springs, and others at water holes or wells which had been dug. The haul was divided into ten sections, each driver hauling the wagons sixteen miles to the next station, and taking empties back along the same route.

The Ajax Borax Company had twelve of the big wagons in operation all the time: they had a hundred and fifty Chinese coolies out in the Valley scooping up the borax from the dried salt marshes, dragging their sleds up to the road where it was collected in carts and hauled to the reduction mill.

"What about costs?" Grady asked.

"We pay our drivers four dollars and fifty cents a day," Judy Townsend told him. "Wood for the fires at the reduction plant costs ten dollars a cord; our wagons run as high as nine hundred dollars a piece."

GRADY looked over her shoulder as she wrote figures down on a sheet of yellow paper. He could see that the outlay was terrific even before a pound of borax came out of the Valley.

"In order to make money," the girl smiled dryly, "we have to keep our wagons running on schedule, bringing out full loads all the time. My father found that out years ago, and he insisted that schedules be kept up."

"How fast can you make the run now?" Grady wanted to know.

"Twenty days from Sage City to the reduction plant and back," Judy Townsend told him. "When we start to go beyond that, our margin of profit is considerably reduced."

Grady went over the monthly figures carefully, noting the items of expense, salaries, the weekly amount of borax delivered to the railhead. He said then, "If you could put a dozen more wagons on the road you could nearly double your profit, and that would take care of the occasional bad spells when wagons break down."

The girl smiled. "That would cost me another ten thousand dollars," she said. "I don't have it. Father had been investing heavily in railroad stocks before he died and he lost out. Our capital is very low at present."

"Any chance of bettering our schedule?" Grady asked her.

"You're the superintendent," Judy said. "That's why I'm hiring you."

Grady nodded. "I'll run over the line next week. If we want to beat Corcoran we have to take more borax out of the Valley than he does. We can get more markets, and we can only get them by having plenty of the stuff to sell."

They heard the sudden commotion out in the yard, and then big George Buckmaster's voice raised in a shout. Grady got up and walked to the window, looking out on the yard. He saw the horseman slipping out of the saddle, one arm hanging limp, his left shoulder bloodstained.

Judy Townsend said quickly, "He's been shot, Mr. Harrigan."

Grady broke for the door. "Recognize him?" he called back.

"Sam Slade, one of our drivers," the girl said tersely. "I don't like it."

Grady broke through the crowd around Slade. The wounded man was leaning against a wagon wheel, head on his chest, holding his arm. His wound had been bandaged, but it had started to bleed through the bandaging.

"What happened?" Grady demanded.

Slade, a chunky, red-haired man, looked up at him stupidly, and then Judy Townsend said, "Mr. Harrigan is the new Ajax superintendent, Sam. Talk to him."

"My outfit was jumped last night," Slade muttered, "between Purple Rocks and Mojave Springs. Ed Grainger was killed when they fired on us from the rocks. I jumped the wagons and got away up among the boulders on the other side o' the road. I watched 'em burn the wagons. They were wearin' masks."

"How many?" Grady asked quietly.

"Counted ten," Slade said.

"Recognize any of them?" Grady asked next.

Slade shook his head. "They cut loose the mules an' built fires underneath the wagons. They didn't stay long, an' they had them damned masks on." He added, "I headed back to our Mojave Springs station, had my arm bandaged an' rode all day to git up here."

"That's Condor work," George Buckmaster said angrily. "We'll walk over there an' clean the whole damned bunch of 'em out."

Grady shook his head. "Start any rough stuff," he said, "and Corcoran will get an injunction against us. They'll close us down."

"An' they'll burn our damned wagons an' poison our stock," Buckmaster said, "if we let 'em git away with it."

"They won't get away with it," Grady said. He turned to Judy Townsend and he said, "Do we have enough men in our employ to put two men with shotguns on top of each load going through?"

"It can be arranged," the girl said.

Grady Harrigan smiled thinly. "I'll take a walk over to see Mr. Corcoran," he said. "We might be able to come to an understanding." He pushed through the crowd of men toward the arched gateway, and as he was going through he heard a man coming up behind him. It was big George Buckmaster.

"If any o' them drivers tries to jump

you," the giant growled, "he'll talk to me."

Grady grinned at him. He stepped through the office door of the Condor Borax Company at quarter past four, and he saw the bespectacled clerk sitting at his desk, poring over papers. The clerk spun around, recognized him, and gulped.

"Corcoran in?" Grady asked him.

The clerk shook his head. He mumbled, seeing Buckmaster, "Who wants to know?"

"Harrigan, new super of Ajax," Buckmaster snapped.

A thin, rickety, bald-headed man came through the door, peering at Grady with his weak, water blue eyes. He said in a rasping voice, "Who is this, Harkness?"

"I'm speaking for Ajax Borax," Grady told him easily, "and we have a little complaint to make."

"Complaint?" the old man snarled. Grady noted the voice, and he tabbed the man as Felix Crane, head of Condor.

"I had two wogons burned last night up at Purple Rocks," Grady said patiently. "We lost forty-five thousand pounds of borax." He was watching Crane closely and he saw the quick surprise, and then the gleam of triumph come into the old man's veined eyes.

"Why do you come here with that story?" Crane snapped at him, recovering himself. "Why not go to Sheriff Smith?"

"I'm talking to you first," Grady smiled, "so it won't happen again." He saw very clearly that the pillaging of the two wogons had been accomplished under orders from Corcoran himself and that Crane had not known of the plan until now.

"What if it does?" the old man shrieked.

Grady shot out his right hand, grasping the old man's long nose between his thumb and forefinger, yanking him, howling, across the counter. With his left hand he scooped up a bottle of ink on the counter and poured the contents on Crane's bald head.

THE BLACK ink trickled down over the man's eyes, nose and mouth. He leaped back, screaming oaths, and Grady said, "If it happens again I'm coming in here and make you drink a bottle of this stuff."

George Buckmaster was doubled up with laughter and the clerk, Harkness, stared at the scene, appalled.

"I'll sue you!" Felix Crane screeched.

"I'll drive you out of this country on your hands and knees!"

"Tell Corcoran," Grady said quietly, "if he wants to use rough stuff we'll give him as good as he hands out. We'll run every damned Condor wagon off the road before we're through."

"You'll crawl on your knees!" Crane was howling as they went out the door.

"He's easy," George Buckmaster chuckled, and then the grin disappeared. "But Jasper Corcoran's not," he added. "He's a pretty tough hombre."

"I'm worried about Corcoran," Grady smiled.

They went back to the Ajax yards, and Grady finished his conference with Judy Townsend. He saw the worry in the girl's eyes as they sat down at the desk again.

"We can never prove Condor was behind that raid," the girl said quietly. "They'll do it again—"

"They won't," Grady said.

She looked at him. "Why not?"

"I'll wreck every outfit they put on the road," Grady said without emotion. "I'll move into the Valley and burn down their reduction plant. I'll raid their yard right here in town." He saw some of the color leave the girl's face. "He said tersely, "When they shoot one of my boys off his wagon they're shooting at me—and from ambush. I don't like that."

Judy Townsend repeated a statement Grady Harrigan had heard earlier that day in the Crown Saloon, something the bartender had said. The girl murmured, "It takes a man to run borax out of this valley."

Grady registered at the local hotel. He shaved and washed up, coming down for supper at six o'clock. Crossing the hotel lobby toward the dining room, he saw men grinning at him and he knew the reason. In a town like Sage City news traveled like wildfire and he realized that the story of his little encounter with Felix Crane was a matter of common gossip now. It meant, too, that Jasper Corcoran, as Crane's super, was morally bound to balance the ledger, and he remembered that he'd invited Corcoran, through the clerk, to meet him in the Crown tonight.

A man sprawled in a wicker chair said to Grady as he passed, "I hear Felix Crane prefers black ink." Grady grinned. He

tossed a cigar to the man and said softly, "Pass the word to Corcoran that I have more ink left in that bottle." He went on into the dining room and he picked out a corner table, conscious of the fact that he'd cast the die now and there was no turning back. He felt the old tingle running through his body, the feeling which presaged physical combat, and he suddenly did not feel hungry.

He ate sparingly, remembering Buckmaster's words concerning Corcoran. The giant, a terrific fighter himself, seemed to have the utmost respect for the former Ajax super. Corcoran was not as big as Buckmaster, but Grady had seen the man's strength in the cut of his shoulders, in the breadth of his neck. In the shape of Corcoran's jaw he visualized a man who would not stop fighting until the last ounce of strength was drained from his powerful body.

Coolly, Grady smoked his cigar through after eating, leaning back in the chair, completely relaxed. His nose was still sore where Buckmaster's elbow had hit him. He'd taken a half-dozen other punches which had not helped, but the fight had not been long, and he was thankful for that.

At seven o'clock Buckmaster came through the dining room door, heading straight for his table. The big man slid into a chair on the other side of the table.

"Corcoran's at the 'Crown', makin' big talk," he said quietly. "He's sayin' you'll drink a bottle o' ink before the night's over." Buckmaster scowled. "Ain't no reason why you should take him on tonight after havin' a fight with me in the afternoon."

"You were easy," Grady chuckled. "Tell Corcoran I'll stick his head in a beer barrel if he makes any more talk."

Buckmaster rubbed his square chin. He looked at Grady for a long time before speaking, and then he said softly, "Harrigan, I'm damn' glad you're workin' on our side." He went out then and Grady finished his cigar.

At seven-thirty he emerged from the dining room and was crossing the lobby when he saw Judy Townsend coming down the stairs. She lifted a hand to him and Grady waited. He noticed that the lobby was quite crowded now, and men were looking in his direction. He heard the

whispers and he noticed money passing from hand to hand. He grinned faintly at that.

Judy Townsend crossed to him, biting her lips. She said quietly, "I heard what happened over at the Condor office this afternoon, and I know you're planning to fight Corcoran tonight."

Grady shrugged. "News travels fast in this town," he observed.

"You—you feel that you have to fight him?" the girl asked.

"I can crawl out," Grady said. "I can leave tonight for that trip into the Valley."

She frowned at him. "You won't," she said, and then she shook her head in exasperation. "Why do these things happen. Why must men fight each other?"

"Sometimes," Grady said philosophicaly, "one man puts his head higher than anybody else and he must be knocked down to normal size."

A man stuck his head through the door and yelled, "Corcoran says to come an' get it, Harrigan."

"My pleasure," Grady Harrigan murmured. He bowed politely to Judy Townsend. "Lay your bets on me," he said as he moved away.

"I won't be there," the girl told him grimly.

AT THE DOOR a slim, sallow-faced man stood with a wad of money in his hand, a Mexican cigarillo dangling from his lips. He looked at Grady and smiled.

"How are they betting?" Grady asked him.

"Three to one on Concoran," the gambler grinned.

Grady turned to Judy Townsend who was still standing a few feet behind him. "He said, 'How much do I make with Ajax?'"

"One-fifty a month," the girl said.

Grady rubbed his chin. He said to the gambler. "I'll take a hundred and fifty of that money, my friend."

"Which way?" the gambler asked him humorously.

"I like myself," Grady Harrigan said.

He went out on the porch and he saw the crowd in the street, most of them Ajax employees who had seen him fight Buckmaster in the afternoon. The giant driver was standing at the edge of the porch,

looking at him with moody disapproval.

"It ain't right that a man should have two fights in one day," the big man growled. "I wouldn't do that myself."

Grady smiled at him, at the seriousness of his face. Buckmaster was a man to whom fighting was as important as working, and Buckmaster had formulated certain rules and regulations, the breaking of which disturbed him.

"Don't worry about it, George," Grady said.

"Watch his damned head," Buckmaster scowled. "He smashed Sam Blane's face in last month. Corcoran takes his fight as is comes."

Grady nodded. He started up the street with Buckmaster at his side, the Ajax men forming a double line behind him on the walk. They swung up toward the north side of town, forty strong, and other men fell into line as they walked.

Some of the heat had left the air now, but it was still warm, and it would not be, Grady knew, until near morning before any real coolness came to this town on the edge of the desert.

Before each saloon along the main street were groups of men, watching for him, grinning as he passed, waving wads of greenbacks at the Ajax men in the crowd. A fight broke out near the tail end of the line and Buckmaster plunged back along the walk to see that the Ajax man received fair play.

The Crown Saloon was on the other side of the street, and as Grady stepped off the walk to cross, he saw Jasper Corcoran sitting on the steps of the Crown porch, a cigar in his mouth. Kerosene flares lighted the entrance to the saloon, the flickering light falling on the faces of the mob of men there.

Corcoran sat with his big hands clasped across his knees, the cigar tilted toward the night sky. He wore a white shirt, with no coat, but he had on a black vest which was unbuttoned. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, revealing the power in his forearms. He continued to sit on the steps as Grady approached. Once he took the cigar from his mouth, looked as it meditatively and then put it back.

Grady pulled up in front of him, coatless himself now, his hat on the back of his head, a grin on his wide face. He said

softly, "Corcoran, where's that bottle of ink I'm supposed to drink?"

The crowd pushed up behind Grady, forming a semi-circle which extended all the way across the street to the opposite walk. Jasper Corcoran rolled the cigar in his mouth as he spoke around it. There was an amused expression around the corners of his green eyes.

"So you want to see that bottle of ink?" he said softly.

The porch behind Corcoran was four deep with men. They were crowded behind the batwing doors of the saloon, looking over the doors, peering through the windows. Felix Crane stood a little distance behind Corcoran, his small, bird-like eyes alight with an unholy glee. His yellowish teeth were drawn back in a snarl.

"Get up," Grady Harrigan said softly, "or I'll knock you down where you sit, Corcoran." He swung his right hand in a backward motion, slapping the long cigar from Corcoran's mouth, knocking it off to the left.

Corcoran looked after the cigar, the grin still on his face, but his eyes narrowed. He got up without haste, taking off his hat and placing it on the porch floor behind him.

Grady heard the low murmur, rising to a roar as Corcoran came forward, hitching at his belt. Grady backed away out into the center of the street, the crowd giving way behind him, forming a huge circle in the road in front of the Crown Saloon.

Circling to the left, Grady looked past Corcoran and saw Judy Townsend standing in a doorway behind the crowd on that side. He lifted his eyebrows in surprise, and then Corcoran was on top of him, driving in like a powerful bull.

They were evenly matched, both of the same weight and nearly of the same height, with Grady having possibly an inch on his man. Corcoran's shoulders were somewhat wider, more compact, and his arms moved with terrific speed and power as he shot punches toward his man, seeking to pelt him to the ground.

Grady braced himself, the smile still on his face, as he returned the punches, giving no ground, taking some of Corcoran's sledge-hammer blows full on the face, and handing out equal punishment.

He could hear the rising crescendo of sound as both men stood there, slugging for

a full sixty seconds, and during this furious exchange Grady Harrigan read his man. Corcoran had one method of fighting, and that was to move in and keep moving in, no matter how many punches he took; to move forward until his man became discouraged at his irresistible force and began to give ground. When he gave ground he was finished.

The bulldog jaw, the thick neck and the solid shoulders indicated that Jasper Corcoran was a man who could absorb a tremendous amount of punishment before it penetrated to the brain cells.

ONE OF Corcoran's sledge-hammer blows caught Grady on the left side of the face, dropping him to his knees. He got up immediately as Corcoran swarmed in on top of him, hitting at him savagely even as he scrambled up. He lowered his head and he lashed out with both hands, smashing Corcoran in the stomach, hearing him gasp from the impact of the fists.

Then, suddenly, Grady broke ground, falling away so quickly that Corcoran stumbled forward off balance. As one of Corcoran's hands swished past him, Grady stepped in again, his right hand coming up sharply. He got his body behind the punch and it landed cleanly on Corcoran's jaw. The man went down, his legs giving way beneath him.

Grady stepped back and watched him, blood dripping from his cut mouth. The crowd was howling. A man to Grady's right was shrieking at him,

"Go in—go in! Finish him!"

Grady waited a few feet away, fists balled, the blood trickling from his bruised knuckles. His right eye was throbbing and the vision seemed to be getting smaller there. He tasted blood in his mouth and he knew that his injured nose was bleeding again.

He watched Corcoran get to his feet, and he was ready when the Condor super lunged in at him again. He wanted to end it quickly, mercifully, and he brought his right fist up again toward Corcoran's face, thinking it would be the final blow of the fight.

Corcoran turned his head instinctively as he plunged forward and the fist missed him cleanly. He fell in close, groping at Grady, head lowered, and then very suddenly

Chapter III

HANG THE SPY HIGH!

Grady heard George Buckmaster's warning shout.

"His head!" Buckmaster yelled. "Watch—"

It was too late. Grady had been half bent over his man, trying to push him away, when Corcoran brought his sandy head up very suddenly, butting Grady under the chin with it.

Light exploded through Grady's brain at the impact. He was suddenly looking up at the stars, and then his back hit the dusty road. Corcoran came down on top of him with the force of a load of brick, knocking the wind out of him. Corcoran was hitting now, savagely, trying to get astride him and beat at his face until he was unconscious.

And then Grady saw Buckmaster coming up behind Corcoran and the giant's face was livid with rage.

"Damn you!" Buckmaster roared. "He didn't jump you when you was down, Corcoran."

With a heave the giant yanked Corcoran up and threw him back against the crowd. Grady got up, his head still reeling, the lower part of his face numb from that brutal butt. He waited for Corcoran to come at him and he steeled himself against the onslaught.

He hit at his man, both feet planted firmly in the dust, and he kept hitting until his head cleared somewhat. He saw Corcoran's puffy, bleeding face in front of him and he realized that his face was in the same condition. He hit at that face steadily, not even thinking about it, swinging one fist and then the other.

He didn't know how long this kept up. He could hear the noise all around him and he could see the faces behind Corcoran, faces lighted by the kerosene flares, tense, unnatural faces, and then those faces started to come nearer and he realized that Corcoran was retreating and that he was moving forward.

There was an increased volume of sound as he hit at Corcoran with redoubled fury, deliberately walking forward, and then Corcoran disappeared. Grady stumbled over something soft and yielding, and he fell into George Buckmaster's arms.

The giant was saying grimly, "That done it, Harrigan. That done it."

But Harrigan was past hearing anything that was said to him.

HE WAS BACK in his room at the hotel then, and Buckmaster was there and Judy Townsend. They had a basin of warm water and they were trying to wash the blood from his face and from his hands. He felt sore, his face, every part of his body above the waist where Corcoran's sledgehammer blows had landed. When he tried to grin, his face was wracked with pain. He said to the girl. "How did you like it?"

"I've seen fights before in the streets of Sage City," she said. "I've never liked any of them."

"No," Grady nodded. "They're not nice—not even for a man to see." He added thoughtfully, "But sometimes they're necessary."

"Why?" the girl asked him bluntly.

Grady counted it off on his fingers. "Condor hit at us; I poured ink over Felix Crane's head, which made it necessary that Corcoran retaliate. He would have hounded me all over this town if I didn't meet him. My own men wouldn't respect me. Rather than wait for him to start working on me, I challenged him."

"So now it's over," the girl scowled.

"Now it's begun," Grady smiled, grimacing at the pain. "You know that Condor is out to break you; they started before I came to this town, and now that I'm on your side they'll try even harder to wreck you."

"There's a rider going into the Valley now," Buckmaster said, "with orders to put an armed guard on every wagon going in or out."

Grady nodded. He said, "Any Condor wagons in town?"

Buckmaster looked at him. "An outfit just came out of the Valley at dusk. Wagons are down at the railroad siding waiting for the line to run cars over."

Grady Harrigan flexed his stiffening, swollen fingers. He said softly, "Take twenty men, George. Put those wagons over on their sides."

Buckmaster gulped. "Roll 'em over?" he asked weakly.

"Condor keep a guard on those wagons?" Grady asked.

"Maybe two men," Buckmaster said.

"They won't fight," Grady said. "Chase

them off and dump the wagons. Have the boys put handkerchiefs around their faces."

Buckmaster was grinning broadly now. "Why, now, that's a pleasure, Harrigan," he chuckled as he hurried off.

Judy Townsend had been listening to this in silence. She said when Buckmaster left, "What is the reason for that?"

Grady shrugged. "General nuisance," he stated mildly. "It always helps. I want Corcoran to know he has to guard his wagons, too."

"I hope you know what you're doing," the girl murmured.

"We'll see," Grady grinned.

In the morning, face still stiff and sore from the pounding he'd taken, he was off into the Valley, riding with George Buckmaster. Judy Townsend watched them from the door of the office.

"We'll give consideration to any suggestions you might make for improvement of the system, Mr. Harrigan," she said.

"I might have some," Grady said. As they rode past the Condor office he saw Jasper Corcoran just emerging from the door. Corcoran stared at him out of one good eye, the other being tightly closed. Corcoran's face was a purple, swollen mass.

Grady lifted a hand to him, but Corcoran only stared at them, hatred making his one eye glitter. Grady said softly, "You turn those wagons over, George?"

"Corcoran's got a crew over there now," Buckmaster chuckled, "shovelin' the stuff back on the wagons." He added softly, "One o' them guards wanted to argue so we shaved his damned head an' painted it green."

Grady Harrigan's shoulders shook. "Buckmaster," he murmured, "you're a man after my own heart."

The heat hit them as they moved into Death Valley. It had been hot in Sage City on the edge of the desert, but nothing like this. It was a dry, burning heat which seemed to absorb all the moisture in the body, pressing a rider down into his saddle.

The white mountains of sand, the alkali flats, the long stretches of dried-up salt marshes were hard on the eyes, and Grady had to shake his head constantly and squint his eyes.

They rode past long files of boulders swept down from the adjacent mountain ranges by cloudbursts. Looking at the

land now, Grady couldn't conceive that even in these ranges of mottled, purplish mountains bordering Death Valley, there could have been rain. Dry, barren rock, utterly void of vegetation, frowned down on the sand hills, and in the distance they seemed to shimmer in the heat.

"Hotter than hell down here," Buckmaster said once. He looked at Grady out of the corners of his eyes and he said softly, "An' this is the cool season, Harrigan."

Grady watched three huge crows fluttering across the vast expanse of desert, the only living objects on the horizon. They were cawing dismally as they flapped their black wings.

A graded road ran from Sage City to the Ajax reduction plant. The road was fairly good but Grady could see that with improvements they could make it faster, thus improving the time.

They stopped at the first Ajax station, at Devil's Hole, a small spring two feet deep and a foot and a half in width. Two station men greeted them from the doorway of a stone hut.

Grady spoke with them, looked over the stock in the corrals, checked the equipment, and then asked them if they had any suggestions for improving the station.

They looked at him in surprise and then at each other. One man said thoughtfully, "This is a hell of a lonely place, Mr. Harrigan."

Grady nodded. There were a few mesquite trees behind the hut in the vicinity of the water hole, but beyond that was desert again, desert and boulder fields, baking in the sun.

"You boys get into town?" he asked.

"Not much," the men told him.

"We'll arrange it," Grady said, "that you get in regularly. We'll have two boys come out to relieve every station at intervals. They'll move through the whole Valley, spending a week at each station."

RIDING OFF five minutes later, Grady knew that he'd left two happy men behind him. He said to Buckmaster, "Keep them contented and you'll notice the difference in the service they give. The stock will be in better shape, and we'll benefit every way you look at it."

"Makes sense," Buckmaster admitted. "When Corcoran ran this outfit, he made

the boys sweat. They didn't like him an' they didn't like the company."

They stayed that night at the No. 3 Mesquite Camp, and Grady found one of the men drunk on his bunk. The other attendant was trying to do the work of two, caring for the large number of animals in the corral, cooking the meals for the drivers and shoeing mules.

Grady waited until the drunk awoke, then he said quietly, "Jack, saddle one of those mules and hit the trail for Sage City. You're through."

"Who in hell are you?" the man growled. He eyed Grady bleakly.

Buckmaster said softly, "Joe, he gave Jasper Corcoran the worst damn beatin' any man ever took in the Valley. This is Harrigan, new Ajax super."

The drunk blinked, licked his lips nervously and then lurched away toward the corral. Grady called after him, "Leave that mule at the Ajax yards in Sage. You try to run off and we'll go after you and hang you to the first damned tree big enough to hold a man."

To the remaining attendant Grady said, "I'll have a sober man sent out here as soon as I return to Sage. While you're alone you'll get double pay. That satisfactory?"

The man grinned at him. "Been doin' double work fer two weeks," he admitted, "fer one pay."

In the morning they left the Mesquite Camp, and at ten o'clock passed an outward-bound outfit. Grady saw the big wagons and the long string of mules moving across an alkali flat in the distance, coming as straight as an arrow with no twists or curves in the road.

They stopped the wagons and Grady had a word with the driver. He noticed that a shotgun messenger rode up on top of the load, his Greener across his knees.

"Any trouble back there?" Grady wanted to know.

"Not since we put the guard on," the driver said. "We're givin' 'em hell the first time they try to lock horns with us."

George Buckmaster chuckled. "Reckon we got 'em licked, Harrigan."

Grady shook his head. "It won't be as easy as that," he said. Remembering the look Corcoran had given them on the way out, he knew that the Condor super wouldn't stop even if he had to wreck Felix Crane's

company to ruin Ajax and the man he hated.

They reached the reduction mill at three o'clock the next afternoon, moving at a fairly fast pace, picking up fresh mounts at the various stations along the route. When they were still about five miles from the plant, Buckmaster frowned at a big salt marsh off to the west.

Grady saw the road which had been laid out through the marsh, and then the abandoned sleds with the long ropes. There were no workmen around.

"Where in hell are them Chinese?" Buckmaster growled. "They should be out here bringin' in the stuff."

Grady pulled up and stared through the shimmering heat waves.

"They may have been shifted over to another spot," he said.

Buckmaster shook his head. "Enough borax in there to last us at least six more months," he said. "If they had been shifted the sleds would have been taken along, too. I don't like the looks o' this business."

"How many Chinese does Ajax have?" Grady wanted to know.

"Damn near a hundred," Buckmaster told him.

"Have any trouble with them?" Grady asked.

"They work like hell," Buckmaster said, "and they don't bother anybody. They been livin' in tin shacks near the reduction mill. Ain't a human being in this world kin stand the heat an' the hell out here the way them Chinese kin."

"Why would they quit work?" Grady asked.

Buckmaster grinned. "Queerest damned people in this world," he said. "Nobody knows why they do things."

They rode on to the reduction mill, seeing the abandoned sleds, some of them half-filled with borax, but no Chinese in the marshes. They passed an empty wood wagon, heading away from the reduction mill, rattling over the graded road. Grady stopped the driver.

"Where are the Chinese?" he asked.

The driver, a grizzled, gray-haired man, spat a stream of tobacco juice into the sand and said, "In their damned shacks."

"Why?" Buckmaster demanded, mystified.

The driver grinned. "Hell," he chuckled,

"ain't nobody kin talk their language. Tom Brennan's been tearin' his hair out tryin' to find out what in hell got into 'em. They jabber, but nobody kin understand 'em."

"Harry Sing speaks English," Buckmaster said. "Sing's the boy got all these Chinamen together from 'Frisco an' brought 'em out."

"Sing skipped," the driver said. "They got another chap there seems to be doin' the talkin' for 'em, but he can't speak English."

"And he's the fellow started the trouble." Grady said grimly.

"He's the ringleader," the driver nodded. "Goes by the name o' Chang."

"We'll talk to friend Chang," Grady growled. "I've had experience with these people before." He remembered working with them on his Nevada railroad. They were honest, faithful and industrious, anxious to please, but also immensely gullible, willing to swallow any tale told to them. Once a large group of them had informed him that they wanted to return to 'Frisco because a drunken Irish paddy had told them the water in the Humboldt River had reversed itself and was flowing east, and that in another day there would be no water in the bed and they would die of thirst!

AT THE reduction plant fifteen minutes later they spoke to the harassed Tom Brennan, a big, red-haired Irishman. Brennan had just come back from the workers' huts, his face dripping perspiration.

"Damn 'em," he growled. "I don't know what they want."

"What about this Chang?" Grady asked. "Can't he talk?"

"He does a lot o' damned grinnin',"

Brennan grated. "I feel like takin' him by the neck an' wringin' his head off. I think he kin talk if he wants to, but he won't. I got three outfits ready to move, but I can't load the wagons an' there's no borax comin' in. My fires are goin' out."

"When did they walk off?" Grady asked. "Yesterday mornin'," Brennan scowled. "If this goes on for a couple o' days Miss Townsend's goin' to feel it back at the office. Our schedules will be broken all to hell. If the Chinese quit altogether it'll take us weeks to bring out a new crew, an' by that time Condor will be grabbin' our markets."

"Let's have a talk with Chang," Grady said softly.

"You won't git a thing out of him," Brennan muttered. "I've been jabbering at him fer damn near eighteen hours."

"Maybe," Grady smiled coldly, "that's been the trouble." He saw the tin shacks, a block of them running along the north wall of the reduction mill. Groups of Chinese were standing around, looking toward them, talking excitedly among themselves. "Which one is Chang?" Grady asked.

Tom Brennan pointed the man out, a short, squat man with a long queue hanging down the back of his blue flannel shirt. He was standing in the midst of about ten others, grinning, revealing his big buckteeth.

Grady walked over to him, caught him by the shoulder and spun him around. He said quietly, "You speak English, Chang?"

Chinese were running from the huts now, assembling together around them, speaking incoherently, pointing at Chang. The short man in the blue flannel shirt shrugged his shoulders at Grady and began to jabber in Chinese.



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! ☆

"I'll bet my damned hat he kin speak English," Tom Brennan grated.

Grady said quietly, "We'll find out. Bring a rope, George."

Buckmaster stared at him and then walked away. He came back with a coil of rope and handed it to Grady.

Grady said to Chang, "So you don't speak English." He was smiling now as he advanced with the rope. Chang started to retreat, jabbering in a high-pitched voice. "Grab him," Grady said to Buckmaster. "Tie his hands and his feet."

Buckmaster made a leap for the little man who had snarled and tried to twist away. A knife flashed in the bright sunlight, missing Buckmaster's neck by an inch. The giant's right hand didn't miss. It crashed against Chang's jaw and the trouble-maker sagged to the sand.

"Kind o' expected that sticker," Buckmaster chuckled.

"Tie him up," Grady said, "hands and ankles." He began to make a hangman's noose with the length of rope in his hands. He looked at the open-mouthed Tom Brennan.

"Hell!" the mill superintendent muttered, "you gonna hang him, Harrigan?"

"Why not," Grady said coolly. "We're the law in Death Valley." He walked over to one of the shacks, picked up a pail of water, came back and poured the contents over the prostrate Chang.

The little man spluttered and started to roll, coughing, shaking his head.

"Lift him up," Grady said to Buckmaster. "Carry him over to that loading platform."

A heavy beam extended out over the platform with a block and pulley hanging from it. Grady ran his rope through the pulley and then dropped the noose over Chang's head, tightening it around the neck, the knot behind the left ear. He saw the sweat breaking out on the man's face. There was a murmuring from the Chinese behind him, but none of them made an attempt to stop him.

Chang stood on the platform with the noose around his neck, facing the crowd. Grady said to him quietly, "So you can't speak English, Chang?"

Again the squat man started to jabber, his voice off-key now as fright got the better of him.

Calmly, Grady started to pull on the other end of the rope, lifting Chang to his toe-tips, choking off his breath. He pulled until the man was clear of the platform. He looked into the faces of the Chinese laborers below him—dazed, bewildered faces—and then he let Chang down again.

The half-choking coolie nearly fell off the platform, but Buckmaster caught him and held him up.

"You remember how to speak English, Chang?" Grady asked him, "or do we go up again."

Chang gasped, spat, and then started to jabber unintelligibly. Grady Harrigan started to pull on the rope, and as Chang went up on his toe-tips again he began to scream,

"Talk—talk—talk English!"

"That's better," Grady said. "Now tell us why these boys aren't going to work?"

"They don't like the work here," Chang said in perfect English, his face sullen.

"That's a damned lie," Tom Brennan snapped. "They liked it until you came along."

Grady began to put the pressure on the rope. He said tersely, "You'll stay up this time if you don't tell the truth."

CHANG SPOKE then, grimly, sullenly. "I told them the company had planned to cut their water rations in half; that there wasn't enough water for the animals and that you didn't want to haul any more into the Valley from the outside."

Tom Brennan said softly, "So that's why they were always pointing at the water wagons and jabbering."

"Who sent you here?" Grady asked.

Chang hesitated. "They'll kill me if I say any more," he muttered.

"You'll die quicker," Grady assured him, "if you stop talking now."

The Oriental hesitated, and then he blurted out, "Corcoran of Condor Borax. He paid me to come here and bribe Harry Sing to run off, and then circulate this story."

Grady nodded. "Now," he said, "tell the boys that you were telling them a lie and that they should go back to work."

Chang hesitated until Grady gave a tug on the rope. He made his talk then in Chinese. The men listened intently and then began to mutter.

"Tell them to go to work," Grady said,

"and we'll pay them for the time they lost listening to your lies."

Again Chang spoke, and Grady saw the grins spread across the yellow faces. As one man the crowd broke and ran for the big wagons which were ready to haul them out to the marshes.

Tom Brennan breathed a sigh of relief as Grady stepped forward and took the noose from Chang's neck. He said, "What happens to this chap, Harrigan?"

"He goes back with me," Grady said, "to testify before a California judge that Jasper Corcoran of Condor Borax hired him to interfere with the business activities of Ajax. They'll either slap a big fine on Condor which they won't be able to stand, or Corcoran might get himself a prison sentence. In either case we're hitting at Condor, keeping them on the run."

"It's a nice thing," Brennan grinned, "to be on the hittin' end."

"We've had enough witnesses here to confirm Chang's statement," Grady said. "I want to get him back to Sage and on the train as soon as possible. Can you have three fast horses saddled, Brennan?"

"Be ready in five minutes," the superintendent informed him. "You can pick up fresh animals at every stop, and if you keep going you can make Sage possibly tomorrow afternoon."

Chang was left trussed up with a guard over him while Grady and Buckmaster stopped in for a drink in Brennan's office. Buckmaster said as they were seated, "You seemed pretty damned sure, Harrigan, that Chang could speak English. You run across him before?"

"No," Grady admitted. "When I learned that the coolies were on strike I suspected Condor Borax to be behind it. I figured Chang would be the man hired by Corcoran to foment the trouble, and that meant he'd be a man who could speak Chinese and English—English because he'd have to dicker with Corcoran."

Tom Brennan said as he poured the drinks, "You could o' been wrong, Harrigan. Suppose the poor chap only knew Chinese?"

"In that case," Grady said calmly, "we'd have to bury him."

Buckmaster started to choke on his drink. He looked at Brennan and then he looked at Grady who was setting his empty glass

on the table, and abstractedly wiping his lips.

"Hell!" Buckmaster muttered.

They rode away a few minutes later, Chang's ankles tied under the horse's belly, his hands loose so that he could ride. Grady took the sixgun from his belt, showed it to the man and said quietly, "You'll ride up in front of us. Try to make a break and I'll shoot you from that horse. Keep fifteen feet ahead all the time. No more."

Chang rode ahead and they waved back to Tom Brennan. They rode till dusk, picking up fresh mounts at the No. 8 Mojave Station, and again at the No. 7 Apache Spring Station. When it was dark, Grady tied a rope between his horse and Chang's, closing up the distance between them.

They arrived at the No. 5 station at two o'clock in the morning, sleeping there till six before they went on again. They made good time before the heat came to the Valley. At high noon, about fifteen miles from Sage City, Grady called another halt till three o'clock in the afternoon. Driving horses at any rate of speed through the Valley during the hottest part of the day was cruelty to the animals. They stayed at the Devil's Hole station, and took fresh mounts for the last stage of the journey.

It was almost dusk when they rode through the main street of Sage City, Chang in between them. Grady said, "We'll head straight for the sheriff's office and lock him up till morning. There's a train out then."

"If Corcoran gets word that he's here," Buckmaster growled, "he might make a raid on the jailhouse tonight. They'll know what you intend to do with him."

"We can put a half dozen of our own boys around the jail," Grady assured him. "Once we get him in he'll stay there."

They were passing the hotel when Grady heard the group of riders coming up behind them. He'd had his hand on his gun all the while that they rode through the town. In the half-darkness he slipped the gun out into the open and dropped back a few feet behind Chang.

The riders were whooping drunkenly as they tore past, kicking up clouds of dust in their wake. As they shot past, four in number, Grady imagined he saw something flash. He watched the riders spur around the next corner, still whooping, and then,

riding up to Buckmaster and Chang again, he noticed that the Chinaman's head was down on his chest as if in weariness.

They rode for another fifteen feet, and then Chang started to sag. His body jerked loosely in the saddle and he would have fallen from his horse if Buckmaster hadn't grabbed at him.

The giant had to hold him up in the saddle as they edged over toward the walk, and then Grady heard Buckmaster utter a quick exclamation.

"That ride knock him out?" Grady grinned. "I never knew a coolie tire like that before, which proves that he's not a regular worker."

Buckmaster slipped from the saddle, caught Chang, and lowered him to the ground. He said quietly, "Harrigan, I reckon this bird ain't gonna sing fer you."

GRADY CAME out of the saddle quickly and knelt down beside the man in the dust. Buckmaster had bent down and rolled Chang over on his stomach. Grady saw the hilt of a knife protruding from the small of Chang's back.

"Those riders!" Grady snapped.

"They're gone," Buckmaster muttered. "They must o' come from the Condor yard."

Grady stared up the street grimly. He said to Buckmaster, "Take him into the Ajax yards." He rode on ahead through the darkened street to the Ajax office and went in.

Judy Townsend was sitting at her desk. She'd heard his step and she was watching the door when he came in.

"Glad you got back, Mr. Harrigan," she said.

She shook hands with him the way a man does, but her hand was warmer, softer. Grady sat down, his hat in his lap, the frown still on his face.

"Things not so good along the line?" the girl asked him quietly.

"The line is all right," Grady scowled. "You have good men for the most part. I liked Tom Brennan at the reduction plant."

"What happened?" Judy smiled.

Grady told her about Chang and the thrown knife. He said grimly, "Corcoran's going too far when he commits murder."

Judy Townsend went pale when Grady related the story of the murder. "I—I'm

sorry that had to happen," she half-whispered. "I don't suppose Chang realized how much damage he was doing when he got our workmen to quit in the Valley."

"How much damage would have been done?" Grady asked her.

"If we were unable to ship borax for three or four weeks in succession," Judy Townsend stated quietly, "Ajax would lose every market it has. The buyers would turn to Condor for their supplies."

"And Corcoran knows that," Grady growled.

"Mr. Corcoran worked for Ajax," Judy reminded him.

"So," Grady murmured, "if Corcoran can wreck Ajax for a month Condor wins."

Judy Townsend nodded. "I don't have the capital to hang on long enough to do any fighting once my markets are gone," she admitted. "I'd have to sell out immediately."

"And no matter who bought you out," Grady said, "Corcoran would eventually get Ajax."

"That's it," Judy said.

"I'll see him dead," Grady Harrigan said simply, "before he takes over this outfit." He got up and walked toward the door. He paused and he said there, "I'm sure Corcoran will be striking again now that he knows his plan with Chang didn't work out. How many wagons do you have on the road now?"

"Ten," Miss Townsend said. "Two are in the yard for repairs."

"Put those wagons out of commission," Grady said thoughtfully, "and Ajax is finished. Corcoran must know that. You can't haul borax out of the Valley on your back."

"You have guards on the wagons now," Judy said.

Grady shook his head. "We can't put more than one or two men on each outfit and it's not enough. If Corcoran sends out a squad of twenty or thirty men going after each wagon separately I think we're finished." He added grimly, "I believe that will be his next move."

"I can keep the wagons off the road for a while," the girl said slowly, "but it'll be hard on us. We've lost money during this strike."

"No good," Grady said. "He'd wait until you were forced to roll out again and then he'd hit you."

"You—you have a plan?" Judy Townsend asked him.

Grady looked at the floor and twirled his hat in his hand. He said finally, "Any Indians in the Valley?"

The girl stared at him. "Some," she admitted. "Back in the hills. They've never bothered us. They're mostly a peaceable people."

"They don't have to be," Grady said thoughtfully. "Indians are always going on the warpath."

"But—but why?" the girl asked, mystified.

Grady Harrigan smiled grimly. "I don't like to wait till a man hits me first," he said quietly. "I'm not waiting for Corcoran to raid us. I'm raiding him; I'm hitting at every Condor wagon on the road and every Condor station. I might even go into the Valley and strike at their reduction plant. I'll keep him so damned—so busy he won't have time to strike at us."

"The Indians?" Judy asked.

"We'll be the Indians," Grady told her. "Take off a white man's clothes, paint him with berry juice, and you can't tell him from an Indian at night."

"I—I don't want to see anyone hurt," the girl said.

"We're hitting at equipment," Grady told her, "not men. We'll be careful." He got up and walked toward the door. He paused and grinned there. "If you hear of an Indian raid tonight, Miss Townsend," he chuckled, "don't be alarmed."

"I won't," Judy smiled.

Grady found George Buckmaster and half a dozen Ajax hands standing by the wagon sheds, conversing in low tones.

"Can you round up all our boys in an hour, George?" Grady said to the big man.

Buckmaster stared at him, the light from a lantern overhead flickering on his wide face.

"What's up?" he asked.

"We're heading into the Valley," Grady said simply, "to raid Condor wagons."

Buckmaster stared at him and then grinned. "I'll have the boys back here in thirty minutes," he said softly.

Grady stared around at the big yard, noticing that the rear of it opened on desert country.

"We're dressing up as Indians," he said quietly, "slipping out through that rear

exit and heading for the first Condor station on the road."

"Indians!" Buckmaster gasped. "Hell's bells!"

CHAPTER IV

THAT HELL-BOUND TWENTY-MULE TRAIN

GRADY WATCHED the big man hurrying toward the gate to the street. He nodded to the grinning men and then followed Buckmaster at a slower pace. He remembered then that he'd had no supper and that he needed a shave and a wash.

He saw Buckmaster dart into the Crown Saloon and then he crossed the street himself and went up the hotel steps to his room. He shaved leisurely, and washed his face and arms. He was slipping into a clean shirt when he heard the cry through the open window.

"Fire! Fire!"

The horrible thought struck him that Corcoran had already gone to work and fired the Ajax yard. He went down the stairs two at a time, nearly knocking down a small, timid roomer who was ahead of him on the narrow staircase. Bursting out on the porch of the hotel he looked north and saw the red glow in the sky. Men were racing past him along the walk; all the saloons were emptying out.

"Fire—fire—fire in the Condor yard!" a man was howling.

Grady stared at him and then looked in the direction of the glow, a puzzled expression creeping over his face. The thought flashed through his mind that Buckmaster might have taken things into his own hands and fired one of the Condor sheds to avenge the murder of Chang, but then he realized that Buckmaster had been with him coming into Sage City, and he'd remained in the yard during the conference he'd had with Judy Townsend.

He went down the street at a half-trot, and then he saw Buckmaster hurtling through the Crown Saloon doors. Buckmaster spotted him, stared at him, and shook his head in amazement.

They saw the crowd running through the open gates of the Condor yard as they came up. One of the big wagon sheds was in flames and a squad of men were rolling a burning wagon out into the open.

Bucket lines were being formed and the adjoining sheds were being washed down so that flying sparks would not ignite them also. Grady spotted Felix Crane in the midst of this, eyes wild, an insane rage in his eyes. Crane was trying to direct all the work, but it was plain to see that one shed was already doomed, and that at least two of his valuable wagons would be ruined. One of them was burning fiercely and another had caught fire.

"Who in hell did this?" Buckmaster muttered.

Grady shook his head. He heard Jasper Corcoran's voice then directly behind him, a note of triumph in it.

"Here he is, Sheriff," Corcoran said.

Grady spun around, and at the same time a hand reached for the gun on his hip. He looked into the gray eyes of Sheriff Ed Smith. The sheriff of Sage City was a short man, stocky in the shoulders, square-faced.

"Now let's have no trouble, Harrigan," Smith said.

Grady's right hand rested on Smith's just as the sheriff's hand closed over the butt of the gun. Smith looked at him steadily, a small smile on his face.

He said quietly, "You'll get a fair trial in this town, Harrigan. I'll guarantee that."

Grady looked over Smith's shoulder at Corcoran standing with a sixgun in his hand, covering both himself and the astonished Buckmaster. Corcoran was grinning coldly.

"What are the charges, Sheriff?" Grady asked.

"Firing Condor sheds," Smith said. "Two Condor hands spotted you running through the rear door just before the fire broke out."

"I haven't been near the Condor yard," Grady said. "I came in to Sage City less than an hour ago. I was in the Ajax yards and then I went to my hotel room."

"A jury of twelve men will hear that," Smith assured him. "You bring your witnesses, Harrigan, but I'll have to lock you up now."

Smith had Grady's gun now and he stuck it in his waistband. He said calmly, "You walk on ahead of me, Harrigan, and we'll have no trouble. You know where the jailhouse is."

Grady looked at Smith and then at Corcoran, and then at the flaming shed. He

listened to the frantic yells of Felix Crane, owner of the Condor Borax Company, and he realized what had happened. Corcoran had deliberately fired his own sheds in order to throw suspicion on him so that Sheriff Smith would have to put him in jail.

"All right," Grady said quietly, "I'll go along, Sheriff."

Buckmaster fell in step with him as they walked toward the gate, Smith directly behind them.

"What in hell is this?" Buckmaster whispered.

"Corcoran wants me out of the way," Grady said. "He knows he can't make this charge stick because I can bring witnesses to prove that I wasn't near his yard before the fire started, but he wants me in jail for a couple of days."

Buckmaster snorted, "Damn him, I'll burn the rest of his sheds tomorrow night."

Smith called sharply from behind them, "Buckmaster, you head off here."

The giant stepped aside and Grady walked down the empty street alone. The jailhouse was at the far end of the town, a solid brick building with three cells in it. They passed no one on the way up. Even the bartenders had slipped out of the saloons to watch the fire.

GRADY WENT up the three stone steps of the jailhouse and into the small office. Smith nodded to one of the empty cells and Grady walked into it. He heard the heavy cell door slam shut behind him and the key turn in the lock. Smith paused there, rubbing his solid jaw.

"If you did start that damned fire, Harrigan," he said finally, "I don't know as I blame you. Never had any use for that Corcoran chap. He'd cut a man's throat for a dollar."

Grady smiled at him. He dropped down on the cot and lighted a cigarette. He listened to Smith's footsteps moving down the corridor toward the office again. He stretched out on the cot, stared at the ceiling and tried to figure Corcoran's next move. It did not take long. Corcoran wanted him out of the way while he went to work against Ajax. Possibly Corcoran would start to operate this very night.

Getting up, Grady strode back and forth several times. He heard a man come into the office and talk with Smith for a short

while and then the man went out. The excitement had died down now in the streets. Looking through the barred window, Grady could see that the fire was out. The crowds were moving back toward the saloons. Groups of men stood on corners and on saloon porches for a while discussing the fire, and then they went inside to quench their thirst.

Grady sat down and smoked another cigarette. He made the rounds of the little prison cell, examining the bars, the floor, the walls. The jailhouse was a comparatively new building, solidly constructed, and there was no possible way of breaking out.

Sheriff Smith came back at eleven o'clock in the evening and said, "Anything I can get you, Harrigan?"

"The key to that damned door," Grady said.

Smith grinned and went away. Grady tried to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come despite the fact that he was tired and he'd had but a few hours sleep the previous night. He got up and walked to the window again, and then he saw the shadowy forms slipping out of an alley across the road, running soundlessly toward the jailhouse.

The jailhouse door banged open very suddenly, and then he heard Sheriff Smith's dumbfounded voice, and the sounds of scuffling.

"Indians!" Smith yelled. "Why, damn it! Indians!"

Padded feet hurried down the corridor and Grady heard the jingle of chains. A huge Indian, stripped to the waist, face painted, appeared before the door of the cell and inserted the key in the lock.

"Buckmaster," Smith was howling outside, "I recognize you in that damned outfit. You open that cell door and you'll rot there yourself. I'll throw away the key."

The cell door swung open and Grady stepped out. He felt a gun pressed into his hand, and then Buckmaster said tersely, "Corcoran rode out of Sage City ten minutes ago with twenty-five Condor men."

Grady nodded. "Nice work," he said. He ran down the corridor past the struggling Sheriff Smith who had been manacled to his own desk.

"Harrigan, you're a damned fool," Smith roared. "You'd better not run out on me."

"I'll come back," Grady promised.

Outside were a half-dozen other In-

dians, sixguns in their hands, guarding the door. A drunk had come out of the Stallion Saloon across the way. He was standing against one of the awning uprights, staring at them stupidly and then his hand slipped from the post and he pitched into the gutter.

Grady said, "Where are the rest of them, Buckmaster?"

"We have twenty boys in the yard," Buckmaster told him. "The horses are ready to ride."

They crossed the street into the alley and headed through back streets toward the Ajax yard.

"Any Ajax wagons due in tonight or this morning?" Grady asked.

"Pat Doyle's due in at five o'clock this morning," Buckmaster said. "He's about leavin' the No. 1 station now."

"Would Corcoran know that?" Grady asked.

"Every man in Sage knows the Ajax schedules," Buckmaster said.

"They'll be going for Doyle's outfit first," Grady scowled. "Can we head them off?"

"Road runs straight as an arrow for six miles," Buckmaster explained, "and then she swings around a spur of the Skull Range. We cut over that spur and we'll hit Doyle's outfit before Corcoran gets there. It'll be a hell of a rough ride."

"We'll risk it," Grady said.

They found the remainder of the group waiting for them in the yard, all the men stripped to the waist, the upper portions of their bodies painted with berry juice, stripes painted across their faces.

Grady leaped into the saddle and headed for the rear exit gate. In another moment they were spurring through the gate, heading out over the desert. They turned into the graveled road two miles out of Sage City and followed the road into the Valley, a Valley made ghostly by the silvery light of the full moon.

In the distance Grady could see the low spur of mountains cutting across the horizon. There were jagged ridges of barren black rock, a mass of volcanic rock thrown across the Valley floor.

"Not very high," Buckmaster said, "but damned rough."

They started climbing at one o'clock in the morning, threading their way upward

in and out among huge boulders. Several times they had to dismount and lead the horses up the narrow passageways Buckmaster selected.

"Damned sight worse movin' up here in the daytime," the giant grinned once. "These rocks get so hot you can't touch 'em."

It took a full hour to reach the summit and then Grady climbed up on another huge boulder. The flat Valley floor lay before him, and he could pick out the road moving across the desert. Far in the distance he thought he saw a small moving object.

"That's Doyle's outfit," Buckmaster, beside him, said.

"I'll stop him first," Grady smiled. "If Doyle sees you boys hammering toward him in these outfits he'll open up with his Greener."

"We'll follow behind," the giant grinned. Grady started to pick his way down on the other side of the spur of mountains. It was precarious work, and once the sorrel he was riding started to slip on loose rock, but the animal righted itself like a cat and made the bottom without any further mishaps.

Grady rode at top speed toward the approaching wagons. The twenty teams of mules were moving along at a trot, the huge, high-topped wagons, one hitched to the other, behind, and the smaller water wagon bringing up the rear. There were three men with this outfit, the driver, his assistant and an armed guard.

THE GUARD stood up on top of the load when he spotted Grady coming near them. The driver brought the outfit to a halt and Grady rode up beside him. They had passed the outfit the day before on the way in from the reduction mill, and Grady had had a few words with Doyle, a red-faced, roly-poly Irishman with a face like a bulldog.

Doyle said, "Glad to see you, Mr. Harrigan." He looked beyond Grady then and he saw the line of riders coming out from among the rocks, racing toward the wagons. He made a dive for his shotgun, at the same time howling, "Pete, Injuns!"

"Put your guns up," Grady smiled. "Those are our boys, Doyle. A little masquerade party."

Doyle stared at him. "What in hell—" he began.

"Corcoran, of Condor, is coming around that spur in a few minutes," Grady said quietly. "We aim to give him a little bit of his own hell."

The grinning, painted Buckmaster spurred up to the wagon and slipped out of the saddle.

"Doyle," he said, "if you lose this outfit, I'm takin' your scalp."

Doyle spat over one of his wheelers. "With two good Irishmen like Doyle an' Harrigan," he said calmly, "we kin hold off the whole damn' Union army."

"How many men can you get up on top of your wagons?" Grady asked him.

Doyle looked back. "All of 'em," he said. "Reckon you kin dump out some o' that borax. We kin pick it up later."

"All right," Grady said quietly. "Everybody up." He clambered up on top of the load himself, and Buckmaster climbed in behind him. The remaining Ajax hands dispersed themselves in the two wagons, and then Doyle cracked his whip again. One man was left to guard the twenty-odd horses left behind.

Grady crouched beside Buckmaster, looking over the edge of the wagon. He said quietly, "This is the end of Condor and Jasper Corcoran."

Buckmaster nodded. "Luck's on our side, Harrigan," he said, and then Grady glanced at him queerly, remembering suddenly how hard luck had always dogged him in the past. "We were lucky," Buckmaster went on, "that we could take that short cut over the mountains. Corcoran could have burned out this outfit, and gone on to knock out a few more, along with some of our stations, before we caught up with him. He could have burned up half the wagons on the line."

"So the luck's on our side," Grady Harrigan said softly. He stared down the road at the long line of trotting mules. He saw the spot where the road moved around the ridge of mountains, and then he saw the riders coming around that bend.

"Best damned mules on the line," Pat Doyle was saying over his shoulder. "Lot of 'em just broke in. They got strength an' they kin go—"

It happened very suddenly. There was a shot from the trailer wagon behind them, a

single shot, followed by a muffled curse, indicating that the gun had been fired accidentally.

The twenty teams of mules up ahead pricked up their ears. The leaders lunged into their harness, and the long-eared animals behind took the cue. For one brief moment there was wild scrambling, jerking against the chain, half-broken animals lunging sideways, losing their footing, fighting wildly to get away, and then they found themselves and the big wagons began to move, faster and faster over the rough gravel road.

Doyle yelled and fought to hold them. He was standing up, yanking on his jerkline which connected the leaders, but the powerful animals were off now, swinging down the road, the big wagons bouncing wildly behind them.

Pat Doyle grabbed wildly at his brake lever, set it, and then nearly tumbled from his seat as the lever broke off, releasing the heavy brake block again. The mules, running free now, were off on the edge of the road and there were big boulders just beyond the gravel.

Grady saw Corcoran's men driving toward them. He stood up, lining his gun on one of the leaders, but before he could squeeze the trigger one of the wheels of the lead wagon struck a foot-high rock.

The impact smashed the wheel, lifting the wagon front up into the air. Grady felt himself flying through space. He caught a vague glimpse of struggling animals down on the ground, twisted in their harness, kicking and threshing.

He hit soft sand off the road, turning in his head as he fell so that he rolled over on his shoulder. He managed to retain his

grip on the ground and he came up on his knees, a trifle dazed.

The lead wagon had gone over on its side, effectively stopping the mules. The trailer wagon had remained right side up, but the Ajax men inside the big vehicle had been badly tumbled about.

Grady saw three men lying on the ground off to his right, thrown out of the lead wagon. George Buckmaster was sitting up dazedly, face full of sand. Pat Doyle was still holding his whip in his hand as he got to his feet, staggering like a drunken man, blood streaming from a cut on the right side of his face.

Corcoran's crew was less than a hundred and fifty yards away, still coming very fast, when Grady climbed to his feet. He ran over to Buckmaster and yanked the giant to his feet, slapping his face vigorously to bring reason back to him.

The men who had not been hurt in the trailer wagon were clambering over the sides, dropping to the ground.

"Stay in those damned wagons!" Grady yelled to them. "Open up on them when they charge us."

Dazedly, the men obeyed him. There were eight or ten who had not been hurt at all except for the shaking up they'd received. Grady lined these men up inside the wagons. He got Buckmaster up on his feet, shoved a gun in his hand and pulled him down behind the overturned wagon.

CORCORAN'S crew was coming in now, breaking up into two divisions, sweeping around on either side of the crazed mules on the ground. Grady rested his six-gun on the broken wagon wheel and picked off the rider up front. The man slumped

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in the saddle and then slid to the ground.

He spotted Corcoran's bulky figure coming in on the other side and he took a shot at the leader, hitting a man behind Corcoran. They were in on top of them now. A bullet clipped the lobe of Grady's left ear. He heard a man to his right catch his breath as lead struck him. Buckmaster had recovered and was firing grimly at the charging riders.

A Condor man rode his horse directly toward the fallen wagon, swerved and snapped his pistol almost in Grady's face. The gun hammer fell on an empty cylinder. It was George Buckmaster who shot this man out of his saddle.

And then the ten men in the upturned wagon poured a heavy volley into Corcoran's ranks, emptying half a dozen saddles. The remaining riders pulled up, stunned by this new attack.

Grady caught a glimpse of Corcoran's Corcoran's horse was shot from beneath him and the Condor super leaped from the face in the bright moonlight, and he read there the astonishment. Before the Condor riders could break away the guns from the wagon roared again at short distance.

saddle, sprawling in the sand. He got up immediately, gun in hand, roaring for a charge at the wagon.

His men had had enough, however, and they were breaking and fleeing across the desert. Grady left the overturned wagon and started toward Corcoran. Corcoran's face was set like a mask. He fired one shot at Grady which missed cleanly, and then he ran for a clump of mesquite growing beside the road.

As Corcoran leaped behind the bushes, trying to conceal himself, and fire through the branches, Grady fired three times from a distance of twenty-five feet.

The mesquite branches began to rustle violently. A gun roared, the slug going straight up into the air, and then Jasper Corcoran fell in among the branches and hung there, head down.

George Buckmaster, running up, stopped abruptly. He said, "Reckon that got him, Harrigan."

Grady stood there, the gun lowered. He looked at the overturned wagon. Doyle was in among the mules, cutting them loose, slipping their chains. A half-dozen of them were pretty badly hurt and would have to be shot, but the others were in fairly good shape.

"Condor will fold up with Jasper Corcoran dead," Buckmaster said. "Crane can't hold the outfit together." He paused and he added with a grin, "The luck, Harrigan, is comin'—"

Grady looked at him, smiled, and then caught a loose horse. He turned the mount in the direction of Sage City, riding into the town near morning. He went directly to the Ajax yards, not expecting to see Judy Townsend so early. The girl was waiting at the office door. She looked at him, the fatigue lines deep in his face.

"I heard from one of our yard men that Buckmaster had freed you last night and that you were going out after Corcoran," she said quietly.

"That's right," Grady admitted. "I'm going over to see Sheriff Smith now."

"What happened?" Judy asked.

Grady moistened his lips. "We lost a few mules," he said. "One wagon was overturned, but can be repaired. Corcoran is dead."

She winced at this and turned her head away. Grady Harrigan said tersely, "Running borax out of Death Valley is a man's job, Miss Townsend."

"I'm finding that out," Judy Townsend said slowly. "I—I believe I'll have to depend upon you very much, Mr. Harrigan."

Grady stared at her standing in the doorway, face pale. He said, "We'll talk about that when I come out of jail." He turned to go, and then he knew she was going to speak.

"I'll be waiting for you," she said quietly.

THE END

The war against starvation and disease
is still going on—

Give to the RED CROSS

FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



← The defeated South was very proud of Robert Caldwell. As a master spy, he had managed to get himself appointed to the staff of Yankee General Sheridan and from there had done valuable work for the losing rebel cause. When he returned to his Texas home town just before the end of the war, he had in his pocket a letter from Lee himself, commending his service. But the people in his home town only knew what returning prisoners had told them—that Caldwell was a traitor and a deserter. As soon as he was sighted at the station, a mob formed, tried him without giving him a chance to say a word, and hanged their greatest hero to their highest tree.

→ There's nothing new about housing shortages nor about ingenious methods of dealing with it. In Goldfield, Nevada, thousands of miners with precious metal uselessly lining their pockets tramped the streets all night because they had nowhere to go. One day they sighted a string of signs reading, "This way to the Underground Inn." In a twinkling, 2000 frantic house-hunters swarmed along the trail. At its end, they discovered Jared Howe, a professional hotelkeeper, rapidly renting out abandoned mine shafts by day or by week!



← Western justice was not always what it should have been, history is agreed. Many an arch criminal went free because he had friends and many a murderer went unchanged because the jury liked the tilt of his hat or the swagger of his walk. But the limit for concealing a killing was reached in Tonopah, South Dakota, in 1861, when a coroner's jury inspected a corpse that was riddled with bullets. The skull was crushed in from the rear, and a knife still protruded between the shoulder blades. The jury took one casual look. "Suicide," they reported.

→ Shorty Harris, famed prospector and desert rat, survived in Death Valley seemingly because of his blind fool's luck. One of his most miraculous escapes began in Chicago, where Shorty had gone to celebrate a new strike. There, he was robbed of his shoulder pack, which contained blankets, jerked beef and a full canteen of water. Months later, back on the Furnace Range, the pint-sized miner was in a bad fix. Two day's travel from water, there remained not a drop in his flask. He struggled on another twelve hours. Just as he was on the point of giving up, he sighted an object several hundred yards away on the shimmering sand. Crawling up to it, he was amazed to discover the stolen pack he had last seen in his Chicago hotel room. Food and life-saving water were intact.



NESTER, WALK SOFT —OR DIE!

SOMETIMES at night he lived those terrible moments over again. Sometimes he woke up trembling and bathed in perspiration and with the drumming roar of the stampede beating in his ears and above it the sound of a name shouted over and over: "*Macdougall! Macdougall! Macdougall!*"

He could remember it almost as vividly when he was awake. He had been on guard duty that night. The shots which had stampeded the cattle had been fired from close to where he had been riding. He had seen the shadowy figures of the men and had streaked toward them. A blast of gunfire had lifted him from the saddle. As he sprawled on the ground he had heard the first rumbling sounds of the stampede. Near where he had fallen one of the men had been shouting for Macdougall. He had heard the name so clearly that he couldn't be mistaken.

There was a faint, tapping sound at the window. Cameron sat straight up in bed. He swung his feet to the floor and reached for his trousers and pulled them on. It was close to midnight, he judged, close to the time when Boardman had said he would be waiting. This afternoon Sam Boardman had called on him and made his offer, Sam Boardman, who was a gambler but believed in giving a man an even break. It would be Boardman waiting outside now.

Jim Cameron moved very quietly so as not to wake the doctor or his daughter. He hated to leave this way without any final word to them, for Doc Walters and Hattie had both been very kind to him. They had brought him to Cottonwood after the stampede and had nursed him back to life. He hated to leave so abruptly but there was no other course for him to follow.

He found his coat and hat and, carrying his boots, made it to the window. It opened easily and he took a quick look outside. Boardman was standing close to the wall of the house, scarcely visible in the deep shadows. Cameron whispered his name and the gambler nodded and then helped him out.

"I left the horse down the road a ways," Boardman said in an undertone. "Come on."

When he was a little distance away from the house Jim Cameron stopped and pulled on his boots. Bending over brought a twinge of pain to his chest and reminded him of the wound which was scarcely healed. A scowl settled on his face. He didn't know how well he was going to stand a long ride, but there was no way around it. After a brief glance at the doctor's house, Cameron hurried on.

BOARDMAN was waiting for him where he had left the horse. The gambler was short, thick-bodied. An unlighted cigar was clamped between his teeth. The watch chain across his vest glistened faintly in the half light from the stars.

"There's a gunbelt with a gun in its holster hanging over the saddle horn, Cameron," he said. "There's some food in the saddlebags, too, just in case you need it."

Cameron nodded. "I can't pay you anything now. I told you that this afternoon. Maybe I can never pay you."

"Then forget it," the gambler shrugged. "I won the horse in a game. The gun, too, for that matter. Which way are you riding?"

"East," Cameron said.

He shook hands with Boardman, climbed into the saddle, buckled the gunbelt around his waist and reached for the reins.

"Good luck, Cameron," Boardman called softly. "Play it safe. Circle wide around the M Bar M."

Cameron made no answer to that. He couldn't trust himself to answer. He didn't mean to circle the M Bar M. Boardman was offering him a chance to escape but he was looking for no escape. All he wanted was the opportunity of facing Macdougall with a gun in his hand.

It was clear and cold and there was a bitter wind. Cameron headed east, across country. He rode slowly, hunched forward a little in the saddle, aware of the constant,

"Macdougall! Macdougall! Macdougall!" the voice in the wild, red night, like a measured death-knell, called on Jim Cameron to use his own bullet-broken body as bait for a ruthless range-hog's gun-trap!

By PHILIP KETCHUM



He heard that voice in the darkness, even as the steers swept down on him.

stabbing pain in his chest where the bullet had struck him on the night of the stampede. It was a pain which reminded him of what he had to do, and of where he was headed and why. A name kept echoing in his mind.

Macdougall! Macdougall! Macdougall! Even the memory of it was like a shock. The hate which consumed him was hot, blind, unreasoning, and he didn't fight against it. He had picked the course he meant to follow.

He had talked to the sheriff in Cottonwood. Doc Walters had insisted on it. He had talked to the sheriff, a cattleman's sheriff, knowing it would do no good and that the sheriff wouldn't listen to a homesteader's story. He had told the sheriff of the warning he and the other homesteaders had been given. Three days after they had settled on their land at Spanish Creek a crowd of men had come by and ordered them to get out, had said they were on Macdougall's range.

Two nights afterwards they had had another warning. Shots had ripped through the camp which they had set up. They had answered those shots and they had started posting a night guard. They had anticipated more trouble but not the stampede. Even when cattle had been pushed into the meadow above their land they hadn't thought of a stampede.

Nine lives had been lost in the stampede. Five men, three women and a boy had died horribly under the pounding hoofs of the fear maddened cattle as they hit the homesteader's camp. Nine had died and he had lived and had been taken to Cottonwood and placed in the care of Doc Walters. He had wished at first that he had died with the others but he was glad now that he hadn't. He had a job to do before he died, a score to settle.

It wasn't far from Cottonwood to the M Bar M and in the gray light of the early morning he stared down on Macdougall's ranch house. How many men worked for Macdougall, he didn't know. How many men he would find here he didn't know. But that wasn't important. The important thing was to reach Macdougall, who had ordered the stampede and who had been there that night, leading the men who had started it. The sheriff had insisted that Macdougall and his men had

had no part in the raid, but Cameron knew that the sheriff had lied. He had heard Macdougall's name called.

Cameron examined the gun Boardman had given him and then dropped it back in its holster. He started down the hill toward the ranch house, still riding slowly. He was dizzy now from the pain in his chest, and each step the horse took jolted him but he was near the end of his journey. He would ride up in the yard, dismount, walk up to the house and ask to see Macdougall. He wasn't a gunman. He wouldn't be fast with his gun but he would last long enough to get the man responsible for what had happened at Spanish Creek.

A man came out in the yard from the bunkhouse and saw him and turned and hurried back. Cameron noticed that but thought nothing of it. The man couldn't have recognized him, couldn't have known why he was coming.

Cameron reined up. He swung stiffly to the ground, leaned for a moment against his horse and then headed for the ranch house. No one shouted at him. He climbed the porch. He crossed to the door and opened it and stepped inside.

AN OLD MAN was seated in a chair across the room. He had thin, white hair and a thin, wrinkled face and he didn't stand up as Cameron came in. His hands were folded in his lap.

"Macdougall?" Cameron asked hoarsely. The old man nodded. "That's my name. I've been expecting you. Shoot straight."

Cameron clawed up his gun. He leveled it. The old man didn't move. He seemed to be bracing himself. His lips made a thin line across his face. His eyes were steady.

"Shoot straight," he said again. "It's the only chance Michael will have. This is the only way."

Cameron didn't know what Macdougall was talking about. Here was the man, he reminded himself, who was responsible for the stampede. Here was the man he hated with a bitterness which was blinding. His finger tightened but he couldn't pull the trigger.

"Reach for your gun, you old fool," he shouted. "Reach for it."

Macdougall shook his head. "I haven't had a gun for a month. Go ahead and shoot

me. That's what you're supposed to do. Shoot me and get it over."

A door to the side opened slightly. Cameron saw a man's shoulder and arm and then a man's head. He saw the gun the man was lifting toward him and he twisted his own gun that way and fired. A bullet sang past his head. He fired again and heard the man scream and saw him fall and then he looked quickly at Macdougall. The old man hadn't moved. He was staring at the man's body. He was frowning.

"There are six of them," Cameron heard him saying. "You don't have a chance. I'm sorry but there was no way I could warn you. I'm sorry about the stampede, too, but there was no way I could have stopped it."

"Stopped it!" Cameron shouted. "Stopped it! You were there. You started it."

Macdougall shook his head. "I wasn't there."

"I heard them call your name."

"A precaution they used to fool you."

"You're lying."

"No, Cameron. I'm not lying. I wasn't there."

Jim Cameron mopped a hand over his face. He stared at the body of the man he had shot and was abruptly aware of



Bill Stuart

the sound of footsteps on the porch and then of a face at the window. A shot smashed the window and streaked through the room. It smashed into the wall beyond him.

"They'll get you, Cameron," Macdougall was saying. "And they'll get me too, if you don't. They'll tell the sheriff that you came here and murdered me and that they shot you as you tried to escape. No one

will ever question the story. It is known that you thought me guilty of having started the stampede. It will be easy to believe that you came here to kill me and killing you will be justified on that basis. Neither of us has a chance."

Cameron stared wide-eyed at the older man. Macdougall still didn't look excited, didn't look afraid. He still hadn't moved from the chair.

"Come on out, Cameron," shouted a voice from the porch. "Come out or we'll come in after you."

"That's Bill Stuart," Macdougall said quietly. "He's the one who planned this. He's the one who took Michael."

"Who's Michael?" Cameron demanded.

"My grandson, the only relative I have," Macdougall answered. "That's the way they took over control. Through him. They have him hidden someplace. They made me lie about their part in the stampede through a promise to kill him if I didn't. After I'm dead they'll bring him back and run this place for him, but Michael is only ten. They'll really be running the M Bar M for themselves. By the time Michael grows up, if he ever grows up, there'll be nothing left for him."

A shot ripped through the door and then another and a third screamed through the shattered window. Cameron moved back to the wall near the door and leaned there. He stared at Macdougall, wondering if there was any truth at all in the man's story. He had hated Macdougall so bitterly it was hard even to consider that he might be telling the truth.

"Bill Stuart was in to see me last night," Macdougall said slowly. "He told me Sam Boardman had convinced you that the M Bar M riders meant to shoot you down as soon as you could leave Doc Walters. He said Boardman was going to furnish you with a horse and a gun and that you would probably head here. He said you would kill me and be killed trying to get away, and afterwards Michael would be brought back, and they would run the M Bar M the way they wanted to. That's the way it is, Cameron, and there's nothing we can do about it."

WHEN Macdougall mentioned Boardman and what Boardman had done, Cameron knew the man was telling the

truth. He couldn't have known about Boardman unless someone had told him. And beyond that there was a ring of truth in what the man had been saying. Cameron sucked in a long, slow breath. There was a movement at the door where one man had already been killed. The door was half open into the room. Cameron twisted his gun that way and set a shot through it. He heard a man's hoarse cry of pain, heard the sounds he made stumbling away. He glanced at Macdougall.

"We can fight, can't we," he heard himself saying. "We don't have to take it lying down."

"I've had to think of Michael," the older man answered.

"Then think of him," Cameron snapped. "Think hard. Do you want him to come back and have these men twist his life to fit theirs?"

Macdougall lifted his hands to the arms of his chair. "What chance do we have, Cameron?"

"Who cares about that now. The odds are settled. We haven't time to count them up."

"I don't have a gun."

"That man lying in the doorway had one."

Macdougall stared toward the man lying in the doorway. He came suddenly to his feet and crossed over to where the man had fallen. He stooped down and picked up the man's gun and then looked quickly toward the window. A shot sang over his head. He started for the window. There was another shot. His body stiffened. He twisted half around and then sank to the floor.

"Got him," shouted a voice beyond the window. "Go ahead, Stuart. Bust in and finish it."

Jim Cameron stared at Macdougall's body. This would end, now, as the old man had predicted, no matter how many of them he might get. He stared toward the window and caught the glimpse of a man's figure. He lifted his gun and waited. A tight, crooked smile came to his lips. It was strange the way things worked out. He had come here to kill Macdougall but had stayed to fight at his side. He would probably die with the man he had spent weeks in hating. A figure showed again at

the window and Cameron squeezed the trigger of his gun.

There was another movement at the door across the room and then at the door through which he had come. They were ready to rush him now, and even as he realized that, Bill Stuart's men were in the room. A blast of gunfire dinned against his ears. Cameron snapped a shot at one man and then another. The hammer of his gun clicked on an empty shell. His arm drew back and he threw his gun, threw it desperately at the twisted, scowling face of the man who was closest to him, threw it as his knees were sagging and as he was going down.

Voices from outside reached him and then voices from the door, and he knew vaguely that help had come but he didn't know from where or who was responsible. He tried to get up but couldn't and suddenly all memory was gone and the darkness he had been fighting off swept over him.

The sheriff, who was a cattleman's sheriff and who had raised a posse and come to the M Bar M at Doc Walters' insistence, stood at the side of Macdougall's bed and listened to what Macdougall had to say. He turned, then, and talked to Bill Stuart who was badly wounded but not too badly wounded to answer. Most of the posse rode off, shortly afterwards, to one of the M Bar M line shacks and late that afternoon, Michael Macdougall was back home.

And that evening, the sheriff, who had his own code of what was right and what was wrong, had a talk with Sam Boardman. It was a talk with guns and Sam Boardman came off second best.

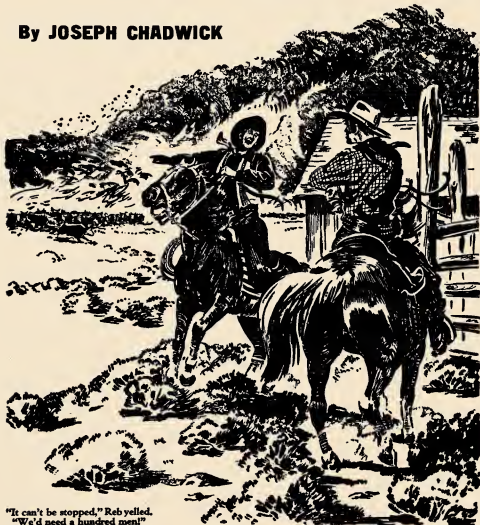
Jim Cameron didn't know this. He woke up in a strange bed with his chest freshly bandaged and with a bandage on his leg and shoulder. A lamp was burning in the room but no one was there. Cameron had a notion that he was still at the M Bar M, and because he was still alive he had a notion in some way or other, everything had worked out all right. He puzzled over this for a while but not for long. More important than anything else was the fact that the hate with which he had lived for weeks was gone. He could remember Macdougall's name and not feel a cold, insane fury. He could even smile. . . .

PANHANDLE BURN-OUT!

The sere, sun-dried grass of Hank McGowan's graze, and the burn-out torch of the ruthless Bell Cattle Syndicate, built a devouring flame that could be extinguished only by the blood of every honest rancher in the Panhandle!

LIKE MOST of the ranchers throughout the Panhandle, Hank McGowan had a lot on his mind that summer. True, he didn't have to worry about water when the streams dried up and no rain came to replenish them. His range was blessed by having *Ojo Largo*—Big Spring—located right in the middle of it. But there were other things to keep a man from sleeping soundly at night.

By JOSEPH CHADWICK



"It can't be stopped," Reb yelled.
"We'd need a hundred men!"

Because of the drought, cattle were being shipped early and the market was being glutted. Prices were tumbling. There were notes to be met at the bank, and always store bills. There were also rustlers. . . . But heaviest on McGowan's mind was the not-to-be ignored fact that he was soon to become a father. It was growing close to his wife's time. Next trip to town, he'd no doubt have to pass out cigars. It would be a boy, sure, McGowan told himself with a smile. He wanted a son. A man with a ranch needed a son.

McGowan had only two hired hands, and so he had to do a full share of the riding. He was riding alone, up among the Faro Creek breaks at the north end of his range, when he caught the smoke-smell of a brush fire and the bawl of a hurt calf. He muttered an oath and drew his saddle gun, knowing at once what was up. Riding into a rocky cut, he came upon a man with a hot running-iron still in his hand. He was mad enough to kill the brand-blotter, and he did lever a cartridge into the rifle chamber—ready to fire. But he didn't have it in him to kill a man in cold blood. The brand-blotter, caught flatfooted, didn't go for his gun. He was Pete Barrow, a wild twenty-year-old kid from up in the Badlands. He just watched McGowan ride up to him, keeping his face stiff and his hands very still.

"You tried it once too often, Kid," McGowan said. "Let that calf loose, then fork your horse. Take that running-iron along with you. It's evidence. But first, get rid of your gun—easy-like!"

The kid was sullen, but he obeyed. He even scattered the fire, without being told. When he was mounted, he said, "Where you taking me?"

"To town."

"You handing me over to the sheriff?"

"I'm sure not taking you in for a drink."

"It won't do you any good," Pete said, his voice loud with bravado. "My brother Russ will get me out of jail quicker'n you can bat an eye."

"Ride ahead of me, Pete," McGowan growled.

He was still mad. Pete Barrow was a damn' fresh kid, and needed to be taught a lesson. McGowan meant to see that he learned a little something—and to hell with his brother Russ.

THE COWTOWN of Trinity was also the county seat. It had a white-painted frame courthouse, and, behind that building, a boxlike adobe jail. Sheriff Tag Doyle had his office in the courthouse, and McGowan took young Pete Barrow there. He gave Doyle the kid's running-iron and sixgun, explained what Pete had been up to, and ended up, "I'll appear in court against him. We'll make an example of him."

Doyle was an old-timer, and age had turned him a bit mellow. He said, "He's a little young for a rustler."

"Those Badlands kids learn to use a long rope and a running-iron as soon as they can fork a horse," McGowan said. "Besides, this one's older than he looks. He's twenty, if he's a day. I know both him and Russ."

"Russ'll see red when he hears about this."

"Let him."

"He's a bad one to have trouble with, McGowan."

"I'll take a chance on it," McGowan said, and turned out of the office.

His arrival with Pete Barrow had caused a little flurry of excitement along Trinity's main street, and now a little crowd was gathered in front of the courthouse. Most of them were townsmen and kids, but there were at least half a dozen ranchers and cowpunchers. One of the stockmen was Fred Seibert, manager of the Bell Land & Cattle Company's big Panhandle ranch. He was a rocky-faced man of about forty. He'd been a top-hand before Bell had promoted him from saddle to desk chair. Now he was a bit flabby, and he went about dressed like a townsman. Even though he owned no spread, he was looked upon as the Panhandle's leading cattleman. He was smoking a cigar, and talked around it.

"Hear you caught a rustler, McGowan?"

"Just a kid doing some brand-blotting."

"One of the Barrows, eh?"

"Young Pete."

Seibert nodded. "What about Russ?" he asked. "The Barrows are all the same. Old Man Si Barrow was hanged for horse stealing, ten years back. Bad blood. It always shows up."

"I've never caught Russ pulling anything."

"He's too smart to be caught," Seibert

said, and looked about to see if the other cattlemen were listening. They were. He went on, "Might be a good idea, next time one of us loses some stock, to form a posse and ride into the Badlands—to see what kind of cattle Russ runs on that stretch of desert he calls a range."

Nobody commented on that, but McGowan could see that the others were thinking it over. Seibert said, "Well, the drinks are on me." He led the way to the Longhorn Saloon, and they belled up to the bar. Over their drinks, Seibert said, "You remember what I said the last time we met, McGowan?"

"Something about my selling out to Bell, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Did you think it over?"

"Didn't bother to," McGowan said. "I'm not selling."

"I've got permission from Bell to let you name your own price—if it's within reason," Seibert went on. "We need water—need it bad."

"So you'd buy my whole spread just to get *Ojo Largo*?"

"That's right," Seibert replied. His heavy, florid face was without expression, but his eyes were eager. "If Bell had *Ojo Largo*, we could weather any drought. I'm not a patient man, McGowan, and I can't wait—"

"Wait for what?" McGowan broke in.

"For you to get into such a deep hole that you'll have to sell—or go bankrupt," Seibert said bluntly. "That's where you're headed, my friend—you and all the other cowpen outfits. One of these days, the bank will get tired of carrying you along. If you're smart, you'll sell now. And take a fair price. Later on, Bell might not feel so generous."

THERE WAS a sudden quiet all along the bar, for the other men there either owned or worked for small spreads like McGowan's. The silence stretched on, for McGowan didn't know what to say. He'd been hit where it hurt. The bank was carrying him along, and, unless cattle prices climbed within a year or two, there would come a time when such financial help ended. It was something a man hated to face, and McGowan wouldn't admit it now. He meant to hold onto his ranch to the bitter end.

Seibert said mildly, "Think it over, McGowan."

"I won't sell, Seibert," McGowan said "Not now—not next year."

The burly Bell man shrugged, but his eyes took on an ugly glint. Ramrodding a big outfit, having a huge syndicate behind him, he didn't like to be bucked. Fred Seibert was a man used to having his own way, and Hank McGowan suddenly realized that Seibert wanted *Ojo Largo* as a miser wanted gold. The never failing water of the big spring would end Bell's water trouble, and that in turn would make Seibert's job secure for life. All that lay naked in the man's eyes. He said sourly, "Well, it's up to you," and then a man came slamming into the saloon.

"Russ Barrow just hit town," he yelled. He was one of the townsman who had seen McGowan come in with young Pete. "He came in with a buckboard, to buy some supplies. He just heard about Pete."

McGowan said, "So what?"

The townsman said, "He didn't like it any."

McGowan shrugged and rolled a quirky cigarette. The excited townsman had turned and was peering out over the batwings. Fred Seibert said, "Can you handle him, McGowan?"

"Russ? I can try."

"He's tricky with a gun," Seibert said.

None of the others spoke. The saloon became very quiet again, and stayed that way until Russ Barrow came in. He flung the swing-doors wide open, making them rattle, and came to a halt in the center of the room, Russ was wearing a week's stubble of black beard. He was a thick man, deep-chested and wide-shouldered. He had a flat nose, a traplike mouth, and his eyes, picking out McGowan, were a muddy brown.

"McGowan, I've just been to see the sheriff."

"Saw him, myself," McGowan said.

"I don't want Pete held for trial," Russ went on, and each word had an impact. "No sense in sending a fool kid to prison for doing a little brand-blotting—not when other hombres are doing the real rustling, and not getting caught at it."

"So you figure I should ask the sheriff to turn him loose."

"I'm asking you to withdraw the charge

against him," Russ Barrow said slowly. "And let him go back to using a running-iron?"

"I'll make a deal with you, McGowan," Russ said. "I'll pay you for every brand Pete changed. We'll ride out to your range and look over the cattle. And I'll guarantee that Pete'll do no more blot-branding. Once he's out of jail, I'll see that he clears out of the Panhandle."

McGowan puffed on his cigarette and rolled Russ Barrow's offer around in his mind. Finally he said, "Tell you what, Russ. This sort of thing concerns every rancher. I'm not the only man who's been losing cattle. I'm not saying you're using a long rope, because I've never caught you at it. But there is a rustling crew working out of the Badlands, and hitting every ranch within a hundred miles. Which means everybody should have a say in whether or not a caught brand-blotter should go to prison. There are three ranchers here, besides myself, and three ranch hands. We'll put it to a vote."

Russ Barrow didn't like that, but he merely scowled and said nothing.

McGowan said, "Any man here who figures I should accept Russ' deal can vote that way by stepping away from the bar."

Nobody moved. Seibert said, "We're not that crazy, McGowan."

Russ Barrow glared at them, then swung about and headed for the batwings. Once there, he faced about.

"I'm giving you twenty-four hours to change your mind, McGowan," he said savagely. "If Pete's not turned loose by this time tomorrow, I'll bring a crew to town and bust him out of that jail. And there'll be hell to pay, should any man try to stop me!"

FOR A MINUTE or two after Russ Barrow had delivered his ultimatum and left the Longhorn, nobody spoke. Then the burly Fred Seibert said, "That puts it up to us. Russ Barrow will sure do what he says. Nobody knows how many men are holed up on the Badlands, but we can count on it that Russ can round up a crew big enough to take this town apart. With an old mossyhorn like Tag Doyle for sheriff, the law won't be able to do much. What do you say, McGowan?"

"I'll be here in town tomorrow," Mc-

Gowan said. "If there's trouble, I'll get Doyle to swear me in as a deputy."

"I'll be here with you," Seibert said. "And I'll bring along some of the Bell crew." He turned to the others. "What about you, boys?"

Ed Hanlon, Buck Anders, Chris Aubrey—all ranch owners—said they would come to town, armed and ready for trouble, tomorrow afternoon. Pinky Wayne, Jim Saba, Ollie Mason—who rode for wages—agreed that they would be in town to see the fun.

"It won't be any fun," McGowan said drily. "Not if Russ Barrow and his crew are in a shooting mood. But a show of strength on our part may keep them from starting anything. Another drink, gents—this one on me. . .?"

The drink downed, they left the Longhorn and separated. McGowan angled across the street to the courthouse, mounted his dun gelding, and headed out of town. Passing Ebberts' general store, he saw Russ Barrow come out with a sack of flour and dump it into his buckboard. The man was scowling. A scowl made him look downright mean.

The road from Trinity led straight north, cutting through range belonging to the big Bell outfit. Puffs of powdery dust lifted from under the dun's hoofs. The sun was low but still so hot it was like a burden on a man's back. McGowan saw small bunches of Bell cattle in the distance; he could hear them bawling for water. It was a pitiful sound, and it made McGowan wince. The grass had turned brown, but was plentiful. Cattle were dying of thirst, not of starvation. Eight miles from town, McGowan rode through a narrow rocky defile in the Amber Hills. The Ambers separated his range from Bell and the other ranches. Coming onto his own graze, McGowan saw how lucky he was to own *Ojo Largo*. His herds were in good condition.

He left the road and slow-walked his horse past the cattle. He owned more than two hundred head of white-faced cattle, and given a few more years—

He remembered then what Fred Seibert had said. The burly Bell manager was right. McGowan was already in a deep hole, and was bound to go deeper unless the price of beef rose. But with luck, he

could hold out and pull through. Preoccupied, McGowan reined in and mechanically rolled and lighted a cigarette. He dropped the match without realizing it hadn't burned out until he heard a sudden crackling. The match had set the grass afire.

There was a puff of smoke, and the flames danced high. McGowan left the saddle in sudden panic, pulled off his brush jacket and used it to beat out the rapidly spreading flames. He spent a wild two minutes beating the fire out. There was a burnt patch ten feet across. The grass was tinder.

* * *

When McGowan rode to town that next afternoon, he left his ranch without telling anybody his reason for making the trip. He kept it a secret from his wife because of her condition, and there was no reason to confide in the middle-aged woman who was staying with Louise until the baby came.

He reached town a little after four o'clock to find an odd-dozen men grouped before the courthouse. Six of them were those who had been at the Longhorn yesterday when Russ Barrow had laid down his ultimatum. Fred Seibert hadn't arrived, but four Bell cowpunchers came riding in. One of the Bell men was its foreman, John Webb.

"The boss will be along," John Webb said, and dismounted.

Sheriff Tag Doyle came out, his old man's face looking worried. He said, "Gents, I don't like this. It's apt to lead to bloodshed. Why not hand the kid over to Russ Barrow—and end the trouble?"

"We've got to make a start against the rustlers sometime, Sheriff," McGowan told him. "It may as well be now. If we turn Pete loose, every ornery cuss in the Badlands will start laughing—and they'll grow just so much bolder. We're law-abiding citizens, but we're ready to fight. You willing to deputize us, or shall we finish this business without having the law on our side?"

The lawman worried for a moment, looking at each man in turn. He was too old to face trouble, but he wanted to hold onto his job.

"All right. I'll swear you in."

When they'd taken the oath to uphold the law, Doyle told them that he'd give the orders. He posted half of the men around the jail and the others by the courthouse. The sun was lowering, and Doyle, after a glance at his watch, said, "Five o'clock. Russ Barrow is late."

McGowan said, "Mebbe he was just bluffing." He hoped that was so.

Another quarter-hour dragged by. There was no sign of the Badlands crew, but a rider was coming in from the north riding at a hard lope. McGowan felt a sudden alarm when he saw it was his rider, curly Hayes.



DIRGE FOR LONG RIDERS!

Roaring out of next month's chute for all Western readers comes Funeral Smith in a real hard-as-nails yarn from the pen of that plenty-tough writing hombre, Tom Roan. One of his best to appear in ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES.

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Reserve your copy of the June issue now. On your newsstand April 25th!



The puncher came pounding into town, yelling at the top of his voice.

Reining in, Curly shouted, "Hank, fire! The grass is on fire!"

"Our range?" McGowan asked.

"Yeah. The whole north end—and the wind's blowing south!"

Everybody stared toward the north, and beyond the Amber Hills the sky was dirtied by smoke. Somebody said, "We'll ride out and help you fight it, McGowan."

Sheriff Doyle said, "What about Pete Barrow?"

John Webb, the Bell ramrod, muttered, "To hell with him! A prairie fire is something real to worry about!"

Men were scattering for their horses. Young Doc Bishop, Trinity's only medico, headed for the livery barn shouting for his horse and buggy.

McGowan said, "Sheriff, I'd gamble Russ Barrow set that fire—to draw us away from town. He'll come here, sure. But Pete won't be waiting for him. We'll take that no-good kid with us!"

LEAVING the others to take care of Pete Barrow, McGowan mounted and headed north. Now he could see the smoky blackness in the sky and smell the smoke. The wind was blowing toward him, not steadily, but in gusts. It would push the flames along. Other riders were on the road ahead, loping toward the Amber Hills eight miles away. McGowan's dun was willing. He overtook the others, one by one. He reached the defile in the hills in less than half an hour. The trail was rough here, and he slowed his blowing horse to a walk.

Once out of the hills, McGowan could see it. He muttered an oath, then knew he should pray instead. Damn Russ Barrow. Surely not even the Devil himself would own a man who fired another's range. The smoke was rolling up, one long cloud of it. The flames were bright yellow-red, a tidal wave of fire that reached from one side of the valley to the other. Far ahead, a big herd of cattle was stampeding, running in animal panic toward the southern end, away from the holocaust.

It was seven miles from the hills to the ranch headquarters. McGowan kept to the road, heading for his house, thinking now of his wife. There was a break in the

dun's stride, the last half-mile, but the animal held up all the way. The fire was but three miles away when McGowan pulled up at the house. A rider came in from the opposite direction. It was Reb Burton, his face smoke-blackened.

"It can't be stopped, Hank," Reb said, yelling the words in his excitement. "We'd need a hundred men!"

"Help's coming, Reb. Saddle me a fresh mount."

"It was set, Hank. So help me, some ornery cuss set it. The flames jumped up at four, five places at once."

"Russ Barrow," McGowan muttered, and ran into the house.

Mrs. Bailey, the woman who was staying with Louise, hurried down the stairs. There was an odd look on her broad motherly face.

McGowan guessed. "My wife?" he asked.

"It's time for the doctor, Hank."

"We've got to get out of here. The fire—"

"Fire or no fire," Mrs. Bailey said, "we've got to stay. And we've got to have Dr. Bishop. Hank McGowan, you've got to keep that fire away from here!"

Panic had hold of McGowan. He started up the stairs, then turned back down. He headed for the kitchen, then swung around and ran out the front door. He yelled at Reb Burton who was over at the corrals. The flames were much closer. A gust of wind swirled smoke and heat across the range. McGowan saw a rain of sparks out there. Reb came running.

"Reb, Doc Bishop's on his way to help fight the fire," McGowan said. "Ride out and meet him. Tell him to hurry. My wife needs him."

Reb mounted and rode, and by now some of the riders from town were getting in. McGowan met them with orders.

"We've got to hold the fire away from the house," he said. "Let the range go and try to save the buildings. My wife's baby—we can't move my wife out now."

"You think we can keep it back?" somebody asked.

"We'll circle-fire," McGowan said. "That's our only chance. There's no time to try a back-fire. Grab what you can to beat out flames, so it doesn't get out of control."

McGowan started his circle-fire a hundred feet from the house. He and the others used whatever was handy—slickers, tarps, blankets—to beat out the flames when they spread toward the ranch buildings. Enough men had arrived to burn the grass away in each direction—one crew working clockwise, the other counter-clockwise. They burned out a circle ten feet wide, controlling it each inch of the way. McGowan hoped the onrushing prairie fire would not jump the hastily made firebreak. . . . Doc Bishop arrived before the circle was half finished. McGowan saw the young medico jump from his buggy, and sprint for the house with his black bag.

"Doc, you need me?"

"Stay where you are, Hank. Keep the fire away!"

The doctor disappeared into the house, and McGowan returned to the grim task of guiding the circle-fire.

The flame wall rolled down on the ranch buildings, thrusting out ahead of it a fist of oven heat. Smoke billowed up, obscuring the sky, and McGowan no longer knew whether it was still day or if night had come. Everything was eerily red in front of the flames. Nearly a hundred men were battling the flames, now that the circle-fire was done with, beating tirelessly. Two men were on the house roof, others were atop the barn, to stamp the sparks that showered down. The corrals had been emptied of horses. The roar and crackle of the flames drowned men's voices. McGowan was all along the line of fire-fighters, giving a hand where the flames were thickest. He made numerous trips to the house, and finally Doc Bishop bluntly told him to take it easy.

"We've just got to wait, Hank. It may take hours."

"You're sure everything's all right?"

"You worry about the fire," the medico told him.

McGowan's face was soot-blackened, and his eyelashes and brows were singed. He was coughing from the smoke. He was dead-tired from beating at the flames with his slicker. The others were playing out, too. Fred Seibert was there in the line, using his suit coat against the fire.

"You're not going to put it out, McGowan," Seibert yelled.

It seemed to McGowan that the Bell

manager relished that thought. There was one bad moment when the flames reached the firebreak around the buildings, and Seibert watched tensely—like a man watching a horse race upon which he had bet heavily.

Then, suddenly, men cheered, for the flames could not leap across the firebreak. Windswept sparks showered across, but they were quickly stamped out. Ranch house and buildings were safe within the island formed by the burned out strip. But the flames crept on, at either side of the firebreak, and the weary men had to carry on the fight.

Despite the fear that all his grass might be lost, McGowan felt grateful that so many men respected him enough to give him a friendly hand in time of trouble. He was a little surprised that so many townsmen had responded; some of them were unaccustomed to such hard work, yet they fought the seemingly unconquerable flames with as much will and energy as the ranchers and cowhands. McGowan saw the town barber, the druggist, the two store owners and their clerks. He bumped into stout Banker Hiram Walsh, and didn't recognize him until he spoke. Walsh was smoke-blackened from head to foot.

"Don't worry too much about it, McGowan," the banker said. "Come spring, the grass will grow again. And there'll be a way to get through the winter."

There was a promise in Walsh's words, and McGowan knew then, that though Seibert was right about him going deeper into debt, the Trinity bank would not push him into bankruptcy.

"McGowan, wait a minute!"

It was Sheriff Tag Doyle calling. He too had been fighting the fire. He had young Pete Barrow with him, and the kid, like everybody else, was sweated and streaked with soot. McGowan said, "What's on your mind, Sheriff?"

"Russ Barrow and some riders are here," Doyle said. "They pitched in to help, but there's bound to be trouble—once this is over."

"You mean to say Russ Barrow is helping?" McGowan muttered. "Why, I'd gamble that ornery son fired my grass. Where is he?"

"Over at the west side of the range," Doyle said. Then: "You hear that? Some-

thing's happening over there! Shooting!"

McGowan heard. Men's shouts and gunshots sounded above the roar of the flames. He said, "Sheriff, keep an eye on your prisoner." He turned away, broke into a run. At the corral, he mounted a horse left there by one of the fire-fighters. He used spurs on the animal, which was skittish because of the fire, and rode through the fire-break opening in the flame wall. He swung west, and then saw what the yelling and shooting was about. The men fighting the fire on that side of the range were making headway at last. The wall of flames had been shortened to perhaps half a mile. And as McGowan reached the crew, a man shouted, "McGowan, luck's with you. The wind has changed!"

It was true. The wind had shifted and no longer blew in gusts that swept the fire southward. It now came steadily from the south, pressing the flames back against the burned over range, and that permitted the men to beat out the fire, with but little effort. McGowan dismounted and joined the others. It was easy going now.

IN ANOTHER HOUR, the prairie fire was beaten out. Men sank wearily to the ground to rest. Some gathered at the corral, Sheriff Doyle and his prisoner among them. The hard-cased Russ Barrow came riding up, followed by a dozen tough-hands from the Badlands. McGowan knew then that Russ had won the fight, after all. The men who had been deputized to guard Pete Barrow were scattered out across the range, all of them dead-beat. They could not be called in quick enough. And even if the deputies had been there, they could not have bucked this tough crew. Russ Barrow and his companions had done little fire-fighting, and so were fresh. Everyone else, McGowan included, was in no shape to handle a gun. Russ Barrow halted his men, then reined in his mount close to the little group by the corral.

"McGowan, I came for Pete," Russ said flatly. "I mean to have him one way or another, so you may as well turn him over without a fight. Like I told you, I'll send him out of the Panhandle so he can't do any more brand-blotting. You withdraw your charge against him, McGowan?"

"Take him away with you," McGowan said savagely. "I know when I'm licked.

It was damn' smart of you, Russ, to fire my range. I'm warning you, if I ever met you when you haven't a pack of wolves at your back—"

"Hold on, McGowan!" Russ yelled. "I won't take that from any man. There's nothing lower than a sneak who'll start a grass fire. Maybe my old man was a horse thief, and my kid brother a brand-blotter, but I've always tried to play square. Just because I live up in the Badlands, hombres like you claim I'm a rustler. But it's a lie. I don't use a long rope, and I don't set grass fires. And the kid here, when I'm done with him, will do no more brand-blotting. Let me give you a warning, McGowan. I'll gun for the first man who says I started that fire!"

McGowan said nothing to that, and his silence goaded Russ Barrow to even wilder rage. The man cursed savagely, then belatedly, "I've never been one to squeal, but this time I'm going to talk. I'm not taking the blame for that fire. McGowan, that fire was started on the Faro Creek breaks. And some of my boys saw the man who started it." He turned in his saddle, and yelled, "Purd, Charley, Ed—come here!"

The three Badlands riders giggered the horses forward. Russ said, "You hombres tell McGowan who you saw riding out of the breaks after McGowan's grass started burning."

The gaunt-faced Charley Wall said, "It was Fred Seibert."

McGowan was jolted. He started to say, "That's a loco thing to say." But then he remembered that the Bell manager hadn't arrived in town with his riders; he hadn't been there when Curly Hayes rode in and sounded the alarm. Seibert had shown up long after the fire was being fought. McGowan turned slowly, for Fred Seibert was there by the corral. The look of guilt on Seibert's face swept away McGowan's last doubt.

McGowan said, "So you wanted *Ojo Largo* that bad, Seibert?"

Seibert was backing away, his hand on his holstered gun. "Don't try anything, McGowan," he warned. "I made my play, and I don't regret it. You cowpen ranchers can't buck Bell. I want *Ojo Largo*, and I still aim to have it. Bell has got to have water!"

McGowan saw a mad glint in Seibert's

eyes, and he said, "You're a crazy man, Seibert!"

"Not so crazy that I won't get what I want," Seibert retorted. "This is only the beginning. I'm going to keep after you until I've got your range. No two-bit rancher deserves to have water when a big outfit like mine has to watch its cattle die of thirst." Some of his riders were there by the corral, and he lifted his voice. "You Bell hands side me. I'm riding out of here!"

John Webb, Bell's range boss, said, "We're not siding you or any other sneak that burns grass. To hell with you, Seibert!"

"You've got no job, then," Seibert yelled, and drew his sixgun.

There was a thunder of gunshots, and Fred Seibert pitched forward and lay still on the ground. McGowan found his own sixgun in his hand, then saw that both Russ Barrow and Sheriff Doyle had also drawn and fired. In the heavy quiet that followed, Russ Barrow said, "That loco son meant to kill you, McGowan!" And McGowan

looked down at his smoke-blackened brush jacket. Seibert's bullet had torn through the slack of it, and just missed flesh.

"He sure wanted to get hold of my water," McGowan said. He turned to Seibert's segundo, then. "With Seibert gone," he said, "it'll be all right with me if you run your beef over to *Ojo Largo* and water 'em."

He heard someone call his name. It was Doc Bishop, standing in the kitchen doorway. McGowan holstered his gun and ran toward the house. The young medico grasped his hand, and said, "Congratulations, Hank. You're the father of a son."

"My wife . . . ?"

"She's doing fine."

A great weight was lifted from McGowan's mind. He stepped into the kitchen, then paused to listen. From upstairs came the hiccoughing cry of his son. Coming from an infant, it was a lusty sound. McGowan walked from the kitchen and up the stairs on tiptoe, impatient to see his wife and the youngster who one day would ride the range with him.

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Gripping Novel of Bayou War

Chapter I

ONCE A RANGER . . .

IT WAS NEARING midnight when Breck Huckabee rode into town, but Indianola was still a hodge-podge of activity.

Big-hatted *vaqueros* jangled their spurs on the boardwalks. Soldiers, seamen, fishermen and adventurers ruffled the plaza dust. Gamblers held forth in the saloons and toogaily dressed women laughed and talked in the shadows along Bowie Street.

Breck's lean brown face wore a worried scowl as he guided his trail-weary horse across the plaza toward the wharf-pens and warehouses. He waited impatiently for a pack train of shaggy, rat-tailed Mexican

mules loaded down with cowhides, to pass at the mouth of Texas Street.

Ahead of him the tall masts and spars of a ship loomed against the stars. Breck knew by the cut of her foremast and top-sail that it was the *Matagorda*, in from New Orleans with a load of chicory and saddle gear, and hemp from the West Indies. The sough of wind through her riggings was familiar. The night air brought the



Guns couldn't stop Breck Huckabee, nor iron-hard fists, nor even a hangman's noose. . . . And he'd be damned if he'd let 3000 pounds of flaming gunpowder halt his smoky journey—straight to a traitor's rendezvous beyond hell's last backlog!

**By
JOHN H.
LATHAM**



"Mind lettin' me have a look at your gun?" the marshal asked.

smell of rotten bayous from beyond Dagger Point to his nostrils.

Breck turned his horse into a wharf-pen, watching the sweat-streaked animal head directly for the moss-spattered water trough. He slung his saddle over his shoulder and crossed the street to a rambling shed. A sign over the door, barely discernible in the murky light reflected from the plaza, read: Huckabee & Roud, Cattle Boat Operators.

A tallow-drip candle was burning in the office and Breck hoped it would be Raben Roud, his cousin and partner in this cattle boat business. He had discovered something on this trip to Fort Apache that worried him immensely, and he had to talk to Roud about it. He paused at the door as a group of yelling riders raced through the plaza, guns blasting away furiously at the sky.

This wasn't the usual procedure for Indianola, he knew. The whole Border was seething with excitement and unrest. Pluma Blanca, rebel general, had taken Brownsville and was holding out like a monarch in the town. Cavalry reinforcements were being rushed to the river. Ranchers were pulling out of the country, moving their stock to safer range. An estimated two hundred thousand Texas cattle had changed ownership in the past few months by the simple process of "wetting" their bellies in the Rio Bravo.

Nanita's cattle, Pluma Blanca called them. His Mexican grandmother's cattle. His by right of inheritance. . . .

Raben Roud wasn't in the office. The man waiting there might have been a trail driver or a leathery Nueces rancher. He was Major Sam Bowdre, attached to Colonel Scott's Frontier Battalion, Texas Rangers.

"I had to talk to you," he said quietly.

Breck's face went hard and cold in the light of the hog-fat candle stuck on the table in its own grease. "What do you want?" he demanded harshly.

Bowdre's faded old eyes were shrewd. "You're still pretty bitter," he said slowly. "That dismissal still sticks in your craw like a sand-burr, doesn't it?"

"I was railroaded out of the service," Breck snapped, and dumped the saddle in a corner. "The evidence—" He broke off, realizing the futility of repeating old argu-

ments. He stared at Bowdre with hostile eyes.

"You didn't come here to wave a flag in my face and rave about the glory of the Texas Rangers," he said flatly. "What is it you want? But make it brief!"

"How is the cattle boat business?"

"I make more money in a month now," retorted Breck, "than I could in a lifetime with the Rangers. Raben Roud is a top-notch businessman."

"And a scoundrel," Bowdre growled. "A cattle thief and killer, with plenty of snake tracks in his back-trail. There's an even chance he's a traitor, too. You're keeping rotten company these days, Breck."

"It's company of my own choosing," answered Breck, stonily. There was no other chair in the room. He sat in an open window, with his back to the dock and wharf-pens.

"I can't blame you for being sour," said Bowdre, and looked suddenly old and tired as he took off his hat. He ran rope-burned fingers through his damp gray hair where the sweatband had left its impression.

"There's a chance you were shanghaied out of the service," he admitted. "The whole case hinged on that 'dobe gold found in your bed-roll. You claimed it was planted there. But somebody in the outfit was tipping off Pluma Blanca, and the finger of suspicion singled you out. The colonel said he couldn't run the risk of having an informer in his ranks. As it was, you got off light. Men have been—"

"As it was," interrupted Breck, and his eyes were hot and wickedly dangerous as he stared across the table at his old commander, "I was kicked out of the service without proper trial. I was disgraced for life—branded a traitor!"

"It looks worse now," growled Bowdre. "From all appearances, you and your handsome-faced cousin, Raben Roud, are openly in league with Pluma Blanca, using your ships to haul out his stolen cattle and run supplies through Matamoras to his rebel army."

"Not in the *Vieux Carre*," Breck answered curtly. "Nor the *Matagorda* or *River Queen*. Not a single Huckabee & Roud ship has been past Medina Anchorage in Brownsville. Perhaps," he added, with icy scorn, "Raben Roud has been

padding powder to Pluma Blanca in a bully boat!"

Bowdre took an oil-silk packet from his pocket and laid it on the table. "That's exactly what I want you to find out," he said slowly. "You were born in Mexico. You speak the language like a native. This is a commission in the Texas Rangers. I want you to find out how Pluma Blanca is getting his supplies—even if it means going into Brownsville. When you have the information report back to Colonel Scott. The old charges will be forgotten."

He took a deep breath. "You father was the best friend I ever had. I was with him at Shiloh when he stopped a minnie ball. I swore you into the Rangers and had you in my company for two years. I've been trying ever since you were kicked out to clear you, but this looks like the only way. I want you to take it."

Breck stared at him coldly. "What you really want," he said, "is for me to spy on my friends. Try to hang Raben Roud's hide on the fence for you. Prove a case against Jasper LeBreau where the Rangers have failed. No, thank you, Major!"

Bowdre rose and clamped his hat on his head. "Breck, the Rangers are going after Pluma Blanca. I'd hate for the son of my old comrade, a trooper who had served in my company, to wind up on a hangrope with the rest of that Border scum. And Huckabee & Roud has been handing out entirely too much gold for the company skirts to be clean!"

Faded old eyes stared into younger ones that were just as sharp and cold. Then, before either of them could move, a hand reached through the window and snaked Breck's gun up out of his holster.

His actions were dictated by instinct. He stabbed a hand after the gun, just as the sound of a shot exploded in his ears. Burning powder scorched his arm and side like a thousand red-hot needles, and he jerked blindly away from the window. But the gun was in his hand now, and a wild rage churned through him as he whirled back. He'd show that back-shooting *pelado* a—

Breck froze in his tracks. Major Sam Bowdre was staring at him with stricken eyes through the black, pungent powder-smoke that rolled through the room.

"Why did you do it, son?" he gasped.

Then, without so much as another word or gesture, he crumpled to the floor with his life draining out of the ugly wound in his chest. It seemed to Breck Huckabee that the accusing look was frozen in the faded old eyes that were now glazing over like new river ice.

"**WHY DID you do it, son?**" Bowdre thought Breck had killed him! The shock of that rooted Breck in his tracks while a clock might have ticked off ten seconds, and in that time he heard the hard pound of booted feet as someone raced along the boardwalk toward the warehouse.

The town marshal asked the same question, when he found Breck kneeling over the dead body with a six-shooter in his hand.

"I didn't kill him!" Breck protested, finally breaking free of the stunned inertia that had gripped him. "But the major died thinking I did," he added dully.

The town marshal was an old, rail-thin man wearing a shirt that had once been white, and dirty serge trousers. He was also brand inspector for the port of Indianola. He held out a brush-scabbed hand.

"Mind letting me have a look at your gun?"

A vein in Breck's throat started pounding. He knew then how it was going to be and helpless anger laid hold of him. He had the panicky feeling of a man being sucked deeper and deeper into a bayou-bog.

"Whoever it was," he said, "reached through the window and grabbed my gun. He shot Major Bowdre, then I jerked the gun out of his hands. He must have slipped in through the wharf-pens."

A crowd was gathering. Breck saw Jasper LeBreau in the door, a tall, immaculate man, smooth as Creole whiskey. He had good connections in Tamaulipas and was making a fortune for Huckabee & Roud off the new revolution. But Breck had reasons for disliking him. One of them was Rita Roud.

"What's going on here?" LeBreau demanded. He slapped a riding crop against his polished high-topped boots. A remote part of Breck's mind noted that the boots were stained with fresh cow dung.

The marshal ignored LeBreau. He

twisted his head and spat an amber-colored stream of tobacco juice, his sharp eyes never leaving Breck's face. "You see this hombre you claim did the shootin'?"

Breck shook his head. "I didn't see anybody," he admitted stonily.

"Then that's a story you'll have a hard time shoving down a jury's craw," said the marshal scornfully. "He was killed with your gun. You claim somebody else done the killin'. But you were standing over the major's body with a smoking six-shooter in your hand when I walked in."

He drew his own gun. "I reckon I'll have to hold you for a grand jury, Huckabee. Hand over that gun—butt first!"

Breck had a wild, reckless impulse to try to shoot his way out. But LeBreau's hand was on his arm, restraining him, and LeBreau's whisper was loud in his ears.

"Not that way, you fool!"

Breck handed over the gun. "The least you could do, Marshal," he said, "is look around the wharf-pens and dock and see if you can pick up a clue to the identity of the real killer. Don't let my arrest stop you from making an investigation."

"I reckon I've got the real killer," said the marshal.

Chapter II

REBELS AND RUSTLERS

BRECK HUCKABEE reckoned he'd come to the end of his rope.

His mind did cruel things to him as he paced his cell in the little 'dobe jail overlooking the waterfront. The cell reeked of sweat and filth and the aftermath of numerous whiskey jags. Through the barred window he could see the black hulk of the *Matagorda*, creaking a little as she pulled against bowline and spring-line.

Indianola had boomed into the biggest cattle port on the Texas coast, and this jail was a relic of the town's pueblo days. It had been left high and dry among the warehouses and wharf-pens, jammed against the docks, and now the relentless, encroaching sea was eating at its crumbling 'dobe foundations. The *Matagorda's* spring-line was tied a scant cable length away.

But the jail was still strong enough to hold a prisoner, as Breck well knew. He entertained little thought of escape as he

mulled the case over in his mind. Had the shot actually been meant for the Ranger, he wondered, or had the killer meant it for him? It didn't matter. Bowdre was dead and Breck Huckabee's chances of escaping the gallows weren't worth a plugged peso.

Recalling that Bowdre had died thinking he was the real murderer was sheer torture to Breck. Alive, he might tell the little old bowlegged lawman to keep his sun-scabbed nose out of what didn't concern him. But now he had to swallow the raw grief that crowded up in his throat.

Sam Bowdre had been as much of a father as Breck had known. His own father had been killed at Shiloh, and the little lawman had raised Breck from a shirt-tail kid until he was big enough to join the Rangers.

They had been close at one time. Close enough so that Bowdre's death knocked a lot of the anger and slow-smouldering resentment out of Breck over what had happened a year ago, and he could see things more clearly.

He knew that Sam Bowdre had been hard hit when he was read out of the Rangers. The old man had defended him vigorously at the hearing. But Breck, full of bitterness and rebellion, had never fully appreciated his foster father's desperate efforts on his behalf until now—now that it was too late, he told himself wretchedly.

If there was one thing he wanted out of life, he thought bleakly, it was to square accounts with Bowdre's cold-blooded killer. But while he was locked in this two-bit waterfront jail, the killer was getting farther away by the minute. He sat on the edge of the bunk and locked his head in his hands in a gesture of despair.

* * *

Breck knew it was nearing dawn when he awoke, because the *Matagorda* was supposed to sail with the tide and he could hear the horny patter of bare feet on her decks as the ship was put in readiness. The moon was up now, throwing sparkling crests of brilliance on the whitecaps hurdling the outer jetty. He wondered what had awakened him. Then he heard the whisper again, sharp and urgent, and a chill spurred up his spine.

"Breck! Damn you, wake up!"

Breck rolled off the bunk, his chest thudding with sudden excitement. Jasper

LeBreau, still immaculate in broadcloth and fine linen, crouched in the shadows alongside the jail. He had snapping black eyes and oily black hair that curled thickly over his ears. He was smiling.

"Here's your gun and papers," he said, thrusting a hand through the bars. "I staged a fight across the plaza to draw the marshal away from the jail. We'll have you out of there in three shakes of a mizzenmast."

A flood of questions jumped into Breck's mind, but LeBreau was already gone, slipping away noiselessly. He was back in a matter of minutes with two seamen. The men strained under the weight of a water-logged line that stretched back toward the ship.

"Give 'em a hand, Breck," LeBreau ordered. "It's the spring-line from the *Matagorda*. The skipper will slap on canvas and snatch those bars out or pull the whole rotten wall down!"

Breck grabbed the wet line and threw his weight against it, bracing his feet on the wall. He drew in slack and passed the end back through the bars to one of the seamen. The man tied a quick, expert knot and LeBreau stepped to the window.

"When the schooner hits the end of that line," he grinned, "it'll be making knots like the devil scorching sail. The skipper won't be able to swing back and pick you up. But Stoll, here—" he hooked a thumb at a burly, bare-chested seaman "—will be at the point with a boat. You run there and they'll have you both aboard once the ship is around the headland."

He had one more thing to say, and he said it derisively. "You can thank me for saving your neck, Huckabee. There is talk in town of stretching it!"

He turned on his heel and was gone.

Breck hurriedly stuffed the papers into his shirt and strapped on his gunbelt. He was fully dressed, except for his hat, and he yanked that on just as the captain's voice roared an order on the *Matagorda*.

"Lively, lads! Lets have full sail on her!"

THE moonlight was clear enough for Breck to see the hands race to the riggings. Sails bellied as the wind caught them, and it seemed that the *Matagorda* was moving almost instantly, surging into

the whitecaps. There was a hum as the spring-line jerked taut, followed by a crash as the wall around the barred window gave way and a ten-foot section tumbled into the sea.

"Hard left!" roared the captain, and Breck heard the slat of canvas as the schooner bore off the wind. He could see the rush of her riggings through the dust-fogged break in the jail's wall.

It was done! Elation needled him. A prisoner in a cell across the corridor lifted a sudden howl. Breck ducked his head and plunged through the gaping hole. 'Dobe dust blinded him for an instant, and he slipped and fell on the wet-moss surface of rocks bulwarking the crumbling outside wall. He scrambled to his feet, thankful for the long shadow cast by the wharfpens, and started toward Dagger Point at a dog trot.

There was no sound of pursuit or alarm after that one startled yell by the prisoner. He reached the point, breathing raggedly, and found Stoll already there and ready with the oars in the dinghy.

They shoved off. Twenty minutes later, they were aboard the *Matagorda* and outward bound for Cavallo Pass.

* * *

By the light of an oil rag lamp in the crew's mess, Breck inspected the papers Jasper LeBreau had given him. The man had made a mistake, he saw at once. These were not his papers. They were warrants, letters, a few tattered reward dodgers and other official documents belonging to the dead Ranger.

Breck's jaws tightened as he fingered an oil-silk packet. This was the commission that Bowdre had somehow wangled for him from the Adjutant General. Orders accompanied the commission and he pulled them out and read them.

The recruit, John Breck Huckabee, was ordered on special detail with the Frontier Battalion. Colonel James Scott. Commanding.

To Breck, it was like hearing the bugle's breath again and realizing that as few as thirty men were struggling to keep law and order south of the Nueces.

There were no sheriffs in that great, thorny brush tangle called the Big Brasada. It was no-man's land for lawmen. But until Pluma Blanca moved into Brown-

ville with his rag-tag army of a thousand outlaws, the Rangers had kept chaotic control over a wild stretch of border running all the way from El Paso to the mouth of the Rio Grande, a thousand miles away.

But Breck told himself that he had nothing in common with that gallant force now, even though he held a commission in his hands.

Border scum, Major Bowdre had called him. Consort of cattle thieves and contraband runners. Colonel Scott could call him far worse.

Murderer. Fugitive. Slayer of the one man in the service who had been his staunch defender.

Breck shoved the papers inside his shirt as Felix MacGruder, the *Matagorda's* master, came into the mess. His mouth lay in a trap-tight line and his eyes were smouldering with anger as he looked up at the man.

MacGruder was huge, hulking, with an enormous black beard and a voice like the bellow of a swamp alligator. A cap with brassy gold braid rode the back of his head. He lowered his bulk into a chair and grinned crookedly at Breck.

"Mr. Huckabee," he said cheerfully, swaying with the roll of the ship, "there is one sure thing about dealing with rascals. An honest man would have left you to the gallows, but a rascal will never desert another in a tight. And I hear a hangnouse can be powerful tight!" He loosed a booming laugh as wild as a gust of sea wind.

Breck used his voice on him like a whip. "What were you doing south of Brownsville?"

MacGruder's lips were still smiling, but his eyes were hard and alert. "You know I wouldn't risk a run into Matamoros," he countered. "Breck, me lad, you're barking up the wrong tree. I'm fresh from the cattle pens on Chicon Street with a load of brush-poppers for the French market. Every brand was in order when I sold in New Orleans."

"It was rebel beef," said Breck, flatly. "I rode in last night from Fort Apache. You haven't picked up a single Bullock & White steer!"

"I picked a few off Padre Island," MacGruder admitted. "But what are you kicking about? You've been getting your cut

while I risk my neck taking chances."

"Roud warned me against hiring you," Breck said, and wanted to smash his fist in the man's leering face. "You'll be reported to the Rangers, of course. And the port authorities may stick a traitor label on it, since you've been dealing with enemies of the country."

"It's your ship," MacGruder pointed out contemptuously. "You'll have to make explanations if the law looks into deals made by Huckabee & Roud. And you're forgetting one thing, me lad. You're not reporting this to anybody. Your neck is as good as in a hangnouse if you show your face to the port authorities in Indianola or Brownsville. So don't put on any righteous airs with me!"

He turned out of the room leaving Breck to stare bleakly after him.

So Huckabee & Roud were running stolen cattle! It was a chilling thought, but Breck had suspected as much after his trip to Fort Apache. He had meant to brace Roud with that information last night, but the major's death had plunged him into a far worse predicament.

Trouble, he told himself, didn't come in small doses. It struck like a tidal wave, engulfing a man. And MacGruder had been right. His hands were tied in this matter.

Then another thought came to him, harder than the rest, and he seized an oil-rag lamp and hurried along the passageway aft. The hatches were battened down, but the galley and fo'c'sle were set in a well amidships and a runway led directly into the hold.

The cargo looked in order: Kyack boxes and baled hemp for Mexican reatas and great burlap bags of chicory. The latter offered the likeliest prospects. Breck took his knife and ripped a bag open. The chicory covered slim canvas sacks laced with sail thread, and his heart started a quick pounding.

Powder!

He was gripping one of the sacks when he heard a slight sound behind him, and whirled. But he was too late. MacGruder had entered almost noiselessly on canvas-soled shoes.

"So you're curious, lad!" The captain's whisper was loud as a carronade blast in his ears. All the lights of the heavens

seemed to explode in Breck's head then, and he dropped limply to the deck. . . .

BRECK HUCKABEE realized dimly that the sun was shining in his face. Pain drummed through his skull like the muted thunder of a discordant surf. By slow degrees he became aware that the thunder was really a surf. The *Matagorda*, then, must be clearing Cavallo Pass.

Rough hands seized him. A voice from some far-out distance said, "The sharks can have him or he can straggle ashore for law bait. One or the other will get him." He was lifted and flung headlong into the sea. Salt water tried to burst into his lungs and water was a crushing weight that closed over him and pressed him down into darkness.

Some deep-rooted instinct for survival made him struggle against the engulfing seas. He threshed water and rose to the surface, gasping for breath. Needle-sharp pains centered in his chest. His brain cleared a little, and he could see the stern of the *Matagorda* over him. Felix MacGruder's bearded face peered over the ship's rail. A swell lifted and turned him and the flat, sandy beach lay a cable length away. He swam toward it weakly, supported mostly by the buoyancy of the salt water.

A long time later he floundered out on the beach and fell prone in the sand. Everything had been drained out of him, it seemed. A pouch-beaked pelican eyed him warily. A dead stingaree had been washed up on the sand and its stench filled his nostrils. Sand crabs scurried away at an awkward, three-legged gallop. He was aware only of bone-wracking fatigue and the warm comfort of the sand.

A sharp sense of urgency finally made him stagger up from the sand. The schooner's sails were a small dirty-white triangle over the headland when he took stock of his surroundings.

Matagorda Island was a seventy-mile-long sand bar, he knew, narrowly separated from the mainland by a shallow lagoon that could be waded at low tide. He was on the northern tip of the island, and somewhere near was an old jetty that had been used in the pirate LaFitte's time.

Raben Roud had established a line camp in the old hide shed at the jetty, Breck re-

called. He turned down the beach, knowing it would eventually lead him to the camp. He walked with stronger stride as the effects of MacGruder's blow wore off.

His fingers gingerly explored the jagged rip in his scalp just over his right eye. The captain had slashed him with a pistol butt, he guessed. Blood ran down his face and he mopped at it with his sleeve. There was a hard, cold knot of desperation in his belly as he planned his next move.

The events of the past few hours had left Breck with a hunted feeling. Raw panic grabbed at his throat. But like a cornered animal, there was nothing left for him to do but fight.

The first thing to do was brace Raben Roud, find out where he stood in this ugly game that LeBreau and MacGruder were playing for contraband stakes. Realization that Roud might be behind it gave Breck the raw lump in his throat that had come to him when Sam Bowdre was killed.

If there was any man in the world that he would have trusted completely, it was Raben Roud. As shirt-tail kids they'd romped in the sand beds together. Side by side they'd stolen watermelons in the dark of the moon and kept their secrets. Teamed up, they'd been a hard pair to handle in school-kid fist-fights. Blood brothers had been no closer in those days.

But all of that seemed gone now. Raben had inherited this Matagorda spread from his Cajan grandfather, and was getting rich from it.

When Breck thought back over it, their troubles had started when Raben hired Jasper LeBreau to ramrod his growing interests. Since then he had neglected the cattle boat business. He seldom rode off the island. He let LeBreau handle all of his deals—and some of them were shady, as the boatload of stolen cattle off Padre Island proved. Wet cattle run out of Mexico by Pluma Blanca's rebels.

There were other things that puzzled Breck. Raben had always been as quick on the smile as he was on the trigger. But now he was always surly. His old, infectious grin was gone. The zest he had derived from mere living seemed gone, too. He was drunk most of the time, and two tough-hand cowpunchers rode with him everywhere he went, as if he feared for his life.

Was a guilty conscience troubling Raben these days? Breck wondered. He had closed his mind to such thoughts before, but now he had to face them. A deep-burning wrath and resentment took hold of him as the evidence piled up in his mind.

MacGruder couldn't consummate shady deals without LeBreau's connivance, and LeBreau was Raben's man. But if Roud was guilty, then Rita—

Breck wouldn't let himself follow that line of thought. A cold bitterness against Roud was poisoning his mind when he reached the jetty and improvised line camp, and he told himself there would be a show-down when he faced his cousin—with guns!

Chapter III

PADDLEBOAT RAMROD

MATAGORDA'S sand dunes knew the fire of outlaws and obscure riders from the mainland. Comanche Charlie was one of the latter. He had been a tracker with the Rangers while Breck was still in the service, but now he held down this line camp for Raben Roud, living in an abandoned hide shed with a Creole girl he had married.

He was a lank, bearded man with the smoky look and red-rimmed eyes of one who spends most of his time outdoors and over a brush-wood fire. If he found anything strange in Breck's bloody, bedraggled appearance, he did not mention it.

Breck told him what he wanted, and Comanche Charlie lent him a saddle horse and a handful of dry shells for his gun.

"I see the *Matagorda* off the pass this morning," said the rider. "With Pluma Blanca in Brownsville, looks to me like MacGruder is running a big risk trying to take his ship in."

"He'll have little trouble," answered Breck bitterly, and mounted and rode away.

It was a raw spot with Breck. He remembered as he rode along what Major Bowdre had said about Huckabee & Roud spreading gold around.

Money had been scarce as hen's teeth in Texas since Reconstruction. But a man on Pluma Blanca's payroll would have ready access to rebel gold—'dobe coin of

the kind that had caused Breck to be cashiered out of the Ranger service. And Roud, through LeBreau, had been buying them out of every difficulty.

If Roud was in league with the rebels, Breck thought bleakly, then he was tainted with the same traitor's brush. In the eyes of the law he was no better than the border-jumping cut-throats who rode in Pluma Blanca's rag-tag army. The Rangers could throw the whole law book at him if he was apprehended now.

He was nearing the island headquarters when a horse rounded a bend in the brushy road ahead of him. It was not a rider he had expected—or wanted—to meet.

Rita Roud was the daughter of some remote relation of Raben's. His grandfather had brought her to live on the island when her family and plantation home near Natchez had been wiped out during the war. But she was no pensioner at the Double-R. She and Raben were more like brother and sister than many blood kin.

Rita's dark Creole beauty had been the toast of Natchez and New Orleans. Yet here she was wearing a *vaquero's* old clothes, with her wine-red hair caught up in a colorful scarf and a pistol at her hip.

"What are you doing here, Breck Huckabee?" she asked and laughed. "Stealing Double-R cattle?"

"I'm not that much of a rascal—yet," he said.

She hadn't changed much, he saw. A Spanish mother and French father had given Rita the sparkling Old-World vivacity that drew him like a magnet. They had been engaged a year ago. Disgraced and kicked out of the Ranger service, he had made no attempt to see her since.

But from all accounts, she had not been lonely. Rumor had it that Jasper LeBreau was jangling his spurs on the Roud porch and more than making up for Breck's absence. The thought put a gulf between them.

"Is Raben at the ranch?" he asked stiffly.

Rita's smile faded and she laid a hand on his sleeve. "Breck, I have wanted to talk to you for a long time. Raben is in some sort of trouble, and you two were always so close. Why haven't you been around?"

"It looks like he has us both in trouble," Breck retorted bitterly.

"He drinks all the time," Rita went on slowly, "as if he wanted to forget something. He has quit wearing a gun, but Lewt Scuffles and that other ruffian are always with him. He seems to be afraid for his very life. And lately I haven't been able to ride away from the ranch without one of them following me. Comanche Charlie keeps a look-out at Long Reef where the lagoon is shallow enough to wade, and he turned me back the other day. Said Raben had given him orders not to let me off the island. I slipped away from the ranch today.

"And LeBreau!" She shuddered. "He is always around, watching me with those eyes that are like chipped ice. He wants to marry me. He has asked Raben to draw up a marriage contract."

That brought the hot edge of misery to Breck's eyes, instantly and completely. He leaned from the saddle and gripped the soft points of her shoulders. Her little cry was cut off by his kiss.

Her lips were warm and tangy as champagne. Her mouth clung to his and fire and fever seemed to weld them into one. Then he shoved her roughly away.

"Breck!" she cried.

But he was spurring toward the ranch, full of white-hot self-condemnation.

What could he hope to offer Rita now, he asked himself bitterly. He was more than in disgrace. Border scum, Bowdre had called him. Cattle thief and contraband runner. Murderer, too, in the eyes of the law. And a traitor if MacGruder pulled into Matamoras with powder for the rebel guns of Pluma Blanca.

All of that seemed branded on his conscience as he rode up to the sprawling 'dobe *hacienda* that was Raben Roud's island headquarters.

LEWY SCUFFLES met him at the door. He was Roud's bodyguard and always stuck to his boss like a shadow. He was slim, small-boned, with a frozen smile and vacant stare. Breck knew that he was one of the worst killers on the frontier.

"Hear you had trouble in Indianola," Scuffles observed, almost idly. "LeBreau just rode in with the news. I plugged a Ranger once, myself."

Breck brushed past him into a long, 'dobe-cool room with split-log beams and

a huge stone fireplace. LeBreau was pacing the floor like a caged lion. Isaiah Noll, skipper of Huckabee & Roud's two-masted paddle steamer, the *Vieux Carre*, cowered from the tall buyer's wrath.

Breck barely glanced at the two men. His hot glance turned on Roud, who sat in a rawhide-backed chair in the corner.

Raben Roud was no more than Breck's age, a slight, swarthy man with the soft speech and explosive temper that seemed a family trait. But today the sharp edge of the man seemed dulled by whiskey. His dead-black eyes were bloodshot and his smile had none of its old charm. Breck stared at him with a mixture of anger and disgust.

"Hear you bumped off a Ranger," said Roud, grinning loosely. "That's bad business, Breck."

Breck took three long steps across the room and jerked Roud up out of the chair. He was a thoroughly dangerous man at the moment.

"You know damn' well I didn't kill a Ranger!" he said angrily. "And another thing, MacGruder is heading south with a load of powder in his hold. I discovered it, and was knocked in the head and thrown overboard. What do you know about it, Raben?"

"You took a long chance," Roud answered. "Felix was only trying to make a little money on the side, and you caught him. It's a wonder he hadn't killed you."

He didn't seem overly worried about the *Matagorda* master's default. He seemed more amused than anything else.

Breck Huckabee suddenly saw red. He brought a knotted fist up from his knees to crash against Roud's loose-grinning mouth. There was a sound like the crack of a sail reefed into the wind and Roud staggered against the wall.

"You'll regret that, Breck," he said thickly, licking his bloody mouth.

Lewt Scuffles had a gun in his hand, pointed at Breck's lean middle. He said almost impersonally, "You try any more of that rough stuff, Huckabee, and I'll fill your guts full of lead."

He stared at Breck out of his vacant eyes.

Staring into the empty eyes of the virulent little killer, Breck Huckabee cursed himself for a fool. He had been crazy to

ride openly into this thieves' nest. But he had been hoping desperately to find his cousin still loyal. Until this moment, he could not bring himself to believe that Raben had really turned against him.

Well, he had his answer now. A killing rage laid hold of him as he swung back to face Roud.

"You're rotten to the core, Raben!" he ground out. "One of your men—probably LeBreau—killed Sam Bowdre because the Rangers were closing in on you. You had me framed for the killin'. But I swear I'll live to see you hang!"

"I may hang a lot quicker," retorted Roud, with a mirthless laugh. "Noll, here, lost the *Vieux Carre*. The Rangers sent a small detachment down Padre Island, to flank some of the rebel forces and caught him loading stolen cattle. The commander a boat and boarded him at night, without any of the crew suspecting they were Rangers until they came over the side and opened fire."

"We had the cattle in deck pens," added the crestfallen Noll, "and they stampeded when the first shot was fired. I went over the side and got away in the confusion. But the Rangers have the *Vieux Carre* now, and she mounts a six-pounder. They can lay for MacGruder in the narrow neck of the pass just outside our rendezvous in Bagdad, below Brownsville."

"It means ruin," said LeBreau bleakly.

Breck checked the bitter reply that leaped to his lips. A stir of excitement ran through him.

"Where is your rendezvous," he asked.

"An old hide shed near the jetty," answered Noll. "The rebs are using it for an ammunition dump."

"Then there's just one thing to do," Breck snapped, turning on Roud. "We've got to overhaul MacGruder and warn him. He can use the old ship's channel and probably slip through."

"How about that?" LeBreau demanded of Noll. "You know that anchorage."

"He might make it," admitted Noll. "Close hauled and running without lights, he might sail well into the channel before they spot him. Then rebel guns from the fort would keep the *Vieux Carre* at a distance."

"But we're both new to this coast," he added. "Neither of us have ever been

through the old channel. MacGruder would run aground before he could enter into the outer harbor."

"I know the channel," said Breck. "I was working cattle boats out of Brownsville long before the new channel was ever dredged."

LeBreau's dark, handsome face showed a mixture of eagerness and suspicion. "Why are you so interested in saving the *Matagorda*?" he asked.

"It's my neck as well as yours," said Breck bitterly. "I want a stake out of the money Pluma Blanca pays you. The only safe place for me is Mexico. When we bring the ship into Bagdad, I'll just keep going. Is that agreed?"

"Agreed," answered LeBreau, with a twisted smile. He cut a warning look at Roud, who was about to speak.

IT WAS as choice a crew of cut-throats, Breck told himself, as any that set saddles.

There was the reckless, swashbuckling Roud, half drunk, but with some of the old devil-may-care fire in his black eyes and a cynical smile on his lips.

And LeBreau. Handsome. Hard as nails. Riding a long stirrup and watching Breck with cold suspicion. Remembering the cow dung that he had seen on the man's polished boots last night, Breck was certain that LeBraeu had killed Bowdre.

Lewt Scuffles was always near Roud, who trusted the little killer so implicitly that he didn't even wear a gun. Scuffles was silent most of the time, as if he had something black on his mind that he never spoke of.

And there was Comanche Charlie, who had followed Breck in from Long Reef. His habitual indifference covered him like a shell. But Breck noticed that Charlie hung back and watched him, just as LeBreau was doing.

Breck had no illusions about this *pasear* they were taking into the rebel stronghold. Running wet cattle out of Mexico was one thing. But having the *Matagorda* captured with its hatches crammed with powder was a matter of treason and death.

LeBreau and Roud realized this and were playing along with him, trying to snatch their contraband fortunes out of a Ranger trap. But they would show him

no mercy, Breck knew, once his usefulness to them was dissipated. He had become dangerous to their plans and they would have to get rid of him.

But Breck had his own reasons for not wanting the *Matagorda* overhauled. . . .

* * *

They left the ranch and headed south along the island. Sand dunes alternated with thickets of chokebrush and chaparral. The trail skirted liveoak mottes and crossed salt marshes where grass grew stirrup high.

A swamp 'gator bellowed as they splashed through a bayou. Snakes slithered through islands of grass and reeds. On either side of the trail were rotten bogholes that would suck a man and horse under in a minute.

They changed horses at a line camp and rode into the last Double-R outpost at dusk. While a camp-hand swapped saddles to a fresh relay of mounts, they wolfed down ash-covered hoecakes dipped in Creole gumbo. They were riding again before dark.

The *Matagorda* had a six-hour start. But at dawn the next day they were on a shell reef when MacGruder brought his ship through the narrow neck of Buffalo Bayou. This was a little-known pass between *Matagorda* and the St. Joseph's islands used by captains like MacGruder anxious to avoid official scrutiny of their cargo.

LeBreau rode his horse into the water and cupped his hands to his mouth. "Lower a boat, Felix!" he shouted. "We're boarding you."

Surprise was evident in the bull-throated roar that came back across the water. "Well, hang me to my own mizzinmast! Is that Huckabee with you?"

"It's not his ghost!" Breck himself answered the captain. "I'm checking the play to you, MacGruder."

There was a wicked fondness in the master's eyes as he leaned over the rail and watched Breck Huckabee crawl up a swaying pilot ladder. He caressed the knuckles of one scarred hand, battered almost out of shape by use on many a truculent crew.

"Even the devil in hell," he chuckled, "hates a quitter. I'm that glad to see you, Breck lad! I've a notion you liked our hospitality, and I'm of a mind to give you another dose. I like the sound of bone on

pretty white teeth like yours, Breck lad!" "All right," said Breck. He stepped over the rail and hit MacGruder a great, smashing blow full in the face.

The meaty thud of MacGruder's heavy shoulders striking the deck was like an echo of the blow. The captain blinked his wicked little eyes. He shoved up from the deck with blood staining his beard, a savage yell of sheer animal pleasure breaking from him.

Breck never let him catch his balance. He took one step and put everything he had into a long-armed swing. There was the sickening crunch of bashed flesh and broken bone, and MacGruder sagged back. He sucked blood through his broken nose with a loud, snorting sound as he tried to get up.

Breck hit him again. The *Matagorda's* master lost all interest in the fight.

Breck held his bloody right hand in front of him and snagged out his six-shooter with his left. "From here on in," he told the startled mate who came running down from the quarterdeck, "I'm ramrodding this ship!"

"Aye, Mr. Huckabee!" muttered the mate, staring slack-jawed at his captain.

"I like your style, Breck lad," murmured a soft voice behind him.

He turned. Raben Roud was smiling at him. It was the old, jaunty smile that Roud had flashed when the two of them stood against odds.

And somehow, the smile made Breck a little sick.

Chapter IV

IN THE WAKE OF THE MATAGORDA

THE NIGHT was pitch-black and a smooth sea bellied under the *Matagorda's* prow. Royals, skysails and stunsails hung taut in the southeast trade wind that was running them smoothly in past the San Juan de Ulloa anchorage, off the Rio Grande.

Breck Huckabee stood with a hand on the taffrail and told himself that the gods of war—so far—were with him. The insurrection had not as yet been declared a national emergency. If a lone Navy gunboat had blocked their way, the *Matagorda* would have been a magnificent explosion,

visible in Matamoras and Brownsville and Bagdad.

From where he stood, he could see fires burning on the Texas side of the river where Pluma Blanca had thrown picket lines about the beleaguered city. Other fires showed in the distance, too, marking U.S. cavalry patrols.

The fighting was still in the skirmish stage, Breck knew. The Army commander, General Mark Johnson, hoped to spare the city a frontal assault. But two companies of Texas Rangers were being rushed in to spearhead his attack, just as they had for Taylor.

Breck moved forward and peered into the gloom, cursing the fact that his need for silence would not allow a leadsman in the chains. He heard the crash of breakers against a seawall, fixed it in his memory and called back to the helmsman.

"Starboard three points."

"Starboard three points," echoed the helmsman.

They were still in the channel, for water was breaking cleanly under the *Matagorda's* prow. He moved aft by the wheel, where the helmsman stood with his face limned in the faint glow of the binnacle.

This was the only light on the ship, except a shrouded lamp below in the captain's cabin. Nearly everybody was on deck, tense as they ran steadily into the river where the *Vieux Carre* might be waiting in ambush.

LeBreau made a tall shadow against the whiteness of the crossjack. MacGruder stood with his feet planted firmly on the quarterdeck, his face in bandages from the beating Breck had given him. Roud moved up to stand beside Breck and the latter sensed, more than saw, the movement on the deck below made by the ever-present Scuffles.

"You're a fool, Breck," said Roud, softly. "A bigger fool than Pluma Blanca. You know you can't win!"

It was a warning, Breck knew, and for an instant it warmed his heart. This trip had changed Raben. He seemed free of some crushing weight. He was more like his old, reckless self, Breck thought. The devilry was back in his smile and in the darkness his black eyes would be dancing with excitement.

It was at times such as this that memory

of their old comradeship became like a twisted knife inside Breck. But he shook his head. He had his own part in this ugly, contraband gamble, and he would play it out.

"I'll get the ship through," he answered grimly. "You've no worries on that score, Raben."

"Damn it!" Roud's voice was softly vicious. "Don't you know LeBreau is after your hide? He'll throw you over the side for shark bait the minute the *Matagorda* drops anchor. He hired Comanche Charlie to plant that 'dobe gold in your bed-roll and got you kicked out of the Rangers. He killed Bowdre and framed you for that. It was partly to drag a red herring across the Ranger's trail and keep them from finding the snake tracks he had left. But there was another reason: Rita!

"That two-bit, tinhorn, spur-jingling dude went wall-eyed crazy the first time he laid eyes on Rita. Swore he'd have her at any cost. She's in love with you, always has been. But he won't stop short of hell to have her, and that means he can't let you live.

"Don't you see, Breck?" There was sheer desperation in his whispered voice. "Give up this wild scheme—for Rita! Go over the side while there's still time. I knocked Comanche Charlie in the head with a belaying pin and took his gun. I'll hold them off. Go on, Breck!"

"It's a little late for that," Breck threw back at him. "You've ridden a black trail, Raben, but I guess there's some good in the worst of men. At least you warned me. But—"

The gun in Roud's hand jammed suddenly into his belly. He could see the rigid set of Roud's shoulder against the light from the binnacle.

"Jump for it!" Roud commanded. "Jump or I'll knock you in the head and throw you over!"

LeBreau heard Roud's lifted voice, and came toward them. Boots scuffed the ladder as Scuffles ran aft. All of that registered with Breck as he stiffened against the pressure of the gun muzzle; and something else, registered, too.

The tall masts of a ship loomed ahead of them. A hard howl came at them across the water, and a shell slapped through sail overhead.

ROUND JERKED his head around as another six-pounder crashed into the schooner's side, somewhere below them. Breck struck his wrist, knocking the gun aside, and hit Roud with an in-driven shoulder that staggered him against the railing.

The ship trying to cut them out of the harbor was the *Vieux Carre*, he instantly realized. His mind leaped ahead. The *Matagorda* was boiling along under full sail, and would outdistance the paddle steamer if the six-pounder on the *Vieux Carre* didn't score a lucky hit in the rigging.

Another shell skittered across the deck, knocking a gaping hole in the port gunwales, as Breck whirled to the ladder. There was boiling confusion below, and that served his purpose. He was down the ladder before anybody could stop him.

Now was the time to act, if ever! He threw his weight against the great cabin door, unmindful of a shout behind him. A bullet splintered the bulkhead inches from his face as he ducked inside. He collided head-on with a seaman coming out to investigate the uproar.

"LeBreau said to keep everybody out of here," growled the man, lifting his rifle. "You—"

Breck had his own gun in his hand now. He slammed the seaman savagely across the head and whirled without waiting for him to fall. He snatched the oil rag lamp from its bracket and plunged into the passageway beyond.

It was dark in the hold, and the oil-rag lamp threw weird shadow designs on the stacked chicory and hemp bales. Breck ripped into a bale of hemp. He knew that he was working against time. He jerked the rag out of the lamp and spilled kerosene over the loose bundle.

There was more light in the hold when he scrambled back into the runway, and his chest was thudding with heavy excitement. The door there was flung open and the virulent Scuffles stood limned in the light of a candle somebody held behind him.

Scuffles fired, and Breck winced from the ricochet of the slug. Then his own gun jumped in his hand, and he felt savage elation at the recoil. He saw Scuffles drop his pistol and fold slowly over, his empty eyes turning blood-red with pain as he

clutched his scarlet, bullet-torn middle. "Breck!"

Raben Roud held the candle. But he made no move to shoot, and Breck knew that he could never pull a trigger against this man who had ridden so many trails with him.

"Stand aside, Raben!"

"Stand aside, hell!" Raben's eyes held a mad joy. "It's me and you, son. I'm siding you!"

There was no time to ask questions. For the moment they were partners again, in a tight corner. Breck stepped over Scuffles and hammered a shot at Comanche Charlie, who leaped into the outer door with a bloody shirt-tail bandage around his head. Raben's shot flicked dust from the breed's jacket, inches from his heart.

"You and me, son!" he yelled, as he plunged up the steps to the deck. That same rebel yell had urged Beck on in school-kid and barroom fights.

The scene that met their eyes was one Breck would never forget. The fire had been spotted as it blazed quickly up the No. 3 hatch, and the alarm struck terror in the heart of every man aboard.

Three thousand pounds of gunpowder lay in the path of the blaze!

No attempt was made to rig a pump. The fire had too much headway. MacGruder was yelling for the courses to be reefed in and the bosun was trying to organize a party to swing out the boat falls. The mate was swinging a capstan bar, trying to drive men to obey the captain's order.

But wild confusion prevailed. A few men labored at the davits. More leaped from the deck and riggings, where they had a better view of the blaze. A body plummeted to the deck near Breck and lay still.

"Get those courses in!" MacGruder yelled again from the quarterdeck. "Into the riggings, men. Bosun, you'll swamp every boat if we don't lose headway!"

Breck sprang up the ladder, with Raben at his heels. He laid his gun on MacGruder and chopped out an order.

"Take in a scrap of canvas and I'll blow a hole in your belly big enough to run a yardarm through!"

Flames, dancing up from the hatch, threw ghastly light on the scene. Breck had a glimpse of LeBreau, his muddy black eyes glittering almost insanely in the reflection

cast by the fire. He swung his gun just as LeBreau fired. He felt the breath of the bullet like a whisper of death in his ears as he triggered an answering shot.

LeBreau staggered and dropped his gun, gripping a bullet-smashed arm. Breck swung his smoking six-shooter to cover both LeBreau and MacGruder.

"Take the wheel, Raben," he ordered. "Keep her on this course. Swing her hard to port when you pass the end of the jetty."

"All right," answered Raben. He sounded all out of wind as he moved to take the place of the helmsman, who had deserted his post and gone over the side. He slumped at the wheel.

"I can guide her, Breck," he muttered. "But LeBreau sho' blowed a hole in my back!"

THE SIX-POUNDER on the *Vieux Carre* was silent as the paddle steamer pounded alongside. Flames had run up the *Matagorda's* mizzenmast, stripping it of sail, and the schooner had lost some headway.

"Heave to!" A voice hailed them from the *Vieux Carre*. "We can take you aboard. You're all prisoners of the Texas Rangers!" It sounded like Colonel Scott's cracked old voice to Breck.

"Stay clear, Colonel!" he warned. "We're carrying a load of gunpowder as fuel for this bonfire. Powder meant for Pluma Blanca. I aim to see that he gets it!"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Texas Ranger Breck Huckabee!" He moved to the railing. The bosun had managed to get one boat in the water and was standing by to let go the painter. Breck stopped him by firing a bullet near his head.

"I'm carrying that special commission that Sam Bowdre got for me, Colonel," he called across to the *Vieux Carre*. "And I'm dropping a prize boatload of rascals that Bowdre had warrants for. You can pick them up."

He motioned with his gun. MacGruder and the mate went over the side into the boat that was wallowing along at the end of its painter. A seaman slid down the falls and dropped into the boat. It was LeBreau's turn, but Breck looked at Roud.

"Climb into the boat, Raben," he ordered. "I'm keeping this polecat—" he jabbed the gun at LeBreau "—to intro-

duce me to Pluma Blanca. I'm telling the colonel that you sided me in this fight. You hear that, Colonel?"

The colonel was a long time answering, but Breck noticed that the *Vieux Carre* fell a little more astern to get out of danger's way.

LeBreau noticed it too. His handsome, swarthy face was a sickly muddy color as he gripped his wounded arm. His black eyes were dilated with fear. He licked dry lips.

"You—you can't keep me here, Huckabee!" he managed hoarsely. "It—it'd be murder!"

"It was murder when you killed old Sam Bowdre and tried to frame me for the crime," Breck rapped back at him. "Remember that when your black soul is scorching in hell."

LeBreau seemed to recognize the dogged determination in Breck's voice. He backed against the railing and stared down at the water with wild eyes. He was breathing raggedly, like a horse after a hard run.

"I—I can't swim!" His voice rose to a panicky scream. "Sure I killed Bowdre. And I hired Comanche Charlie to plant that 'dobe gold in your bed-roll and get you kicked out of the Rangers. I'll admit it. I'll sign anything. I—"

Terror choked him, and the rest of it was a meaningless babble. Breck stared at him with revulsion in his eyes. It made him a little sick to see a man turned into a sniveling, belly-crawling thing like Jasper LeBreau.

"You hear that, Colonel?" he lifted his voice. "That was LeBreau, giving off head like a bull calf at the branding fire. Roud had nothing to do with killing Bowdre. I'm trusting you to see that he gets a square deal when he comes up for trial."

"I heard it, Breck," the colonel called back. "Give up your crazy scheme, lad. Crawl in that boat with Roud and LeBreau and we'll pick—"

Breck didn't listen to the rest of it. LeBreau's eyes were bulging insanely and he had to be helped into the boat. He was shaking like a man with the ague.

"Take this thing," Breck told the bosun, "and turn it over to the Rangers. Bat him between the horns with an oar if he goes berserk. I—"

He was leaning over the rail, gripping

LeBreau's arm, when something struck him a stunning blow over the head. He made one frantic grab for the railing, then tumbled headlong into the boat.

Raben's voice came from some far-out distance above him, high and gay and as reckless as it had ever been: "I'm delivering this present to Pluma Blanca alone! So long, Breck lad! No hard feelings, huh?"

Still dazed, he felt the boat lose headway as Raben cast off the painter. When he recovered enough to shove erect, the high stern of the *Matagorda* was already a cable length away, every detail of her riggings outlined in the lurid glare of the fire.

A great, raw ache grabbed at Breck's throat as he saw Raben's slight shape at the wheel, surrounded by leaping flames that at times seemed to engulf him.

The *Vieux Carre* came up with the boat. A line fell across the bow. Breck seized it and pulled in close, and leaped aboard the paddle steamer.

Rangers pounded him on the back. Colonel Scott gripped his hand. But Breck fought through them and ran forward. Sweat cracked through his skin as he stared after the *Matagorda*.

There was a great, rendering crash as the *Matagorda* drove into the shed that was warped out over the water on heavy pilings.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the night seemed to come apart in sound and fury and a hell of light. The explosion blinded Breck. The sound of it rolled across the water, rocking the *Vieux Carre* in a titanic gust of wind. For a seeming eternity fiery pieces of wreckage filled the air.

"My God!" The colonel's voice seemed remote and far away. The explosion had done that to Breck's ears. "That schooner must have been packed to the gunnels with powder!"

"It was the rebel ammunition dump," answered Breck in a dead voice. "Pluma Blanca will quit Brownsville before the night is over."

LEBREAU made a full confession before the *Vieux Carre* put in at Indianola. And it exonerated Raben, in part.

The lure of easy money had started them

hauling stolen cattle. Knowing that Breck wouldn't agree to the shady business, the transactions had been kept from him. Raben had kicked, though, at running contraband to the rebels.

But by then LeBreau's hold on the outfit was secure. He had blackmailed Roud, keeping him in line. And he had framed Breck and secured his dismissal from the Rangers to discredit him with Rita Roud. He had planned to use Breck as law bait if the Rangers uncovered his ugly game and had almost succeeded when he killed Bowdre and threw the blame on Breck.

The remainder of his story was what hit Breck so hard. Raben Roud had finally kicked over the traces and threatened to call in the law. For months he had been a virtual prisoner at his Double-R ranch. And he couldn't warn Breck or fight back because LeBreau had given orders to his tough gunhands to kill Rita Roud if Raben double-crossed them.

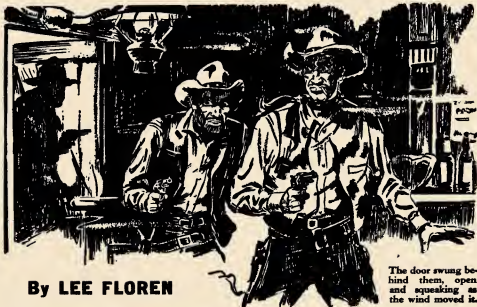
That explained to Breck why Raben had stopped wearing a gun and why the virulent little Scuffles had stuck to him like a shadow. Raben, he remembered, had had to knock Comanche Charlie in the head with a belaying pin to get a gun on the ship. That dull ache was back inside him when he recalled how Raben had tried to keep him out of the showdown fight.

Rita Roud was standing on the wharf when the *Vieux Carre* cleared Cavallo Pass and threshed its way into Indianola. She was wearing a black dress, which meant she had already heard of Raben's death, and a black lace mantilla covered her winered hair. Breck told himself that he had never seen her look so beautiful—or so sad.

He turned to Colonel Scott as the gangplank was lowered and the crowd—Rita among them—hurried aboard.

"Remember this," he said slowly. "Raben was my friend and a mighty fine man. Sure, he went wrong. But he paid his bill. He wiped the slate clean when he ran that burning schooner into that hide shed."

It was worth it, the hard-bitten old Ranger decided, just seeing the way that sweet-faced girl's eyes lighted up when Breck told her about Raben. But he was a little embarrassed when the two youngsters kissed, right there on the *Vieux Carre's* deck with half the town watching. . . .



By **LEE FLOREN**

The door swung behind them, open and squeaking as the wind moved it.

Tinhorn Jess Spurling could either toss in his cards and quit, or bet on a hand that could win him only the biggest share of a grim boothill plot!

JESS SPURLING pushed back his chair with, "Excuse me a moment, gentlemen," and laid down his cards. He looked outwardly calm, his thin face without purpose, but inside he felt a tightness. He had watched Odom and his gunman set their trap for young Tim Ward, and now Ward was entangled in its meshes. The young miner stood with his back to the bar, his right hand on his holstered gun, as he watched Mike Odom and his gunman, John Cumbers.

Seemingly unmindful of the grimness of the three, Jess Spurling moved against the bar, close to Ward's elbow. "Whiskey," he told the bartender.

The white-aprons was at the bar's far end. He shook his head and Jess grinned. Gunplay might break loose soon between Tim Ward and Odom and Cumbers, and the bartender was playing it safe—at a distance.

Jess looked at Ward. "They're getting so they won't even serve a customer at this bar."

Tim Ward was only twenty-two but now he looked older. "You'd better get down the bar, Jess, 'cause there's danger here."

"Yeah? What's the matter?"

Mike Odom cut in roughly. "You got eyes, gambler. You seen this would-be miner swing at me an' miss! You ain't as ignorant as you put on!"

Jess Spurling turned and looked at the mine owner. Men were quiet in the long saloon and outside the wind sang against the eaves.

"You talking to me?" Jess asked.

Odom clipped his words. "Yeah, you!"

John Cumbers was scowling. He didn't understand Jess Spurling's part in this. He and Mike Odom were ready to cut Tim Ward down and Jess, for no apparent reason, had moved in on their play.

• • **LAST HAND** • •

Jess came forward. He said, "I don't like you, Odom!" He slapped the mining man across the jaw.

The slap sounded loud. Odom reached for his gun with, "You'll pay for this!" Jess Spurling's fist followed and hit Odom on the jaw.

Odom went back. He'd flung his gun-arm up for protection but Spurling's second blow smashed through the mining man's guard. Then Jess Spurling had Odom's .45, lifting it from Odom's holster and throwing it aside. The wall caught Mike Odom and held him and Jess Spurling stood with his hands down.

Spurling said, "Come on, big man, come on!"

Tim Ward's voice cut in with, "I've got my cutter on this other gent, Jess. He didn't expect me to pull."

Cumbers stood with his hand a little high. Spurling saw Odom glance at him, and then a cloud came across Odom's eyes. He said, "All right, tinhorn, I'm comin'!" He had his mind clear and he moved straight ahead.

He outweighed the gambler by twenty pounds.

That difference in weight forced Jess Spurling to give ground. Odom was schooled in barroom fighting and Spurling knew that if the man got his hands on him, he was done for. He fought from a distance.

Dimly he could hear the shouts of the watchers. He wondered if they were cheering him or Odom. Not that it made much difference. But he doubted that Mike Odom had any friends in the crowd. He'd used some mighty high-handed methods to get where he was.

Spurling kept moving back. He blocked, feinted, hit. But always he was careful to stay out of Odom's reach. Once he went down over a chair. Odom rushed him, boot back; Spurling rolled and came up, rising from all fours.

Yes, Odom knew barroom fighting, and that was all. He had no science or skill; he had only brute strength and animal cunning. Spurling was taking more than he was giving, but Odom was tiring. He was gasping for breath.

Spurling waited, ducking, blocking. He fought coldly, using his science. The power was leaving Odom.

JESS SPURLING came ahead then. He punished the big man terribly. His left was a straight, fast rapier, cutting and ripping, working in and out, in and out. His right followed, moving with machine-like rapidity. There were no shouts now. Men were watching this thin-lipped, hard-hitting gambler in a new light.

A left started Odom down and a right finished the job. The big man went down on his side in the sawdust and Spurling stepped back, tired and bloody around the mouth. He moved with his back to the bar and he wiped his mouth with his linen handkerchief, breathing with a great heaviness.

Tim Ward, said, "Thanks, Jess."

Spurling said, "Get out of here, Tim, and go to your wife."

Tim Ward stood silent.

Spurling repeated, "Please leave, Tim." He made it a command.

Ward was undecided; he was scowling. Finally, "All right, Jess." He walked out the swinging doors into the night.

Spurling looked at John Cumbers who said, "Why don't you pack a gun, tinhorn? You're handy with your dukes but the man who built the first pistol made all men the same size."

"I might do that."

Cumbers was helping his boss to his feet. Mike Odom was shaking his head like a big Hereford bull who's run into a four-wire fence in the dark. One eye was closing and his lips were swollen already.

"This ain't the end of this," Odom promised grimly.

Jess Spurling grinned almost boyishly. Cumbers stepped back and Odom looked hard at the gambler, then turned and walked out the door with Cumbers behind. Spurling watched them leave, the boyishness turning to a mature hardness.

The saloon was coming back to normal with the talk of men and the shuffling of cards. Jess Spurling stood there and thought, suddenly, of a golden-haired woman, and a distaste for his profession arose in him. Maybe Fran was right; maybe a gambler was one of the lower forms of humanity. This brought a wry smile to his lips.

He went over to his table and said, "I'm dropping out. There'll be a new dealer for you."

He took his rack of chips and went into an office off the saloon. A heavy man looked up from his work on a ledger. He said, "There was a rumpus outside, Jess? Or did I hear wrong?"

Spurling told him he'd whipped Mike Odom.

"He's dangerous, Jess." Jack Smith owned this saloon and he was Jess' boss. "You watch him. You checking in for the night?"

Spurling nodded.

"Early to quit, Jess."

Spurling felt the raw rub of something inside of him. "Today a girl told me she couldn't love me because I was a gambler. I guess it hurt me more than I cared to admit. Maybe she's right, Jack."

Heavy Jack Smith caught the edge of Spurling's indecision. He got to his feet and walked to the window and looked out on the lights of Crooked Bend. After a while he said quietly, "I reckon I knew how you feel, Jess."

Jess left.

He got a short one at the bar and went outside, the cut of the liquor against his battered lips. He'd been a fool for moving in between Odom and Cumbers and Tim Ward. What did the young miner mean to him? Nothing. . . .

Yet he had stepped into their trouble. Why?

Was it because of Patricia Ward, young Tim's young wife? Patricia was dark and small and quick of tongue and thought. He remembered when he had first seen her, holding her little girl by the hand in front of the Mercantile. That was when he had ridden into this town for the first time six months before.

He'd said, "Your little girl, ma'am?"

Patricia Ward had said, "My daughter," and little Trish had given him her hand. Young Tim had come out of the store and Jess Spurling had introduced himself, saying he was a gambler. He'd noticed the light that had come into Patricia Ward's dark eyes and he'd understood.

The word 'gambler' had brought that sudden light. And Jess Spurling had felt a wry taste around his mouth as he had said good-by. He had met Patricia Ward many times again and she had been distantly polite.

Then he'd met Fran Gardner.

He had met her the same day he'd met the Wards. He'd stabled his horse and turned into the first restaurant and there she was behind the counter. She was busy waiting on a customer and she had not seen him as he watched her and thought, "She's the one. She's it, sure enough. She's the girl."

He'd noticed her ringless fingers.

She'd said, "And your order, sir?"

He'd eaten with a great slowness, making the meal last. He'd tried to draw her into conversation and he'd had little success. He got the impression that she was deep and her character was like her hair: golden and fine.

After that, he always ate at her cafe, the Single Spade. One day she'd said, "You're at the Mill Iron Bar? You're a gambler?"

He'd studied her. "Yes, I'm a gambler."

She'd been colder, after that. One night he ate late and he was alone. He said, "You don't like gamblers?"

She didn't answer.

But she was interested in him; he knew that. This lay between them, unseen and silent, as it lies between a man and his woman. One day she came to him and said, "Why don't you go into something else, Jess?"

He studied her golden hair, not trusting himself to look into her eyes. He told her about his dream, then. He wanted to settle and raise white-face cattle and he gambled to make his money fast. And then he told her that he loved the pasteboards, that maybe, after all, gambling was a part of his life—something he couldn't lose. And he saw something die in her eyes. Something had glowed there and slowly it went away.

He understood. A gambler was low in the social scale; he worked in saloons; his work was not honest; he traveled with dance-hall girls and other looked-down-on forms of humanity.

HE THOUGHT of these things as he went down the street, the wind sharp against him. The kerosene lamps in the Mercantile cut a yellow ribbon out into the street and in this illuminated square was a pack-mule that young Tim Ward was untying from the rack.

His wife was with him. She said, "Jess," and Spurling walked over. She said, "Thank you for helping Tim."

Jess Spurling looked at the miner. "You shouldn't have told her," he said. "She'll worry about you from now on."

Ward looked up with the lamplight showing his fierce scowl. "I never told her, Jess. It got around town and she heard of it in the Merc. Damn these loose tongues, anyway!"

"You watch yourself," Jess warned. "Mike Odom wants your claim."

The miner assured him he'd keep close watch. He put little Trish on the mule, tying a rope around her middle as she sat on the pack, and the little girl said, "Hello, Jess," and Spurling found himself returning her smile. Ward took the rope and he and Patricia left, leading the mule into the darkness as they headed for their claim.

Jess Spurling watched them, tied into thought.

A woman's voice said, "Wake up, Jess." Spurling stood and looked at Fran Gardner. She was small in the light, her coat pulled tightly against her to turn the wind, and the lamplight played on the golden edges of her hair, showing from under her hat.

He glanced at the cafe, saw it was dark. "Closing for the day?"

"About time, isn't it? I was just ready to lock up and some of Odom's miners came in—about twenty of them—and you know me when a dollar shows up. I couldn't turn them out so—"

"May I walk home with you?"

She was silent a moment.

He spoke almost bitterly. "Sure, I'm just a gambler. You're on one side of the town and I'm across the tracks. Should some of these old town biddies see us walking together you'd lose some of your Sunday family trade, I suppose."

"Don't talk that way, Jess!"

Anger pushed him. "What other way is there for me to talk?"

She was angry, too. "You're tying dollars in with a woman's wishes, Jess, and that isn't fair—and you know it. Listen, I'll tell you something, something you've never known. My uncle, on my father's side, was a gambler. Sure, he had lots of money—but he died over a green-topped table, a bullet in his chest. His money wasn't honest money. Every cent I make is honest, made by work. But your's isn't honest."

He said, "That was a long talk, girl."

"I'm sorry, Jess."

He watched her walk into the night and watched the darkness swallow her. She hadn't given him much chance to defend himself and his position. He thought of young Tim Ward. Odom wanted Ward's mining claim and Ward wouldn't sell. Odom and Cumbers had picked trouble with Ward in the Mill Iron Bar and they'd've killed him if he hadn't stepped in.

But why think of that?

He walked for an hour. The night tumbled down from the high peaks and the moonlight lay yellow and golden across this grass, making him remember Fran Gardner's golden hair. Was she right?

There was a level bit of land out along the river, where it entered the higher country. He had seen it one day and he'd leaned back in his saddle and thought, "That's the place. A man could build a corral there and his house over there and send down a well and run his cattle back in the foothills. Some winter he'd feed the dogies hay he'd cut and stacked down there on the flat. Good hay, too—bluejoint and wild grama grass. . . ."

He went over the plans for his spread again that night, checking each detail in the buildings, even to the kitchen and what a woman would want in it. He found a great pleasure in this. Then he checked his bankbook again and knew that he almost had enough on deposit.

He kept thinking of Fran Gardner. She'd worked hard—possibly too hard—and she'd built a strong code of conduct, he was outside its pale—for he was a gambler. He knew that she had tried to compromise with herself about him.

What would her verdict be?

He kept thinking of young Tim Ward and of Patricia Ward and little Trish. He remembered one day in the Merc. Patricia had been standing with her baby in her arms talking to a clerk, and somebody had come in. He had watched her turn and he'd seen her eyes when they found out the man who entered was her husband.

He remembered her eyes.

Sleep came slowly.

HE WAS UP at sunrise the next morning. He loved the rise of the sun—he liked to see the shadows melt and run be-

fore the sunlight, he liked to see it wrap the sagebrush and the sleeping hills in warm folds.

Fran was not at her restaurant but her cook had the place open. Jess Spurling was the first customer. The cook served him ham and eggs and grinned. "That was your order, wasn't it?"

"You never gave me a chance to order, Mike."

Mike grinned. "That is what you ordered, fella."

"All right, I'm not arguing."

Mike placed his brawny, hairy arms on the bar. "Odom's gunning for you, Jess. Him an' that John Cumbers is out for your hide. But you know that, I reckon." He wiped the clean bar with a towel.

Jess nodded. "Good eggs, Mike."

Mike stuck the towel under his belt. He was very serious. "Look, Jess, I'm your friend. I like you, fella. An' I don't want to see you get killed. But it sure looks like you stuck your beak into trouble."

Jess looked at him.

Mike went on. "I see what you think, Jess. You've told me about filing on that half-section back on the river. You want to stay here and I've—pardon me for sayin' this, friend—seen your eyes when you watched Fran."

Jess remembered Patricia Ward's eyes when she'd seen Tim come into the Merc. He wondered if big Mike had seen that same look in his eyes when he'd watched Fran Gardner. He hid his thoughts behind his poker-face.

"Go on, Mike?"

Mike wiped the bar again. He was hesitant and finally he said swiftly, "Jess, them two'll have to go—Cumbers and Odom. Unless they do, there'll be no peace here. Odom wants more property. He's working for some big minin' company, they tell me; and Tim Ward is takin' good gold from his claim."

Jess said, "They'll have to go, Mike."

"The town's scared of them. The deputy sheriff is gone; left right after you an' Odom had that ruckus last night. You know why he left; he's yellow and when hell busts loose, he wants to be out of town."

Jess nodded gravely. He finished his meal and paid, and Mike said, "Jess, I'd like to side you, fella, when the big trouble comes."

The gambler looked at him. "Fran?" he asked.

Big Mike was scowling. Suddenly his scowl changed to a slow smile. "Yes, Fran. I love her, Jess. She's the world to me, the sun and the stars."

Jess waited.

"I'm twenty-five years older than she is," Mike continued. "And besides, she's eyes for only one man."

"Who?"

"You damn' fool, wake up!"

Jess left. Impatience boiled inside of him and he kept remembering big Mike's prophecy: There'd be no peace here until Odom and Cumbers were gone. Odom and Cumbers probably were working for some big mining company and, in the process, were trying to swindle the company, too.

For there was some gold in this section, and most of that seemed to be on Tim Ward's claim. That's why Odom and Cumbers wanted Ward's land.

He went to the livery barn and saddled his bay gelding. The whole thing had taken definite form and solidified in his mind. He saw now that he'd gone to side Tim Ward last night for two reasons. One, because he remembered the look in Patricia Ward's eyes, there in the Merc. He remembered that slow look and he remembered the deepness of her at that moment, her maturity and how her eyes had shown her love for young Tim.

The other had been more personal. With Odom and Cumbers on this graze, there would be no peace; there would be only trouble that would lead to gunsmoke and in turn lead to death. He found himself smiling at that thought. Him, wanting peace! He would travel all over the world, following the clarion call of the cards, following the dangerous path of the poker chip. . . .

Now he wanted peace.

He kept remembering the day he'd ridden into Crooked Bend. He kept remembering the first time he'd seen Fran Gardner, how this town had attracted him, how he'd told himself, "This is the place. This is it." And he still felt the same way. This was the place, the one place in the world that he wanted to stay in. He'd be happy no other place.

The bay was fresh, pulling against the curb bit. He held him in and the horse

reared, but Jess' hooks brought him down. He let him lope for a mile, a wild run as wild as his thoughts, and the bronc gradually slowed as the distance cut into his wind. Finally he was at a long running-walk.

A flock of sagehens lifted out of the thick brush and sailed over a hill, bulky and big in the morning. A jackrabbit crouched beside the trail, long ears back, and watched him, trusting in his long legs to get him away speedily if he had to. Jess unbuckled the flap of a saddlebag and took out his .45 and gun-harness. He pulled the bay in as he looped the gun-harness around the saddle horn and pulled the .45. The rabbit, thinking himself hidden, remained low against the ground, gray ears flat on his gray back.

The gambler lifted the big .45, drew a bead on the rabbit, eared back the hammer. Then he lowered the gun unfired and grinned as he pouched it. He swung his bronc offtrail and rode toward the jack, who got up and loped off, kicking the gumbo with his long hind legs for more speed.

Jess said, "Get a-moving, old man, and maybe the next cowboy to pull on you won't be as soft-hearted as I am."

TWO HOURS later he rode across the high mountain meadow which would be his homestead. Bluejoint grass brushed against the belly of the bay and he was a long-legged saddler. Jess thought, "A mower could sure cut a nice swath through that grass," and he wished he could mow it now. But his final papers hadn't come through.

Again he pulled up and looked at the site where the house would be, a spot a little higher than the meadow lands. Below it, in his mind's eye, he saw the corrals and the barns, and below them, further down on the flat, would be the haystacks. He felt a great restfulness creep into him and loosen his muscles. Then this died and he became rigid as John Cumbers rode down out of the hills and into the clearing.

Cumbers rode up and said, "You're off your range, gambler. Your spot is a green-top table in the Mill Iron Bar."

Jess studied him, holding his anger. The gunman looked at the .45 in the holster around the fork of the gambler's kak.

There was a silence.

Cumbers spoke. "You want this grass. Odom wants it too. He's no fool. He knows this gold will play out soon and cattle are the thing. Odom tried to file on this as a homestead."

Jess Spurling watched him closely.

Cumbers shrugged. "Your filing is ahead of his."

Spurling asked, "Just what is your deal, Cumbers?"

Cumbers' fingers untwisted a burr from his bronc's mane. "I'll lay my cards on the table. Odom and me are partners. We'll make you a deal, gambler."

"And that?"

"We'll leave you alone. Odom will overlook that beatin' you handed him."

Jess Spurling smelled something rotten. "On what terms?"

Cumbers leaned forward in leather. "These terms, gambler. We'll leave you alone—not bother you—if you let us have our way with Tim Ward. He's got gold and we want it. You savvy?"

Jess had already fed steel to his bay, driving the animal ahead hard. The terrified beast lunged into Cumbers' saddle and turned the animal around. Jess had Cumbers by the neck, holding him in a hammer-lock, and he dragged the gunman from saddle. They hit the ground, with Jess on top. The gambler had Cumbers' gun and it rose and came down, and Cumbers sat stunned on the ground, half-dazed but not out. Jess stepped back, his breath heavy.

He said, "Get on your feet, fellow!"

Cumbers sat there.

Jess grabbed him and took him up, shaking him. The fight had left Cumbers but the gambler knew cowardice had not taken him. Cumbers fought with a gun, not his fists, and now Jess had his gun. Cumbers climbed into saddle, cursing a little, and he looked down at his .45, rock-hard in Jess' fist.

"I got another cutter," he said meaningly.

Jess nodded. He knew now there was no other way out but through gunsmoke. "Use it when you see me again," he said flatly.

Cumbers turned his saddle and loped away, heavy in his saddle with purpose and hate. Jess watched him until he could see him no longer, then he went up and turned his bay toward town.

The distance was many miles. He rode at a running-walk, the joy gone from the sunlight, his eyes holding no place for the beauty of this range. He kept remembering that John Cumbers had tried to buy him. Maybe Fran was right; maybe a gambler was the lowest form. Maybe Cumbers had thought this, too. But at that his grin came back. Cumbers would not think so now.

It was in the middle of the afternoon when he reached Crooked Bend. He rode into the stable by the back door and went down and started to unstrip his bay. The hostler, an old man warped with age, looked at him through watery eyes.

"Well, they got young Tim Ward."

Jess Spurling looked sharply at him. "What do you mean?"

The oldster spat. "Mrs. Ward took Tim into town about thirty minutes ago. He got shot—they had a gunfight out there—and she druv off the man through the brush. This gent wanted their gold—"

Jess' fingers were hard on the old man's bony shoulder. "Where is young Tim now?" The oldster told him they'd taken Tim to the hotel. "Who shot him?"

The oldster spat again with slowness. "Don't seem to know, Jess. Accordin' to Pat Ward, the gent was hid in the bresh; there was some shootin', with Pat handlin' a rifle, but the gent made his getaway without them seein' him."

Jess stood silent. He could see Pat Ward with her rifle, taking her aim and pulling the trigger. He could see that and he could see the look in her eyes die when young Tim had gone down.

He said, "Rub my bay down and feed him."

"Odom's connected with this," the old man said angrily. "Him an' that damn' gunsake of his, Cumbers. But what do the men in this burg do? They take it, shiverin' in their boots. I wish I didn't have the rheumatiz so damn' bad. But I can't hol' a cutter." He looked at his warped, shaking hands.

Jess Spurling buckled on his .45. He left Cumber's gun tied to his saddle fork. He went out into the sharp sunlight. He went down the street and went to the hotel and met Patricia Ward in the lobby.

Little Trish said, "Hello, Jess."

Jess took her and kissed her. She was crying against his shoulder. He stood and

felt her soft nearness and looked at Patricia.

"Tell me about it," he said.

"Well, I was in the house. I heard a rifle and went to the door. Tim was down along the grass in the creek and he hollered to me that he was all right. He had a .38 pistol but I got the rifle and I heard the brush rattle and I started to shoot. The man got away."

"One man?"

"I saw him on his bronc, later. From the hill. He was too far away to recognize. The bullet hit Tim in the chest."

Jess Spurling was thinking, "The man was Odom, sure enough. Cumbers was out to watch me while Odom did the dirty work." He turned around as Doc Williams came down the stairs, the boards creaking.

Jess asked, "How is he, Doc?"

The medico looked at him with heavy eyes. They had matched wits across a table and each respected the other's intelligence.

"He'll come out of it, Jess, but it'll be slow. He's young yet; he's got youth on his side."

Patricia Ward broke and started crying. Little Trish wanted to get to her mother. Jess left with the doctor sitting on the arm of the big chair, running his hand over Patricia's dark hair.

Jess went outside.

THE SUNLIGHT stabbed its length into the dust. A horse neighed and a dog barked and then there was silence. He saw the two saddlers in front of the Mill Iron Bar, tied to the hitching post, and he recognized them as belonging to Cumbers and Odom. Cumbers had pushed into town ahead of him apparently.

He looked at the horses and thought of their owners.

Big Mike came out between two buildings. He still wore his apron and his brawny forearms were covered with flour. "I was makin' bread when I seen you ride in, Jess. It was Odom that shot him. Patricia drove him away. No, she didn't recognize Odom, but I know it was him."

Jess Spurling said, "Odom doesn't know that Patricia didn't recognize him."

"I've thought of that."

Jess asked, "The deputy sheriff still gone?"

Big Mike nodded.

Jess said slowly, "What law there is has

to be made by us then. We are the law."

"The folks here're afraid of them," said Mike. "They're lot a bunch of sheep-kill-in' dogs, Jess. They're settin' an' tremblin'."

Jess said, "I'll talk with Odom and Cumbers."

Mike wheeled and ran between the buildings, heading for the back door of the Single Spade Cafe. Jess went along the sidewalk and Fran Gardner came out of the restaurant.

"Jess," she called quietly.

The gambler stopped. The sunlight shone on her golden hair, shooting off facets of reflection.

"Yes, Fran."

"Mike just came in. He told me, Jess. You can't go against them. What does Ward mean to you? Is he joined to you by blood?"

"He's my friend. He has a wife and baby. I'm a gambler." He tried to hold back his bitterness but he couldn't and it cut into her, for her eyes showed it.

She spoke hurriedly. "Jess, I was wrong. I see that now. I was setting a man's job against his soul. I was wrong, Jess."

He waited, cold inside.

"They sit around, these townsmen, and you carry out their fight. Jess, will you marry me?"

He didn't look into her eyes. He looked at her hair. He said, "Yes, if I come back."

He looked at her eyes. They held that same softness that Pat Ward's had held that day she'd seen Tim Ward enter the Merc. He saw this softness die before a hardness as solid as flint.

"You'll come back, Jess. I'll see to that. I've got a gun inside and I'll go with you."

"No."

But already she was running through the restaurant toward the kitchen. Jess went ahead, almost running himself. He felt light inside and yet, in this, was a heaviness. They were two gunmen and they would be waiting.

So Fran had finally seen the light. It wasn't what a man did for a living that counted, it was what he thought, the way he acted. That counted. She'd seen that and now she was his.

He had his gun in his hand when he came into the Mill Iron Bar. The dimness hit his eyes along with the stale odor of cheap whiskey and tobacco-smoke. He had these smells and in him rose a loathing for four walls and a green-tooped table and the rattle of chips.

Odom and Cumbers stood against the bar, their backs to the mahogany. They had their guns out and on the door and the three men stood there, each holding a pistol. Two men were going out the side door, running out in wild haste, and the door swung behind them, open and squeaking as the wind moved it.

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Odom asked huskily, "Why the gun, gambler?"

Cumbers was silent.

Jess said, "I was down talking to Tim Ward." He looked at Odom's gun and then at Cumbers'. They had two guns on him but he had his own gun on them. Maybe he should have waited and challenged them later, one at a time. They had the drop on him and he'd walked into it.

Then he knew with a stabbing suddenness that he would never have gotten one alone, for in town or on range this pair rode together, thieves and killers bound together for protection. The only time he'd seen them apart was that afternoon when Cumbers had challenged him and failed.

He remembered Fran Gardner and knew he'd have to get this over with before she came in.

"And what did Ward tell you?" Cumbers spoke.

"He saw the man who tried to kill him. And that man was Odom. While you were watching me, Cumbers, Odom tried to murder Tim Ward."

"What's your plan?" Odom scoffed.

"You're going to jail."

Odom said, "You're no star-man."

"You're going to jail," repeated Jess Spurling. "We're holding you two for trial until Tim Ward can testify against you."

Odom looked at Cumbers, who grinned faintly. "What if we don't go?" Odom demanded harshly.

"You'll go, Odom."

The voice came from the back door. Jess Spurling thought, "That's Fran," and then realized it was a man's voice. Big Mike stood there with a cutter naked in his freckled hand.

"You'll go," repeated the cook angrily. "An' me an' Jess'll put you behind bars."

Odom's face was the color of a sorrel horse. He looked at Jess' gun and then at big Mike's Colt. "All right," he said. The odds had turned and he didn't want to buck them right then.

But Cumbers shook his head. "Not me, Odom, not me. I'm wanted for murder in Utah and if they find out—"

Cumbers swung his gun around and let the hammer drop. The bullet smashed against the wall beside Jess Spurling but the gambler did not hear the wham of lead

into the heavy planks. For his own gun smothered the sound and killed it.

He shot twice and he said, "That one's for Tim Ward, and that one for Pat Ward." Cumbers came ahead, buckling under the bullets, and his knees carried his weight for a yard before losing strength. Now Jess Spurling had his gun on Odom.

Odom was down.

Spurling holstered his gun and crossed the strip to where big Mike stood in the door, leaning against the frame. The cook's face was pulled with pain and Spurling asked, "You got one, Mike?"

"In my leg. High on the right, Jess. It'll be okay."

"Can you walk?"

Big Mike had his arm around the gambler's shoulder, his weight solid against Jess Spurling. He hobbled outside like that, Jess holding him up.

Doc Williams came up then and took the other side of the cook and lots of the weight left Jess Spurling. It was over and he was alive and there would be wind in the sage and the sparkle of sunlight on a woman's golden hair.

They got Mike in a room in the hotel and the doctor cut the trouser's leg. Big Mike said, "Hey, them California pants cost me twenty bucks," and the medico said, "Shut your mouth, you big idiot."

Big Mike looked up and grinned at Jess Spurling.

Five minutes later, Spurling went downstairs. A man said, "Both of them are dead, Jess, both of them," and Spurling said, "Get outa my way, fellow."

He went into the Single Spade Cafe. The place was empty. He called, "Fran! Where are you?"

"In here, Jess."

He scowled and went into the kitchen. He heard her beating against the door of the storeroom. The lock had just been slipped into the hasp and was not snapped shut. He let her out.

"That damn' Big Mike! He locked me in, Jess. I was comin' to help—"

"Big Mike came." He added, "They're dead and Big Mike is wounded. Not bad, but he'll be laid up for some time."

She said, "Kiss me, Jess."

The sun was bright against her golden hair as he lowered his head.



ROUND-UP

THERE MAY have been gents in the Old West who were more ornery than Clay Allison, but if there were, Clay is probably fighting it out with them now in Hell to find out for himself.

Clay was an artistic hombre, after his fashion, and when he polished off a man, it had to be in a novel style. There was the time Clay met up with Bill Chunk, a desperado who already had fourteen tallies to his credit. Clay and Chunk fell out over a horse race, in which Clay charged that Chunk had used foul means to win. Clay proposed that they have a mounted duel, riding together and firing their pistols as they rode. But first they had to eat.

They sat at opposite ends of the table, eyeing each other suspiciously. Then Bill Chunk took his pistol out and started stirring his coffee with it. Clay, of course, followed suit. Then they put their pistols away. But a moment later, Chunk had his pistol out again, finger on the trigger. This time, though, his barrel caught on the edge of the table and before he could change his aim, Clay had put a bullet through his head. That was the end of Bill Chunk.

Clay's favorite drinking town was El Moro, New Mexico, and periodically he'd go there for a real spree. During one of those sprees, Clay became infuriated by a hat that the local physician, Dr. Manger, was wearing. The sawbones was wearing a

tall stovepipe hat and Clay, loyal Westerner that he was, couldn't bear it. He borrowed a shotgun and blew the hat off the medic's head. Then, seizing the trembling sawbones by the arm, he steered him into a store and bought him a fine Stetson—Western style.

Then, just to polish a fine spree off, that evening Clay killed two gents by name of Pancho and Griego for having the sheer, unadulterated gall to want to put a slug through him.

Those were the last recorded killings of Clay Allison. He disappeared shortly after.

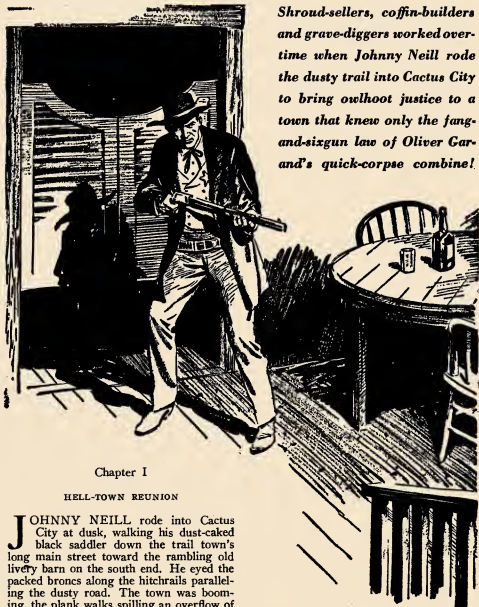
But however Clay Allison died, while he lived he served a purpose that he, himself, was unaware of. For men of Clay's breed made clear to the sober citizens of the West the need for law and men to guard the law.

It marked the turning of a page in history, the end of the reign of killers, and the beginning of the West's golden era.

Featuring more stories of the salty characters who contributed to the history of the West,—and fast-moving fiction by writers who know the West first-hand—next month's issue of *Big-Book Western Magazine* will be published May 21st.

—THE EDITOR

Shroud-sellers, coffin-builders and grave-diggers worked overtime when Johnny Neill rode the dusty trail into Cactus City to bring oulhoot justice to a town that knew only the fang-and-sixgun law of Oliver Garand's quick-corpse combine!



Chapter I

HELL-TOWN REUNION

JOHNNY NEILL rode into Cactus City at dusk, walking his dust-caked black saddler down the trail town's long main street toward the rambling old livery barn on the south end. He eyed the packed brons along the hitchrails paralleling the dusty road. The town was booming, the plank walks spilling an overflow of people into the street.

"She's changed some," he muttered under his breath. "She's busting out at the seams. But I still don't see why Garand sent for me. There's plenty of salty gents here that can handle any job he wants done."

Grim and thoughtful, he placed his horse in the care of the hostler at the stable. At a barber shop, he got a haircut, a shave and a bath. Attired in fresh clothing, he felt the weariness of three weeks' steady travel fade away. He ate a steak at a Chinese res-

THE LAW STOPS AT CACTUS CITY!

Fast-Paced Novelette of Hell-Town Lawmen

By ED EARL REPP



Instinctively Johnny's eyes turned to the lone figure in the doorway.

taurant, bought a long black cigar and loafed along the street, puffing idly on the stogie.

For all the weary miles behind him, Johnny Neill's slightly bowed legs had more spring than those of any other man on the

street. He had the lean, bronzed hardness of a man whose trade is riding troubled ranges. Trail travel had melted all softness from him. He was slim, almost gaunt, long limbed. The wind-burned flesh of his face was a dark brown, and against it his tawny eyebrows and light blue eyes stood out strikingly.

Habit turned his footsteps toward Saloon Row. He would see Garand there. The trouble that had sent him fleeing from town four years before, just ahead of a posse, had occurred in Oliver Garand's

place. He found the Alamo and pushed through the batwings.

The saloon was humming with patrons at the bar, the gambling layouts, and the poker tables. It had grown, Johnny saw as he braced himself for the inevitable rank smell of whiskey and stale tobacco smoke and sweaty, unwashed men. It had swallowed up the two smaller places that had once sided it.

Johnny slid into an empty spot at one end of the polished bar, running the length of the room. "Three fingers," he ordered of the bartender. Garand was not in sight.

Bottle and glass were slid along the mahogany before him. "Join me, mister?" he murmured. He didn't trust Garand. The barkeep might supply him with some pertinent information, something that would come in handy when talking to Garand.

"Thanks," said the bartender. "Stranger hereabouts?"

Johnny said, "Sort of. She's growed some since I last saw her. Nothing but a sleepy little cowtown then."

He tossed down his drink, felt its fiery glow warm his insides. "Have another?" he invited.

The bartender accepted. "Been here almost three years myself," he remarked. "Came in right after the railroad."

Idly, Johnny toyed with his glass. "How's old Sid Farr? He still sheriff?"

"Sid had to turn in his badge not long after I got here." The man lowered his voice. "Took a slug through his belly. Been sick a long time. Saw him the other day, walkin' on crutches."

"Too bad," said Johnny, meaning it. Sid Farr was all man. In that past episode, he'd done his duty and Johnny held no grudges. "You got lawdogs to handle these Texas trailhands? It's plain hell when those sons come into town to cut loose their wolves."

THE BARTENDER looked cautiously around. His words came so low that Johnny had to strain his ears to hear them. "We've had four marshals. All of 'em died with guns in their hands. The job's been vacant for better'n a month. We got the same sheriff that stepped into Sid Farr's boots." He made a wry face. "One of the street posts out there might's well be wearin' the star. He means well but he's a blind

fool. Old Miller, the banker, talked the town council into it. They ought to let him go back to his law books. Vern Tyson ain't man enough for the job."

Vern Tyson! The name was like rubbing salt into a raw wound, a wound that Johnny Neill had tried to heal in such hell-roaring towns as Abilene and Wichita and Dodge. He choked on his drink. Unaware of the damage inflicted by his words, the barkeep went on,

"I hear lots of talk, stranger. Tyson's measured for a Boothill grave. I wouldn't want it repeated but that's gospel truth. They'll plant him any day now. And leave that pretty wife of his a widow."

The pretty wife would be Dorothy, Johnny thought somberly. The girl who'd once worn his ring and promised to marry him—the girl whose memory had drawn him back here after all these bitter months.

"Who you mean by 'they'?" he asked casually.

"For a stranger—" The barkeep's face and eyes went blank. He moved on down the bar, wiping industriously at the wet spots on the mahogany.

Johnny lifted his eyes to the gleaming mirror on the wall back of the bar. He felt a prickling along his spine at sight of the dark, frock-coated man sliding into the empty spot at his elbow.

"Hello, Johnny," Oliver Garand greeted him, extending a smooth hand. "I'd almost given you up. Have a drink on the house?"

"Just one more," said Johnny, repulsed at the clammy feel of the man's fingers. "Some place you have here, Garand."

The gambler murmured, "It'll grow, fella. I've got plans. That's why I sent for you. Your reputation up north got back to us. I liked what I heard."

Johnny smiled coldly. "I heard things, too," he said. "Rumors that you were getting too big for this town—that you aimed to take over. Anything to 'em?"

"Plenty," admitted Garand, an odd smile bending the corners of his thin lips. "You've an old score to settle with this town. You could get in on the kill. How about it, Johnny?"

"Could be." Johnny spun his glass, staring at his reflection in its amber contents. "My gun's for sale—if the price is right."

"I'll make it right!" Garand turned toward the stairs in the corner of the room.

"Let's go up to my office and talk, Johnny."

Garand's office was at the head of the stairway. He unlocked the door, struck a match to the wick of the lamp on his big desk, and waved Johnny to an overstuffed chair. The gambler leaned back in his chair, propped his shiny Wellington boots on his desk.

"There's a cool thousand in this for you," Garand murmured, eyeing Johnny sharply. "Vern Tyson, that pig-headed fool that married your girl, is sheriff now. He wants to make a name for himself. He gave me and my friends until tomorrow night to clean up our places. That means no more rigged layouts, no more crooked card games, no more girls to roll the drunks for their cash." He laughed harshly. "The damn fool expects the impossible."

"And asks for trouble," said Johnny.

"Yes. He keeps getting in my hair. He took your girl away from you. Here's your chance to even things with him, Johnny. That's why I sent for you. I want him gunned down before sundown tomorrow. I don't care how you do it. Besides the thousand, there'll be a cut on the profits when we take over the business district. What do you say?"

"Sounds interesting. I'll give you an answer tomorrow morning."

"Good. Our solid citizens would like you on their side. Don't listen to them, Johnny. That's a tip."

"Bueno," muttered Johnny, getting to his feet. He threaded his way through the crowd downstairs, just another lean-hipped rider in the motley throng.

Until someone recognized him. He heard his name pass from lip to lip, sensed the tension that gripped the barroom though no one openly showed it. It was a name to command respect anywhere the gun-swift brigade gathered, and he was proud that he'd never done anything to tarnish it. But tonight he felt a sense of shame.

Outside the saloon, he stood on the plank walk and wiped at his face with the red kerchief knotted about his neck. Garand's offer was mighty tempting. Johnny had often dreamed of a situation like this. But now that he had it, indecision gnawed at him. He laughed bitterly, knowing that Dorothy still held him in her spell. No matter how deep his hurt, he wanted to spare her that same sense of loneliness, the

empty nothingness that he had lived in these long, dreary months.

He moved up the street, crossing First Street, the dividing line between the business and the saloon districts. He noticed the little groups of people that gathered at his approach, felt their hostile eyes upon him, heard the low mumble of their voices as he passed. He did not have to guess at their talk. For these were the respectable people of Cactus City, the solid citizens.

They had heard that Johnny Neill was back—Johnny Neill about whom many lurid tales had floated up and down the cattle trails and wherever cowmen gathered. His kind belonged on the other side of First. He had ignored the boundary and these people resented it.

Johnny saw the glittering star on the sheriff's black coat as the lean, bony figure materialized from the blackness of an unlighted doorway. Vern Tyson, second-rate lawyer, had always fancied himself another Abe Lincoln, and Johnny had to admit that the man's emulation of the late president was complete, down to trimmed beard and soft, flat, button shoes.

"You're in the wrong part of town," said Tyson, blocking the walk and treating him as a stranger. "Since you're not drunk, that's no crime. We do have an ordinance against carrying guns on this side of First. I'll check your weapon at the jail. You can pick it up there."

It pleased Johnny at this moment also to ignore the past. "I don't pack a gun for show," he said gently. "There's certain gents that shore would be tickled to catch me without it. I don't aim to give 'em that pleasure. You'll have to take my gun, Sheriff. You think you can do it?"

Under a nearby overhang, men were listening and watching. One of them snickered loudly. Red stained the visible portion of Tyson's face. His black eyes glowed hotly in his rage twisted features.

"You're a trouble-maker, Neill," he snapped. "What brought you back to town?"

Johnny grinned, savoring the sheriff's discomfort. "There's only one reason could bring me back," he said slowly. "Dorothy."

The deliberate thrust left Tyson sputtering for words. Johnny stared at him, amazed. He'd meant to needle the man a little; instead he'd kindled an instant, mur-

derous hate that the man made no attempt to hide.

"You—you—" choked Tyson. The urge to kill flamed in his eyes as his hand dipped for the holstered gun under his coat.

JOHNNY could have killed him in his tracks. For a sheriff who might have to save his life by gun-play, Tyson was incredibly slow and fumbling on the draw. The weapon was half drawn before Johnny moved. He took one swift step forward, his left hand coming down on Tyson's gun-hand in a steely grip. His right hand came up from his boot tops, bunched fingers exploding against the sheriff's bearded chin.

Vern Tyson folded like an empty gunny-sack and sprawled his bony length in the powdery dust of the street.

Johnny turned to face the gathering crowd, hand gripping the worn black butt of his sixgun. "Anybody backing the sheriff's play?" he asked softly.

Their faces were dim blurs in the flickering light of a nearby street lamp. He could not judge their reaction to what he had just done, but a man trained to gunplay and violence could easily spot the temper of an audience. These were business men, staid and respectable and outraged at his flaunting of their law. Yet for the man, Tyson, there was no sympathy.

"The ass!" somebody muttered aloud. "Tryin' to handle Johnny Neill like a drunken cowhand. He had it comin'!"

"We've got no quarrel with you, Johnny," said another. "Better git out of town before the sheriff wakes up. He's a stubborn fool. He'll come lookin' fer you. You'll have to kill him."

"Could be." Johnny bent over Tyson's black clad figure, placed his hands under the lanky frame and lifted. He came erect effortlessly, the limp body sagging over his muscled shoulder. "Where does he live? I'm taking him home."

A short, fat man pushed his way through the crowd, stood panting before the slim redhead and his burden. "Not that, Johnny," he pleaded, his voice sort of cracking around the edges. "You wouldn't do this to Dorothy? You wouldn't take him home this way?"

Old Hiram Miller was a little fatter, his hair a little whiter. The years had not changed him, Johnny decided, except for

his sunken, black-rimmed eyes. The banker looked as if he'd had many a sleepless night of late.

"If you don't want me to, I won't," Johnny said sarcastically. "I thought I'd be doing him a favor. Any suggestions, Hiram?"

Miller lowered his voice. "Yes. Bring him to my office. I want to talk to you, my boy. I've been praying for a long time and hoping that you'd come back."

They laid the still unconscious Tyson on a couch in Miller's comfortably furnished bank office. The banker sank into a stuffed leather chair and motioned his visitor into another.

"What brought you back here?" asked Miller tensely. "Dorothy?"

Johnny nodded, a bleak smile touching his face.

"Nothing else?" insisted the older man. "Garand didn't contact you in any way?"

"He sent a message to me in Dodge." Johnny uncrossed his legs, spur chains jingling as he planted his boots squarely on the carpeted floor. "But I'm under obligations to no man—if that's what you want to know."

The banker's breath gusted heavily out of his lungs. "It is," he said, his voice shaky. "I want to pin a badge on you, Johnny."

Old Hiram had turned Dorothy against him, Johnny bitterly remembered. He'd encouraged Vern Tyson to court the girl and done his best to get them married. He'd branded Johnny Neill a ne'er-do-well and a hellion. His had been the voice that caused old Sid Farr to gather a posse and tail Johnny out of the county with a murder charge hanging over his head—a charge that later had to be dropped.

"You've got one hell of a lot of gall," said Johnny flatly. "After running me out of town. Why should I wear your star?" He pointed a thumb at the sleeping sheriff. "You put him in office. Aren't you satisfied?"

The old man's shoulders slumped. His face turned grayer, and Johnny saw the sick look in his faded eyes. "A man makes mistakes, Johnny. I tried to contact you, to tell you the law didn't want you for murder. I'm apologizing, son, trying to give you a chance to start over again. And I'm not offering you Tyson's job. We need a marshal—one that can control this town."

Johnny laughed harshly, relishing the irony of this offer. He had gone on a wild bust following Dorothy's marriage to Vern Tyson. He'd stayed drunk for several days. One of the local sports had made an off-color remark about the girl. A fight followed in Garand's place. The sport had drawn a gun. He'd triggered once before Johnny's bullet smashed him to the floor. Months later, Johnny had learned that the man had not died—that he'd recovered and left town.

"Garand offered me a thousand dollars to beef Tyson by sundown tomorrow," Johnny said, probing for information. "You're almighty anxious to line me up on your side. Why? What's behind all this that makes a footloose gent like me so important?"

"Tyson," said the banker, "is an idealistic fool. He has his eyes on Washington, and nothing can stop him. He runs his office with law books and big words. Yet he knows he's got to clean up Cactus City before going into politics. Public pressure forced him to give Saloon Row an ultimatum. Either they clean up their places or leave town. They've done neither. The ultimatum expires tomorrow night." Miller wiped the sweat from his forehead with a white handkerchief. "Whatever I think of my son-in-law, he's not afraid. He'll try to close Garand and his friends within another twenty-four hours."

"So you want me to help him?"

The banker nodded. "I can't blame you for refusing. Do me one favor, son. Go talk to Dorothy before Tyson wakes up. What she has to tell you might change your mind."

Chapter II

MAN-TRAP

TYSON HAD set up living quarters in one wing of the rambling brick jailhouse. Johnny approached the building, a frown creeping across his dark face. The jail squatted on the southeast corner of the intersection of First and Main, conveniently close to the saloons and dance halls and sporting houses from which it drew most of its customers. This was no neighborhood for Dorothy to live in. What manner of man was Tyson to subject his wife to it?

A wizened jailer admitted Johnny into the office. Inquiry took him into the corridor beyond. The cell block lay to his left. He turned the ell to his right and faced a closed door.

His rap on the door would bring Dorothy. Johnny braced himself for the moment, wondering if sight of her would shatter the pyramiding emotion that had gathered in him all these months.

She opened the door, stared at him with startled, unbelieving gray eyes. She wore a simple wrapper that revealed the graceful curves of her slim body. She'd matured a little, Johnny saw, and put on some weight. The result took his breath away.

"Johnny. . ." she said huskily, breaking the silence.

"Howdy, Dot." He removed his big-brimmed hat, feeling now that he had clumsily reopened a door on the past, a door that should never have been touched. "I was just riding through town," he blurted, feeling the red steal over his face. "I—I dropped by to see how you and Tyson were getting along."

She said, "Come in, Johnny." He sank awkwardly onto a hard couch in the small parlor. She closed the door and locked it. She sat down on the couch beside him.

"Why did you come back, Johnny?" she asked. "Was it me that brought you back?"

He sensed a hunger in her words that puzzled him. "Yes," he said. "I thought I could forget you. It didn't work, Dot. So I'm back."

Her eyes grew somberly tender. "I haven't forgotten either," she said frankly. "Only I didn't choose your way to forget. I almost wish I had."

"Something's wrong," he said, smelling the subtle scent of her perfume, fighting the temptation to reach out and take her into his arms. "What is it, Dot? Why did Hiram send me here?"

"You saw Dad? And—and Vern?"

Her sharp glance caught the unconscious movement of Johnny's left hand as he gently massaged the bruised knuckles of his other hand. He saw blood on her lower lip where her teeth bit in. Then he saw other things that had escaped his notice: the wistful droop to her mouth, the tired drawn lines that disturbed her smooth skin about the face. It dawned on him that she was laboring under emotional strain.

"I saw your husband, too," he admitted. "He tried to shoot me. I knocked him out. Why, Dot? I never did anything to him."

Now her face looked ghastly. "More than you realize. I never stopped loving you, Johnny. Not for one moment—though I didn't know until it was too late. Vern is a queer man, and proud. He's never said anything to me about it, but he knows. Does that explain things?"

"Plenty," muttered Johnny. Suddenly she was in his arms, her thick, curly hair pressing against his face, her slim shoulders shaking as she sobbed upon his chest.

He held her until the crying stopped. Gently he pushed her away, the ache inside him growing as he remembered that she was another man's wife. Silently he cursed himself for coming back. All he'd done was open old scars and further muddle the situation between Dot and her husband.

"There'll be no more of this," he said unsteadily. "I'll try to show Tyson that I'm out of your life forever. That's the way it's got to be, Dot."

"Yes." Her voice was toneless, dead. "That's the way it's got to be."

She unlocked the door and he left without touching her hand or saying good-by. The unspoken understanding between them needed no words. He passed through the jail office and paused on the street outside before he remembered that Hiram Miller had sent him to hear a story from Dorothy's lips.

It came to him with a shock that the older had cunningly seen the outcome of this visit. The girl had no story to tell—unless her unhappy marriage was it. That was what old Hiram had wanted him to see. Because of him, she and Tyson had never got along. Now that he was back, things would undoubtedly grow worse between them.

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. He felt nothing but contempt for Vern Tyson. The sudden thought struck him that after tomorrow night Dot would be a widow. She'd be rid of her husband and free to marry him, Johnny. His spirits soared high for a moment.

A thin shadow materialized from the jailhouse wall and paused beside Johnny. Oliver Garand's dead voice purred in Johnny's ear.

"Nice going, fella. Tangling with Tyson

and paying his wife a visit the same evening. He'll have to hunt you up. Maybe tonight. The thousand bucks is at my place, ready for you."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't get it, mister. Tyson's a dead pigeon the moment he starts trouble in your district. Your paid guns will see to that. Why waste money letting me do the job?"

"A logical question," said Garand. "The Rangers might investigate if my crowd does away with the sheriff. There've been a lot of rumors. If Johnny Neill shoots him, it's a personal affair. You'll leave town and I'll take over. Savvy?"

Johnny said, "Yeah. I ain't int'rested in your bounty money, tinhorn. I got other ideas. Just like you said, Hiram Miller offered me a marshal's badge. I'm pinning it on tonight."

"You're a fool," warned the gambler. "You'll never take the girl that way. All you'll rake in will be an easy ticket to—"

Johnny buried his fist in Garand's soft belly, just under the ornate gold watch chain looped through his vest. He followed with a right to the smooth-shaven jaw as the man doubled up. The gambler slid into the dusty street, moaning his pain.

"Mrs. Tyson ain't the taking kind," Johnny said heavily to the still conscious man. "I won't have her classed with sporting women—by you or anyone else. Next time I hear such talk, I won't use fists. Remember it, tinhorn!"

He sensed movement in the deep shadows to one side of the jail. Orange flame blossomed luridly over there as he whirled, sixgun leaping into his lean hand. The slug tugged gently at his shirt in passing. Johnny triggered once, twice, the reports sounding almost as one. He heard the clatter of a falling gun, a man's fervent curse, the pound of fleeing boots.

"Your hideout almost got me," Johnny told the prostrate gambler. "I was plumb careless. Next hombre takes a crack at me, I'm coming straight for you, tinhorn. That's something else to remember."

JOHNNY did not try to minimize the personal danger to him that went with the star, pinned on his shirt pocket by Hiram Miller. "I'm a plain damn fool for mixing into this," he swore as the fat little banker grinned back at him. "I ought to

grab my horse and make tracks out of here while I've got a sound hide."

"Not you, Johnny." The oldster eyed him sharply. "You talked to Dorothy?"

"Yeah. You're smart, Hiram. You knew I'd see how it was with them. The hell Dot's going through—tied to an hombre like Tyson? That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

The banker shifted uneasily in his chair. Once more they were in the quiet of his office. The clock on the wall said eleven o'clock.

"I've got a hunch, son. Vern Tyson won't be alive another twenty-four hours. Dorothy will need you if Garand's crowd takes over. She told me about it last week, and nobody else knows—not even Tyson. Oliver Garand has been after my girl for months—secretly—and he'll take her just like he'll take this town. You want that to happen to Dorothy?"

"It won't," drawled Johnny, "unless they get me first."

"What then, son? Say you manage to clean up the town? What will happen between you and my girl?"

Johnny said flatly, "Nothing, Hiram. I'm a stray stallion in another stud's pasture. I'll be moving on."

"I told my son-in-law you'd do that. We had a heart-to-heart talk, Johnny. I think he'll talk to you now. You'll find him in his office."

The red-headed marshal paused with one boot upon the jailhouse porch, listening to the fusillade of gunfire down along Main in the midst of the saloon district. It continued in sporadic fashion, a faint south wind carrying the sound of tinkling glass and boisterous voices to him.

Johnny took his foot off the jail porch. Deliberately he jacked the shiny cartridges from his sixgun and examined them. Finding them satisfactory, he reloaded the weapon and tested its hang in the oiled holster. He started down Main at a fast walk.

A door squeaked noisily behind him. Tyson's oratorical voice brought him to a halt, heeling about to see the lanky figure limned in the bright yellow patch of the jail office doorway.

"You'll do best to ignore them," the sheriff warned. "This sort of thing goes on almost every night. Come in here, Neill. I want to talk to you."

Johnny said, "Later. That ruckus comes first. They know I'm wearing a badge. They're asking me to back it up. I'll try to oblige 'em. Keeping the town peace is my business."

Tyson was silent a moment before answering. "Always playing the hero, aren't you? Brandishing your gun and daring the other fellow to try to outshoot you? There's no need for that here. I'll have the situation well in hand by tomorrow night."

"What with?" Johnny asked contemptuously. "More talk and a lot of high-sounding legal words? Garand's kind don't scare easy. They respect guns—and men that aren't afraid to use 'em."

"They'll see plenty of weapons." Tyson laughed confidently. "I've been promised a company of Rangers. They'll arrive some time tomorrow."

"You shouldn't have said that so loud," Johnny murmured, sensing hidden eyes and ears in the darkness of nearby buildings. "It'll get back to Garand. He might not wait for your help. You're liable to be damn sorry."

The ragged sound of pistol fire rose to new heights down among the saloons. Disgusted with Tyson and his incompetent handling of his job, Johnny put his back to the man. He swept down the street at a stiff-legged trot, ignoring Tyson who kept shouting something at him.

Several new herds of longhorn cattle had been pushed onto the flat holding grounds west of town this day. Several crews of wild, thirsty drovers had come into town to celebrate the occasion. As Johnny approached the trouble zone, he noted the crowded saloons, the swarming dance halls, the long rows of parlor houses from which came a bacchanalian riot of music and laughter. Cactus City was at its zenith of prosperity and hell-raising, he thought grimly. It was a gigantic powderkeg with unlit fuse attached. Only a spark was needed to blow the town apart.

Interested onlookers had found shelter about the dance hall from which the shooting came. As Johnny passed the Alamo, he saw Oliver Garand's slim, black-clad figure standing just outside the batwings. The gambler said nothing but the tight smile wreathing his thin lips did not touch his eyes. They were narrowed, seething with an unhidden hate.

"Dreamland" the smashed sign over the gaudy doorway read. Johnny pushed through the struggling, frightened hostess girls that filled the front exit. There were more of them inside, cowering against the walls, fighting off the amorous advances of the drunken, berserk cowboys. In the center of the floor, a grizzled old musician hopped about, dodging the bullets that tore splinters about his feet and sawing madly on his fiddle. Three roughly dressed men ringed him with smoking guns.

They stopped shooting as Johnny neared them. The huge room grew silent as word spread that the new marshal had arrived.

"Fun's over, boys," said Johnny softly, his words carrying over the crowd. Most of these men were fun-starved drovers. But not these three before him. They were paid killers, men he had spotted in Oliver Garand's place earlier tonight. "You'll stack your guns in the checkroom and pay for the damages. Otherwise you go to jail."

HIS STATEMENT measured the three ringleaders with a blunt challenge. They hesitated, perhaps stunned that one lone man would dare face them. Johnny did not overlook the covert glances they shot at each other.

"I ain't checkin' no guns," snarled the largest of the three, a huge, bearded giant with a gun in each hand, their long muzzles pointed at the floor. "What's yore handle, mister? I'd like to know the name of the lawdog that aims to make me!"

"If you're int'rested," said Johnny tonelessly, "the name is Neill. Johnny Neill. Better hand over those guns, amigo."

"*Johnny Neill!*" The smallest of the trio said the two words in a whisper. His dark face paled. The gun slipped from his hand and clattered on the floor. "I didn't know you were the new marshal. Sure, I'll pay damages. Garand didn't say—"

He choked off his words, realizing he had said too much. But his two companions had never seen Johnny Neill in action and they were not impressed at their comrade's fright. They swung their weapons up simultaneously, squeezing triggers as the six-guns leveled.

It was the tightest spot the red-headed marshal had ever been in. The soft spat of his palm on his gunbutt came with the two killers' lightning move. Few people in the

room were certain that he'd drawn his gun until it spat lurid flame in his hand, the concussion rocking the dance hall. The bearded giant gasped and stared disbelievingly at the black hole on his shirt front, a hole that was suddenly rimmed with crimson. His guns tumbled out of nerveless fingers, the heavy body crashing down upon them.

Fast as Johnny had been, the remaining gunman would have gotten him but for the grizzled old fiddler. He brought his battered instrument crashing down on the man's gun. The fiddle splintered into wooden fragments. The man yelled in pain and dropped his Colt. He stood there, helpless and cursing. The scared third member of the trio had made no move to assist his comrades.

"I'm obliged, old-timer," said Johnny. "They had me. I owe you a new fiddle."

He turned to the gaping crowd. "Shuck the hardware, boys. The sheriff says no guns on the other side of First. We're broadening his ordinance to include this side, too."

Under the threat of the gun in Johnny's steady hand, those wild Texas drovers unbuckled their gungear and stacked it in a corner. The dance hall proprietor passed around a derby hat, the impromptu kitty taking in more than enough silver coins to repair the damage done to the place. Another fiddle showed up to replace the one destroyed by the old musician. He tuned it up and was ready to resume playing for the crowd when Sheriff Tyson stormed through the front door.

He carried a short-barreled riot gun on the ready. His black eyes flamed at sight of the tranquility restored to the hall. His black, trimmed beard quivered on his bony chin as he racked to a stop before Johnny.

"I warned you, Marshal! You're no better than the rest of them. In office less than an hour, and already you've murdered a man! The whole lot ought to be jailed before they start up again. They're going to be. We'll put them behind bars until they sober up."

Johnny shook his head, wondering how any man could have lived among these people for so long and never learned how to handle them. If he didn't shut this fool's big mouth, neither one of them was liable to leave Saloon Row alive.

Chapter III

BOOMERANG ULTIMATUM

"Keeping the peace is my job, Sheriff," he said coldly. "I've handled it my own way. You're too late to assist me. I'll walk back to your office with you."

"They go to jail," insisted Tyson stubbornly. "Every last one of them. Like it or not!"

Remembering Hiram Miller's scathing denunciation of his son-in-law, Johnny felt pity for the sheriff. This grandstand play had been forced upon him. He'd neglected this district for many months. Now Johnny had stepped in just one day before Tyson's big coup and shown Cactus City that one man with sand could maintain order. A company of Rangers showing up to do the sheriff's work for him would make him the laughing stock of town, a political buffoon destined to failure in anything he later attempted.

Though Tyson could not see it now, this ill-timed grandstand play would only hurt him—and Dot.

"Be sensible, man," Johnny argued, drifting forward, hoping to get a hand on the riot gun that menaced him. "These gents are Texans. They'll take our rules, but they won't be shoved."

The Greener ten gauge came up, its blunt muzzle pressing against Johnny's chest. The twin click of the double hammers sounded loud in the hushed room. Johnny stood rigid, afraid that those tensed, bony fingers would jerk the triggers. Tyson's deep-set eyes blazed in their hollow sockets. Gazing into their maniacal depths brought a clammy sweat over his back.

"We jail them," said Tyson, his trigger finger tightening.

Two big, lanky cowhands stood just behind the sheriff. They looked at each other, then winked at Johnny. One of them caught the riot gun in a callous hand, deflecting its muzzle into the air. The other swung a looping punch that had the power of a mule's kick behind it. It landed behind Tyson's ear, knocking the sheriff off his feet.

A deafening roar blasted the hall as twin loads of buckshot tore into the bare rafters overhead. Tyson landed beside the dead gunman who awaited disposal on the saloon floor.

"Thanks, fellas," Johnny said, mopping his face with his kerchief. "He shore had my ears pinned back."

THE CORONER came for the dead man. Johnny draped the sheriff's limp body over his shoulder and packed him back to his office. He found the door open. The wizened jailer was slumped on the floor inside, blood oozing from an ugly blow across his forehead.

Johnny dumped Tyson across his polished, smooth-topped desk. The door to the cell block was also open. He stepped through it. Earlier in the evening, a dozen or more men had fretted behind the bars. They were gone now.

But why? wondered Johnny. They'd been locked up on insignificant charges. He figured that Oliver Garand was behind the jail break but could not see what the gambler had to gain by releasing a bunch of drunks.

Then it struck the slim marshal. Dot! She'd been alone in her quarters. Hiram had said that Garand was making a play for the girl. There was a reason for this, and it made sense.

Johnny slid around the ell. His heart dipped sickeningly at sight of another open door. The little parlor showed signs of a brief struggle. A table was overturned, a vase of flowers smashed. The couch sat askew, the threadbare carpet was rumped. He searched the other rooms, knowing it was a waste of precious time. Dot had been forceably removed from the jail building!

The jailer stirred feebly, moaned as Johnny made for the office. After some cold water had been dashed into his face, the oldster sat up. He saw Tyson crumpled over the desk and a wry grimace wrinkled his whiskey jaws.

"So he got it too," he cackled in a shrill voice. "I thought I wuz alone. Seems to me the sheriff grabbed his scattergun an' left in a mighty big hurry. He must o' come back."

Johnny asked, "Who slugged you, fella?"

"I dunno." The oldster's eyes were blank. "Somebody knocked on the door. I opened it. Several hombres wuz on the porch an' it wuz mighty dark. I reckon one of 'em cut me down with a gun-barrel. I don't

rightly remember nothin' after that."

They moved the unconscious sheriff to a cowhide bench, intending to revive him. The square of paper on the desk caught Johnny's eye. He picked it up and moved under the wall lamp so that more light fell upon the neatly lettered note.

"Tyson," it read. "Word reaches me that Mrs. Tyson is missing. I might have knowledge of her whereabouts. If interested, contact me at once. Alone." Oliver Garand's bold signature ended it.

Johnny saw the gambler's scheme at once. The dance hall ruckus had been deliberately planned to draw him there. Probably that was all there was to it at first. Garand wanted him rubbed out. Then Tyson had spouted his news of Ranger aid, and word had reached Garand instantly. Kidnapping Dot might have lurked in the gambler's mind for a long time, knowing Tyson's insane jealousy of his wife. With the girl in his possession, Garand could dictate his own terms to the sheriff, forcing him to withdraw his clean-up ultimatum and suspend further operations by the Rangers.

Garand had overlooked only one thing. Johnny Neill had evaded his guntrap. And that one slip-up was going to prove mighty costly the way Johnny saw it now.

He let the old jailer read the note. "I plumb forgot about Miz Dorothy," the man worried. "You mean she's disappeared?"

"Garand's got her," said Johnny. "I aim to make him wish he'd never done it. Forget about Tyson. He'd only get in the way. Take this note to Hiram Miller. Tell him to get up a posse as fast as he can. Bring plenty of guns and ammunition. I'll be somewhere down here, looking for the girl. There'll be shooting if I find her. They better come on the run. Got it?"

"Yeah." The oldster shuffled through the office door and vanished into the night.

Searching through the assortment of gun-gear hanging on pegs behind Tyson's desk, Johnny found a Colt sixgun that matched his own holstered .44. Ramming its long muzzle under his belt and inside his pants, he rummaged further, finding a couple of boxes of ammunition. These he appropriated.

Vern Tyson snored peaceably on the bench. On the chance that he might regain consciousness and blunder into the saloon district again, Johnny found a pair of hand-

cuffs and snapped them around the sheriff's ankles. The vagrant thought came to the marshal that he was probably saving Tyson's life. If so, he was repaying the man for any mental anguish he'd suffered due to Johnny's reappearance in town.

Satisfied, he closed the door and headed up Main into the business district. Garand's men were watching him. They'd think that he was finished with policing their section tonight. Two blocks away, he cut into a side street that intersected Main. One block over, he turned to his right and slipped along the lampless street. He hugged the inky shadows, thankful that there was no moon.

The house-lined street petered out into a dirty, smelly alley that snaked past the rubbish littered rear of Main's lower dives. The Alamo was easily spotted because of its huge size. Squatting down behind a small shanty, Johnny built a smoke and lit it while he studied his next move.

An uneasy tension gripped him. He kept remembering the stories he'd always heard about Garand—how he'd hounded respectable women who dared not tell their husbands about his attentions for fear that the gambler would kill their men with his deadly gun when they sought vengeance. Ironically, those same husbands had later hunted Garand up and died before his gun. The widows had left town in shame, or turned to the dance halls and dives for a living.

Was Garand up there somewhere with Dorothy at this moment? The thought sent an uneasy fear throbbing throughout Johnny's body.

She hadn't been in Garand's hands very long, though. The man should have been busy with his plans to thwart Tyson's ultimatum. That meant he'd probably put her in one of the upstairs rooms while he stayed below to direct his men and await a visit from the sheriff.

A room-to-room search for Dorothy would take time and lead to certain alarm and capture. Johnny made his decision. He ground his cigarette out under his heel. Climbing to his feet, he worked the stiffness out of them. Ignoring the rear stairway that led to the upper story, he glided to the door on the street floor. It opened to his touch.

He found himself in a storeroom. A dim light sifted through cracks in the rough

paneling. By moving from crack to crack he could view the large barroom beyond.

THE ALAMO was strangely deserted. The usual coterie of care-free, fun-bent cowboys did not line the long bar or crowd about the gaming tables. There were men at the bar and the tables however, alert-eyed men who appeared not to see anything about them except the drinks that they did not touch and the games that they pretended to play. Gun-hung men whose hands never strayed far from their weapons.

Garand sat alone at a green-topped poker table close to the rear wall where he could watch the entire room. His slim, white fingers played with a deck of cards in mechanical fashion. Johnny had to admire the man's nerve. He'd kidnaped a woman, an inexcusable crime in this country, and baited his death trap with her. He was staking his own life on this one great gamble. Yet no shakiness marred the precise rhythm of those flying fingers.

Johnny slid the extra Colt from under his belt. He found the doorknob with his left hand. It turned under his touch. No one noticed him as he sauntered into the barroom. Half a dozen steps brought him close to Garand, his gun muzzle boring into the seated gambler's back.

"You're plumb careless," he said softly, "leaving the rear of this place unguarded. You're slipping, Garand."

Except for a momentary start, the gambler hid his surprise. "I gambled on Tyson," he said in his toneless voice. "He'd never come in the back way. You were supposed to be out of this, Johnny."

"I know that. Your men are looking this way. Tell them to stay put—or I'll drill you."

Garand did not argue. He lifted his voice. "It's all right, men. This is between the marshal and me. Stay out of it."

"Bueno," murmured Johnny. "Now get to your feet. Slow. I'll shoot at any tricky move. I won't miss."

The gambler got to his feet, carefully keeping his hands away from his frock coat. "What do you want?"

"Mrs. Tyson," said Johnny. "Take me to her."

"You'll never get away with it!" Garand bit out thickly, his narrowed eyes seething with anger. "You've overbid your hand."

"Take me to the girl!" Johnny snapped, grabbing the gambler by the arm and whirling him toward the stairway that led to the upper level. He rammed the gun muzzle into Garand's ribs with harsh force. "And call off your dogs—or I'll shoot!"

Garand did as he was told. "You'll never get out of here alive," he choked as they climbed the stairs.

"Mebbeso," Johnny grunted, knowing the gambler's prediction was based on fact. "Never figured on a long life anyhow."

They were halfway to the tiny landing midway up the stairs. Not a hand had been lifted by any of Garand's men, not a shot fired. The landing was before them. Once they disappeared up there, every man in the Alamo would be on his trail, Johnny knew. His only chance of escape lay in keeping his gun against Garand's ribs.

"Garand, you dog!"

The outraged bellow came from the front doorway. Johnny swore under his breath. Instinctively, he turned his head to stare at Vern Tyson's lone figure.

Oliver Garand seized the slim opportunity. He twisted, his elbow knocking the gun muzzle aside. He brought his doubled leg up with lightning speed, planted his polished boot in Johnny's stomach and shoved.

Johnny staggered backward, gasping for breath. He crashed into the heavy balustrade, made a grab at the polished rail with his left hand. His feet tangled under him, sent him down several steps before he managed to check his fall. By the time that he had untracked himself, Garand had raced up the stairs and vanished.

Johnny knew the gambler was headed for the room where he kept Dorothy a prisoner. Fear laid a clammy hand upon him at thought of what the cornered man might do to her. Yet, though time was running out, he remained glued there on the stairs watching the nightmarish spectacle below.

Vern Tyson's shaggy head was bare, his craggy face aflame with a black rage. His sunken eyes glowed like hot coals as he started toward the staircase, his double-barreled riot gun weaving its ugly menace at the roomful of Garand men.

"Out of my way, you sons!" he screamed. "I'm coming after my wife!"

Johnny wanted to yell at him to go back. The warning died on the tip of his tongue.

Already the berserk sheriff was storming forward, Garand's men giving way before him. They closed in a half circle about his back, sixguns clearing leather.

A single shot ripped out, the concussion shattering the tension over the room. Tyson staggered, lost his stride. An astonished look glazed his eyes as he lurched around. He tottered on rubbery legs that collapsed under him as he squeezed both triggers of his scattergun. The recoil of the big weapon tore it from his limp fingers. Its thunderous blast rocked the glassware behind the bar as the buckshot buzzed harmlessly over the head of the sheriff's grim assassins.

Johnny got the man who had shot Tyson, putting a bullet through his mouth. He emptied his gun as the gang surged toward the stairs, sending a couple of men sprawling and breaking up their first wild rush.

Dropping the empty gun, he dashed up the stairs. He felt the whisper of searching slugs, the fiery bite of wooden splinters in his face. He considered it a miracle when he emerged into the upper hall unharmed.

The dimly lit corridor was lined with closed doors. Tyson's blind intervention had given Oliver Garand enough time to disappear into one of these rooms. But which one?

Heavy boots rumbled on the stairs behind him as Garand's men surged upward. Scant seconds remained in which to find Dorothy. Johnny broke into a loud run down the hallway, pulling his kerchief over his mouth as he went.

"We got both of 'em, boss!" he bawled excitedly. "The sheriff and the redhead! There's gonna be hell to pay! What you want done with 'em?"

A door creaked open. Garand stepped out into the hall just ahead of Johnny. He stared open-mouthed, seeing the ruse he had fallen for. His hand flashed under his coat, came out holding a stubby pistol.

Johnny pulled his .44 simultaneously, squeezing trigger as the long barrel came up. The gambler stiffened, a shocked look crossing his thin face. His unfired gun slipped out of his fingers. He pawed weakly at the bullet hole in his checkered waistcoat before slumping to the floor.

The man was dead. Johnny needed no examination to tell him where the slug had struck. Stepping over the sprawled body, he entered the room. One glance sufficed.

Quietly he turned the key in the lock, barring the door against the approaching men.

A LAMP guttered its smoky light from a rickety dresser in the corner. Dorothy's trussed figure lay helpless on the unpainted, steel bed in the opposite corner. It was a few moments' work to unloosen the cords that held her. Johnny's hands were unsteady as they fumbled at the knots.

She spat out the gag in her mouth. "Thank God you're here, Johnny!" she gasped. "I'm all right. Garand didn't harm me. He's—"

"Dead," said Johnny. "Here! Duck behind the dresser. There's going to be shooting. One hell of a lot of it, I'm afraid."

Silently, he prayed that Hiram Miller's posse was on its way. They'd had plenty of time to organize. All this gunfire should bring them in a hurry.

A sudden hush claimed the hallway outside the door as Garand's men milled around their dead leader. Johnny heard the mutter of low voices, then a loud order.

"Open up, redhead! Or we're comin' in after you!"

"Try it," invited Johnny. Dorothy was in the corner protected by the dresser. He flattened his stomach against the hardwood floor.

Bullets began ripping through the door paneling and ricocheting off the walls. As Johnny had figured, most of them were aimed higher than the floor. He emptied his gun at the door, heard curses and the sound of a falling body. A rush of stampeding boots cleared the area before the door.

A tight grin bent Johnny's lips. He had scattered them once. He wondered if he could do it again. Why didn't that damned posse show up?

"Johnny." Dot's low voice. "Is Vern d-dead?"

"Yeah." He said it gently. "He came after you. He didn't have a chance, Dot. But he was a brave man. Whatever anybody says, you can remember that. He had sand."

Her low sobs distracted him. He wanted to take her in his arms and talk her sorrow away. But he didn't. No matter what they'd once meant to each other—or what

(Continued on page 129)

LADY LUCKLESS

By JOHN T. LYNCH

MOST OF the gun battles and bowie-knife fights that took place in the Idaho Territory in 1862 were caused by gold—or by Cynthia.

Cynthia had left both her husband and her last name in the East before she daintily blew in to cause "more quarrels, fist fights, knifings and killings among former friends, than any other woman in the entire West"—as a newspaper description of that time put it.

Five misguided men had already died because of Cynthia's fickle ways of deserting one swain for another when, in Lewiston, she met the notorious Bill Mayfield, a former member of the Henry Plummer band of outlaws.

Cynthia was attracted by Mayfield's handsome appearance and bad reputation. But she did not really fall in love with him until she saw him hack United States Marshal John Blackburn to death with a bowie knife. This act appealed to her romantic instincts so strongly that she pushed her present Romeo over a 900-foot cliff, which left her free to take up with Bill.

For the killing of the marshal, Mayfield was tried, convicted and sent to the territorial prison at Carson to await execution. It was clear to Cynthia that this would interfere with her blissful plan of becoming Bill's sweetheart. She quickly recruited a number of Bill's outlaw friends, with whose aid she engineered Mayfield's release from the prison, after murdering a few guards and some assorted officials.

The happy couple made their way to Florence, a broad-minded and roaring settlement near the Oro Fino mines, where they knew no outlaw was ever molested by the law. But it was here that Henry Talbert—better known as Cherokee Bob, and, like Mayfield, a former member of the Plummer band—entered the picture.

Cherokee Bob was prospering in Florence. When he had first arrived there he was glad to find that a man who owed him \$500 was running a saloon. Instead of the money, Bob insisted on a half-ownership of the thriving business, backing up his insistence with a meaningful display of his flashing bowie knife. It was not long afterward that he was full owner of the place and the original proprietor was deep in the local boothill.

Cherokee Bob and Bill Mayfield were old friends. This did not keep Bob from immediately making a play for the beautiful Cynthia. The town grew tense at the thought of a showdown between the two well-known desperadoes. Cynthia was delighted to have two men fighting over her, again. Life had been getting sort of dull.

Mayfield was under the impression that everybody was taking the whole thing too seriously. He knew he was a much better man than Bob. He was more of a gentleman and much more handsome. So he had no doubt as to the outcome when he went to Bob to talk the matter over as man-to-man.

"Bob, I know you want Cynthia," Bill said. As old friends we ought to be able to settle the matter without a fight. We will both go to Cynthia and let her choose for herself. We will agree that the one who loses will leave town."

It was here that Bill Mayfield found out that he didn't know much about women like Cynthia.

Cynthia looked them both over carefully. Then she sweetly said, "I choose Cherokee Bob. After all, he has a good business here, and he will be able to support me a lot better than you did, Bill."

True to the agreement, but still puzzled at the feminine mind, Bill Mayfield left.

(Continued on page 128)

It was time to get a fitting for a pine box when Cynthia, that mincing mixture of mayhem and murder, fell in love with a gent . . .

All that snarling sixguns and sledging fists could win for Chance Corbett was a range that could never be his, a girl who loved another man, and a bushwhack bullet inscribed with the initials 'C.C.'!

Chapter I

BUSHWHACK BOOMERANG

THE ROCKING CHAIR gunhands had a trap laid for Chance Corbett in the livery at Semon's Flat. A ten-dollar bill had gotten the old stable attendant out of the way, giving Nick Frieze clear room to work in; and now his men were placed and there was nothing but the slow, tense drag of time before them as they waited for Corbett to come for his bronc.

Nick himself was stationed just within the big sliding door, in the deep shadows at the edge of the building. He leaned against the rough planking there, and he could feel the trickle of sweat running down inside his shirt. It was hot in the stable, but that was not the only reason he was sweating. From time to time he ran a glance around him in the entrance way, where the splintered wooden ramp slanted up from the rutted street level. It gave him added courage to see Joe Giboney's form, poised motionless behind the door of the built-in tackroom; and to hear also the slight sounds of Spud Renner in the shelter of the nearest stall.

Carefully chosen positions, these. They would put Chance Corbett into a perfect whipsaw the minute he came up the ramp and into the big room; before his eyes had time to adjust to the semi-darkness it would all be over. And yet, not to miss any pos-

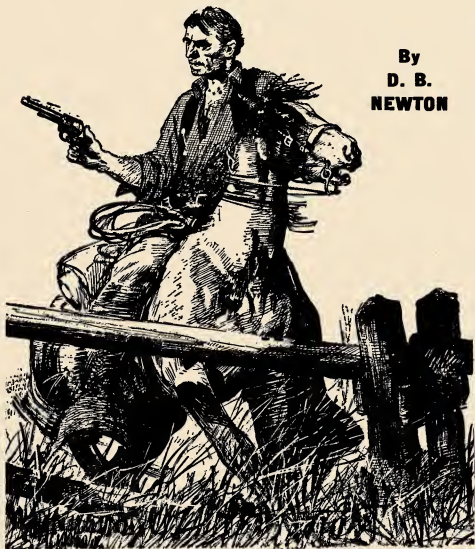


Chance was outside then, his eyes fixed on Nick Frieze.

GUNS OF THE EMPTY-SADDLE LEGION

Smashing Frontier Novel

By
D. B.
NEWTON



sibility—remembering this Corbett's reputation as a gunswift—Nick Frieze had covered his bets by placing Winnemucca Jones in the rear door of the barn to cover that exit in case, by some miracle or mischance, the quarry got past them here. Nick did not count too much on Winnemucca, but the big boss had given him four men for this job and he aimed to use every gun to best advantage.

Yes, he was reasonably satisfied with the set-up, but he'd like to get this over. Nick shifted his weight impatiently, ran an arm across his sweaty forehead. From the cubbyhole, Joe Giboney's whisper came harshly: "There's not a breath of air! When's that guy gonna get here—or is he?"

"Don't get boogery." Nick Frieze grunted. "His bronc's in a stall back there, ain't it? And he only rode in today because he got the boss' note hinting at a deal. When he's told Ed won't see him after all, he'll be heading for the trail again. Take it easy!"

Spud Renner, in the empty stall, suggested, "What if that old goat of a stable tender shows up before it's over?"

"He knows better'n that! He's into his third bucket of beer by this time, I wager. He don't want to be a witness to nothing. . . ."

At the rear entrance of the stable, the stringbean called Winnemucca was having his moments, too. His was no lightning gun-speed, but an easy conscientiousness and a willingness to do any job for money. Frieze and Renner and Giboney were out of his class entirely. And yet he knew that even they were scared of their necks when it came to bracing this Chance Corbett ranny.

He could hear them augging up front and wished he could catch what they were saying. But there only a subdued and intermittent hum of voices, mingled with the idle stamping of shod hoofs and the sound of a rat stirring in straw-filled mangers. And that almost unbearable agony of waiting. . . .

Something was prodding Winnemucca in the ribs and he moved to ease this pressure. The pressure remained, however, and suddenly a violent trembling went through all his limbs. He started to do a number of things then, to turn, to cry out, to reach skinny fingers for the butt of his holstered

sixgun: He finished none of these movements. The voice that spoke behind him drew him taut and motionless except for a shaking of his bony knees:

"All right, Winnie! That's very good. Now—steady!"

Winnemucca swallowed with a painful rasping of his dry and constricted throat. He felt a tug at the gumbelt around his thin waist, knew the gun had been lifted from its tied-down holster. He risked a half-turn of the head then, a hasty glance behind him. He had just a glimpse of hard eyes under a lowered hatbrim, of a deep brown and dangerous face. It looked to Winnemucca Jones like the face of the devil.

"Let's just walk straight ahead, Winnie," the voice said. "Right down the aisle. And don't let's say a word unless I tell you!"

THE PRODDING of the hard, round object against his back sent Winnemucca forward as though a wire had jerked him, the big dollar-size spur rowels at his bony heels ringing and rolling along the splintered floor. But those other feet seemed to make no sound at all as they followed Winnemucca Jones along the dark aisle.

Halfway down they came abreast of the stall where a long-coupled roan mare was feeding from a manger full of oats. This, Winnemucca knew, was Chance Corbett's bronc. He had already halted before the whispered voice warned: "That's far enough!"

At the same moment Nick Frieze, up front, exclaimed sharply, "What's the matter with you, Winnemucca? Get back to your station!"

Jones hesitated, swallowing. The voice in his ear whispered, "Tell him: 'What if this guy should come in the back door?'"

"What if this guy should come in the back door, Nick?" Winnemucca managed to get out.

Nick Frieze snorted in derision. "You damn' fool! Why would he do that?"

"Maybe he got wind there was a trap at the front end," the voice prompted.

Winnemucca repeated this, obediently. The pressure of the gun in his back eased for a moment, but when he faltered in the middle of the sentence it returned with prodding force.

He knew the three in ambush were listening, though he could not see them against the sun-bright square of the wide doors. Now the leader said: "If Corbett had any idea what we've planned he'd never come near this stable. So go on back and quit worrying; you won't have any trouble."

"He thinks a heap of that roan mare," the skinny gunslinger made protest, having received his cue. "Maybe he'd try some trick to get it, right from under our noses."

As he made this speech, he thought he heard a faint metallic noise behind him, the jingling of a bridle, perhaps.

Scorn dripped from the voice of Nick Frieze. "Nobody'd be that silly! Now, are you gonna do like I tell you or—"

"Tell him okay, and start back the way you came!" ordered the voice.

Jones obeyed, hastily. "All right, Nick!" he exclaimed. "Don't get sore!"

He turned. The man with the gun was in the stall, beyond his line of sight. Winnemucca had taken two steps past when a boot planted against his shoulders suddenly sent him pitching forward and down to the straw-littered floor. At the same instant the roan mare came out of its stall already running, a man clinging to its bare back like a leech. Iron shoes splintered floorboards as the bronc turned sharply, dug in to catch its stride. Then it was pounding thunderously up the aisle and straight toward the bright square of light at the head of the ramp.

It drove straight into that three-way trap, and split it asunder. Spud Renner started out of the end stall, dived back to safety in a wild leap. A gun roared in the hand of the rider and Joe Giboney yelped as lead pumped into the sill of the tackroom door. Only Nick Frieze kept his wits about him. He had started to turn away after his exchange with Winnemucca, but at the sudden explosion of sound behind him he whirled desperately, trying to get around toward the disturbance and get his gun into his hand at the same time. His foot slipped on loose straw; he went to one knee, and before he had his balance the roan was almost on top of him.

Sweating face a twisted mask, Nick Frieze threw up his gun-arm and triggered twice. Both shots missed cleanly. The first bullet lost itself somewhere in the hot shadows of the roof supports; the second

went winging down the aisle past the plunging bronc and on the tail of the echoing explosion a scream of pain tore from the throat of Winnemucca Jones.

Then Nick Frieze had to throw himself flat, and iron-shod hoofs barely missed his skull as the roan leaped the gunman's body. After that the fugitive rider was out into the hot blast of the sun, his bronc taking the ramp in two jumps and then plowing loose dust as it hit the ruts of the street and made a fast turn there. Seconds later the quarry was gone, and only gunsmoke curling and drifting out of the big square doors told how Rocking Chair brand's carefully laid trap in the livery stable had been sprung and busted wide open!

WORSE THAN defeat was the hard moment when Nick Frieze had to report his failure to the boss. He found Ed Wallace waiting for him and there was nothing to reassure him in the look of the Rocking Chair owner's dark, scowling features. Like every other soul in town, Wallace had already some knowledge of the fiasco at the stable.

"What an experience!" he exclaimed sarcastically. "How the four of you must have screamed your little lungs out as that terrible man came tearing down on you!"

Nick, with his back against the closed door of the room Wallace used for a town office, felt the blood pulse upward into his face. He had to clamp his jaw to avoid the sharp answer he did not dare to make. He said only, "The guy caught us napping, I guess. That damn' fool Winnemucca—"

"—Is dead," the rancher snapped. "So you can safely pile all your own mistakes onto his shoulders!" The sarcasm slipped from his voice and sudden flashing rage replaced it. "Damn it!" He slapped the paper-littered desk with one bony, spatulate hand. "I arranged a perfect chance for you. I sent what were supposed to be the best gun-handlers on my payroll. There was no excuse for a slip-up!"

Doggedly, Nick Frieze took this tongue-lashing and came back with a protest. "It wasn't our fault, chief! Someone tipped Corbett off; they must have!"

"Unless he just plain outguessed you," Wallace retorted. He got up suddenly, paced to the window and glowered into the street. This room was in the back of the

Three Spot Saloon, which Wallace owned, and they could hear the small noises that came from the bar as well as those that drifted in across the opened sash of the window.

"What am I going to do now?" demanded Ed Wallace, whipping around to favor Nick with a scowl of ferocity. "It's the second time in a year I've been challenged. We got rid of that other one, that Lew Duncan who first staked the homestead claim at Warbonnet Springs, but it looks like Corbett is too fast for you in an honest fight and too smart to be trapped. What's worse, everyone knows it was me first hired him and brought him into the picture here, to begin with, and that he turned against me. Now if we don't manage to stop him, they're going to think I've slipped, that I can't keep my hold on this range any longer. And if they start ganging up on me, maybe I can't!"

Nick Frieze shrugged. "I'll take my carbine and lay for him in those big rocks he has to ride through on his way to the Springs."

"Oh, you will?" Wallace gave him a sidelong, scornful glance. "You'll just mess it up again, you mean! Haven't you heard the talk around town? People are making a hero out of Corbett since what he did to Rocking Chair this afternoon. Oh, no! The time's slipped by us when a slug in the back would have taken care of him; my bet is that if we tried that now, we'd find ourselves with hell on our hands! There's got to be another way!"

Nick frowned. He was not a subtle man and the suggestion Wallace had thus ruled out was the only one he understood. To his mind it left but one alternative and he wanted no part of that. He said hurriedly, "If you mean a shoot-out in the dust—one man against him—you can't interest me, not at the wages you pay! Remember what happened to Yaeger?"

"Shut up!" the other cut him off. "I'm thinking!" His eye did have the narrow look that a sudden idea would put there. All at once he turned on Nick. "It's coming through!" he stated, a note of triumph in his words. "The way to get rid of Chance Corbett. Send me that new man, Haines," he ordered. "Better get the sheriff, too. I want them both in this office inside of ten minutes."

Before leaving town Chance Corbett stopped by the shop of Tom Joyce, the saddler. Tying his roan at the hitching post, he was conscious of many eyes watching him, covertly or openly. He gave no sign of this awareness. An aloof man—brown and hard and silent—Corbett had made only a pair of real friends in the three months since his coming to this town and range, and since his taking over of the abandoned Duncan place at Warbonnet Springs. His sombre mouth settled into softer lines now as he entered the saddle shop and returned the greeting of the kindly, white-haired craftsman.

He noticed a new straightness in Tom Joyce's bent shoulders, a new sparkle in the old man's eyes. "We heard what you been up to!" he exclaimed. "Scaring the life out of Ed Wallace's best trigger artists—"

Corbett shrugged. "I played in luck. A hunch said I ought to take a look before I walked in too easily. Good thing I did!"

"It was more than luck, Chance Corbett!" The girl who stood in the doorway connecting the shop with living quarters at the rear came forward now. She came to Corbett and put her hands upon his sleeves and lifted her bright head to face him squarely. She said, "Even after you saw the trap, you deliberately walked in and sprung it. That took nerve, but it was foolish, too! It's had Dad and me scared stiff ever since we heard. How could you take such a chance?"

"Chance," he repeated, and smiled. "That's my name, remember? But I couldn't have backed out on Wallace," he went on seriously. "It would have given him too much satisfaction, convinced him I was yellow after all. And maybe he'd have been right!"

The girl did not try to answer that, though a frown was in her pretty face. Her father said, "Did you get to see Wallace, like you came to town to do?"

"No. That was just bait for the trap, I take it; he never intended to see me. If I thought it would do any good I'd have gone back after the affair at the stable and made a showdown, but he'd have squirmed out of that some way." Corbett shook his head. "It will come later. Meanwhile, I guess I haven't entirely wasted the day by riding in. You have the saddle patched up?"

"You bet." Old Tom Joyce laid his hand

on a brush-scarred, center-fire rig on the workbench. "Ready for you to cinch on your bronc. I had to build a new horn into the tree while I was at it, but it's good and sturdy now."

"Thanks, Tom. Looks like you did a good job."

Lee Joyce was between them again, insistent. "That's another thing you can't put me off about, Chance. It was a bullet smashed your saddlehorn, a rifle bullet. You needn't tell me that was any accident!"

"All right," he agreed solemnly. "It wasn't an accident. I ran into a Rocking Chair hand on Warbonnet day before yesterday and we traded a little lead. A short, sandy-haired gent. . . ."

"Gil Yaeger!" old Tom exclaimed. "He's dynamite!"

"He used his saddle gun, and then I drilled his arm for him and he went away satisfied. It was just a lucky shot."

"Luck!" The girl echoed the word again, her tone angry and with a hint in of something deeper. "Oh, Chance, you've got to be careful! Twice now Ed Wallace has tried. Another time and he'll be rid of you, the way he got rid of Lew Duncan before you!"

"She's right, Chance!" her father agreed. "Duncan was a good man, faster with a trigger than any of Wallace's hired gunmen, maybe even a little faster than you are. But they got him, and all because he dared to file a homestead claim on the Warbonnet Springs that Wallace had warned everyone away from and was trying to hog, although Rocking Chair had no legal right to them. Duncan put up his buildings, registered his brand and brought in the beginnings of a herd. After nearly six months, Rocking Chair managed to get rid of him!"

"Are you so sure?" Corbett objected. "Duncan disappeared, but no one has ever laid eyes on his body!"

LEE JOYCE was staring at him. "You— you think he's alive?"

"I hate to think otherwise! It's a sort of legend to me, the tales I've heard about him since I came onto this range. It changed the whole shape of things, made me take a good, hard look at myself and my own gun-smoke past, and shamed me a little to think of what I'd been. I was ashamed, too, that Ed Wallace's brand was on me. That's why

I told Wallace where he could go—quit him cold—and chose my own side in this fight!"

"If I hadn't shown my hand so soon, maybe I'd have learned from him the whole truth about Duncan's disappearance. As it is, no one can say for sure whether the man is really dead or alive. But the buildings still stood at Warbonnet though Duncan's herds had been run off. The homestead claim was still registered in Duncan's name, so Wallace couldn't legally touch the place until Duncan was declared dead by court order or the homestead reverted to the public domain for lack of the necessary improvements. Wallace certainly never thought anyone would do what I did: move in and try to hold the Springs in Duncan's name, by proxy, keeping up the improvements and meanwhile maintaining a search for evidence as to what had become of the owner."

This was the first time Corbett had ever discussed his motives so fully with anyone, even with the Joyces. Old Tom frowned thoughtfully. "I don't say as I get it, Chance. What is there for you in all this?"

"Well, naturally, if Duncan should be proven dead—or after the necessary lapse of time is legally declared dead—then I'll be in position to file my own claim for the Springs. And if he returns—"

"You'll be left out in the cold, after all your work!"

Corbett looked at the other levelly, shook his head. "No, Tom. It will still have been worth the trouble, just to know I'd done my part in holding Ed Wallace at a standstill and carrying on a worthy fight. Maybe it will make up, somehow, for the useless gun-smoke years when too often, I guess, my guns were on the wrong side. I owe that much to the memory of Lew Duncan, who even though I never met him, left a legend with the power to make me take a second look at myself, and to make me want to change what I found there!"

Tom Joyce said slowly, "You got no cause for shame now, Chance Corbett. As for Lew Duncan, yes, he was a sort of man to fill the mind and the eye. That much Lee can tell you as well as I!" The girl suddenly turned away, confusion showing in her pretty face. Her father went on: "She—we thought a lot of him, and it was a shock when he disappeared. It broke the spirit of any opposition Wallace might have

had building against him in Semon's Flat. "But now—" He looked at Corbett and he smiled a little. "After today, there's a new legend! The range is lifting its head again. We got a new leader to look to, a new champion. Just think that over, Chance Corbett!"

Corbett digested this, frowning over it. Later as he piled blanket and the mended saddle upon the back of the mare and jogged away slowly through the town's sultry heat, the things Tom Joyce had told him were still in his mind. And Lee—more by what was left unsaid than by what was said, had divined the nature of her feelings for Duncan. That, perhaps, had been the final reason for his decision to stay at Warbonnet. A man worthy of high regard from a girl like Tom Joyce's daughter deserved better than to have his dreams end in nothing, his battle lost utterly, the evil that he fought triumphant. It was typical of Chance Corbett that there should be in this no tinge of jealousy, despite Lee's obvious affection for the missing man.

Chapter II

SADDLE—AND HAUL FREIGHT!

THE DAY dragged on to its close as Chance jogged the long miles to Warbonnet, his mind working with these things. Wallace, he knew, was not going to accept today's defeat. The range baron was not used to being crossed, and the value of Warbonnet Springs had grown in his mind to huge dimensions since the best efforts of two men had gone into taking it from him. Chance Corbett was under no delusions but that more trouble was coming, and probably very soon.

Gray dusk lay smokily over the land as he threaded through the granite boulder field that marked the southern limit of Corbett's graze. A moon tipped up above the horizon of eastern hills, putting its frosty whiteness over the range. As he cleared the mouth of a shallow draw it showed him, presently, the sparkle of the Springs, the buildings and corrals Lew Duncan had constructed lying dark and silent. Corbett was thinking about the legend of Duncan, wondering about him, as he dismounted, stripped saddle and gear from the mare and put her into the corral where there was water and feed.

He lugged his equipment into the tack shed, hung the saddle Tom Joyce had repaired for him on its peg and spread the sweaty blanket to dry. Then he walked up to the little one-room house, shoved open the door, found his way surely across the blackness to a lamp that stood upon the table. Right hand reaching for a match stuck in the band of his flat-topped hat, he put the other out toward the lamp.

The glass of the chimney was black and warm!

As that startling fact rammed home Chance Corbett suddenly dropped the matchstick, right hand streaking desperately down toward the gun in his holster. He was much too slow, too late. For even as he whirled back and sideward away from the table he moved directly against a gun-muzzle and heard the voice of the man behind him rap out: "Stand hitched! Don't make me use this!"

With that gun at his back Chance Corbett could not afford any movement to excite a nervous trigger finger. He froze. The next instant the free hand of the other was fumbling for the jutting gun-handle in Corbett's holster, finding it, dragging it forth. It was his own carelessness that had put him in this plight and Corbett cursed himself bitterly.

After that, working awkwardly with one hand and in the dark, his captor got the lamp off the chimney and then a match scraped across the table top, the flame of it leaping across the blackness. He got the wick going, and dancing shadows steadied as he replaced the chimney. He said, "All right, turn around. I been waiting here for you ever since I heard your bronc coming up the draw. Now I want to look at you!"

Facing him in the lamplight, Corbett saw a man whose body was thin almost to the point of emaciation, a man whose eyes, in pallid features, burned at him intently across the leveled barrel of the sixgun. Puzzlement flickered in the man's glance. "A new one, I guess. How long you been riding for Wallace?"

Chance Corbett did not answer for a long moment and in heavy silence the two surveyed each other with a hostility that could be felt in the cool air of evening. He said then, "I'm not a Rocking Chair man. Chance Corbett is the name. I guess you must be Lew Duncan!"

Slowly, the muzzle lowered. The man across the sights put up a thin and wasted hand, ran it over sunken cheeks; it rasped dryly on beardstubble, and the bloodless mouth twisted sardonically.

"Do I look much like Duncan?" he grunted, and there was bitterness in his voice.

"I never saw the man. But I still think you're him."

"His ghost, maybe," the man with the gun said. The weapon seemed suddenly too heavy for his feeble strength and he dropped the hand to the tabletop and leaned upon it.

Corbett said, "Did one of Wallace's gun-slingers miss, and leave you for dead when there was still a spark of life in you?"

Sudden weakness must have put the trembling into the thin man's body then, made him drop into the split-timbered chair that stood beside the table. The burning eyes stared up at Corbett for another long moment. Then with a quick gesture he dropped the gun upon the table and shoved it away from him. Shrugging he jerked his thumb toward a second chair.

"Sit down!" he ordered. "I still don't know what you're doing in my cabin, but if you're no friend of Ed Wallace's maybe you can tell me a little of what's been going on. I seem to have lost nearly half a year out of my life!"

Corbett dragged the chair closer and straddled it, with his elbows upon the back. "Where were you?"

"A Mex sheepherder found me, took me to his shack in the hills. I'd have died; I almost did anyway. But he dragged me through somehow. And when I was strong enough to ride I took my bronc and came back." He looked around him at the crudely built but neat cabin. "It looks just the way I left it. I'm surprised Ed Wallace didn't either burn it down or take it over for himself."

Corbett said, "He'd have liked to. He didn't get the chance."

The other looked at him keenly. "Who stopped him? You?"

"I moved in," Chance explained, nodding. "I came into this country, heard about the Springs and your fight with Rocking Chair, and then how you had disappeared so strangely. Tom Joyce told me most of the story."

"Joyce?" Duncan's eyes lit up at the

name. He hesitated, asked then, almost diffidently, "How is Lee?"

"She's fine. She—" Chance paused a moment, feeling for the first time a twinge of jealousy and ashamed of himself for it. "She speaks of you often. She'll be glad—"

A softness had melted the bleak lines of the emaciated features. Then they sobered again. "So you've been holding down the Springs. Has Wallace given you trouble?"

"Some." Chance Corbett told him all that had been happening since the day of his arrival at Semon's Flat. He ended: "I just tried to carry on what you started here, hoping that the people of this range might throw in and help pry loose Ed Wallace's hold. It's a fine country, too fine for him to rule. As for this—" He indicated the cabin, and included in his gesture the corrals and outbuildings of the little spread that lay around them. "I hoped you would be back, some time. It didn't seem fair—"

A WARNING lift of the other's thin hand stopped him. Duncan's head was up, his eyes sharp, his sunken features tight with attention. Then Chance heard, too, a single horse and rider, the echoes bouncing between the walls of the rock-ribbed gulch below the Springs. At once Corbett was on his feet, thrusting the chair away from him. He reached automatically toward his holster, remembering the gun Duncan had taken from him.

Quickly Duncan drew the weapon from his waistband and tossed it to Chance, the lamp making a streak of light along its polished barrel as the latter caught it. Duncan was on his feet too, now, reaching for the gun he had laid upon the table. Chance Corbett threw him a look and motioned him back into the shadows at the corner of the room. "I'll take care of this," he muttered.

He stepped to the door, threw it open and moved quickly out and to one side, so as not to make a silhouette against the light. He could see their visitor now in the frosty shine of the moon as his bronc circled the corral and came on toward the cabin at a walk. He sang out, "Don't come any closer until I know who you are!"

The rider reined in abruptly. "Corbett? This is the sheriff, and I don't want any trouble from you!"

"Oh!" Distaste was in Corbett's grunt of surprise. Herb Massey, he knew, was in ef-

fect a hired man for Ed Wallace, but he had the law's shield on his vest and the law's authority to back him. "Come ahead, then."

He waited that way beside the door, gun in holster but ready to his fingers. Sheriff Massey brought his horse to a stand and swung down from saddle. He stood there, squinting at Chance, and he said angrily, "Come on out of the shadows, Corbett. I got a warrant with your name on it!"

"A warrant?" Chance echoed. "For what charge?"

"For the murder of Winnemucca Jones."

Corbett could only stare at the preposterousness of this. "Nick Frieze killed Winnemucca with a wild shot, a shot that was meant for me!"

"Nick says otherwise," the sheriff retorted. "And there's two other witnesses, Spud Renner and Joe Giboney. I got sworn depositions from them in my office. You'll hang for that killing, Corbett, or I miss my guess!"

The other cursed angrily. "This is a stinking frame-up! Ed Wallace's witnesses, Ed Wallace's sheriff. And probably Wallace's own paid judge and hand-picked jury to run the trial!"

"You bucking the law?" Massey wanted to know, testily.

Corbett parried him. "I want to see your warrant!"

"It's in my pocket. Move inside the house and I'll show it to you." And as Chance hesitated: "I said move inside! This is a gun I'm pointing at you, and don't think I can't see you well enough to plug you if you make a wrong move. I got eyes like a cat!"

With a shrug, then, Chance Corbett turned back through the doorway and Massey followed him. The sheriff did indeed have a cat's eyes, a little slanted and greenish tinged. He had a cat's silent tread, too, as he came at Chance across the doorsill, gun and eyes trained on him. With his left hand he reached toward his hip pocket, came out with a folded paper that was crumpled and limp with sweat. "There's the warrant!" he grunted. "Take it and read it."

"Take it and tear it up!"

Lew Duncan came moving out from the corner where he had waited unnoticed. At the sound of his voice the sheriff whipped around to meet this unexpected danger. His glance took in the gun Duncan had leveled at him, and then they lifted to the gaunt,

emaciated face. For a moment there was no sign of recognition, but suddenly the greenish eyes widened and Herb Massey's jaw sagged open. He swallowed, shook his head a little, and his gaze held, riveted to the other's face. "You!" he croaked.

"Go back to your boss, Sheriff!" said Duncan, still pacing forward, the gun in his thin hand steady enough now. Massey watched him come, fascinated. He winced, but made no sound as the barrel of the other's gun rammed hard into his soft stomach. He did not resist as the man from the grave plucked the six-shooter from the sheriff's fingers and shoved it contemptuously back into holster.

"Go to your boss," Duncan repeated. "Tell him it will take more than a piece of paper and a tin star to make this frame-up stick!" He tore the warrant from Massey's hand, crumpled it, thrust it from him scornfully.

The sheriff found his tongue then, but he could only stammer incoherently. "I—I thought— Where did you—"

Duncan laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "This isn't any ghost, if that's what you're thinking! I'm real enough! Now—get out!" He gave Massey a shove that half turned him toward the open door. "Your bronc is still outside. Fork it and ride while we're still of a mind to let you!"

"All right, Duncan!" The sheriff's voice fairly shook with terror. "I—I ain't fool enough to stack my gun against yours. Against the two of you!" he added, with a sidelong look at Chance. "But the charge against this man still stands, and I'll be back—with help enough to take him in. Maybe it won't go so good for you either, Duncan, bucking the law, harboring a wanted man!"

He hurried away then, leaving that threat behind him. The two stood in the door and watched him mount and take his bronc away without a backward glance. They listened until the pound of hoofbeats rattled to silence down the rocky throat of the gulch.

"A big talker!" Duncan grunted then. "Always was. But it's nothing but bluff; the guy is scared stiff!"

"Maybe." But Chance Corbett was frowning, without confidence.

A decision that had been shaping itself during the talk with Duncan suddenly came

clear with a sharpness which was beyond questioning. Reluctant as he was to accept it he could see only one choice open to him now.

"Herb Massey will be back," he predicted darkly, "with a gang of Wallace's men big enough to take me if their minds are made up to it. I'm not waiting for them. I'm going to saddle and pull my freight!"

Chapter III

RANCHERS' MEETING

YES, HE WAS running, though it galled him fiercely. He had done his job at Warbonnet and to remain now would only mean piling needless danger on Lew Duncan's head. Chance had held out and held Ed Wallace at a standstill, until the return of the rightful owner. That had been his purpose. There was no further function he could serve.

So it was best this way. Best just to be in saddle with the night wind in his face and his belongings strapped in a blanket roll behind the cante, leaving the basin just as he had ridden in three months before. He'd have liked to say good-by to the Joyces, father and daughter, but feeling as he did about Lee it was easier without that. Better to leave the whole thing without show or farewell: the trumped-up murder charge he was reasonably sure would not follow him, and the Springs ranch for which he'd fought, and the girl who would soon forget him, since Lew Duncan had returned. . . .

He made camp in a rocky niche close below the timberline, throwing off saddle and blankets and staking his bronc to graze in a pocket of scant grass. It was close to midnight as he rolled up in his blankets and lay with saddle for pillow and the wide sky stretching its spangled mesh above him. The moon was down now. The night was dark and nearly soundless in this high place. He felt sure he had lost any trail he might have left, so that there was no fear of pursuit. When he slept it was with a clear conscience.

With morning he ate a cold breakfast and was on his way again, riding the rim that flanked the basin's western edge. It was rough country, and unfamiliar to Corbett. He picked his way slowly through the

high granite ridges, with the rimrock jutting jaggedly into the sky's blue at one hand and timbered slopes sweeping down at the other. At midmorning he came to a stage road that thread the pass across the rim, and having followed this for another couple miles had to haul rein while he considered a fork in the trail ahead.

He was sitting like this when the slow sound of mule hoofs and wide wheels turning came in from behind him, and on a cautious impulse Chance pulled his bronc out of the trail into the protection of scrub growth. The wagons and team hauled into view presently, a freighting rig with trailer hitched behind and three span of mules in the traces. The man on the high seat was a stranger to Chance Corbett, so at the last minute he decided he could risk letting himself be seen. He rode into the trail with hand lifted in greeting, and as the wagon hauled abreast he sang out: "Friend, can you tell me the trail to Hatchet Rock?"

The freighter, a grizzled and sun-cured old-timer, showed no surprise at his appearance. "The left fork," he grunted. "That's the way I'm going, and they's a shortcut I can point out if you want to ride along with me a piece."

"Thanks," said Chance. He saw the freighter wanted someone to talk to, so while the old-timer cursed his mules to a halt Chance dismounted and tied his bronc's reins to the tailgate of the second wagon and then swung up to the broad seat beside him. The rig got rolling again and they went that way through the stillness of the morning, sunlight on quartz crystals laying a bright sparkle across the white and tan granite slants about them.

"Cope through Semon's Flat?" the freighter wanted to know idly. At Corbett's brief affirmative the old man made a face and shook his head. "You heard all the excitement about this Corbett jigger, then. No? Why, the whole town was in an uproar about it when I rolled in there last night!"

Chance tried not to show his startled interest. He said, "What's the story?"

"Just another case of a tin god turning up with clay feet," the other grunted. "Seems like everybody in the basin was looking to him to organize a fight against that varmint, Ed Wallace, that runs things down there. But all at once he turned yel-

low and let Wallace scare him out, and them that praised the feller are cussin' him now and the whole range has lost heart. That's the second time they've lost 'em a leader, but they're sure heated up about Corbett ratting on them."

A cold finger laid itself along Corbett's spine. He managed: "Is—is that all the story?"

"Yep. Wallace's hand-picked sheriff went to Corbett's with a warrant made out for some phony murder charge that everyone knew wouldn't hold water. Corbett got the drop and run him off the place, but when Herb Massey went out a second time with a crew of gunnies, he come back bragging that Corbett had skipped out. Lost his nerve, I reckon. Can't blame him, mebbe, bucking such odds. Anyway, Massey burnt down his spread and this morning the Wallace crowd is cocks of the walk in Semon's Flat, and nobody to question 'em."

The freighter kicked the brake suddenly, leaned to point with one bony arm. "There! See the dim trail angling down by that boulder near the stunted cedar? A horse-man can cut off twenty mile that way, head-in' for Hatchet Rock."

Chance said, "Thanks a lot, old-timer," and swung down over the wheel. A moment later he was standing beside his roan as the freight rig crawled away along the high trail, the cussing of the old muleskinner floating back on still, thin air.

For some time after the dust settled, he stood there alone, staring at nothing, his hand tight on trailing reins and thoughts tumbling in his head. For that oldest's idle gossip had shown him with cruel clarity what a fool he had been.

What had seemed the best solution for a hard problem had proved, instead, a terrible mistake. Instead of removing from Lew Duncan the onus of protecting a man wanted by the law, Corbett had only succeeded in leaving him—a sick man and alone—to face Wallace's gunslingers when they returned with Herb Massey looking for Chance. They had disposed of Duncan and burned Warbonnet to the ground!

Too late to undo the harm he'd accomplished. Yet, roweled by bitter self-accusations, Chance Corbett was already piling into saddle and reining his bronc sharply around, heading it straight back the way he had come along the steep basin trail.

IT WAS only an hour from noon when he sighted the ashes of Warbonnet, the timbers of cabin, sheds, and corral still smoking a little. Any question as to the cause of that fire was settled by sight of a herd of red-backed cattle, all bearing the Rocking Chair brand, that had been pushed in on the empty acres of the homestead and now were feeding peacefully under the heat and blast of the sun.

A helpless fury gripped Chance Corbett as he sat saddle for long moments, looking over that desolate scene. Finally he stepped down and moved forward to begin a grim search. But there was no charred body in the fire-gutted ruins of the house, nor, though he hunted carefully over a wide radius, could he find any sign of a grave or caved cutbank. Maybe Duncan had eluded his enemies, but more likely he was a prisoner, or else his body had been carried away and disposed of where no man would ever find it. Which answer was correct, Corbett meant to learn if it was the last thing he lived to do.

A tense stillness seemed to hang over the town as he rode in. It was almost as though the spirit of the place had been broken and those who hated Ed Wallace had crawled into their holes in fear of showing themselves. One idler in the shadow of the tobacco store's wooden awning caught sight of Corbett and jerked sharply erect. Chance could imagine his astonishment at this return of a man who had been branded a coward.

He rode slowly past the Three Spot, checking the hitchrack in vain for Wallace's bay gelding and noticing how the hot sun streamed into the closed window of the back-room office. If Wallace was there the shade would have been pulled, so Chance concluded the man was out at his Rocking Chair spread. He rode on, then, until he reached the unpainted, drab building that housed the sheriff's office and jail. He put his tired horse to the hitchrail and, coming out of saddle, stepped up deliberately to the scarred plank walk and moved across and through the open door.

The Semon's Flat sheriff, all alone at his desk, jerked his swivel chair around and then was coming out of it in a hurry, right hand clawing for a holstered gun. He tangled with the chair in his rush and nearly fell over it. Before he could regain his bal-

ance or get the weapon cleared Chance Corbett was on top of him.

Chance seized the thick wrist, clamped it in a hard grip. He didn't draw his own weapon.

He said, "So you're telling it I showed yellow and run out on you, Herb Massey? But you see I came back this morning to learn what you did with Lew Duncan!"

Massey's face whitened. He started to stammer, "I—I didn't do—"

Chance hit him, a sharp smash right across the teeth, and he followed that with a blow that sank wrist-deep into the man's soft belly and Massey caved, collapsing into the swivel chair that was rammed back against the battered desk.

"You didn't what?" snapped Corbett. "Think again and tell me straight this time!"

The blood trickled down Massey's weak chin and rank terror was in his greenish eyes as he cowered away from the fist that had smashed him.

"Don't hit me again!" he begged. "If I talk you won't hit me again, will you?"

"No," said Chance and even moved back a step encouragingly. But that was too much encouragement. There was no gun in Corbett's hand and Massey thought he saw an opportunity. He came lurching up out of his chair with a sudden burst of strength, his shoulder lunging into Corbett, driving him backwards, and then Herb Massey was going past him at a heavy run, screaming for help as he cleared the doorway and plunged into the street.

Chagrined, Corbett went after him. With a surprising show of speed, Massey was already halfway across the street and his cries were bringing men to doors and windows. The batwings of the Three Spot fanned open and Joe Giboney stepped out. One look at Corbett and the Wallace gunslinger was bringing his sixgun out, shooting.

The slap of the report and whisper of the bullet past his cheek brought Corbett to a quick halt and he turned to face this danger, his own hand diving for a weapon. It was a time for speed, and Corbett's gun-magic did not fail him. In a smooth motion, the lean hand whipped around the jut of his sixgun, and it came up level and blended its roar with Joe Giboney's hurried second shot. The gunman caught up as though he

had been kicked in the stomach, and he melted back loosely against the swinging green door. The panel let him through to sprawl full length across the threshold of the saloon.

With the same motion, Chance was already swinging back toward Herb Massey. The sheriff, seeing help in the offing, had plowed to a stop and whirled. He had his gun out of holster now and was lining for a second shot at Chance. He didn't get to make it, because Corbett's second bullet took him and he slewed down into the thick dust. Then the concatenation of gun-sound echoing among the sun-scoured false-fronts of buildings ran out and silence returned.

Slowly Chance Corbett stuffed his weapon back into holster as he walked across the dust to Massey. He had failed again! For the sheriff was dead and still he was without the thing he needed to know. But then a voice spoke his name across the stillness and he looked up quickly.

Lee Joyce stood on the edge of the walk, hands pressed to her white face, staring at him. The silence was broken after that by men running out into the street on the tail of the shooting. Chance Corbett turned his back on them all and went to Lee. "I'm sorry you had to see that," he told her soberly.

"You aren't—hurt?" Her blue eyes were on his, insistent. But at the shake of his head the fear ran out of her and she turned almost limp. "Then that's all that matters!"

Chance said, "You aren't concerned that I ran away last night, that Herb Massey branded me a coward?"

"Not really." She smiled tremulously. "For, you see, I didn't believe him. I knew you would have a reason."

"I had!" Chance looked about quickly. There had been no move against him, despite his shooting of Massey and Giboney. A couple of men had come out of the Three Spot and carried in the sheriff's limp body; that was all. Apparently there were no more of Ed Wallace's gun crew in town at that moment and no one to take up Corbett's challenge. Chance turned back to the girl. "Let's go to your father's shop. I have things to tell you!"

"LEW DUNCAN—returned!" Old Tom Joyce repeated this unbelievably as Corbett finished his terse recital.

"He fought six months against the gunshot that should have killed him," he muttered, "and came back from the grave to carry on his fight against Ed Wallace. And then I let him fall into Wallace's hands again. This time there's hardly a chance he isn't dead!"

Lee Joyce put a hand upon his arm but Chance couldn't bring himself to look at her. He heard her soft voice cry: "It wasn't your fault, Chance! You thought you were doing right to leave."

"I knew Massey was coming back—with guns," he objected bitterly. "I should have seen what was bound to happen when they found Duncan there, sick and alone."

There was a silence in the little saddle shop, a silence redolent with the scent of new leather and broken only by the sounds of the street outside. Then old Tom got to his feet stiffly, his shoulders straight, the glint of resolution showing in his faded eyes.

"Ed Wallace has gone too far this time! Chance, I'm going to start the word spreading. I'm going to call together the men of this range who hate Wallace, the men who might join to stand up to him if we only rouse them out of their apathy and fear. What you've just told us should do the trick! I want you to repeat it to them, every word of it."

"Will they listen to me? Will they listen to a man they think has showed the white feather?"

"How can they believe that now, after your coming back and after what you did to Massey and Joe Giboney? No, all they need is a leader, Chance, and they'll follow you—when you stand up and give them proof, from Lew Duncan's own lips, that it was Wallace who had him bushwhacked and left for dead! And when you tell that Duncan returned last night and is dead now—or maybe a prisoner in Wallace's hands—it'll bust this range wide open!"

* * *

News of the meeting spread along the grapevine, passed from mouth to mouth and from rider to rider, charging all the basin with an electric excitement. It was called for half past two at the ranch house of Jud Knoles, who came to Joyce and offered his living room as a meeting place.

Chance Corbett had his doubts. He did not believe it possible Ed Wallace himself didn't know what was afoot; a thing like this could not be kept completely secret. When, half an hour before the meeting, he rode into Knoles' ranchyard with Lee and her father, Chance put a careful eye over the layout, noting the ridge behind it and the bright flash of a creek a quarter-mile away, with dappled heads of cottonwoods lining it. A big new barn dominated the other buildings, the loft doors opening eastward and facing the direction of Wallace's Rocking Chair holdings.

Corbett told Joyce, "Let's have a man up there during the meeting—just in case."

The old man saw his point and agreed. As the moments dragged past Chance was beginning to feel a tightness inside of him and he wished more and more that Lee Joyce had not come this afternoon. But, with all these premonitions, he kept a stony front and moved ahead with his part of the thing. Now the men were straggling in, grim and troubled riders who spoke terse greeting and bore visibly the weight of the danger they invited by their presence here.

When, at three o'clock, old Tom Joyce decided no more were coming and stepped up to a place before the mantelpiece of the long, cool living room, he could not hide a bleak look of disappointment. Six men had gathered, only six of all the ranchers of Semon's Flat who had felt the weight of Rocking Chair tyranny! With such poor representation there hardly seemed any point or any use in going on.

But he called the meeting to order and he spoke briefly of the fight that had to be made. Then he called on Chance Corbett. In dead silence Chance unfolded his lean length from a rawhide-bottomed chair, put his shoulders against the stone of the fireplace and looked down at the faces of these men. He sensed the uncertainty, the hopelessness, in them. But few as they were, they might yet become the nucleus of a fighting organization that would grow until it held the strength to move against Ed Wallace's gun crew and best them. Then, looking at the pale, tense face of Lee Joyce, and with the thought of Lew Duncan prompting him, he began to speak.

He told his story simply, making no effort to condone his own mistakes. When he came to the events of the previous night and

to Lew Duncan, his tiny audience began to straighten in their chairs, a new and angry light in their eyes. Before he had quite finished, there were startled exclamations, and one sharp-eyed rancher broke out: "This is the last straw! We got to do something about Wallace, dispose of him like the mad dog he is!"

"Feeling that way," Chance Corbett shot back at him, 'it's up to the handful of us here to work on those who didn't have the guts to come. It's up to us to build an army against Rocking Chair that isn't too scared for its own necks to fight!"

Another said, coming to his feet, "By God, we'll do it! It'll take time, but—"

"But maybe we haven't got time!" exclaimed Corbett. He was moving to the door as he spoke; it opened before he got there and the man from the barn lurched inside, panting, "A gang of riders coming hell-for-leather, from Rocking Chair! Must be close to twenty of them!"

Horror showed on stunned faces. Chance, whirling, looked quickly over the room and found Lee's startled face. "Lee!" he cried. "Get your pony and ride out of this, while there's still time!"

She shook her head. "I'm—I'm not going!"

He groaned inwardly, but there was a stubbornness in her that he could not defeat. Turning on the rest, he said, "A half-dozen of us against them! But we can give them a fight. They won't know we're ready for them!"

Chapter IV

BLOOD BUYS A RANGE

THERE WERE only seconds. Chance placed himself and Tom Joyce at the door and window of the little house, two others in the shelter of the tack shed, Jud Knoles and his hired hand inside the barn—quickly chosen positions that put the ranchyard under the sweep of their guns. Knoles being a bachelor, there were no children to worry about and no other woman than Lee Joyce, who waited inside the house with Chance and her father. Utter stillness lay over the tiny ranch, except for the stamping of saddle horses tied under a tree in the yard.

"I'll give the first shot," Chance had or-

dered. "We've got to take them by surprise and do a lot of damage quick!" Behind the narrowly opened door he pressed against the wall and his gun was heavy in his hand. Suddenly, then, came the Rocking Chair crew, Wallace heading them, a solid mass of riders, dust boiling under their broncs' pounding hoofs. They fanned out as they swept in and their guns began speaking almost before they were in range.

At the last minute Corbett's leveled six-shooter bucked in his hand and a rider spilled out of saddle, and at once a clatter of rifles and sixguns began from the beleaguered men, just as the tide hit.

A confusion of gun-thunder, of shouting voices, of plunging hoofs boiled up from the ranchyard. That first surprise volley had emptied four saddles. One of the raiders' horses was down and threshing with steel-shod hoofs, and the bronc tied in the yard were plunging, tearing at their reins, maddened by the noise.

Driven back, the Rocking Chair killers hesitated only a second to regroup and then came pounding in again with guns smoking, and more gunfire met their frenzied charge. Ed Wallace could be heard, shouting through the racket. One of the defenders in the mow of the barn took a bullet dead center and toppled forward, tumbling loosely down to the ground with bright yellow hay sliding after him. He lay there, dead, in a crumpled heap.

A bronc raced, stirrups flying, past the door where Chance Corbett stood; it raised a screen of dust and he had to wait for this to whip away before he could go on firing. His wrist ached with the kick of the six-gun's bucking. Then the weapon was empty and he threw it aside, reaching for his rifle instead. From the tail of his eye he saw Lee Joyce dart forward for the discarded six-shooter, begin punching out the empties and reloading from the cartridge belt Chance had given her.

A shot from outside smashed the window below which old Tom was crouched. He only ducked and came back with another shot and a curse for the sting of a scratch one of the splintered shards had scored along his leathery cheek.

Suddenly, Chance flung open the door, waded out into the carnage and swirl of powder-smoke with rifle pressed against the flat of one hip, levering and firing as he

went. He had caught sight of Nick Frieze, and Nick saw Corbett at the same moment. Face distorted, Nick held his bucking, frightened horse in with one hard hand on the reins as his sixgun swung at Chance and the muzzle streaked flame. Its breath was hot on Corbett's face but the bullet churned into the dirt, and then the rifle slapped his thigh with its explosion. Nick Frieze reeled, went backwards out of saddle.

Standing there, wide-legged, Chance Corbett knew suddenly that Rocking Chair was through! A handful of determined men had stood up to them and done the trick, and all at once the gunfighters that still had broncs under them were jerking around, clapping in steel, trying desperately to get away from there, scattering in a dozen directions, their spirit shattered.

A little dazed, Chance stood and let the smoke and dust shred out and the air clear about him. He saw silent heaps that had been men, but only one, the man at the foot of the haymow, belonged to the defending forces. Then, as the echoes of gun-thunder died and Jud Knoles and the others came hurrying from cover, shouting, Chance moved forward and started a quick search among the bodies in the yard.

None of them was Ed Wallace, and he frowned then, knowing the battle was not yet quite over. Quickly he whirled, ran to his bronc that was still tied, untouched by flying lead, where he had left it, and jerking his reins loose he swung into saddle. His friends were staring at him.

"Where you off to?" Tom Joyce cried.

"After Wallace," said Chance. He saw Lee standing with the reloaded gun and shell belt in her hands, and he leaned and took them from her. The rifle was in its boot and he was buckling the gun around his flat waist as the roan pounded away in the direction of Rocking Chair, Lee's voice calling his name the last thing he heard above the rising drum of his bronc's hoofbeats.

ONLY ONE rider was ahead of him and he knew who it was. All Wallace's gunfighters were dead or scattered now, and Wallace must have known his power was ended. But he had such a lead on Corbett that even by pressing his roan cruelly Chance was not able to bring his quarry into sight.

Some rough country lay across his way and this shortened his vision. But the tracks were there, stamped fresh into the earth by flying hoofs, and the tang of dust was a sharp odor in the nostrils. Grimly Corbett clung to the trail. When he raised Rocking Chair headquarters, the place looked completely deserted. Even the old ranch cook must have got wind of the rout at the Knoles place, seen the writing on the wall and pulled out while he had a chance. And yet, Chance Corbett knew a cold, warning touch.

Tracks were lost in the hardpacked earth about the buildings and corrals. Ed Wallace could have ridden right on. But again, he might have thrown his lathered bronc into the barn and be lurking for a shot at his pursuer. He was a tricky character; no point taking chances with him.

So Chance came in cautiously, keeping to the cottonwoods and then moving up with corrals and sheds between him and the blank, staring windows of the main house. The stillness held. He was nearly convinced he would be better off circling to pick up Wallace's trail when his attention fastened on the front door of the house, standing open—and a movement just beyond!

Quickly, he was out of saddle and running forward, sixgun ready. He took the steps at one leap, and then was across the shaded veranda and shouldering the door wide. The man lying on the floor stirred again, feebly.

It was Duncan. A length of rope lay beside him, and at Corbett's touch the man raised himself with a painful effort, the eyes in his gaunt face focusing on the other. "Wallace!" he managed. "He was here—just as I got loose from the ropes he had me tied with. I tried to stop him but he—slugged me and ran." He tried to point northward through the door, across the rolling sage flats. "I think he headed—"

"It's all right," Chance grunted. He got the light weight of the man into his arms, placed him comfortably on a deep-cushioned sofa at one side of the massively furnished room. "Just take it easy, old-timer. I'll get Wallace!"

As he came hurrying out again to his bronc, a dust cloud rolling in on the back-trail caught his attention and he waited a moment, hand on horn, squinting at it with narrowed eye. As the dark shape came nearer he recognized it suddenly as Lee

Joyce. He frowned. She should not have followed him; her father and the others should not have let her.

She saw Chance and veered straight toward him, and as she dragged rein he cried, "Whatever has got into you?"

"Oh, Chance!" Her blue eyes were clouded, her pretty face pale under the flat-topped riding hat. "I couldn't stay behind, knowing what you were heading into!"

Corbett grunted. "Well, maybe it's a good thing you came!" he said then. "Because Lew Duncan is inside there, and he needs your attention."

"Lew?" Quickly she was out of saddle, a confusion of emotions mingled in her face.

"You better go in to him," Chance said. "I got to ride!"

She hesitated only a moment, and then she turned and was hurrying up the path to the house. Chance turned away again, thinking: *Lee Joyce and Duncan*. He had helped to bring them once more together. . . .

He found stirrup, was poised to mount when a scream of horror shrilled through heated stillness.

Chance froze for a long, bewildered second. Then he broke loose and the sixgun flashed into his hand as he headed after Lee. He heard scuffling, a man's curse. In the doorway he hauled up and incredulously he saw Lee Duncan and the girl struggling together in the middle of the room. She had lost her hat, the bright curls falling in a cloud about her. Chance saw the sheen of the gun in Duncan's hand, and the fury twisting the man's bloodless features, turning them into an ugly mask of hate.

Corbett moved in then, circling to get at the man. He took him by the shoulder, tore loose his grip on Lee, and with a chopping blow of his gun-barrel on the other's wrist made him open numbed fingers and let the six-shooter clatter to the hardwood floor. The man stumbled back, brought up against the edge of a huge carved table and crouched there, hair streaming into his face, eyes flaming.

Lee Joyce clutched Chance by the arm.

She gasped, "*That's not Duncan!*"

"I guessed as much—finally!" Chance said. "He's an impostor! The whole thing was a clever trick, staged by Ed Wallace for my benefit!"

A voice at his left said, "Quite right! And if you'll just drop that gun—"

Corbett turned slowly. A door at the other side of the room had opened without his hearing, and Ed Wallace stood framed there with the red and blue splash of an Indian rug against the wall beside him. Wallace had a gun rock-steady in his hand, and it was obvious that no one—not even Chance Corbett—would have been able to beat a drop like that one. Teeth gritted with chagrin, Chance opened his hand and the sixgun fell from it. He stood helpless and unarmed.

At once, the dan who had posed as Duncan scooted forward and picked up his own weapon and Corbett's, and stepped away in a half-crouch with a gun in each hand trained on the prisoner. Ed Wallace came into the room, facing Chance across the heavy table. Hatred of Corbett—of the man who had upset the order of things on this range he had controlled unchallenged—was a harsh light in his eyes. He jerked his head at the third man. "Meet Dick Haines, a valuable man, even with his lungs full of bugs. Not much of a gun-handler, perhaps, but a damned good play actor. He had you fooled, all right!"

THE CONSUMPTIVE let a crooked grin touch his thin features at this compliment.

"I knew you'd never seen Duncan," Wallace went on, "and Haines looks sick enough to have been laid up six months with a bullet. So I staged that scene with him and Massey. The sheriff was to identify him as Duncan and settle any doubts in your mind. I figured you'd do just what you did: clear out so I could burn War-bonnet and discredit you with your friends as a yellow coward. That was considerably better than a drygulching, and caving a cutbank on you the way we disposed of

For a present to your future—

BUY VICTORY BONDS!

Lew Duncan! It might not have set so good with our enemies, a second time!"

A gasp had broken from the girl. Chance's face tightened. "Then Duncan's really dead?"

"Of course! Nick Frieze took care of that job for me, and he was never one to make a bungle—until, of course, that bad one in the stable yesterday! You killed Nick this afternoon, didn't you, Corbett?" He shook his head. "Too bad!"

Chance Corbett took a step away from the girl, nearer to the big table and Haines. There was going to be shooting in a moment, and though he guessed clearly enough that one bullet would have Lee's name on it he wanted space between them.

He said, "I don't see why you didn't plug me from a window when I rode into the ranch just now. You had plenty of opportunity."

The Rocking Chair owner gave a shrug. "We had no rifle," he grunted, "and if you want to know, Haines and I were none too anxious to deal with you up close—not with your gunswift reputation. So instead I had Dirk do a little more acting so as to send you off on a wild goose chase, and give the pair of us time to strike out on a clear trail. The girl's coming spoiled that chance." He smiled a little then, the gun in his fingers tightening. "Maybe I'm just as glad. I'd have hated to leave without settling my score with you! You know," he added, "you don't really look so damned dangerous—"

Of the two, Dirk Haines seemed most vulnerable even with a pair of guns in his hands, because Chance remembered what was said about him not being much of a gunfighter. It showed in the very way the man stood there, narrow shoulders hunched, the weapons weighing his wrists heavily and awkwardly. It was worth a try, and Chance and the girl were slated to die anyway. . . . Corbett moved with the thought, one booted foot lashing out in a kick that caught Haines squarely and by surprise and sent him stumbling. At the same moment Chance was going down, hurling himself at the edge of the massive table.

He heard Lee's piercing scream; then as Wallace cursed and the gun in his hand streaked fire, Chance hit the table edge and the heavy piece of furniture was tilting at Wallace, the bullet smashing harmlessly into

its polished top. The table went up and over with a crash. Chance Corbett, rolling, checked himself and saw a gun that Haines had dropped. He lunged for it, just as the Rocking Chair owner's weapon crashed again.

Hot pain skewered Corbett's thigh. But his hand was on the gun and he rolled with it, brought it swinging around as he came onto his back and the room spun in a splash of oak furniture, of Navajo rugs, and bear skin floor coverings. Then Wallace came into his sights and without aiming Chance pressed the trigger, twice.

He saw the man stagger, start to break. Then he thought of Dirk Haines and even as Wallace was falling, lifeless, Chance forced himself to squirm around toward that other danger. Haines was on hands and knees, reaching for the second fallen gun, but when he saw the smoking muzzle pointed at him, fear ran into the consumptive's face and he cowered back. "Get the gun, Lee!" Chance panted, voice rasping with the pain of his gun-shot thigh.

Lee came in quickly and snatched the weapon away from the consumptive's hand, but Dirk Haines was in no mood to try for it. The sweat on his sallow face was real, and the paralyzing terror with which he faced Chance Corbett's gun was not any of the man's play-acting. The fight had run out of him.

And Ed Wallace was dead, and his domination of a whole range had ended.

Lee Joyce fell on her knees beside Chance, her arms about him. Anxiety made her voice tremble. "Chance!" she sobbed. "My darling!"

"I'll be all right!" he assured her. "Nothing wrong with my leg that a doctor can't—" And then what she had said struck home and he took his eyes from his prisoner long enough to give her an amazed and searching glance. "Darling?" There was no misreading what he saw shining in her tear-filled eyes. "Then it—it wasn't Lew Duncan?"

"You thought I—loved him?" She shook her head. "No, Chance! I liked and respected him for a brave man and it's— it's terrible to think of him dead. But I've never been in love in all my life!"

She kissed him suddenly, and added; "Never—before now!"

• THE BELLED KILLER •

NAK, THE LITTLE wild mare, was down, from a savage side-swipe of the big silvertip's forepaw. But despite the force with which the blow was delivered, Nak staggered to the cover of a juniper clump.

Snarling, the huge grizzly rolled in. Seldom had Mukwa failed to crush to death a creature so small as Nak.

Nak shuddered as she watched the great Bitter Roots monster rise to his hind quarters and stretch himself to his full height in a pose calculated to frighten any adversary. The lather of fear sweat dripped from her body. Suddenly she lifted her head and poured out a wild scream. Soon

she heard the quick drum of heavy hoofs.

Out of the nearby low hills beyond the narrow valley, Tahn, the wild stallion, pounded. He leaped a narrow draw and bared his strong teeth as he chopped to a standstill a couple of rods from the enraged silvertip.

Tahn, the wild stallion leader of the hills band, tanged a blood scent which was blended with little Nak's fear scent. It sent Tahn's blood racing through his system.

As Mukwa, the grizzly, wheeled and rushed, Tahn struck. Had his forehoof



As Nak swung around she heard the soft snuffing of her young one, and she tensed herself for the blow to come.

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Neither cougar fang, grizzly claw nor all the wiles of man could prevail against Nak, the little mustang mare, when that coquette of the wild changed into a fighting, blood-mad killer!

stroke connected, Mukwa would have been badly wounded, but despite his squat, awkward shape, Mukwa whipped to one side with amazing agility. He whirled about and attempted a slashing forepaw stroke at one of Tahn's forelegs, but Tahn reared out of range. He had come through many a wild battle and in him there was established a developed alertness. He had learned a lot from fights with bear, cougar and even Many, the bull elk chieftain.

Now Mukwa half toppled as he missed another rushing, slashing attack. He was coming around in recovery when Tahn swapped ends and ripped a barrage of hoofs toward Mukwa's head. But Mukwa, save for one hoof blow which staggered him, leaped back unhurt. He had, however, felt the potential force of Tahn's hoofs. Though he took the blow going away in his least vulnerable spot, he now applied an element of discretion. The stallion screamed, and stomped his great hoofs as Mukwa hung, swaying hesitantly a long moment. Then all at once the big silver-tip wheeled and went hippety-hopping over a windfall to strike a shallow draw down which he ambled, grumbling his rage from deep down in his cavernous belly.

TAHN STOOD head high, tail and mane pennanting in the breeze. He quivered in every nerve fiber and muscle as he turned sharply and lowered his head, snuffling softly. The little sorrel was still down. She was one of his band and he stayed beside her throughout the night, ever alert for a cry which would send him tearing back to his band in the near hills.

With the coming of dawn, Tahn moved in close to Nak. Her snuffling muzzle touched his, but she had lost the desire to respond to his urging to rise to her feet. The bear-paw blow had shaken her and shocked her beyond the possibility of immediate recovery.

Throughout the day Tahn remained close to her grazing only lightly and drinking not at all. Time and time again he returned to Nak, endeavoring to get her on to her feet, but his efforts were in vain. Nak nibbled only what browse or grass was within range of her lips.

As the sun set and swift twilight sifted its purple gray ashes of dusk on the hinterland, Tahn suddenly wheeled, rearing.

From across the narrow broken valley there came a shrilly whinnied call. It was the call of an oldster mustang mare, the deputy leader of the wild band.

Tahn flung up his head and bugled an answering call. He stamped nervously with momentary indecision, then suddenly bounded forward toward the band.

Nak trembled, conscious that she was alone with the dread tang of the grizzly still in her nostrils.

At last she staggered to her feet, hung swaying a few moments, then ventured a few steps forward. Her forelegs buckled, almost pulling her to her muzzle, but she recovered and in time minced haltingly from the brush to search for water.

Not until the moon was high did Nak find water and then it was only moist turf, soppy from some hidden spring. She was obliged to paw through the turf, creating depressions which in time filled with water. This she sucked eagerly through her feverish lips. Her efforts exhausted her and now, quivering nose into wind, she settled again to rest, not conscious of the general flight of her band.

Tahn had led them off. There were too many young creatures in his band to risk them any longer in the grizzly-infested area. Nak, the little mare was abandoned.

At dawn, Nak grazed for an hour, nervously starting from time to time. She searched the wind for the scent of her kindred, but it was faint now, almost completely smothered by the sharp scent of bear.

Slowly the little outcast moved on, heading toward the south across the valley's neck, then rising into a climb of the next uplands terrace. Here her nostrils quivered as she picked up the varied scents of wild animal life, the tang of predators and game life. But there was an absence of bear scent. Thus, on reaching a small green pasture which carried a tang of sweet spring water, Nak elected to remain.

For days she grazed here and daily grew stronger.

Now and then in the soft evenings she was forced to back off to the cover of a scrub thicket at the approach of a small band of nomadic bighorn rams which came to drink. Once, an oldster with massive curved horns showed signs of belligerence, and with guttural grunts warned the little

mare that he was king in this upland realm.

Nak would have fled, but she enjoyed the companionable feel of these smelly sheep creatures, seeming instinctively to feel that if danger threatened they would be a bulwark of defence. Now and then she picked up the sharp fresh scent of cougars, an alarming scent which, too, was quickly caught by the rams.

There came a sullen, brooding evening when from the depths of the mountain fastness, thunder gods grumbled. A storm was brewing. Nak drank, then withdrew to rest while standing.

The rams approached with startling suddenness; then all at once Nak whirled, her nostrils wide. She snuffled a sharp warning as she picked up fresher, sharper scent of cougar.

As this dread scent strengthened, Nak trembled with an instinctive fear of the big cats. Not in all the wild hinterland was there a flesh that so appealed to their taste as horse flesh. More than once, as a filly, Nak had fled in terror from the sleek lions which came down to raid the wild band of Tahn. Once she had been struck down, had felt the bite of fangs through the hide of her neck. Only the timely arrival of Tahn and an oldster mare had saved her.

Yet this evening, Nak did not flee. The big leader ram stood not far off, stomping his forehoofs, muttering soft warnings to his kindred. He was unafraid. There were no ewes or lambs to hamper him here on the small plateau and although two of his ram band were not equipped with a full growth of battering horns, two others had a handsome, well-matured pair, capable of siding their leader with terrible effect.

But it was not the sheep scent that wrinkled the nose of Acheeta, the old female cougar, and her yearling son, but that more seductive and more delicate scent of horse.

THE BIG CATS glided and weaved silently down on the plateau area. Nak shuddered. Now she wanted to turn and run, but she was rooted to the spot by fear. Suddenly her keen sense of hearing brought her wheeling sharply about. Through a clump of greasewood scrub she glimpsed two sets of glaring eyes, frightening eyes. Then suddenly a set of those eyes leaped toward her.

Acheeta, the older cat, landed lightly a rod or two from the trembling mare. Her long, thick tail twitched sharply from side to side as she gave out deep throat sounds. She was arching her back, bunching her paws under her when like a streak the big ram rushed. But for the suppleness of her writhing form Acheeta would have been crushed. She was hit, but scarcely damaged, as she coiled away.

Now the big ram grunted throatily as a signal to his fellows.

Both cougars were now hard pressed. The fight was on—talon and fang against the battering horns of the stout buffers of the high places.

Nak found herself alone, her body flaked with lather. Suddenly she was aware of the nearness of a stealthy cat shape. She whirled, her fear prompting her into lightning action. She turned and struck almost in one motion. Her hoofs struck like lightning, stabbing viciously at the mountain faces. Again and again she lashed out, striking battering blows with her hind hoofs.

A hideous screech sounded close. Nak whipped about and shrilling a sharp, husky scream, struck fiercely with a forehoof as the big ram streaked past to deliver the soggy coup de grace. A mangled cougar form went spilling over the rim of the cliff and toppled down to the rocky canyon bottom below. Acheeta, herself, whined as she limped off alone back to the upper heights, there to nurse her wounds.

In a state of continued agitation, the rams grunted angrily as they continued to stamp. None paid any attention to their strange companion, Nak.

Nak suddenly flung her head high and snorted as she, too, stomped sharply. She had shed her fear and had manifested a striking power and the power to think and act with speed.

Not even the sharp blasting storm which followed frightened her. She stood, her eyes reflecting the sharp flare of lightning. When an awe-inspiring bolt struck a boulder of mineralized rock, precipitating a small slide, Nak stood her ground, stomping as she listened to this added thunder go roaring on down past the plateau.

Out of a threat of death had come a new life for Nak. From now on she would not quiver in fright at the first scent or sound

of approaching danger, but would rely on her inherent wisdom, a heritage of her wild mustang forbears. Any element of fear that possessed her would be instinctive, but something she could now control.

In time she left the plateau to the rams and moved to the south, and as she moved she searched constantly for some sign of a creature of her kind.

Not, in many weeks of searching, did Nak pick up a trace of her kindred. Meanwhile her inherent instincts had become sharpened to the equal of any of the wild creatures. Seldom was she surprised by the big cats or bears. Her speed had become one of her greatest weapons of defence, not only her speed in flight, but that lightning speed of quick shifts when on occasion she was unable to flee from battle.

She had alone killed a big she-cougar, and had wounded a black bear.

Now, as the sunset drenched the strange new valley country to which she had come, Nak caught the tang of horse scent, but with it was blended the scent of man.

Nak snuffled softly as she moved toward the silvery creek which split a narrow meadow. On the far meadow across the creek stood two small creatures of her own kind. She minced toward the water's edge, quivering with a new sensation of delight and desire, the desire again for companionship.

Slowly, she walked forward into the water. The cayuses on the other bank called to her, snuffling soft welcomes. Nak moved deeper into the water, then suddenly snorted as she sank.

Quicksand! Nak was down almost to the withers, struggling. In a frenzy of fear she sent out shrill scream after shrill scream, sounds heard by the trapper at his cabin not far off.

Fisher Larkin snatched up his rifle and hurtled from the cabin fearing a grizzly attack on his pack ponies, but he choked up short in his tracks. Both ponies stood unmolested, heads high, at the meadow. He turned and then a low cry escaped him as he glimpsed the form of the struggling mare at the creek.

Quickly saddling a pony, Larkin built a loop and rode down to the creek.

Nak screamed in terror at the man creature's approach.

"Wild mustang," Larkin told himself as

he shook out his loop. Dismounted, he edged close to the narrow creek's right bank and started talking, softly, soothingly.

"You're goin' to be worse scairt pretty soon, baby," he called. "More yo' struggle, the worse it's goin' to be. . . ."

The rope hissed out and Larkin swore softly as he missed his cast. Nak snorted and tried to heave herself backward as she savagely shook her head.

Again that snakelike thing hissed toward her and now she screamed as the rope settled over her head, to drape her neck.

Larkin called to his pack pony. One end of the rope was hitched to the saddle horn. As the pony strained forward, tightening the rope, Nak struggled and almost strangled herself.

"Best come ahaid, kitten," Larkin encouraged, "or you'll git yore neck broke." He gasped as he watched Nak do exactly the opposite. She leaned back, shaking her head, coughing, gasping.

When it seemed she could no longer breathe, Larkin called sharply to his pony. At the sudden added tug of the rope Nak sank almost from sight. Then in sheer desperation she heaved suddenly forward. The pack pony lunged and Nak's forehoofs struck a solid gravel bar. Shortly she stood, head down, coughing, quivering on the solid bank.

For a long moment Larkin let her hang thus before again calling to his pony. Nak fought. She reared, attempted to swap ends and to throw herself, but always that strangling thing about her neck held and tightened.

Larkin hurried for another rope, cast a loop and between him and the pony finally dragged the wild one to a thicket where he snubbed her down, freed the pack pony and left Nak to quiet down.

LARKIN chuckled as he moved off to sit and watch the trembling little sorrel. He could do with another pack horse and was glad to note the well-muscled limbs of the wild one.

For several days he placed food and water within her easy reach. He talked softly to her, never attempting to abuse her when she lunged and struck at him. He encouraged the other two ponies to associate with her until it seemed that Nak had lost much of her fear.

The day came when Larkin snubbed her down and managed to slip a hackamore over her head. She fought with screaming savagery, but the man won.

Larkin made no attempt to bust her, or to saddle-break her for riding, but before the winter snows whooped down from the grim Bitter Roots, he had broken her to pack saddle.

Each morning he let her buck herself into exhaustion under the pack saddle; then came her demonstration of explosive savagery when he snubbed her in close to the flank of a quiet pony for a pack trip into the hills.

Thus Nak became a valuable member of Larkin's pack train. He watched her closely throughout the winter. When his stock tired under heavy loads, Nak came snorting, puffing through the drifts. When caught high in the hills by a howling blizzard, it was Nak's instinctive sense of location that brought the almost spent outfit through to the creek cabin.

Now and then in the soft spring evenings Fisher Larkin heard Nak's shrill cries and the faint, distant calls of Tahn, the wild stallion.

When a roaming grizzly attempted a raid on the camp, it was Nak who gave the warning and saved the stock.

In time she became accustomed to the atmosphere of domesticity. Larkin brought in a neck bell and belled Nak. He sensed that she was the logical horse to bell. But for some time she fought against that heavy strap about her neck and against that terrible clanging thing dangling below her throat. More than once Larkin caught her attempting to scrape the bell off against corral poles or in the heavy brush. But Nak learned that the strange neck ornament was doing her no harm. She learned, too, that it was an asset. When the three pack animals had strayed into the high country—cougar country—it was the clatter of the bell that turned marauding cougars away.

But the bell, too, held off Tahn, the wild stallion.

* * *

The following autumn, Larkin looked for Nak in vain. She had strayed off alone.

Today she snuffled softly as she heard the drum of Tahn's heavy hoofs. Now and then he halted to call, responding to her

cries. He was in close when suddenly he skidded to a sharp halt, then wheeled. Nak had shaken her head and the bell clattered with startling effect on the handsome Tahn.

When she trotted toward him, the big stallion wheeled, snorting, squealing with rage and fear. He moved off, but Nak followed.

For over a week Larkin despaired of ever seeing her again. He went out along her tracks, but when he saw too, the big tracks of Tahn, he shook his head and swore softly.

At last, Tahn's fear of the bell was gone. No longer did the clapper sound. Nak had gotten it plugged with mud in a lake's shallows. Yet there lingered with the mare a tang of the man scent, a scent which caused Tahn to toss his head and scream. Still, in time Nak was able to mince up to him, and they touched muzzles.

They roamed together until the coming of the first blizzard when, at a shrill cry from the old mare leader of the wild band, Tahn whirled and bounded off. Nak was inclined to follow, but the sudden sharp tang of grizzly scent stopped her. When she glimpsed the rolling form of a big grizzly in a shallow draw below, she wheeled and struck into a sharp lope, headed toward the south.

Larkin was busy greasing up his traps for winter when he heard Nak crossing the creek. He jumped to his feet and at once set out cured bluejoint hay for her, but a smile changed quickly to a sharp frown as he watched Nak suddenly wheel to face the north. Her nostrils flared as she snorted.

"B'ar!" the man told himself. . . .

The winter was not a month old when Larkin came across the remnants of the carcass of one of his pack ponies. The ponies had strayed for a day or so. It was two days later before the trapper found Nak. She limped. He had not heard the bell. Close to her flank was the other remaining pack pony, the little roan.

Back at camp, Larkin cleared the bell, freeing the clapper. He then set about hunting the grizzly. Using all his knowledge of trapping craft he made every kind of set, from steel trap to deadfall and pitfall, but with no success.

At each sharp horse voice sound in the night he bounded out of doors, but the

sharp clanking of Nak's bell told him that all was well. He concluded that many of the snorts he heard were caused by foxtail in the hay.

SEVERE weather seemed to have brought about an exodus of game animal life, emboldening the predators such as Mukwa, the silvertip. Throughout the winter Larkin was filled with deep concern for his ponies and was glad indeed when the spring freshets tumbled down from the mountains and hills, to flood his creek.

Today as he started to cinch the pack saddle on Nak, his brows flicked up sharply in amazement. The latigo seemed too short and a slow grin gathered about Larkin's mouth, a grin of understanding, as he shucked the saddle and slapped Nak gently on the rump.

"Okay. . . Good luck to you, baby!" he called. "But watch your step from now on."

Nak remained in close to the meadow as its waters receded. Larkin watched her closely, corralling her at nights. Then one day he missed her and in spite of a long hunt, failed to find her. He despaired for her safety, for wisely he knew what had taken her off to the timber.

One day as he moved along the neck of a small meadow he came across Nak's tracks, and the smaller tracks of a foal, but he failed to catch a glimpse of Nak whose wild shyness had returned at theorning of her young one, her first foal, a son of Tahn.

Jealous of the little little one which punched her so vigorously as he nursed, Nak drew him farther and farther away from the man camp.

When she found it too difficult to locate suitable and sufficient forage without straying too far into enemy-infested country, she brought her gangling young one back to the man camp.

Larkin watched them for some time but made no attempt to force Nak to shuck her shyness. It was more than a week before she ventured into the open corral to lick at the salted corneal with which the man had baited her.

Now when the last of the blizzards had blown themselves out and clear warm weather drenched the wilds Nak became more spirited. Larkin watched her playing

with her colt. He watched her rear and whirl in mock attacks and marveled at her agility in whipping clear of the colt's sharp hoofs. Shortly, Larkin put the other pony in with them. At first Nak rushed the little roan, teeth bared. She reared as if to come down striking, but in time she permitted the roan to enter into play.

At the farther edge of the brush copse, old Mukwa licked his chops and drooled as he tanged the fresh scent of the young foal. His great snout wrinkled, but he still retained a strong respect and dread of the man creature. He wisely withheld himself from an attempt to rush in and with a few blows of his forepaws smash down those light poplar corral rails.

He moved off and was absent for a long period. Larkin hunted for tracks of him, but found none. Yet he lived with the thought that Mukwa would return.

When another trapping season dawned, disaster struck sharply at the trapper. In crossing a labyrinth of twisted dry lodgepole pines in a swale, he slipped and injured his right leg. It took him hours to crawl back to his cabin. In great pain he applied what aid he could think of, alternating hot and cold compresses, but if the bone had not suffered a light fracture it was badly bruised.

Fearful for the safety and welfare of his stock he attempted to get out to them, but was unsuccessful. There was nothing for it but to hole up at the cabin, continue his treatments and hope for the best as he realized that shortly the ponies and colt would run out of food.

It was not the massive forepaws of Mukwa the silvertip that broke down the corral gate rails, but the battering hoofs of little Nak. For two days she and her companions had been without fodder. It was Nak who led the others down to the snow-covered meadow, to paw through the snow in a search of grass. Now and then sharply encrusted snow cut her fetlocks, but she found sufficient matted grass below to sustain herself and her companions.

Now and then Larkin hobbled painfully to the lone small window of the cabin to watch the vigorous Nak at work. When the weather moderated the man missed Nak and the colt. She had moved on through the timber, to become separated from the little roan.

A GAIN, save for the gangling youngster ever at her flank, Nak was alone, to revert in part to her former wild state. Save for the clanking bell dangling from her neck, Nak was again the shaggy mustang of the wild hills. She searched in vain for sign of Tahn, but the wild band had been led far up into the rugged north hills.

Today, Nak's colt was resting and the little mare grazed slowly on, striking a meadow where the snow was light and the foraging easier. It was the sudden scream of her youngling that brought Nak whirling about. Nostrils a-quiver, she stood trembling for a moment as she sniffed sharply into wind. Then, uttering a sharp, shrill whinny, she lunged into a full bounding gallop.

The colt was down, and near-by, poised now on his hind legs, facing the charging mare stood Mukwa, his jaws dripping bloody saliva.

As Nak thundered in, Mukwa dropped to all fours and rushed and as he half-rose to strike, aiming to break one of Nak's forelegs and so stop her, the little sorrel whirled and chopped down, missing Mukwa's broad back by inches.

Like lightning the great silvertip whirled and struck at her throat. His jaws closed savagely, but he snarled as his strong tusks closed on that hard, clattering object about her neck. His teeth had sunk into Nak's flesh, though, bringing a drip of blood. She jumped back, screaming, only to lunge and strike out with vicious power with her forehoofs, driving them hard down on the grizzly's big skull.

Moaning, coughing, the silvertip weaved back, his tiny eyes blood-red with anger. Never in all his career had a creature, a horse creature of this size, defied him or engaged him, alone, in battle.

He churned froth from his big jaws as he weaved now in a circle about the little mare, blinking sharply as he scouted for an opening. Then, head low, he tightened his circle. Then like a streak he rushed and struck.

Nak caught him a glancing blow in the chest as he rose to attack her throat, but although she slowed him momentarily, he charged again. Only the heavy strap about her neck saved her jugular. Mukwa half-reared, half-whirled, and smashed a blow with his off-side forepaw. Nak's knees

buckled but she recovered and again she tanged the blood of her youngling, and heard his soft piteous snuffling. She suddenly lunged and like lightning swung around to drive a barrage of hind hoofs at the grizzly's broad chest. A series of hard smashes found their target. Mukwa coughed as he suddenly sagged. . . .

Nak gave her enemy no respite, but reared to bring her forehoofs smashing down on his skull. He attempted to strike at a foreleg, but his senses were dulled. He coughed up blood with his snarls. Now, as he tried to rise, the little mare wheeled and lashed out savagely with her hind hoofs. Mukwa flopped from the impact. He had taken this last battering at the base of an ear. He rolled out of range of the hoofs and struggled to rise from his haunches, but his breathing seemed cut off. In desperation he clung to his last reserve of fighting spirit. Despite the pain in his chest he roared, coughing up blood, and raised a massive forepaw. And again, with lightning-like speed the little mare wheeled and struck.

Mukwa sagged limply to the snow, his great jaws gaping in a pool of his swiftly ebbing blood. Nak's hoof attack had stove in his ribs, whose breaks had in turn punctured both a lung and his heart. But Nak was not finished with her wild demonstration of savagery. Like a bull elk in action on a rattler, she bunched and chopped again and again, bringing all four hoofs pounding down on the limp shape, even continuing her attack for some minutes after Mukwa's last breath had gone from his body in a throaty gurgle.

Now Nak wheeled away, snorting, blowing the scent of blood and death from her nostrils. Her forelegs almost buckled under her from sheer exhaustion, but she turned to her colt, whose rump had received a serious fang wound.

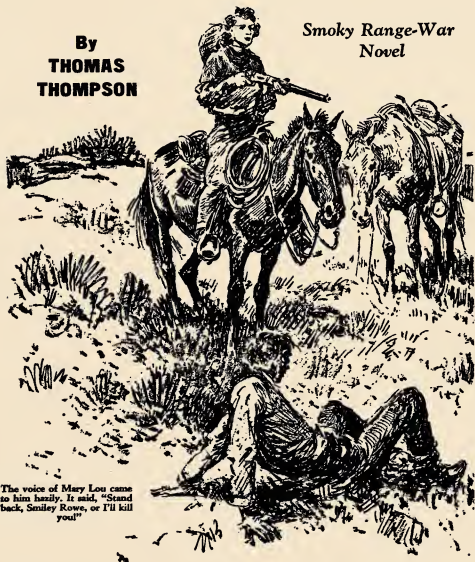
Nak settled down beside the form of her young one to lick his wound and her own. Softly, comfortingly she snuffed to him as she nuzzled him throughout the night.

IT WAS three days later that Nak stumbled to a halt down the creek. She had caught the scent of horse, mingled with man scent and the acrid tang of wood smoke. Now she glimpsed the horses and
(Continued on page 130)

It was a good range, Johnny saw, smelling sweet of cured grass and hollyhocks and summer. . . . And all he had to do to get it, was to buckle on a fighting man's guns and, maybe, die for it!

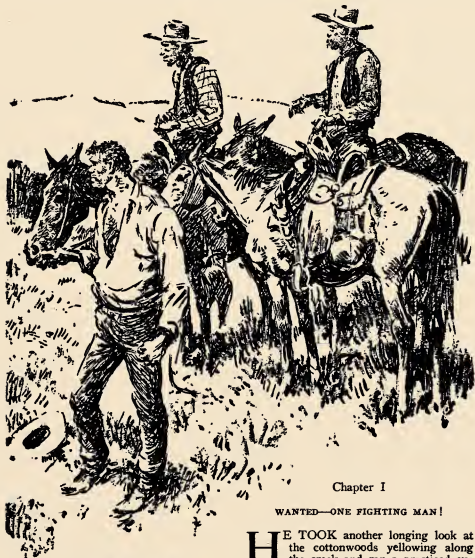
**By
THOMAS
THOMPSON**

**Smoky Range-War
Novel**



The voice of Mary Lou came to him hazily. It said, "Stand back, Smiley Rowe, or I'll kill you!"

A GOOD RANGE TO DIE FOR!



"You're forcing my hand
now, Mary Lou," Smiley
Rowe said.

Chapter I

WANTED—ONE FIGHTING MAN!

HE TOOK another longing look at the cottonwoods yellowing along the creek and ran a practiced eye up the oak-covered slopes, sweet smelling with cured grass, and he set about figuring a way to own some of it. That was the

way Johnny Paseo did things. There was a wagon coming down the road toward him and that maybe would be as good a place to start as any, so he put down the saddle he had packed all day, rubbed the cramp out of his hand and waved a greeting to the driver. The man on the wagon pushed his foot against the brake and pulled up.

The wagon looked like the man was going someplace, considering the jumbled pile of household goods, and from the look on his face it would seem the man didn't approve of the place he was going. He shifted the cud he was chewing, spat out over the near wheel and glared down at Johnny. Johnny Paseo returned the unfriendly look with his usual wide grin.

"Howdy, mister," said Johnny Paseo. "Could you tell a feller where he might dab his loop on a job hereabouts?"

The driver of the wagon took his time about appraising the short young cow-puncher there, looking up. He let his eyes wander to the saddle on the ground, then brought them back to crawl slowly up Johnny's scuffed boots and faded levis. He let them rest for some time on the worn holster and sagging gunbelt around Johnny's sparse middle. He didn't seem interested in the grinning frank face with its peeling nose separating blue eyes. He passed up the strand of straw-colored hair that pushed its unruly way out from under the sweat-stained Stetson. Johnny figured maybe the man was a little hard of hearing. He said, "I asked you, did you know where a feller can go to get a job?"

The expression on the wagon driver's face didn't change. He took his foot off the brake and made a loud sound that sounded like "Hiyah." The team seemed to know what it meant, for they leaned into the harness. The driver spat once more, close to Johnny's feet. He said, "You might go to hell."

Johnny Paseo had never been too keen about taking that kind of answer from a man regardless of his size or shape, but the wagon driver seemed utterly sincere in his suggestion so Johnny let it pass. He stood there in the road, hat pushed back, scratching his head. The wagon went on, its load of chairs and cooking utensils teetering dangerously above the tail gate. Johnny Paseo said, "Takes a while to get

acquainted in some of these out-of-the way places."

Secretly he knew what was wrong. A man who had a way with a gun always had the mark on him. . . . He picked up his saddle and walked on.

That was the first of four such wagons he was to meet in the next couple of foot weary miles. Of each one he asked his question. The second wagon refused to stop at all. The driver of the third one made an answer nearly as vague as the first one had made. The fourth wagon had a sunbonnetted woman and two kids in it as well as the lanky driver. They were a little more expansive. To Johnny's question the driver said, "Stranger, if you don't know, this sure as hell ain't the place for you."

The woman said, "Paw, quit yore' cussin'."

With that they drove on down the road without looking back. Johnny stood there watching them and the two kids poked their heads out from under a tarp they had pulled over themselves and made faces at the foot-sore waddy. Johnny screwed up his face and stuck out his tongue at them and they ducked back under the canvas. After that he decided there were the damndest people in this pretty country.

JOHNNY WAS cogitating about that when a horse and rider came out of the oak thickets and rode out onto the road. The rider was a big man, flashily dressed. He carried a rifle in his right hand, holding it around the grip with his finger through the trigger guard. He kept it tilted toward Johnny.

His saddle was silver-mounted and there was a silver-mounted breast collar to match. The horse was impatient and it fretted and champed at the bit as if anxious to get going. Both the man and the horse seemed to have more energy than they knew what to do with. Johnny Paseo looked at the man and then at the rifle. He said, "Yes, I know. Go to hell. I got no business here anyway."

The rider tugged savagely on the reins and the big sorrel set up sharp. He brought the rifle up quickly and said, "What's that you said?"

Johnny grinned his most disarming grin. He put his saddle down again and said,

"I was talking to myself, I guess. I just asked four men where I could get a job." He appraised the rider a little more closely, saw the hint of money about the man and said warily, "Say, you wouldn't be for turning that gun a little to the left and telling a feller where he could get a job before supper time, would you?"

The man on the horse seemed to see nothing but the gun on Johnny's hip. He said, "Down on your luck, eh?"

"Well," Johnny said, "I'm available."

The man on the horse said, "What are you doing around here?" He said it as though he might have a right to know. With the rifle centering on the third button from the top the way it was Johnny figured he was in no position to tell the man it was none of his damn' business, so he told him what he was doing here.

"I'm from Arizona," Johnny said. "Trailed a bunch of mules into Los Angeles, got paid off and started out to see California. Got as far as your town of Visalia and found a gent who had cards I didn't figure he held."

"What'd you do in Arizona?" the rider asked. He was snapping his questions now.

Johnny was beginning to dislike the way the man pried into his affairs. He said, "Mister, there's a heap o' things to do in Arizona."

"But you don't figger on going back to do 'em, that it?"

"I just had a one-way ticket," Johnny said.

The man on the horse became a little more at ease. He lowered the rifle a bit, just so it covered Johnny's belt buckle. He had a half-smile on his face. He said, "What do you do with that hogleg you're packing?"

That didn't set too well with Johnny Paseo. Back home that gun had a reputation of sorts, but it wasn't something Johnny went around talking about. He said, "Never can tell when I might jump a jackass rabbit."

"That's a good way to get in trouble, wanderin' around loose on another man's land, packing a gun the way you do," the big man said. There was a sudden hardening of the lines in his face. His grip tightened on the rifle. He said, "Maybe you got a price on your head."

Johnny said, "Maybe." The muscles across his broad shoulders felt suddenly tight.

The rider said, "How do you know I won't gut-shoot you on general principles?" At the moment he seemed capable of doing it.

The smile never left Johnny Paseo's face. He said, "Mister, how do you know I can't knock you out of that saddle before you ever pull the trigger?"

The rider laughed. "You're a cool one," he said. With a single quick motion he dropped the rifle into the scabbard that hung in front of his right leg. "I'm Cleg Partridge of the T Cross K," he volunteered. "That mean anything to you?"

"Can't say that it does," Johnny Paseo said truthfully. He had decided he didn't like Mr. Cleg Partridge of the T Cross K.

"I'm taking on a few hands," Cleg Partridge said. "The job pays better than average." He let his eyes drop to the gun on Johnny's hip and he made no attempt to hide his meaning. Johnny met the man's eyes and shook his head.

"I let trouble look me up," he said.

Cleg Partridge shrugged. "Makes me no never mind," he said. "Hereabouts you work for the T Cross K or you don't work. I don't like strangers. Take the left road about a mile up. That goes out through Squaw Valley and you can hit the road to Sanger. So long, stranger. Just keep moving right along. Stick around here and trouble will look you up for sure." He dug his spurs into the flanks of the big sorrel. The horse broke from a standing start into a full lope and Cleg Partridge disappeared in the screen of black oaks that covered the hillside.

Johnny Paseo pushed back his hat and did a little soft cussing. He had taken a liking to this country around here. After a while a man got tired of busting bronses for five dollars a head and got a hankering to settle down before he got his lungs shook loose. Most of all a man got tired of folks thinking of the gun he wore instead of the man who wore it. All this he had decided as soon as he got a good look at the country. He hadn't counted on the kind of welcome he was getting. He picked up his saddle and went on up the road.

Two things kept him from taking the road Cleg Partridge had told him about.

One was that natural stubborn streak of his that had already made him decide he would do nothing that was in agreement with Cleg Partridge. The other was what he saw when he came up over the crown of the hill.

There it was, lying right out in front of him. Not too big a place—just himself and a couple of hands could run it fine. Plenty of water. The comfortable little house set up on a knoll where it could look out over the creek. The air was soft and blue and a patch of gnats here and there moved lazily. There was a white picket fence around the yard, half as high as the hollyhocks that stood against the house. It was a man's dream suddenly coming right out and setting itself down in front of him.

He took off his hat, combed his hair with his fingers, slapped some of the road dust out of his levis, took a better hold on the saddle and started toward that inviting front gate. He pulled up short. The front door had opened. The prettiest girl in seventeen states came out and she was followed by the smell of frying steaks. Johnny decided that maybe this was a dream after all, but he changed his mind quick.

From around the corner of the house came a little leathery old man, bouncing along as if he had hot coals in his boots. His snow-white hair bristled out all over his birdlike head and his bushy eyebrows gave the impression that he was peering out from behind cover. He carried a rifle nearly as long as he was. He made a quick bird-hop and squatted down behind the fence. Laying the rifle between the pickets in the gate he yelled to the girl, "Get back in the house, Mary Lou. I'm a gonna get me one of them dirty sons and I don't want you to see the blood!"

JUST FOR a piece of a second Johnny Paseo paused to see what it was the old man was going to get, and in that span of time he decided he was the only living thing around close, so he made a dive for the nearest cover, an old wagon. He gave a wild yell that was supposed to indicate he was peaceful and peered through the spokes of the wheel. The girl stepped over and took the rifle away from the old man and Johnny heard her say, "Put that

gun away, Gramp. You want to get us both killed?"

Johnny let a long whistle of air escape his lungs. He stepped out from behind the wagon, grinning widely. He said, "I sure thank you, ma'am. That's the first friendly move I've seen since I left Arizona."

He had overestimated the gesture. The look in the girl's eyes was far from friendly and she seemed to know what to do with the old squirrel gun. She balanced it across the fence and said, "Don't be getting any ideas, stranger. Get on back where you come from."

"Now wait a minute," Johnny said, beginning to get his dander up. "I've taken all the shoving around I aim to take in one day. My feet hurt and I'm hungry and where I come from folks know how to be neighborly. All I want is a bit of grub and a barn to sleep in. Is that askin' too much?"

"Cleg Partridge is getting right cute with his ideas, isn't he?" the girl said. "Go back and tell him it didn't work."

Johnny had taken a half-dozen steps toward the gate. The old man kept bouncing up and down, reaching for the gun. The girl kept it away from him but she still managed to keep it pointing in the general direction of Johnny Paseo. He stopped at her mention of Cleg Partridge.

"Lady," Johnny said, "I only met this Cleg Partridge once and that was a few minutes ago. What I've seen of him I don't like. I'm a stranger here and I don't want no part of your fight. All I want is something to eat. Now will you put that old busted-down muzzle loader away before it explodes and kills all of us?"

It seemed that she was going to believe him, but the sound of a horse turned her attention to other things. Old Gramp shaded his eyes against the low sun and withered visibly. The girl became extremely nervous. She set the rifle down against the gate and stood there, her knuckles white where she gripped the pickets. Johnny turned to see who it was that could bring this sudden change into the two who had been so sure of themselves. He felt his own stomach make that little twist that always preceded trouble.

The man on the stocky bay was a big man in that he filled the saddle and was wide across the shoulders. He was bare-

Chapter II

A LODGING FOR JOHNNY PASEO

headed and his red flannel shirt was open halfway down his chest exposing a mat of black hair. There was no belt around his paunchy middle and the top button of his levis was open, letting the pants hang low on his hips. He had a wide flat face with a scar that twisted up one corner of his mouth so that it looked as if he was smiling. His eyes were a nondescript color and his sandy-colored hair was cropped short. He stepped down from the saddle and led his horse by Johnny as if Johnny wasn't there. He stood squarely in front of the gate, facing the old man and the girl. Jerking his head over his shoulder, indicating Johnny, he said, "Who's that?"

"If he's not one of your men I don't know who he is," the girl said. She had lifted her head until her chin was straight out. She spoke off into space, not to the big man across the gate.

The newcomer stood there, slapping the tips of the reins across the palm of his left hand. After a while he said, "I never saw him before."

The girl said, "That's in his favor."

The big man laughed and Johnny made a sudden decision that he was going to stick around and see what was up. He walked over and hooked his heel between a couple of pickets in the fence, letting his foot rest on the bottom horizontal board. He could get a good side view of both the man and the girl that way. The man paid no attention to him. He said, "I come for my answer, Mary Lou."

"I told you what my answer would be, Smiley," the girl said.

"I don't like that answer," the man called Smiley said.

Old Gramp apparently couldn't stay out of it any longer. He moved over and thrust his face close to Smiley's. "She told you she didn't want no part of you, didn't she?" he said. "We been livin' our own life and we plan to keep on livin' that way. We ain't takin' no favors from you, Smiley Rowe. Now get on that horse and get out of here!"

The old man was gripping the pickets of the fence with his bony hands. Smiley Rowe kept slapping the free ends of his reins across the palm of his left hand. He turned his wrist and brought the reins down sharply across old Gramp's arm. "You keep out of this, Gramp," he said.

JOHNNY COULD see the color flood into the old man's cheeks as he stepped back, rubbing the sting out of his wrist. The girl's face had gone white. Johnny removed his foot from the fence and there was a queer tightness in his stomach. Smiley Rowe had become suddenly pleading.

"You're bein' crazy, Mary Lou," the big man said. "I ain't never done nothing to hurt you. I come here friendly. I ain't packin' no gun and I don't intend to. You can't buck Cleg Partridge and you know it. I'm ready to quit Cleg now and I told him so. I got that place up back of Fresno that's got this country beat all ways. Why you and me—"

"Please, Smiley. I told you no. Isn't that clear?" The girl had turned to face the big man for the first time. There was desperation in the set of her features. Johnny saw the meanness come into the eyes of Smiley Rowe and he saw the sudden hard set of his mouth.

"Maybe you're one of them girls that likes to be convinced," Smiley Rowe said. "Maybe you don't go for all the sweet talk I been givin' yuh. You like a big strong man, huh?" He reached down and unlatched the gate and pushed his weight against it. Old Gramp protested and Smiley shoved him aside.

The girl backed away, terror in her eyes. Johnny Paseo spit out the cigarette he was smoking and said, "Maybe you better leave the girl alone, Smiley."

Smiley Rowe didn't appear to hear. He moved on through the gate and the girl backed away toward the house. The old man stood helplessly by, the glitter in his eyes telling what he would have done had he been forty years younger. Johnny Paseo had seen enough. He moved quickly.

Stepping through the open gate he caught up with Smiley Rowe in two quick strides. Grabbing the man by the shoulder he spun him around. His voice was amazingly soft when he said, "Get out of here, Rowe. You ain't wanted!"

The muscles of Smiley Rowe were visible in their bunching under his red shirt. He said, "Why you—" His right arm jerked

back, close to his body, his fist knotted for a blow that would have ripped off a man's head. He finished neither the sentence nor the blow. Johnny Paseo's hand had dropped smoothly and now a gun was pressed into the paunchy middle of Smiley Rowe.

Johnny Paseo was smiling, but his voice was still that strange shade of softness. He said, "Get out of here, Rowe."

A quick line of perspiration became apparent on Smiley Rowe's upper lip. He licked it away with a broad tongue. His eyes held a vacant undecided hatred, but his face had relaxed. The scar at the corner of his mouth made him look as if he was returning Johnny's smile. "Big with a gun, ain't yuh?" he said.

Johnny Paseo made no noble move to meet the man with fists. Smiley Rowe had the look of brute strength about him that would have made him more than a match for any man. Experience had taught Johnny Paseo that when he had the upper hand he should keep it. He had never been a man to fight with fists, anyway. If a man was his friend there would never be need of fists. If a man was his enemy it would take more than fists to settle the score. He jabbed the gun deeper into Smiley Rowe's middle. "Get moving."

Smiley Rowe stood there, looking down at the gun in Johnny's hand. After a while he laughed shortly, turned on his heel and walked quickly out the gate. He swung himself into the saddle. With one hand on the cantle and the other on the horn he twisted his heavy body around and looked back at Johnny Paseo who still held the .44 in his hand.

"That wasn't smart, what you just did," Smiley Rowe said. "Be seeing you, stranger."

"Johnny Paseo's the name," Johnny said. "Any time."

Smiley Rowe slapped his horse across the neck with the reins and headed back toward the main road. Old Gramp let out a shrill whistle of relief and admiration.

"Let me shake your hand, Johnny Paseo," the old man cackled. "That was the smoothest draw I ever seen since my boy Luke—" He glanced at Mary Lou, still standing by the porch. "Doggone me," the old man chortled. "Glad to know you, Johnny Paseo. Mighty glad to know you. I'm Luke Britton."

He grabbed Johnny's hand with both of his and worked it up and down vigorously. Johnny's eyes kept going to the girl, standing there by the porch. There was fear. Relief and worry clearly mirrored in her deep blue eyes.

Johnny watched the girl's face when he said, "Did you say your name was Luke Britton?"

"That's right, Johnny. Luke Britton." The old man paused, then grinned a toothless grin. "So you heard tell of the name, eh Johnny?" He cackled that perfectly gleeful laugh of his. "Not me, Johnny. That was my boy you're thinkin' of. Best doggone—" His eyes went to the girl and a note of embarrassment crept into his voice. "Well, you know how he was, Johnny," he said half under his breath. Then, all enthusiasm again, he said, "This here is my grand-daughter Mary Lou, Johnny."

She offered her hand but said nothing. There was still that hurt worry in her eyes and worry in her face.

Luke Britton had been California's most famous gunswift sheriff. Johnny kept trying to put two and two together and suddenly he got the answer. Luke Britton had disappeared from public life after that long-disputed case where he had shot the wrong man. Johnny Paseo saw all that passing through the girl's eyes and he understood. This girl, the daughter of Luke Britton, was gun-shy. That quick draw he had made had reminded her of too many things. Old Gramp was aware of it, too. He was doing his best to make conversation and, instead, he was only making it worse.

"Did you see that pot-bellied Smiley Rowe back down quick, Mary Lou?" the old man said. "Did he go up his tree?"

"Maybe he'll come out of his tree just as quick," Mary Lou said dully. "Come on, you and Mr. Johnny whats-your-name. Supper's getting cold."

BEFORE the meal was half over Johnny Paseo was sorry he had tipped his hand by making that quick draw against Smiley Rowe, for it had set up a barrier between himself and Mary Lou Britton that would be hard to batter down. In a way he could understand it, and in another he couldn't.

The emotional strain of this girl, caught in the middle of trouble, was a thing that hovered over the entire place, and it was only accented by the senseless prattling of old Gramp Britton who had taken it upon himself to adopt Johnny as a sort of heaven-sent saviour. The old man seemed completely fascinated by Johnny's draw and he was continually biting off his words to keep from turning the conversation to that subject which to Johnny had suddenly become a sore topic.

Johnny could see how it was with Mary Lou, all right. The only girl in a family that had been famous as gun-fighters, she was rebelling against the thing that had destroyed that family. The absence of ex-Sheriff Luke Britton from the table and the way in which they spoke his name told Johnny that old Gramp was the last of the fighting clan that had been known and feared by lawbreakers from the Mexican border to the Oregon line. But at the same time he could see that this girl was caught in a web being spun by Cleg Partridge and his T Cross K crew, and from what he had seen of Cleg Partridge and Smiley Rowe, Johnny couldn't see how a no-gun policy was going to get very far. They didn't offer to enlighten him on what the trouble was, so finally he came out flat-footed and asked, Mary Lou stopped on her way to the kitchen for another platter of steaks and looked back at the young puncher who was in the act of spearing his tenth biscuit. "It doesn't concern you, Johnny Paseo," she said, and she went on into the kitchen. It was the opportunity that Gramp had been waiting for.

"Women," the old man snorted. "There's as fine a girl as ever lived, Johnny, but women ain't got no right to mess with men's affairs." The old man had been bursting with talk all evening, so Johnny kept still and listened.

"Her idea gettin' this place here in the first place," the old man said, gumming a piece of steak. "My boy Luke woulda gone right on and made 'em eat their words if he'd had his say. But Mary Lou was always a-naggin' at him to get a ranch and leave the shootin' to somebody else." He snorted like a startled steer. "As if there was somebody else could fill the boots of my boy Luke."

Johnny could see that the old man was

about to launch out on a long windy about the prowess of the Britton clan so he brought the conversation back to matters closer at hand. "How about this Cleg Partridge and Smiley Rowe combine?" he asked. "They sure act like God growed the grass for them."

"Them two!" old Gramp snorted. "Two months ago Cleg Partridge was peaceful as a dad-blamed sheep and Smiley Rowe was glad to get his sixty a month and keep his mouth shut. That's because they knew if they got out of line my boy Luke would whittle their ears off close to their head. Why I recollect one time when Cleg and Smiley was plannin'—"

"Now Cleg Partridge has decided to get big, that it?" Johnny put in, prompting the conversation.

"Big, you say," Gramp said, glaring through the tines of his uplifted fork. "Know what give him that idea? Forrest Mallory sellin' out to him, that's what. He got Forrest's place; then he figgered maybe he'd like another one. Lem Collomer he come to next. Then Pat Mansfield. After that it was Carl Ritterden he tried to buy out. But did them boys sell to him? Not by a damn sight they didn't. They come to my boy Luke and they says, 'Luke, what you think?' And you know what my boy Luke told 'em? He told 'em, 'You stay put, boys. The valley's gettin' settled and the railroad is right out there to Goshen and we got the world by the tail. Don't you sell out to no Cleg Partridge.' Then they says, 'He's a-makin' it a leetle rough for us, Luke.' I mind the very words old Pat Mansfield used. He says, 'Luke, she's a gettin' a leetle wet to plow.' That's the very words he used. My boy Luke he looks right at Pat and he says to Pat, 'Pat, you let me handle that end of her. You just go ahead and buy that white-faced bull you was a-tellin' me about.'" The old man cackled gleefully. "And my boy Luke was as good as his word, I'll tell you. Cleg Partridge pulled in his horns mighty quick. He soon got over the idea that maybe he ought to own all the foothills from Badger to Sanger."

"But he seems to have the same idea again," Johnny reminded. "And from the looks of those wagons I saw going out of here it looks to me like he's making headway."

OLD GRAMP put down his knife and fork and leaned across the table. His bright blue eyes held a glitter and his wizened old face was sharp as the edge of a knife. "If I was forty years younger they wouldn't be leavin'," he said. "Eighty-three, that's what I am. Don't look a day over fifty, but eighty-three I am. They ain't scared of me no more, fellers like Cleg Partridge and Smiley Rowe. If they was, you wouldn't of seen Lem Collomer and Pat Mansfield and the others pullin' out."

He leaned forward and placed one hand alongside his mouth and his voice was a hoarse whisper. "You know why Cleg Partridge is so big across the britches all of a sudden? Because my boy Luke can't do nothin' about it, that's why. And why can't my boy Luke do nothin' about it? I'll tell you why, Johnny Paseo. Because Cleg Partridge murdered him, that's why!"

"Gramp!" The girl's voice was sharp and commanding. The old man withdrew immediately and he seemed to sink into his withered skin. Mary Lou stood there, the platter in her hands, the color drained from her face. She said, "Why don't you learn to keep your mouth shut?"

"Now jest hold onto your bloomers, young lady!" Gramp yelled, suddenly coming to life and beating the handle of his knife against the table. "You ain't a-talkin' to me that away! No young filly is a-gonna tell me to keep my trap shet—not in my house they ain't!"

"Well, then don't be making statements you can't back up," Mary Lou said, her voice rising. Johnny fidgeted uneasily, caught in the middle of a family argument.

"Like what fer an instance?" Gramp yelled, raising half out of his chair. "Like what?"

"Like saying dad was murdered!"

"Well he was, dad blame it," the old man said. "They couldn't of got rid of my boy Luke no other way and if you wasn't so blamed pig-headed you'd admit I'm right. You're jest like your mother was—always a-naggin' and a-naggin' at a man to put up his gun and talk peaceful to a rattlesnake."

Mary Lou was not to be outshouted. She said, "And if dad had listened to mother he would be alive today!"

"And my boy Luke wouldn't a-wanted to

be alive if he had to chaw taller fer some slimy reptile like Cleg Partridge or Smiley Rowe."

Mary Lou seemed about ready to burst into tears. She groped for words, then said, "Please, Gramp. Let's don't talk about it now. After all, we have company."

She turned to Johnny, embarrassment putting a rosy tinge in her cheeks. Her eyes had a glister from the tears that were nearly there and her full lips quivered just enough to draw attention to them. Johnny Paseo felt a little wiggly feeling going up and down his spine. She said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Paseo."

"Mr. Paseo, hell!" Gramp growled, bound to have the last word. "What's wrong with calling him Johnny? Johnny's his name, ain't it? I never saw a big man yet that didn't want his friends to call him by his first name. Ever hear any friend of your dad's call him Mr. Britton? Like hell you did. Call the man Johnny."

Johnny realized that old Gramp was passing out a big compliment, but he was too concerned with Mary Lou's feelings at the moment to appreciate it. He had to say something. "Make me feel homesick, the way you two fight," Johnny blundered. That didn't sound right after he had said it and he could feel the color crawling up his neck. Mary Lou looked across at him and for a second their eyes met and held.

"You're a nice fellow, Johnny," she said, and the world started going around in Johnny Paseo's head. He gulped down a mouthful of steak and nearly choked. Mary Lou got up and left the table and to Johnny the whole room seemed suddenly vacant.

As she left the room Gramp, his face close to his plate, said, "Course he's a nice feller. Mr. Paseo, hell!"

The rest of the meal passed in silence. Mary Lou did not come back into the room. When he had finished eating, Johnny lit a smoke and sat there, staring down at his plate. He hadn't been invited to spend the night and he felt ill at ease. Finally old Gramp lifted his head and said, "Come in here, Johnny Paseo."

Johnny got up and followed the old man into a room off the living room. It was a small room, cluttered with book cases and an old roll-top desk. Instead of pictures,

WANTED posters adorned the wall. A pair of gunbelts with the two guns still in the holsters hung on a huge set of deer horns across from the desk. Old Gramp said, "It's a hell of a world, ain't it, Johnny?"

"I don't know, Gramp, Johnny hedged. The sudden touch of sentimentality in the old man's voice threw Johnny on the defensive.

"Yes it is, too, Johnny," the old man said. "It's a hell of a world. Take me now. I jest outlived my time, that's all." He went over and took the gunbelts down from the antlers. "You know, Johnny," he said, balancing one filled holster in either hand, "maybe Mary Lou is right. Things has changed. Railroads smokin' up everything, young bucks more interested in white collars than they are in good honest jobs. . . ." The old man shook his head.

"That's the trouble, Johnny. Things are changin'. The world is movin' too fast. Nobody wants to hang on to anything any more. Maybe Mary Lou is right. Her a woman and me gettin' older by the minute. Cleg Partridge runnin' the taller off the stock, cuttin' fences, payin' six prices for hay so as the little feller can't get none of it. Smiley Rowe always a-pesterin' around for her to marry him. . . ." He sighed and slipped one of the guns out of the holster, cocking a wary eye at Johnny Paseo as he did.

"Course in my time I'd a-knowned how to handle a gent like Cleg Partridge," the old man said, spinning the gun in his hand. "But I guess things has jest changed and passed me by."

"These fellers you mentioned," Johnny said. "Lem Collomer, Pat Mansfield, Carl Ritterden. . . . They just pack up and leave or did they sell out?" He could see the twinkle of excitement come into the old man's eyes and he knew he was being trapped into joining the fight against Cleg Partridge, but somehow that was the way he wanted it.

"They didn't sell. Not yet," Old Gramp said. "They got scared out, that's all, and they took their families into Woodlake to wait and see what happens. They'd never of done it if my boy Luke was here to advise 'em."

"Tell me about Luke," Johnny said.

"They found him at the bottom of a

hundred-foot cliff over back of Badger," the old man said. His voice was low with a slight tremble in it. "He was broke up real bad so the coroner couldn't tell nothin'." His voice became strong again. "He was hit on the head and pushed over, Johnny. My boy Luke wouldn't of slipped over no cliff."

Johnny didn't know how it happened. He only knew that by the time the old man finished speaking, the two guns were in Johnny's hands. He stood there, saying nothing, testing the weight of the weapons.

They were standard, nickle-plated, single-action .44's with spring-loaded ramrod type ejectors and a loading gate to the right of the hammer. The walnut grips were scarred and there was nothing ornate about the guns except the scene of a sea battle etched in the smooth forepart of each cylinder. Johnny laid one of them on the desk. The other he thumbed to half-cock and spun the cylinder with his forefinger. It turned as if set in jeweled bearings. He looked at the low-notched rear sight and the smooth, rounded front sight and he imagined a pair of hard blue eyes not unlike Gramp's sighting down those barrels. He handed the guns back to Gramp, butt first, and said, "Nice guns."

"Luke's guns," the old man said. He squinted through his shaggy brows at Johnny Paseo. "What this country needs," he said, "is a man who ain't afraid to wear those guns."

"Maybe you're right, Gramp," Johnny said. "It ain't such a bad country. It's just the people that's in it in spots."

Gramp was his cackling, bouncing self again. He took Johnny by the arm and waltzed him back into the living room. Without asking permission he hollered to Mary Lou, rattling dishes out in the kitchen. "Fix up the spare bed, Mary Lou. Johnny Paseo is a stayin' all night!"

And Johnny Paseo knew that he was staying maybe a lot longer than that.

Chapter III

SIXGUNS MAKE THE MAN

JOHNNY was awakened about midnight, a feeling of apprehension prickling the hair along the nape of his neck. Somewhere out there in the night he had heard

what sounded like the screeching sound of nails being pulled from cedar posts; later the thudding sound of running cattle. He listened closely, but could hear nothing above the din of crickets and the steady beat of a lone frog down along the creek. Then he heard a horse, leaving fast out there toward the foothills.

He slipped out of bed and into his clothes, not taking time to put on his hat or a coat. Buckling his gunbelt on, he tip-toed out the side door, boots in hand. A dozen yards away from the back porch he put on his boots and headed in the general direction of the sounds, stopping now and then to cock his head, listening. There was nothing but the steady rhythmical chirping of the crickets.

Not knowing the general layout of the place he made several false starts, coming once to the horse pasture, another time to a pole corral, later a fence line. He went along the fence line then to where it cornered, and again he stopped to listen. The single bawl of a cow disturbed the night. He went in that direction.

His eyes accustomed to the darkness now, he saw a board corral, quite large, and he turned into that. The ground was tramped solid by many hooves and a mat of spoiled hay told him that it was perhaps a small feed lot or fattening pen. There was a board gate, and this was open. There was no stock in the pen. He went through the open gate and followed a well-defined trail that led out into open range that grew increasingly rough as it sloped up into the oaks and jackpines and undergrowth of manzanita. The trail forked, broke again, then dwindled in its many branches as the cattle that used it went their various ways to their favorite places. There was no way of determining anything here and he started to turn back. A voice, near at hand, stopped him. "Hold up there and let's take a look at yuh!"

"Gramp!" Johnny hissed. "It's me—Johnny."

Gramp came out from behind a clump of manzanita, the old squirrel gun in his hand. He laughed sheepishly. "Thought maybe I had something," he said.

"I thought I heard a commotion out here," Johnny said.

"You did," Gramp admitted, "but I was too late to do anything about it."

"What's up?"

"Somebody let the cows out of that fattenin' pen yonder. Had thirty head of yearlin's in there. Fixin' to deliver 'em tomorrow or next day."

"Cleg Partridge?"

"Who else?" the old man said. "He knows we ain't got a crew to round up that stock and the butcher shops ain't gonna wait until them steers wander back of their own free will. There goes a nice piece of change, Johnny. It would of bought hay for the rest of the winter."

"What's your move, Gramp?"

"Nothin' tonight, Johnny," the old man said wearily. "Whoever let 'em out is back over to Partridge's place by now. Man couldn't do no good goin' there alone and startin' a ruckus." Gramp seemed older than before. He said, "This is gonna be about all Mary Lou can take. Pedersen won't hold that hay for her. . . ."

This importance of hay—or of thirty steers, for that matter—was something new to Johnny Paseo, used to ranches measured in sections and herds measured in thousands. He said as much to Gramp.

"These are little places, Johnny," the old man said. "We only got a mite over four hundred acres in this place. It ain't range—not like you know it. We summer-graze higher up in the park lands. Jest use this place for workin' the stock and feedin' through the winter. Sell quite a few for stockers and some to the feed-lot boys up around Merced. Rest goes to the local slaughter house there in Visalia. Pretty important to have hay, Johnny, and that's been hard to get. Mary Lou, she had some lined up off of Sven Pedersen over there round Woodlake, but he ain't gonna hold it. Not with everybody after hay, he ain't."

"You been handling it alone—you and Mary Lou?"

"We had a couple of boys," Gramp said. "They quit to take jobs drivin' grain wagons over to Traver. Can't blame 'em none. Make a sight more money. Then Lem Collomer and Pat Mansfield and Carl Ritterden, they always pitched in and helped. Sort of swapped work, you know, long as my boy Luke was alive. But now that they got cold feet—" The old man gave a long sigh. "This looks like it, Johnny."

"Maybe not," Johnny Paseo said. "Back home they run one cow to a hundred acres and we manage to round 'em up now and then. Shouldn't be much of a job chousin' thirty yearlings out of this oak country."

"Cleg Partridge wouldn't like you much, Johnny."

"We'd be even," Johnny Paseo said.

They walked on in silence, back toward the house. As they came around the horse corral they saw a light in the kitchen window. Gramp said, "Mary Lou awake when you left?"

"I didn't think so," Johnny said.

"She is now," Gramp said. "I was hopin' I wouldn't have to tell her till mornin'."

THEY didn't have to tell her. She read it in their faces. "Calves gone?" she said. Old Gramp nodded. She said, "I fixed a pot of coffee."

Gramp looked at Mary Lou standing there by the stove, a wrapper pulled tightly around her. Her hair was caught back loosely with a ribbon. The shadows of worry under her eyes accented the blueness of them. He looked at Johnny Paseo and there was a slight knowing hint in his voice when he said, "No coffee for me. Might keep me awake. You two go ahead." He went to his room, glancing back and giving Johnny a broad wink from under his shaggy brows as he pulled the door shut.

Johnny sipped his coffee, not knowing what to say. It was Mary Lou who broke the silence. "You're getting tangled up in something that doesn't concern you, Johnny."

"It concerns me," Johnny said. "I don't like to see people get pushed around."

"Like trouble, don't you Johnny?"

"I don't duck it if it comes looking for me."

She added another half-spoonful of sugar to her coffee. "I don't like a trouble man, Johnny."

"What would you have a man do?"

"You could ride on in the morning, Johnny. I'd let you have a horse."

"And you?" he said.

"Whipped."

He held his cup in both hands. "I won't be riding on," he said.

She didn't say anything for a long time.

She got the coffee pot and poured two more cups. While she was setting the pot back on the stove, her back to him, she said, "That's the only kind of man I've ever known, Johnny. Three uncles, my dad, a brother. I don't know how I feel about it."

"Does a woman ever love a man like that?" It came to him easy, as if he had known her for years and this was a question he had built up to for a long time. There was a queer shaky feeling inside him. She did not turn to face him.

Her voice was strangely muffled when she answered. "I believe a woman always loves a man like that, Johnny," she said. She turned suddenly, facing him, and there was a quick brightness in her eyes. "But a woman shouldn't love a man like that, Johnny. All she gets is hurt and grief. I know, Johnny. I've seen it. I'd never marry a trouble man, Johnny."

That queer tingling within him had grown to a waving pulsation that beat through his veins and made his heart seem loud in his ears. His knuckles were white where he gripped the heavy cup. He said, "A man could change, maybe. For the right woman."

"It takes a big man to change. He's never happy afterwards."

"But if he did change? If he could be happy?"

"I don't see how a woman could ask for more than that, Johnny." She went quickly to her own room, leaving him sitting there alone. He built a cigarette and his hands were trembling. His heart was less and less loud in his ears and the waving pulsation within him faded and died.

THEY ate breakfast silently the next morning. Afterwards she took him to the horse corral and pointed out a big black. She saddled a small blue roan for herself and shoved a .30-30 carbine into her own saddle scabbard. If she had noticed that Johnny was not wearing his gun she did not say so, but when Gramp came out to see them off he called it to her attention.

"You crazy, Johnny?" the old man said.

"Why?"

"Where's your gun?"

Johnny Paseo laughed. "I'm just gonna round up those calves, not shoot 'em."

The old man scoffed. "Back in my day

I'd jest as soon gone ridin' without my britches," he said. They rode off together, leaving the old man standing there, muttering to himself.

They rode a mile before she said anything. They came to a spot where the trail passed between two huge boulders and their knees touched as they rode through. She looked at him then, and she said, "You're a nice fellow, Johnny."

He had no answer. The intimacy they had known last night was not here now, but she knew he was trying, and it was all that Johnny could ask. The sun, filtering down through the jackpines, seemed a little warmer, a little more golden. The lingering drops of dew, caught in the pockets of the curling leaves of the black oak seemed a little brighter in their sparkling. Cleg Part-ridge and Smiley Rowe seemed like persons he had once heard about vaguely. They did not fit into this setting. The screech of wire being pulled through staples shattered his day dream.

Johnny reined his horse quickly, gigging it into a lope as he headed down the side of the gulley and turned left toward the sound. He pulled up sharp and stepped down out of the saddle. Smiley Rowe and three other men were there. They were all armed. Around them the cut strands of wire curled back from the posts.

Smiley Rowe stood bareheaded, his shirt open down the front. The gunbelt he wore sagged low on his right hip. The other men had dropped wirecutters and let their hands settle on their guns. One man moved slightly and picked up a rifle that was leaning against a tree. The sun was bright on Smiley Rowe's face, silvering the sweat that was there. The scar on his lip made him look like he was smiling. He said, "Hello, Johnny Paseo."

"Hello, Smiley Rowe," Johnny said softly. It was not until then that he remembered he did not have his gun.

Rowe said, "I see you ain't got that fast gun, Johnny Paseo."

"But you got yours," Johnny reminded.

Mary Lou had ridden up now and sat there, her face white, looking down at the men. Smiley Rowe said, "I'm more of a man than you, Johnny Paseo. I'll take my gun off." He unbuckled the belt and handed it to one of the men. The three fanned out behind him. The one with the rifle

worked the lever and the click of the shell sliding into the barrel was sharp in the stillness. There was a full smile on Rowe's face now. He said, "Come and get it, Johnny Paseo."

Johnny knew he was whipped before the first blow was struck. This was the way Smiley Rowe wanted it. This was his way of fighting. Johnny bored in, trying to keep close, but the big man's fist caught him alongside the head and set him back on his heels. Another measured blow rocked his head and before he could fight back, another staggered him. He tripped over a root and fell and he could see Rowe's boot raising to tromp him.

In that thousandth of a second, lying there on his back looking up at the bulking figure of Smiley Rowe, Johnny saw the man as he was. The bulging muscles, the blunt chin, the wide flat features. There was the mark of a killer about the man and it was worse than the killer mark of a gunman, for it was a savage lust that could be satisfied only by the crushing of flesh with bare hands. Johnny knew then that this was the man who had killed Luke Britton. He knew it as clearly as if Smiley Rowe had signed a confession. The manner of the ex-lawman's death! That was the way Smiley Rowe would kill a man.

He twisted onto his side and Rowe's boot scraped the skin from his cheek. Reaching out with both hands he got Rowe around the legs and pulled him down.

He was no match for the man. The sheer weight, the power of brute muscle soon told. Again and again Smiley Rowe slashed in his ripping jabs, blows that seemed intended not to kill but only to maim. Johnny's eyes were glazed with blood. His mouth was full of blood. His hands were slippery with it. He pounded his fists into Rowe's face with every ounce of strength that was in him. His blows felt weak and slow.

Somehow Johnny got to his feet. He was weaving, his head hanging loosely on his neck. He could see the gloating face of Smiley Rowe, blood-smeared and cut now, lips drawn back from his teeth. It kept advancing, closer and closer. Johnny tried to get his arms up to protect himself.

The voice of Mary Lou came to him hazily. It said, "Stand back, Smiley, or I'll kill you!"

Johnny staggered in a vague half-circle. He saw her sitting there in the saddle, the short .30-30 saddle gun in her hand. Behind him he heard Smiley Rowe say, "So that's the way it is, eh? You forced our hand now, Mary Lou."

"It would have happened anyway, she said."

"You could of got out peaceful," Smiley Rowe said. "I offered to let you get out peaceful."

It mattered little to Johnny Paseo. He was whipped. Whipped as thoroughly as a man could be whipped and still stay on his feet. He pulled himself into the saddle and sat there, sagging, panting for breath. He heard the slash of leather against flesh and knew that Mary Lou had quirted his horse.

The wind in his face restored his reasoning. It caked the blood and pulled the skin tight. He could feel the swelling that distorted his features and his lips became thick and cumbersome. He remembered now. Remembered that blood-lusting face. He wanted to tell Mary Lou that it was Smiley Rowe who had killed her father, but he could not do it. She would think he was lashing out at the man who had whipped him, trying to get revenge. He said nothing and turned his thoughts within himself. He had made a mistake today. A bad one. He had tried to be something different than himself, going out without a gun. He kept thinking of that leering face of Smiley Rowe and he remembered the three men who had stood by, hands on guns. He would not make the same mistake again.

He paid no attention to the gasping amazement of old Gramp when they returned to the ranch. When Marry Lou would have brought water to bathe his blood-smearred face, he pushed her aside. He went to the room that had been the office of Luke Britton and took the matched guns down from the antlers. He turned then to Gramp and Mary Lou who stood silently in the doorway.

"Do they want their land, this Lem Collomer and Pat Mansfield and Carl Ritterden?" he demanded savagely. "Are they men with the guts to fight for what they want?"

"They were once, Johnny," Gramp said softly.

"You know where to find them?" Johnny asked.

"I know," Gramp said.

Johnny Paseo buckled on the twin gunbelts. "Then go find 'em," he said flatly. "Go find 'em and tell 'em we caught Cleg Partridge's crew red-handed. Tell 'em it's showdown, Gramp, and tell 'em you've found a man who's willing to wear Luke Britton's guns!"

Chapter IV

GUNSWIFT'S TRADE

THIS was the thing that was in him then. He was a gun-fighter, and there was no changing him. He brushed past Mary Lou, not wanting to see the look that was in her eyes. While he was at the pump on the back porch, washing the caked blood from his torn face, he saw Gramp mount the blue roan and head out toward the road at a full gallop. He wiped his face on the roller towel and stood there, loading the twin .44's.

He knew she was standing behind him, but he did not turn to see her. Perhaps she was condemning him with her eyes; he didn't know. In a way it didn't matter, for this was his way, the thing he had been cut out to do. It was a man's way. . . .

There was never any doubt in his mind but what Cleg Partridge and his crew would come. Once Smiley Rowe got back and told his boss that they had been caught cutting fence and had allowed a man and a woman to live to tell it, he knew what Cleg Partridge would do. He had met men like Cleg Partridge before, and he knew their ways.

He hadn't asked how far Gramp would have to go for help from the ranchers who had left because they had no leader. He didn't ask now. If he were to face this alone, then that was as it must be. He paced back and forth on the back porch, anxious to have it over with. In a way there was a cold satisfaction within him. At least there was the cloud of dust, sweeping nearer down the road. It was what he had been waiting for and he went inside. He was calm and ready now.

She knew the feeling that was in him; she had been born and raised with it. He could see that she knew. He wondered

what it was he saw in her eyes the one time he dared meet them. Was it fear? Hatred? Or was it the sickening uncertainty of a woman who loves a fighting man? He put the thought aside. The eight riders had turned in off the road and were coming toward the house.

He took time then to motion her toward the back bedroom, told her to pile the mattresses against the wall and keep on the floor. For a second he had a feeling that she had something to say to him, but he did not give her the chance. He went out the back door and sprinted across the opening to the small shed that set near the horse corral. He wanted the feeling of space around him.

The riders fanned out and dismounted, ducking behind the shelter of the old wagon, some going on to the barn. Smiley Rowe he saw, bare-headed and grinning, a six-shooter in his hand. Cleg Partridge, confident and deadly, his rifle gripped in one hand the way he had carried it the first time Johnny had seen him. Johnny placed a bullet near the ranch owner's feet. It was best to get it started; let them know there would be no compromise.

His shot had the desired effect. Lead ripped through the thin walls of the shed, showering splinters, and Johnny Paseo felt a savage thrill run through him as he returned the fire.

He emptied the gun in the right holster, drew the left gun and made a border shift—a gunman every inch of the way. Reloading was a matter of seconds with him as he worked the ejector against the spent cartridges or thumbed open the gates. A man tried to shift position and Johnny's gun spoke once. The man spun half around from the impact of lead.

There were three men behind the wagon, firing through the spokes. Johnny moved enough so that he could see between the front and back wheel on his side and he saw one man straighten up, his gun slipping from his lifeless fingers. But it was the four who had made the cover of the barn that he could not handle. They had worked around to where they could get a line on him and their lead burned close to his face and the showering splinters drew blood. He ducked quickly to one side and brought himself into the sights of the men behind the wagon.

They were yelling now, calling encouragement back and forth to one another as they realized they had him in a cross fire. They shot more deliberately, and the whining lead took on the more somber tone of a death song. Johnny felt live flame sear across his shoulder and when he looked down the fabric of his shirt was smoking. He slapped at it, his hand coming away bloody. Again he tried to get a line on the men behind the wagon, and again the men in the barn drove him back.

He was trapped and the men in the barn were quick to see it. They shifted their position, vaulting the low manger to get over to the square windows that lined the side of the building. One, bolder than the rest, leaned out to get a better shot, and Johnny sent him back screaming curses, grabbing at his bloodstained forearm.

The gunmen behind the wagon moved from the back wheel to the front wheel in a headlong dive, increasing their advantage by closing the jaws of the pincer. Johnny rolled out two shots and saw the dust spurt under the wagon, but the men had made their objective.

He was hit now. Hit hard. The shocking tear of the lead sent a quiver of fire up his leg and knocked him off his feet. He could hear the yell of triumph from the man who had got him. He pulled himself to his knees, a gun in either hand now, a cold blind rage in him. There was a face in one of the barn windows. He fired and the face disappeared.

So this was how it was. Sometimes at night he had lain awake, wondering if it would end this way. This was the thing that he had seen in the eyes of Mary Lou. It was the thing that had been in the eyes of her mother. Live by the gun, die by the gun. . . . He wanted Cleg Partridge before he went down, and he wanted Smiley Rowe. That way he would know he had finished the job. They were closing in on him.

Lead cut all around him as he kneeled there, calmly reloading those twin guns that had been the reputation of a man. The attackers were shooting wild, confident of themselves now. Overconfident. It was a bad thing for a man with a gun to be overconfident. He saw Cleg Partridge, the rifle to his shoulder. Johnny fired, then cursed. He had missed. Cleg Partridge

A GOOD RANGE TO DIE FOR!

was not dead. He had dropped the rifle and was staring dumbly at his mangled hand.

THE gun in Johnny's hand clicked empty, and he tossed it aside. He rolled four shots out of the other gun. There was the crack of a rifle. Again. There was no longed any fire from the men behind the wagon. He looked toward the house and saw her standing there by the broken window, the .30-30 carbine pressed to her shoulder.

There was no stopping Johnny Paseo then. He got to his feet, fighting the pain that threatened to crumpled his leg under him. With the danger of the men behind the wagon gone he could get around to where he could cover the barn. She had done that for him, done it with a gun. She was a girl for a fighting man!

He would have taken them single-handed, but he didn't get the chance. There were new voices now, the clatter of shod hoofs on the hard-packed road. Rifle fire laced through the sides of the barn and the shrill yell of Gramp dwarfed the sound of gunfire. Johnny Paseo came out from behind the shed, dragging his leg. A bare-headed figure made a running dive from the barn, headed for the horses. Johnny Paseo called his name. "Right here, Smiley Rowe!"

Rowe's gun was in its holster. He stopped dead, then turned toward the man who had called him. That distorted grin was on his face. His hand hovered above his gun, but he did not attempt to draw.

Back there behind him, Johnny could hear the shouts of men and he caught the glint of sun on the badge of a lawman. Old Gramp's voice kept jabbering excitedly and he could hear the whining protest of Cleg Partridge. They were all a vague curtain that closed off a different world. There in front of him was a man he was going to kill. The .44 in his hand had one shot left. He dropped the gun in its holster. He smiled at Smiley Rowe.

"I'm giving you a chance, Smiley," Johnny said softly. "The same kind of a chance you would have given me back there today. The same kind of chance you gave Luke Britton. You haven't any more chance against my gun than I would have

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had against your fists if Mary Lou hadn't stopped you, Smiley. Go ahead and draw!"

For a second Smiley Rowe hesitated and Johnny was afraid the man would refuse to move. He started to protest. Then his hand swept down wildly. It was not the draw of a man who had never handled a gun. It was smooth and it was fast. But it was not fast enough. There was still smoke trailing from Johnny's empty gun when he dropped it back in its holster. He turned and walked away from the body that jerked convulsively there on the ground.

There was a weakness in him now, just as there always was after a moment of violence. It would change, gradually, change to a revulsion against this talent that had driven him always toward the vortex of trouble. He had felt it before, and each time he had hoped it would be the last. It was the thing he had been trying to escape when he walked down the road penniless, packing his saddle. It was why he wanted a piece of land, a place to hang his hat. . . .

He saw now that she had been right. What was in a man was in him. He couldn't change. He unbuckled the gunbelts and they found him that way, leaning against the shed, the heavy gunbelts in his hand.

They patched his wound and made him as comfortable as they could, and they stood there silently, thanking him with their eyes, yet keeping their distance the way men always did once they had seen him at his trade. That too was a thing he had come to hate. He shook hands with them, silently. Lem Collover, the man on the wagon who had told him to go to hell. Carl Ritterden, the silent one. And Pat Mansfield, the one with the woman and two kids who made faces from under the canvas in the back of the wagon. Then they left and he was alone again with Mary Lou.

She stood by the window, her back to him, and he wondered if she would ever face him again. There were a lot of things he wanted to say but it was no use. He said, "You were right about a man, maybe. Maybe he can't change. Even if he tried."

She didn't answer at first. She kept

A GOOD RANGE TO DIE FOR!

twisting the curtain in her hands. Then she said, "Maybe just the trying shows the size of a man."

There was encouragement in what she said, a hint that perhaps if he tried again. . . . The words came up in his throat but he couldn't speak them. There was no sense in making a promise. How could a man tell what was around the bend of a road? If trouble was there he'd have to meet it in the only way he knew. She waited and heard only his silence.

It was perhaps five minutes before she came to him. Five long minutes that ticked out in Johnny Paseo's heart. Then she was by his side, her face pressed against his arm, sobbing. She took his hand and put it to her lips. When she looked up at him her eyes were moist with tears and there were tear streaks down each of her cheeks. She said, "I was wrong, Johnny. If a woman loves a man she's got to have him regardless of what he is. Your kind is the only kind I've known, Johnny. Maybe I couldn't love anyone but a trouble man."

He took her face in both his hands and held it that way, tilted toward his own. For a long time he looked into her eyes, then he bent down and kissed her lips, a long, lingering kiss. There was a half-cackling cough and the door to the kitchen opened a crack wider. Gramp stood there, grinning. He said, "I'm always crabbin' about things movin' too fast nowadays. Hell, some things is slower by a site than when I was a young buck. I got to thinkin' you young 'uns never would get around to that!"

Mary Lou picked up a book that was lying by Johnny's chair and threw it at the door. The grinning, bristly white head of Gramp ducked out of sight and the door slammed shut. For a second Johnny and Mary Lou sat there, looking at each other. Then they started to laugh.

Through the window Johnny could see the cottonwoods yellowing along the creek and he ran a practiced eye up the oak-covered slopes, sweet smelling with cured grass. He decided that he could figure out a way to own some of it now. That was the way Johnny Paseo did things.

THE END

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 85)

The citizens of Florence were having a big dance to celebrate the New Year of 1863. Cynthia knew how the reputable town women felt about her—she was known everywhere in the West—but she insisted to Cherokee Bob that she wanted to attend the dance. Bob, not being of a dancing nature, called in a tough friend, Bill Willoughby, to escort Cynthia to the social function.

As Cynthia knew it would, her arrival at the dance caused a big stir. The other ladies threatened to leave immediately. Scared as they were to do it, the dance managers approached Willoughby and told him to take Cynthia away—far away.

The next morning the unhappy dance managers remained off the streets and away from public places. Willoughby and Cherokee Bob, flourishing guns and knives, ranged the town, intent on wholesale murder. Not finding any of the dance managers the two outlaws hunted for Jakey Williams, leader of the orderly citizens.

Williams was at the door of his own saloon when the two gunmen approached. When they opened fire he ducked inside, got his loaded shotgun and came out firing. Within a few seconds the street was cleared and other citizens had armed themselves, taking cover and firing from both sides of the street.

Willoughby and Bob, forced to retreat backward down the thoroughfare, kept firing at random until they went down. They counted sixteen bullet holes in Cherokee Bob's body. Twelve shots had ploughed through Willoughby.

Cherokee Bob had lost his life and his business on account of Cynthia, but the charming lady spent that evening in a poker game in the saloon so recently operated by her sweetheart.

Within a month Cynthia had rejoined Bill Mayfield in Placerville. He was glad to have her back again. Two weeks later Cynthia met a suave whiskey drummer from San Francisco. She cooked Bill a mess of his favorite stew for dinner one evening. In the stew she had sprinkled a large quantity of rat poison. Bill was dead by morning and Cynthia left for parts unknown with her new Romeo.

THE LAW STOPS AT CACTUS CITY!

(Continued from page 84)

they might do in the future—he knew that it wasn't the decent thing to do. Not with Vern Tyson lying downstairs, dead.

The sound of heavy gunfire broke out in the street below. It spread into the Alamo, crept upstairs. Johnny swore relievedly under his breath. He heard Garand's men scatter and break for the rear stairs leading to the alley. Chances were the posse would take them down there. He stayed with Dorothy.

He unlocked the battered door when old Hiram's wheezy voice was raised in the hall. The fat banker waddled into the room and took the girl into his arms. Johnny shook hands with the lean, white-haired man with Miller, remembering that he'd been fogging it out of town just one jump ahead of Sid Farr when last they'd come together.

Later, they held a conference in the banker's office. The clock on the wall said three o'clock. Just looking at it made Johnny think of a soft bed and clean white sheets. Policing Cactus City should be easy now, he mused wearily. There'd be time to rest and sleep.

"We'll need a new sheriff," old Hiram was saying. "Sid here isn't up to the job yet. You'll take it, Johnny? In the meantime he can marshal the town instead of you."

Johnny said, "Yeah. You can count on me—till Sid gets well. Then I got other plans. Such as settling down on a little spread down Texas way. I know just the spot. And the gal that's going to share it with me."

THE END

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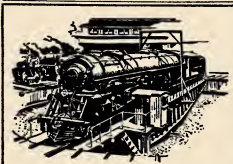


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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 109)

man creatures. Never before had she seen tents. She was at first afraid, but in time she discovered that no harm threatened.

When at last the man creatures sighted her and came toward her she was too weak to offer any resistance. Soon, her colt stumbling along at her flank, she was hazed into the compound of the big wilderness road construction camp.

Brush cutters and skimmers moved in close to examine her, but it was the foreman who first noted the fang marks on the bell, whose sides were crushed in, flat.

"Grizzly!" he stated. "Look at the fang marks. She's been chewed up some; so's the little feller. Must be the little wild mare Larkin was tellin' us about."

"It wasn't no silvertip done that, an' old skinner said sharply. "No critter this size could ever escape a silvertip attack." Most of the men were inclined to agree.

The following day, cutting brush along the newly surveyed road line the men discovered the pulped from of Mukwa. The old skinner was with them and his brows flicked up sharply.

"I—uh—still don't believe it. I'm goin' to skin the big feller out an' see if'n there ain't a bullet mark in the hide."

But he found no such mark, no bullet or knife gash or hole, nothing save the sign of Nak's battering hoofs.

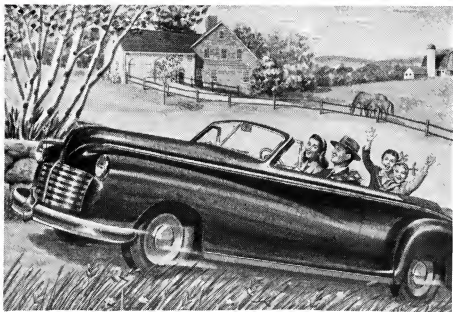
* * *

Fisher Larkin sat in the sunlight, a flattened bell and chewed strap across his knees as Nak flicked salted cornmeal from a pan near the cabin.

"It's the truth, kitten," Larkin went on. "You kilt him yore ownself." His eyes batted strangely as a slow smile turned up his mouth corners when Nak lifted her head to whicker softly.

"You'n me are goin' on a sort o' pension, baby." the man went on. "I don't need to trap no more. I'll take you out o' grizzly country an' while you graze the rest uh yore life in some good grass meadow, I'll fish trout in the crick."

Nak snuffed huskily and turned to nuzzle her colt. Whatever the man creature was saying, she liked the tone of his voice: it was soothing, restful, encouraging. . . .



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